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Farms Forever: Artists Capture Rural Landscapes Before They Disappear

Posted on 02 June 2011



By Annette Hinkle

Bridgehampton has a strong farming history — perhaps more so than any other community on the South Fork. Generations of farmers have tilled its fertile soil, and several continue to do so to this day — albeit in much smaller numbers and on much less land than they once did. But walking down the hamlet’s Main Street, it’s still easy to imagine what the place might have looked like 50 years ago when potato was king and the area was a bustling agricultural community.

In recent years, Bridgehampton has become known more as a destination for second homeowners, and much of that farmland has been given over to development with huge houses sprouting up instead of crops. No one knows this better than local landscape painters. Gordon Matheson even recalls watching it happen while he was in the midst of painting a farm on Mecox Road.

“There was a great barn there with a tower,” recalls Matheson. “I had just gotten a good start on it when a bulldozer knocked it down in front of my eyes.”

“That’s why Leo Revi says, ‘Paint it before it’s gone,’” adds Matheson, quoting a fellow East End artist.

This Friday, June 3, from 5 to 7 p.m. the Bridgehampton Historical Society opens “Farm Scenes” an exhibit of paintings that preserve those views by artists including Matheson, Mary Gardner, Eileen Dawn Skretch, Joanne Rosko, Beth Galaban and others. The show, which runs through October 9, will be on view in the society’s Corwith House Museum and offers a glimpse at the increasingly rare rural side of Bridgehampton and surroundings.

For Matheson, who has been painting the East End for more than a decade, selecting a scene takes a bit of consideration. No artist likes to see their view irreversibly altered in the midst of a composition.

“The active farm views are the ones that are the most reliable,” says Matheson. “Except

for Zaluski who just decided to sell his place on Deerfield Road. The first hint I had something was wrong is when they knocked the water tower down that had been there forever, making everyone's artwork inaccurate."

For those who are newer to the area, it may be hard to envision just how expansive the area once was before houses and landscaping — but Matheson's "Sagaponack Fields" does just that. Painted from Hedges Lane, the scene shows farmland stretching clear down beyond Daniel's Lane to the ocean.

"That was really the only view like that between the Shinnecock Canal and Montauk — where you could see the ocean from that far away," he adds. "When I was working on that painting, they were just doing the excavation for the Rennert property. There were piles of dirt there but I saw no reason to put that in the painting."

"Besides Rennert, there are now three or more buildings there built after some property was sold to pay real estate taxes," he says.

"Somebody said recently there's not too many more places that can be preserved, so we've got to paint them before they build on them," comments Matheson. "As long as there's a field and it's not an agricultural preserve at this time, there's a good possibility by the time kids today grow up it won't be there anymore."

One view that's still there is portrayed in Matheson's "Mecox Bay Dairy" painting featuring Art Ludlow's cows in the field, which will be on view at the historical society. And when asked if there are any local views he hasn't gotten around to painting yet, Matheson responds, "Horsemill Road. It's a beautiful view — I go down there all the time. That's on my to do list."

Before she moved to the East End from New York City in 1989, Mary Gardner's art leaned toward figurative and portraiture, as well as fabric and fashion design. But it didn't take her long to fall in love with the rural landscape here. Her offerings in this show include animal portraits of swine, and a cow sedately lounging on the grass.

"I saw the Babinski Farm on Mecox Road and this cow," recalls Gardner. "She was just sitting there, and I thought I'd paint her."

"We had a conversation," she adds. "The bull didn't like it. He came charging over. It was a wire fence, he was only 40 feet away and I could almost see the smoke coming out of his nostrils. It was unusual. So I got out of there quick."

"But she looked so regal and was slyly looking back at me," adds Gardner who likes to embellish the personality of the animals she paints. That farm and its cows are now relegated to history and Gardner laments the loss of livestock in the area.

"It's the best thing for kids to grow up around and to understand animals," says Gardner. "It makes you more human. It's a shame we're losing that whole sensibility. It was so gorgeous out here."

Perhaps no local artist can appreciate the rural landscapes that have been lost more than Eileen Dawn Skretch who grew up in Southampton.

"When I was a kid, at least once a week we'd drive to Sag Harbor to visit my

grandmother,” she says. “We’d take the back roads through the fields. I loved that you could see all the way to the ocean from the back roads. There were huge vistas, like out in Sagaponack when we’d go visit friends, you could just see forever. I loved that wide open feel like that.”

“In a lot of my paintings, I don’t do many structures,” she adds. “I sort of ignore what’s been done. It’s how I remember it and what I most still love about it.”

Skretch’s paintings are all done on wood — often plywood — and she uses the grain of its surface to inform the scene at hand in an organic melding of inspiration and material.

“I always loved woodworking and the smell of cut wood,” she says. “I also like the grain in the wood. Even as a kid I would make up a scene out of wood grain, like you make up things by looking at clouds.”

Often, Skretch will have a specific scene in mind that she wants to paint, but first she must hunt for the proper wood grain to accommodate the scene.

“The wood might indicate more clouds in the scene than real life by the way the grain is moving,” she notes. “It also gives a certain depth. Sometimes my fields are nothing but the raw wood, because they just happen to be the right color.”

When it comes to subjects, Skretch loves finding the East End of her youth. In winter, after the leaves have fallen, she goes in search of those lost views. Skretch has witnessed transitions that go beyond field to houses, and can point out places where farmland has reverted back to forest.

“I still like to go in winter and look between the branches and remember what was there,” she says. “There’s so much that isn’t there, but still so much that is. I can still have those spots between houses where you can see from Bridgehampton through to Sagaponack and remember those places on the back roads where you can get those views.”

“Farm Scenes” at the Bridgehampton Historical Society’s Corwith House Museum (2368 Montauk Highway, Bridgehampton) opens Friday, June 3 from 5 to 7 p.m. Call 537-1088 for details.

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