

The Sag Harbor Express.

Inspiration From the Land

Posted on 24 September 2010



"Mashomack Point" by Melissa Franklin Sanchez 15 x 35 inches, Oil, 2010

By Annette Hinkle

Angel Ramiro Sanchez and his wife, Melissa Franklin Sanchez definitely have a foot in two worlds — and it's certainly an enviable life for a pair of artists. Ten months a year spent living and working in their studio in Florence, Italy — the very cradle of artistic expression — followed by two glorious months each summer painting on the East End.

Melissa and Ramiro, as he is known, are two of the painters featured in the new Plein Air Seascapes show opening this weekend at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor. The couple, who just celebrated their first wedding anniversary last week, met five years ago at the Florence Academy of Art. The academy specializes in teaching old world technique, and Ramiro, who left his native Venezuela at 18 for Italy, studied at the academy and eventually became a teacher there. Melissa was a student from Stratford-upon-Avon (Shakespeare's hometown in England) who came to the academy in search of classical artistic training.

"Florence is now our permanent home," says Melissa. "We love it very much. Every day you go out and see something new and inspiring. Ramiro and I and two friends created a studio with 17 spaces and we have photographers, etchers, all sorts of artists working there."

But once summer arrives each year, Melissa and Ramiro leave Florence just as the hordes of tourists begin to descend on the small city. They head west — to the East End where they seek out secluded beaches and pastoral views to paint.

“The beauty of the East End is amazing — the light and color are so unique,” says Melissa. “You have water around you everywhere, the colors are so crystal clear. Then you have the tradition that many artists have always come here. Every year we come back, there are more scenes to paint.”

Melissa adds that she is struck by the care East End residents have for the natural places around them. This summer, she painted her major work along Southampton’s Dune Road and was inspired by scenery that evoked the art of another painter who worked in the area more than a century ago – William Merritt Chase.

“It’s hard to find the dune scenes — more houses are being built — but that area is still very pure,” she says. “The colors there are amazing.”

Like Florence, the artistic history of this area is not lost on the couple. They admire the generations of painters who came before them, and Ramiro and Melissa both feel that in many ways, they are writing the next chapter of the story of painting on the East End.

“Thomas Moran was always here in summers, then he’d leave and paint figures and the west,” says Ramiro. “It was the same with William Merritt Chase. In winter, he’d do portraits and figures — summer was the time to come here and paint landscapes. Somehow, we have the same schedule today. Winter is dark, we spend more time inside the studio working with figures.”

Among the many friends Ramiro and Melissa have made during their time on the East End is Shelter Island’s Nelson White, a fellow painter who also shows at the Grenning Gallery, and, by virtue of his artistic lineage, stresses the history of the place.

“He says we are congenial,” laughs Melissa.

White comes from a long line of artists. His family built their house on Shelter Island in the 1920s, and has a direct link to painters from Connecticut who were contemporaries of Childe Hassam and other renown artists, as well as those from the Peconic colony of on the North Fork in the early 20th century.

“We admire the work of that period and they give us a lot of inspiration,” says Melissa.

“It pushes the pressure up,” admits Ramiro. “You see what they did at their time. Even the more modern painters — the light and the language used in the ‘60s and ‘70s. We use the language we know now.”

Though they are classically trained and their canvases may resemble the pastoral landscapes of the East End in an earlier time period, Melissa and Ramiro stress they are contemporary painters for the modern age — and their work represents the era of conservation. Painting views, not of houses and highways, but of open spaces and natural areas like those at Mashomoack bring emphasis to the foresight of groups like The Nature Conservancy who took steps to preserve the view for future generations. This, they note, is art that is representative of the new reality.

“Today there’s so much concern about nature, what we have we don’t want to destroy,” says Melissa. “We’re there watching it observing and hopefully we’re part of it.”



“Mashomack” by Ramiro 24 x 42inches, Oil, 2010

“Modernism today has many branches,” adds Ramiro. “I think people look for conservancy, ecology and human relationships. Mashomack was established in 1980. It’s a very contemporary theme.

“It’s all boats and nature, and no houses,” he adds. “You admire the view. It’s very contemporary and offers a more subtle message.”

And in that way, Ramiro and Melissa feel they are carving a new niche for the next generation of East End artist.

“Art is splitting or curving,” explains Ramiro. “There’s a lot more acceptance of realism today than there was in the 1980s. I think it validates what we’re doing. The tradition and real inspiration.”

In addition to painting their major works during summers here, Melissa and Ramiro also take time to visit a variety of East End locations and create small sketches that could become their big projects next summer. The couple returned to Florence this week and they already have a good idea of what next summer’s compositions will be.

“We know we’ll be doing some major projects at Mashomack. That’s my goal,” says Ramiro. “Another artist here at the gallery, Jim Albinson, took us out to Montauk and Camp Hero to see the cliffs. We were also very inspired by that, but there’s no time now. That’s what I’m looking forward to next summer.”

“It’ll be nice to spend more time there,” agrees Melissa.

When it comes to painting on location, time is an important ingredient and the one that allows Melissa and Ramiro to immerse themselves in the experience. They say it's what makes the painting more than just a visual representation of a place, but rather, a work that inspires deeper emotion in the viewer.

"it's about the feeling of a place and it's why we often spend 10 days at a location," explains Melissa. "We're not capturing the line of a tree, but the movement, the feel of the breeze, or the sand between your toes. That's hopefully what people see and they have that feeling. That's why we come here for two months every summer."

"I think that's the most exciting part of job," she adds. "The amazing locations. One night it will be so hot you have to jump in the water, then the bugs will be flying in your face or your palette will fall in the sand. It's the beauty of experience — it's a depiction of time in that place."

"That's something I think that makes us very lucky," she says. "We have the time as artists to spend observing."

The Plein Air Seascape show opens on Saturday, September 25 with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Grenning Gallery, 17 Washington Street, Sag Harbor. In addition to Ramiro and Melissa Franklin Sanchez, the show features works by Paul Rafferty, Ben Fenske, James Daga Albinson, Nelson White, Marc Dalessio and Shea Keating. The show will remain on view through October 17.

Top: "Mashomack Point" by Melissa Franklin Sanchez

Middle: "Mashomack" by Ramiro