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Posted April 6, 2012

## Inspired by a Coastline

by Annette Hinkle



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When painting coastal landscapes, most artists who work al fresco prefer to focus on summer views. This is especially true in a place like Maine where darkness falls early once summer ends and the winters can be downright brutal.

But on view now at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor is the work of three artists, including Michael Kotasek and Ben Fenske who have not only spent an admirable amount of time painting in Maine - they have chosen to do so at a time of year when most painters – and in fact many residents – are no where to be found.

In the off season.

Michael Kotasek lives in Binghamton, N.Y. a place that is no stranger to tough winters. But he's long been drawn to coastal views in

his work. Kotasek, who's shown at Grenning Gallery a number of times in recent years, has painted several works featuring Sag Harbor's familiar architecture (including the Whaling Museum and the Hannibal French House) as well as local water views.

"I always liked the ocean," admits Kotasek. "When I was younger, my parents ran a travel agency and I saw the world. They also owned property in Florida."

But Florida is nothing like coastal Maine, which is where Kotasek headed last spring and fall to paint (partly due to his love of seafood but also, he presumably jokes, because of the need to get away from his crazy relatives). With his earth-toned based palette and a penchant for painting weather beaten houses, Kotasek's work is strongly reminiscent of another American painter who was drawn to the scenery of coastal Maine – the late and great Andrew Wyeth.

"I like to seek out historical buildings and things like that," explains Kotasek. "I think that's the same anywhere – like the work I did in Sag Harbor. Historical properties kind of capture my imagination. It seems in Maine every other house looks like it's haunted."

"The people in Maine also kind of fascinate me," he adds. "It seems like such a hard life. The coastlines are so unforgiving. I've heard in the winter it's almost scary to be there."

Usually Kotasek, who paints in the Ogunquit area, will spend at least a week on his artistic trips to Maine, and for good reason – the weather.

"Up in Maine the light changes really fast. It can be sunny and then suddenly you're in fog. When the sun comes out I jump in the car and take off," explains Kotasek. "In the past I've tried to go just for a couple nights, but if the weather's not with me it's kind of a waste. With a week, I'm guaranteed a couple of good days."

Spending time in summer resorts in the off-season can be an eye opener and Kotasek has found Maine to be no exception. Not only is it a good time to get to know a place and its people – Kotasek notes there are bargains to be had as well.

"It seems like everything is 20 percent off in the fall so they don't have to sit on it for the winter," he says. "I like talking to the people – the innkeepers and people who own the small hotels. Even the working people – the maids and the waitresses and waiters. You talk to some who are just there for the season and gone for the winter. From a lot of locals you can find out about places of interest you wouldn't have known about."

"I stayed in one place which was literally next to the harbor master station and the cove where the lobstermen kept their boats. When I looked out the window I could see the guys loading the fish."

That view from his room is the subject of "Harbor Master Station," a watercolor included in the Grenning show.

There are other benefits to Maine in the off-season and for Kotasek, that means painting outdoors in solace without the curiosity of passersby.

"Ogunquit has a long history of artists and is known as an artists' community, so they don't really pay a lot of attention to artists," says Kotasek. "But I like to go in spring and fall because there are not as many people. You don't have a lot of visitors looking over your shoulder to see what you're doing."

If viewers find Kotasek's work evocative of Wyeth's Maine imagery, it may also be because he prefers the same mediums – watercolor, which Kotasek uses to paint on location, and egg tempera he does not, due to the fact it requires a long process of preparing a wood panel with gesso.

"The water color is more spontaneous and less involved than the egg tempera," he explains. "The tempera is for paintings where an idea or image is stuck in my head and I want to explore it more."

When asked why he prefers egg tempera – a very old method of painting – to either acrylics or oils, Kotasek explains.

"I think there's a very unique look to it which sets it apart from other mediums," he says. "I'm able to work in details of very crisp edges which you can't get with the others. It dries to the touch, but it takes months to go through the chemical breakdown and harden. Then it's supposedly as tough as oil."

But working with watercolors on location in Maine in the off season? Kotasek has a secret for that one.

"I found in cold weather you can add a couple drops of alcohol to your water," he confides.

Like Michael Kotasek, Ben Fenske is no stranger to northern climes. A native of Minnesota, he grew up knowing all about winter.

But these days, he spends most of the year in a much different environment – the Tuscany region of Italy where he lives seven months of the year just south of Florence. Fenske, a painter and teacher of classical realism, studied at the Florence Academy and he paints the area's warm verdant rural scenes and the busy street life of medieval towns.

It's a far cry from Maine in the winter. But, in fact, that's exactly where Fenske has chosen to paint for a month and a half over the course of the last two years. He is drawn to the mid-coast region of the state, around Rockport, and in many ways, going to Maine feels like going home.

"I think snow and ice have an interesting effect. They transform the landscape completely," he says. "Something that might not be that interesting in the summer might be really more interesting in winter."

"Living in Italy for the past six years I missed snow," he adds. "The snow is my favorite thing and also the sea. There are not many

people [in Rockport] and it has a small town feel. People are so nice and welcoming there.”

And getting to know the inhabitants of coastal Maine, rather than just capturing the scenery from an outside observer’s point of view, has been one of the highlights for Fenske.

“That’s the interesting part of it,” he says. “I’m meeting a lot of people and there’s a group of fishermen that kind of took me and my friend in. They said I could paint whatever I want on the dock and took us out fishing a few times.”

While the landscape has primarily been his preferred subject in recent years, Fenske, who often spends summers painting in Sag Harbor, is interested in adding more figurative work to his Maine portfolio.

“In Maine I’ve painted just on location - almost 100 percent – and haven’t tried that hard to paint people doing things,” says Fenske. “I would like to do more of that. It’s kind of something I’m working for. But painting people takes some time.”

One way Fenske is tackling the “people problem” is by working with a Maine clammer that he became friends with who was willing to be his subject.

“I made 10 drawings of him posing and then followed him out clamming and made paintings,” says Fenske.

One look at Fenske’s collection of Maine paintings will confirm this is an artist unafraid of the cold. Snow and ice figure prominently in many of his pieces and as a painter who works nearly exclusively on location, Fenske has proven he has the constitution to stand up to the elements (though if ever there was a winter to paint in Maine, this one was it).

“I grew up in Minnesota so I know how to keep warm,” says Fenske. “I wear three pairs of pants and a good pair of boots. But I don’t wear gloves because I can’t hold the paint brush with them.”

“Though this winter, the week I was there it was 80 degrees,” he notes.

*“Peconic and Maine Bayscapes” is on view now through April 29 at the Grenning Gallery (17 Washington Street, Sag Harbor). In addition to Kotasek and Fenske, the exhibit features the work of Amagansett’s Thomas Cardone, an artist new to the gallery who offers a series of Peconic and Long Island Sound scenes including images of Southampton, Shelter Island and Three Mile Harbor. For more information on the show, call the gallery at 725-8469.*

