

UNDER AN OPEN SKY

BY TRICIA RAYBURN

PLEIN AIR PECONIC CELEBRATES THE EAST END'S NATURAL INSPIRATION

The East End's special quality of light has lured artists for more than 100 years. That hauntingly incandescent light — and the evocative power it can lend to a painting — has never changed. The same cannot be said of the East End's priceless landscapes, many of which have literally disappeared — collateral casualties of development. Now a group of twelve local artists have joined together to record on canvas and in photographs the fields and dunes and shoreline vistas that make the East End glorious to behold. Their labor of love benefits us all.

In 1878, the Tile Club, a group of renowned painters including Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase and others, teamed with the Long Island Railroad to promote summer travel to eastern Long Island. The group's New York-to-Montauk journey was documented in *Scribner's Monthly*, in short stories complemented by photographs of the artists working outdoors—or, en plein air. Since then, countless artists have made the same journey, and “the light” of the East End has become famous in artistic circles for its unique, inspiring effects.

Today, Plein Air Peconic, a group of twelve landscape artists who celebrate the East End's natural beauty in watercolors, oils and photography, continue to be inspired—but they can't give the light all the credit. Certainly, the shifting, often moody glow contributes to each and every work, but despite its widespread popularity, it really wouldn't amount to much without what is perhaps the area's most significant source of inspiration.

The land.

While not overlooked or unappreciated (that would be impossible), the East End's fields, farms, dunes, beaches, flora and fauna are not generally given enough credit. “You always hear about the light,” said Yvette DeBow-Salsedo, Director of Marketing and Communications for Peconic Land Trust, “but what about the land? The light wouldn't mean anything without the land.” And given that the stunning landscape continues to evolve—and even disappear, in some places—it's more important now than ever that it's given its due.

Rebecca Chapman, Vice President of Philanthropy at Peconic Land Trust, had this in mind when she approached local artist Gordon Matheson about forming a group of plein air painters to capture the beauty of some of the Trust's preserved lands in 2005. Since its inception in 1983, Peconic Land Trust has effectively protected nearly 9,000 acres on Long Island from development—but despite the area's

seemingly limited size, there's always more work to be done. Without the Trust and other like-minded organizations, the East End landscape as it's currently known would soon only exist on canvas and in photographs. Chapman sought to raise public awareness of this fact through these same mediums, in hopes that a collective community effort could prevent an unfortunate, irreversible outcome.

Matheson, who had already been organizing and participating in other plein air art shows, was on board. In fall of 2005, he and artist Casey Anderson started planning two separate landscape shows to benefit the Trust. The first show, *Four Roads to a Landscape*, featured work by Matheson, Anderson, Tom Steele and Carolyn Conrad, and was held the following April. The second show was limited to plein air painters and landscape photographers whose work was completed on land preserved by the Trust. Matheson invited nine landscape painters and three photographers, all full-time artists,



What every aspiring plein artist needs:

- portable easel (for oil and acrylic painters)
- paint palette that won't blow away
- trash bag and closed containers to dispose of turpentine, paper towels and other waste
- small table
- limited number of brushes and tubes of paint to help conserve space
- high stool or a chair
- big hat, sunscreen and bug spray

Gordon Matheson, *Sagaponack Wildflowers*
Parsonage Lane, Sagaponack, June 2003

to participate, and Plein Air Peconic was born. The group worked with the Peconic Land Trust stewardship team to select twenty preserved vistas and watersheds, and then spent countless hours "in the field," capturing some of the area's most stunning scenery. The results were shown in Plein Air Peconic I, which was held at East Hampton's Ashawagh Hall over Columbus Day weekend in October 2006, and proved to be a huge success.

"People really responded; they felt a connection to the land," said Matheson. "Many people bought works of places they were familiar with. One woman bought a painting of a house she lived in as a child."

Riding this success in 2007, the Plein Air Peconic Traveling Exhibition took a sample of 40 paintings to libraries across the East End for one-month shows. In October of last year, Plein Air Peconic II was held at Wallace Gallery in East Hampton; the show lasted the entire month and drew more than 700 visitors.

A traveling exhibition will follow in 2008, as will Plein Air Peconic III, to be held this October at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor. A portion of all artwork sales is donated to the Trust, and has so far amounted to tens of thousands of dollars.

To prepare for the shows and traveling exhibitions, the group, which currently consists of twelve of the original thirteen artists, sets up easels and tripods on Trust-preserved land on the North Fork, South Fork, Shelter Island and Ram Island, and in Riverhead, Westhampton, Quogue and Hampton Bays. The artists work year-round, though the painters sometimes swap the cold outdoors for warm studios during winter months, and complete paintings begun in the fall.

For the artists, it's time well spent. Said landscape photographer and Plein Air Peconic member Kathryn Szoka: "In the early 1980s the East End was relatively obscure. Scuttlehole Road was an open vista from end to end. To travel through that environment,

to stand in it, noting season by the crop, the smell in the air, the shape of the light, was both an education and a profound experience.

I was drawn to photographing these quiet spaces, barns like chapels, luminous in the slanted light of dawn or dusk." She added, "If the late 80s were a development wave, the last ten years have been a tsunami, rendering the landscape unrecognizable. Scuttlehole Road is now suburbia. Our open horizons have vanished."

The pairing of dedicated plein air artists with an organization committed to preserving their inspirational spaces is a natural fit, and the partnership has proven beneficial to all involved by raising funds and awareness for the Trust, artists and, most importantly, the land. "It's a wonderful collaboration with local artists who also care about working farms and natural lands on the East End," said John Halsey, President of Peconic Land Trust. "The show itself serves to inspire people as to what can be done, and what should be done."



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About the Artists

1. Casey Chalem Anderson

Founding Plein Air Peconic member Casey Chalem Anderson moved to Sag Harbor in 1990. Her vibrant and colorful oil paintings of seaside gardens, tranquil water and ocean waves are composed from sketches, photographs and direct observation. She has participated in exhibitions at Ashawagh Hall, Guild Hall and Parrish Art Museum.

caseyart@hamptons.com / caseyart.com.

2. Susan D'Alessio

Susan D'Alessio grew up on Long Island and currently lives in Bridgehampton. A committed on-site painter, her work depicts the light, atmosphere, tranquility and beauty of eastern Long Island marshlands, farms and dunes. She is also drawn to visually capturing old South Fork traditions: farming, fishing and boating. She has participated in exhibitions at Ashawagh Hall, East End Arts Council and the Water Mill Museum, and received the Best Representational Work award during the Members Exhibition at Guild Hall.

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3. Terry Elkins

Terry Elkins has been painting the South Fork's vanishing subject matter—open space and its dramatic peninsular light—since moving to Bridgehampton in 1987. His traditional approach to painting accurately expresses a place's look, feel and atmosphere. He has participated in numerous exhibitions, received two Pollock-Krasner Foundation awards and taught extensively at Guild Hall, Parrish Art Museum and the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art.

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4. Aubrey Grainger

Aubrey Grainger's paintings comprise a visual journal of her life. Each landscape is a record of the time she spent in a particular place and the effect it had on her. She credits shadows of trees and light dancing on water as her inspiration. A member of the Artists Alliance of East Hampton, she has exhibited at Ashawagh Hall and Clayton Liberatore Gallery.

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5. Gail Kern

Gail Kern has painted images of eastern Long Island since moving to Amagansett in 1978. Although her work is painted on-site and might be called painterly realism, her primary concerns are visual ideas (light, color and abstract composition) as opposed to literal representation. She has exhibited throughout Long Island, and is represented in the Skidmore College collection.

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6. Michele Margit

Michele Margit's paintings capture the ever-changing light and colors of the land through the seasons. Her landscapes in oils and watercolors reflect her love of this land, and the serenity she experiences working in nature. A member of the Artists Alliance of East Hampton, she has participated in exhibitions at Ashawagh Hall, Guild Hall and the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art, where she was awarded a prize in 2002.

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7. Gordon Matheson

Inspired by paintings of 19th-century American tonalists and luminists and the gorgeous vistas of the South Fork, Gordon Matheson started a second career as a self-taught plein air painter after moving to the area twelve years ago. His landscapes have a definite sense of place and season, and he frequently returns to favorite preserves to capture their different moods in varying atmospheric conditions. He has participated in exhibitions at Guild Hall, Parrish Art Museum and Benson Gallery.

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8. Joanne Rosko

Joanne Rosko moved to Southampton in 1982. Her background as a perennial gardener is apparent in her depictions of plants in her landscapes. A blending of moody colors and uncommon compositions brings freshness to her canvas. She is a member of the East End Arts Council, Artists Alliance of East Hampton and Southampton Artists Association. She has participated in exhibitions at Ashawagh Hall, Guild Hall and the Water Mill Museum.

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9. Eileen Dawn Skretch

Whether painting en plein air or in the studio, Southampton native Eileen Dawn Skretch captures the peaceful spirit and unique beauty of the vanishing open spaces of the East End. She is a member of the Artists Alliance of East Hampton, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club and Guild Hall, and has exhibited at the East End Arts Council, Parrish Art Museum and the Water Mill Museum.

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10. Tom Steele

Founding Plein Air Peconic member Tom Steele is a widely recognized East End landscape photographer. His photographs, often viewed as paintings, are large in scale and include dramatic imagery of wide open vistas, farms, fields and waterways. His work has been featured in many regional publications and exhibited at numerous galleries and museums across Long Island.

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11. Kathryn Szoka

A Sag Harbor resident since 1987, photographer Kathryn Szoka is best known for her Vanishing Landscapes © series. She is represented by The Robin Rice Gallery in New York City and Canio's Gallery in Sag Harbor. Szoka's publications include *Sag Harbor Is: A Literary Celebration*. She has documented Quail Hill Farm, a Peconic Land Trust C.S.A. in Amagansett, and other subjects.

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12. Ellen Watson

In addition to commercial photography work, Ellen Watson has been capturing the people and places of eastern Long Island's beautiful landscape since her arrival from the Midwest in 1991.

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Exhibition

Plein Air Peconic, "Open Spaces"
Saturday, April 26 (10 a.m.–8 p.m.)
and Sunday, April 27 (10 a.m.–5 p.m.)
Ashawagh Hall, 780 Springs Fireplace Road,
East Hampton