

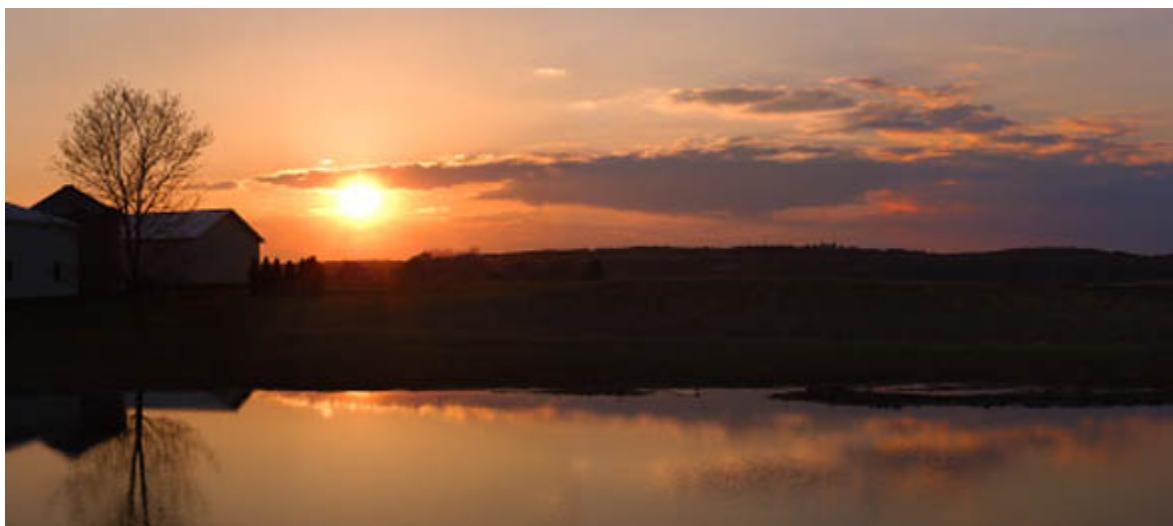


the arts

Plein Air Peconic II At The Wallace Gallery

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"Sunset Over Wesnofske Farm" by Tom Steele

This is a beautiful show – in substance and spirit. The exhibition features landscapes by ten painters and three photographers who, in response to a suggestion by Gordon Matheson and fellow painter Casey Chalem Anderson and Artist Alliance president and photographer Tom Steele, organized last year to put on Plein Air Peconic, a collaborative effort with Peconic Land Trust to celebrate the working farms and fields, seas and bays and beachfront and woodlands of The East End.

This second show is thus a first anniversary, and it couldn't happen at a better time or at a more attractive venue: the Wallace Gallery. Early autumn, far from the madding crowd, is the perfect time to mount such an exhibition, says Terry Wallace, a long-time supporter of art-related causes and cause-related art. Both the gallery and artists are donating a portion of their sales to the Peconic Land Trust. Philanthropy is fine. Fine art is fine. Both are impressively realized here.

Matheson, interviewed recently on WLIU, waggishly remarked that he was delighted that Terry Wallace, whose gallery is known for late 19th, early 20th century work, seems to have finally gotten over "his breathing problems" and is showing living artists. Indeed, the pieces on exhibit here glow with breathtaking color. Some scenes may seem familiar, but in fact the artists were given special access to North and South Fork conserved land, owned by the Peconic Land Trust - Reel Point, Quail Hill Farm, Quogue Preserve, Dam Pond, Berglund Marshes, Blair Property, Scallop Pond, and Reeve Farm, to

name a few locals. Numerous scenic trails and wildlife habitats that first attracted plein air artists over 100 years ago, especially the Peconic Bay Impressionists led by Caroline M. Bell, were also showcased.



"Reeves Farm" by Ellen Watson

In addition to Matheson, Anderson, and Steele, those filling the walls with their joyous interpretations of nature include Susan D'Alessio, Terry Elkins, Aubrey Grainger, Scott Hewett, Gail Kern, Michele Margit, Joanne Rosko, Eileen Dawn Skretch, and photographers Kathryn Szoka and Ellen Watson. "Plein air" refers to paintings or drawings made directly in the open air. While many painters today also work from sketches and photographic images, and photographic artists enhance their pictures digitally, the essence of contemporary plein air is

unmistakable. As Wallace says, it's "the air," the light, tactility, mood.

The arrangement of the art works to group and individual advantage. With multiple (and different size) pieces spread around the gallery, each artist invites viewers to form an impression of signature style (D'Alessio's bold, impressionistic greens, Elkins' luminosity, Grainger's geometry), which, in the aggregate turns out to be much more various. Gail Kern, for example, shown here with hazy landscapes, clearly representational – "Lazy Point, Cooks Lane" – is also seen with "View of Wednesday Night Regatta, Sag Harbor," a minimalist, almost abstract scene of foreground fluid blues and browns set against small white sails angled on the background horizon line and with "View From Blair Preserve", a picture full of dark greens and light-inflected areas that recall Leo Revi. Scott Hewett's "Flower Field, Scuttle Hole Road," with its captivating array of flowers, Black Eyed Susan's prominent among them, would seem to establish him as a colorist of shimmering yellows and oranges, green hills and grasses and late summer- blue skies. He's also represented with "Conklin House 1840," an almost stylized piece of Americana, charming as it is eye-catching in its dramatic play of light and shade.

The arrangement also prompts viewers to muse on how the Plein Air Peconic artists may be influencing one another, a tradition that, as Wallace notes, dates to the Peconic Bay Impressionist days when Caroline Bell's North Fork women constituted themselves a plein air group for "sharing encouragement and criticism with one another." Is it mere coincidence that so many of the paintings here have mid-point horizon lines? Or that several pieces, unlike canvases of thickly applied pigment, typically associated with impressionist and post-impressionist plein air work, seem to straddle a genre line between oil and acrylic, and accented watercolor, capturing, as it were, the fragility as well as the beauty of the land?

No mistaking the photographic art, for sure, especially Steele's spectacular, wide-angle arresting "Montauk Point", a glimpse of the cliffs rarely seen, with its uncanny sense of rocks in motion and its theatrical evocation of diminished or diminishing sunlight. Ellen Watson's slightly off-center compositions, fascinating for their linear perspective as well as incredible detail, show well. Kathryn Szoka's compelling "View From the Hill", is a striking aerial perspective of wispy loveliness.

Alas, space does not permit more extensive notice of all the participating artists. It should be noted, however, that Plein Air Peconic II is also a traveling collaborative educational exhibit that will be making its next stop at the Hampton Bays Library. The show runs through October 29 at the Wallace Gallery, Park Place Passage, 37A Main Street, East Hampton. And check out the gorgeous catalogue, with its attractive shots of pictures and artists.

Joan Baum lives in Springs and covers literature and the arts for print and radio.

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"Dune Beach" by Casey Chalem Anderson



"Bayside Dune Beach" by Gordon Matheson