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## local news

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### Broad Strokes For Environment And Community As Activist Artists Speak

By Mariah Quinn



Renowned landscape artist April Gornik, a North Haven resident, is an organizer of the Save Sag Harbor movement. Photo by Eric Fischl.

**East Hampton** - No one style encompasses the work of the many artists living on the East End – it runs the gamut from sculpture to large scale landscapes to intimate portraits. However, a desire to protect a unique way of life is a link that joins many local artists, who, individually and in groups, support local environmental causes, hold benefits for groups such as Maureen’s Haven and The Retreat, and work to preserve the historic character of local villages.

Their art is entwined with their advocacy – sometimes directly, other times in a more allegorical manner.

Political involvement “is one of the roles of artists,” said David Slater, one that comes more naturally to some than others. “This is more of my nature. I don’t think all artists have to be political or take action,” he added. Slater, a Sag Harbor-based artist, often includes political and socially aware overtones in his art, having composed paintings touching on life during World War II, the Chernobyl disaster, and the Iraq War.



Gornik says her work is a “poetic depiction of truth and beauty.” Above, “The Fall,” an oil on linen from 2001.

Artists often use their works to support local organizations and causes, donating pieces to be auctioned at benefits or giving a part of their commission to a cause. “Many organizations tap artists for work - they’re always asking and artists are very generous,” said Hector deCordova, past president of the Artists Alliance of East Hampton, who now has a gallery in Greenport.

DeCordova has organized benefits at his gallery for Habitat for Humanity, Maureen’s Haven, an organization that provides shelter to the homeless on the East End, and the Hudson River Health Care Center, a clinic that serves uninsured and under-insured patients.

While he uses his work to support his community advocacy, deCordova says his art of late, which he describes as sensual in nature, has no overtly political overtones. His artistic background does not go unused, however. One of the founders of Organización Latino Americana (OLA), an advocacy group

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for the Hispanic community, deCordova has instituted an art program for children through OLA, using a grant from the Town of Southampton.

Each year a group of eight to 12 students of different social and economic backgrounds create original works as part of the program; their finished pieces are framed and displayed at the gallery. The program and reception that follows uses art to bring the diverse elements of the community together, deCordova said. "I make sure at the reception that people mingle," he explained, adding, "We get everybody together and talking, and it's easy because they have their children in common."

#### Painting and Protecting the Environment

For a number of area artists, preserving open space and protecting the environment are more than a cause to get riled about – it's a vital lifeline to their work.

Gordon Matheson, a landscape painter based in Southampton, who paints on site at local farms on a regular basis, said his environmental advocacy crystallized as he sat painting a barn on Mecox Road in Water Mill several years ago. "Before I got too far along in my painting, three bulldozers came and knocked the building down in three hours right in front of my eyes," Matheson recalled.

"Watching that barn get bulldozed over I saw how quickly it disappeared," he said. "It was a defining moment that I should do anything I could to save the farms." He soon became involved with the Peconic Land Trust (PLT), a Southampton-based organization that conserves farmlands and other natural lands, organizing a series of shows featuring his and other local landscape artists' works.



Gordon Matheson created Plein Air Peconic, a group of landscape artists and photographers who serve as artistic ambassadors for Peconic Land Trust. Photo by John Casesa.

#### Defining Views

In 2006, Matheson created Plein Air Peconic, a group of 13 landscape artists and photographers who painted at many sites conserved by PLT. The choice of landscape artists and photographers was a specific one on Matheson's part – it ensured the local nature of the landscapes was not lost in the translation to art. "I wanted artists where you could recognize the area. Abstract expressionism doesn't leave an impression on you why that land has been saved."



Matheson's work en plein air includes an acrylic on canvas at the Towd Point salt marshes at sunset. Landscape photos by Gordon Matheson

Matheson said a "symbiotic" relationship developed between the artists and PLT; their paintings became "a platform to show the benefits of land conservations," Matheson said. "We think of ourselves as ambassadors for the land trust."

For Casey Chalem Anderson, a Sag Harbor-based landscape artist, also involved with Plein Air Peconic, environmental advocacy and her art are interconnected. "If we don't have beautiful places to paint, we're out of subject matter," she said, adding, "It only makes common sense that you would do what you can to hold on to it." The chance to work at protected sites as a result of her involvement with Plein Air Peconic has helped Anderson expand her scope as an artist. "Because I'm involved with the Peconic Land Trust I get access to places I mightn't have known about," she said.

There is no end in sight for Plein Air Peconic's role as an ambassador for the trust, with the third incarnation of its annual show supporting PLT, Plein Air Peconic III, scheduled

to be held at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor in October. Last year, a traveling exhibition of works featured in Plein Air Peconic II, were seen at local libraries. "It's been very successful in our mind and in the Peconic Land Trust's mind in talking about land conservation," Matheson said.

#### Saving Sag Harbor

While some interpret the paintings of April Gornik, a landscape artist based in Sag Harbor, as statements about the changing environment, Gornik says it's not the case.

"My art has always been a poetic depiction of truth and beauty that I recognize. I never focused it on anything political - though I'm very happy to have people interpret it that way," she said. Nonetheless, Gornik uses her art in different ways to support her chosen causes, which include the Save Sag Harbor movement, aimed at preserving the historic character of the village, The Retreat, and East End Hospice, donating works to be auctioned off and participating in benefits.

Though her activism and art may be separate entities, Gornick holds that "aesthetic appreciation is linked across the board whether it be about art or environment." In the case of her work to preserve Sag Harbor and what she describes as its "special aesthetic," Gornick noted, "No matter how far flung people are from this area, they have a universal enthusiasm for Sag Harbor's individuality."

At its most basic level, the artists' advocacy is linked to preserving and bettering life in the communities in which they work. "As you see the places you love disappear it makes you want to do something to help," Matheson explained. "It's a natural part of it."



Another piece by Matheson is an acrylic on canvas painted at Circle Beach.



Artists in Plein Air Peconic have access to sites preserved by the Peconic Land Trust. Above, a work by Gordon Matheson at Two Trees Stables in Bridgehampton.

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