

## the arts

## artists of the hamptons

### Artists Among Us - Gordon Matheson

*Eileen Casey*



"Mecox Bay Dairy" 2008 (Acrylic on Canvas, 20 x 40). All images courtesy of artist

Continuing with our artist profiles of artists both living and working in the Hamptons, our next artist is Gordon Matheson, who lives in Southampton, with his wife Claire.

Born in South Carolina, Matheson attended the Fishburne Military School, and received his B.S. in Textile Technology and Design at North Carolina State University (1965). He also attended the U.S. Army Air Defense Missile School from 1966 through 1967.

Matheson lived in New York after leaving the U.S. Army in 1968. He spent 30 years in the woolen and worsted textile industry as a fabric designer and creative director, and then retired after 30 years. For 12 of those years Matheson was a woolen and silk fabric designer for JP Stevens and Burlington Industries. From 1980 on, he was Vice President and Director of Styling and/or Creative Director for Burlington Menswear Worsteds, as well as a three year stint as Corporate Vice President for the fine tailored clothing company Hartmarx Corporation.



Artist Gordon Matheson in his studio. Photo by John Casesa

However, at 52, Matheson left the textiles business and became a full-time resident of the Hamptons.

He soon began studying with Ralph Carpentier and Janet Jennings to prepare himself for his passion to pursue landscape painting as a full-time vocation.

Although unable to paint full-time while designing high fashion woolen and worsted fabrics, Matheson's work did, in fact, immerse him in color and composition. His travels abroad gave him the opportunity to spend countless hours studying art in the museums and galleries of Paris, London, Edinburgh, Florence, Venice, Tokyo and Seoul, in addition to his time spent in the museums of New York City and The Hamptons. Once he devoted himself to painting full-time, Matheson had, in fact, been studying art for years.

Being primarily a self-taught painter, Matheson focused mostly on those artists whose work he personally admired.



"Breeze Hill At Hayground" 1999 (Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 24).

Matheson states "My subject matter is primarily the local landscape vistas I love. My goal, when painting a Hamptons scene, is to match the feeling the painting invokes to the compelling feeling of the actual place. Water, fields, greenery and manmade structures get changed, maybe rearranged a bit, but the sense of wonder of the place remains intact. Weather permitting; I prefer completing 90 percent of the painting en plein aire in order to stay in touch with the mood of the land and water."

"I know the painting is nearing completion when I can look at the painting from 20 feet away and feel a pull urging me to walk in. My calm demeanor, my sense of humor as well as my love of the

incredible light playing off the local vistas usually find their way into my landscapes. It is an excellent way to share with others the unique way I see things."

Matheson is the organizer and a founding member of Plein Air Peconic, a group of plein air artists that paint and photograph land that has been conserved by the Peconic Land Trust. Their exhibitions call attention to the work the Trust undertakes in conserving open space on the East End.

Additionally, he has been a member of the Artist Alliance of East Hampton for many years, having served as Secretary from 2002 through 2005, and Vice President in 2006 and 2007.

***When did you start making art and what medium(s) do you consider to be your roots in art?***

**Gordon Matheson:** I have spent a lot of time in MOMA since I came to New York City in 1968. I always loved the abstract expressionists

and pop artists shown there. When I changed jobs in 1985, I had a suite of rooms as my office and I thought the walls would look better with some colorful modern art. I didn't want posters and had no art budget so I decided to paint my own. Since my field was textile design, the composition and color skills needed for the art wasn't a stretch for me. I thought the results looked pretty good on my walls but I wasn't really interested in being that kind of artist so they were the last ones I painted. I chose acrylics to do those pieces simply because I have an allergic reaction to turpentine so oil was not an option. So my acrylics roots totally stem from an allergy. Now there are substitutes for turpentine but I'm very comfortable painting with acrylics because of the flexibility. I can change my direction at will or on a whim which makes it more creative and fun in my opinion. I love color and I like to keep my color options open. Most people are surprised to find out my work is not oil if they see it without a gallery label. It's



"A Gathering of Crows" 2004 (Acrylic on Canvas, 30 x 60).

because of my secret process.



"Two Trees Stables - Water Mill" 2007 (Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 52).

**What is it about the Hamptons that brought you here and enticed you to stay, work, and pursue your art as opposed to some place else?**

**GM:** That's an easy one. I grew up in the Carolinas and my extended family would spend all summer in a beach house in a little South Carolina beach town called Windy Hill. I was always happy when I was at the beach and missed it terribly when my family moved to Pennsylvania right before Hurricane Hazel washed away the house and the whole town. When I moved to New York I came out here for the beaches and I stayed here for the beaches. My wife Claire and I started coming out to Montauk right after we met. Guess where we met? Correct. It was at a beach. Actually the beach was in Puerto Rico. I pursue my art here not because of the local art scene

but because of the local beaches. I think there's the beginning of a trend here so the likelihood is I'll stay here as long as the beaches are here.

I also believe that the work I produce is not about me and what I feel inside, but is rather all about the beautiful places I feel fortunate and privileged to be able to visit and paint. Because those places are disappearing to development, I spend almost as much time working with Peconic Land Trust and Plein Air Peconic to help save the views as I do painting them.

**How do you support yourself as an artist?**

**GM:** I'm happy to be able to sell a good amount of art here but I also sell a few around the country thanks to everyone being able to see my art on my website [www.gordonmathesonstudio.com](http://www.gordonmathesonstudio.com). The web really is amazing. Last week, my site had visitors from China and Australia. And of course I accept Euros. When I was just getting started trying to sell my work, my friend Paton Miller used to kid me that I had taken the smart approach to supporting myself as an artist. First I made my money in business, and then I started painting. Every artist can use a patron. As it turns out I am mine. I'm looking for a more generous one though. I can be replaced.

**Why live and work in the Hamptons as opposed to elsewhere?**

**GM:** Would you be surprised if I said 'beaches?' That's part of it of course but not all. Even though I've lived in the city longer than anywhere else by a wide margin, I'm still more a country boy than citified. I love all the farmland, as well as the ponds, salt marshes, and harbors here. Add the beaches and I've filled a personal inside 'Royal Straight' that's hard to beat on the East Coast. Plus my wife refuses to leave. I've also met a lot of good friends and interesting people through my art and through



"Wild Ocean Farm" 2005 (Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 36).

my efforts in land conservation. I'm not sure if my art attracts interesting people or if I've just been lucky but I certainly have been lucky either way. Many artists I know here also seem to have a little more edge or perhaps snarkiness than artists I've met elsewhere. I like that.

***What local environmental or historical aspects of the Hamptons do you relate to that may be reflected in your medium?***

**GM:** I've always spent a lot of time walking, biking and driving around just enjoying the view. I'm probably more visually oriented than 99.99 percent of the population. I figure the fact that the Hamptons are more beautiful than anywhere else I could live must be reflected in my large vista landscapes. Now if we could just keep it that beautiful. Many of my favorite barns and fields now look more like the cover of a coffee table book titled 'Repetitive Architecture' than the cover of a beautiful landscape art book.

When we decided to move here full-time 13 years ago, I had planned to spend my time fishing, golfing and generally avoiding work. Somewhere after many rounds of golf and a lot of largemouth bass, I lost my focus and decided to give landscape painting a try so I could have those beautiful views with me all the time. Now having painted them helps me remember them better when they are gone. It pleases me greatly that those who own my work now, as well as in the future, will also be able to remember those places. I'm not sure about the historical aspects - although I find the history of East Hampton and Gardiners Island especially interesting. One of the most interesting days I ever spent was touring Gardiners Island. I'd love to go back there for a few days to paint the Great Lagoon.



"After The Storm" 2006 (Acrylic on Canvas, 36 x 48).

***What artists do you feel have influenced you and your work?***

**GM:** The first time Claire and I visited Paris in the 1970s we both fell in love with Charles-Francois Daubigny, a Barbizon artist. I was lucky that my work took me back to Paris and London often and I always sought out his landscapes in museums. He made me want to learn to paint landscapes. Visiting the National Gallery in Washington, DC I found John Constable's "Wivenhoe Park" to have the same effect. Now I see their work often at the Met and on the internet. I thought of Constable when I was painting the cows in a painting of the Mecox Bay Dairy now at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor. When I actually

started learning to paint, William Merritt Chase's Shinnecock paintings at the Parrish Art Museum and the East Hampton paintings of Thomas Moran at Guild Hall influenced and inspired me. They still do.

***What advice would you give an emerging artist?***

**GM:** If you are young and want to pursue a 10-year plan to being a very good artist, I'd recommend studying at a classical art school or atelier. That requires a lot of time and dedication but a high percentage of the best young painters in the U.S. right now have gone that route. Laura Grenning's Gallery in Sag Harbor is a good place to see their work. For example, I've been watching Ben Fenske's progress there for three years. He seems to get better with every painting and he's still a young man.

With apologies to my art professor friends, unless you want to try to figure out what a very good contemporary artist is (a difficult, fast-moving and changing target) be very careful about spending a great deal of your time in art school.



"Maidstone Club At 17th Hole" 2008, (Acrylic on Canvas, 30 x 60).

Too many successful "realistic" artists claim they wasted their time getting an art degree because the school didn't teach realism. Maybe that will change, I hope so. Realism is definitely on the rise and a lot of art students are in danger of missing the bus. I started painting full-time about eight years ago at the tender age of 57 which didn't leave much room for a 10-year plan. I knew that I wanted to paint landscapes so I studied a couple of years with the best two local painters I knew of, Ralph Carpentier and Janet Jennings.

I also studied a lot on my own about the period of art I most related to (American tonalists and luminists from 1865 to 1915) and pretty much ignored everything else. Seeing the work in museums and galleries helped me even more. Then just do it until the paint starts acting like you want it to and then do it a lot more. Nothing beats on the job training whether it is self-taught or you're learning from others.

Once your art looks like you want it to, show as much as you can. You'll soon find out if you should continue pursuing art for fun or get really serious about it. If you're just in painting for the money and don't have time for the 10-year plan, I suggest you interview a good house painter and see if you can get a housepainter apprentice position.

#### ***What gives you an edge (if any)?***

**GM:** Being so visually oriented definitely helps me as a landscape painter. My ability to concentrate for long hours at whatever interests me and ignoring what doesn't has always served me well and been a source of frustration to those who thought I should have been concentrating on something else. For instance I may not have had the highest academic grades in school but I generally learned more than most of the other students about what I would later need to know and use. Organic chemistry would be a pretty big exception to that general rule.



"Wainscott Pond Sunrise" 2007, (Acrylic on Canvas, 30 x 60)

***What are you working on now, and are you involved in any upcoming shows or exhibitions?***

**GM:** I'm in the Plein Air Peconic III show at the [Grenning Gallery](#) until October 19. I'm still very busy with [Plein Air Peconic](#) and the Peconic Land Trust which you can learn about at our brand new website. I'm looking forward to spending the fall and winter concentrating on enjoying my good fortune at living here. In addition I have about eight medium to large studio paintings I want to finish for a spring show that are maybe a little more dramatic, climatically speaking, than the ones I've been painting lately, plus I want to paint a couple of marine paintings I've been studiously avoiding. Somewhere, Francis A. Silva is laughing at me. It should be a good six months. I also would like to get involved with a gallery in the Carolinas to give me some more incentive (with tax deductions) to get down there to paint and visit with old friends and relatives. The Low Country marshes are beautiful and when I go there I feel like I'm home.

- To view more of Matheson's work or to contact him directly go to [www.gordonmathesonstudio.com](http://www.gordonmathesonstudio.com).

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