

Russian and American Painters Connect through Painting En Plein Air

Pat Rogers, November 26, 2016

It's not uncommon to see en plein air painters working alongside the back roads of The Hamptons, staring intently at farmland or landscapes including ponds, bays or ocean. The busy walking village of Sag Harbor in The Hamptons recently gained a noticeable influx of plein air painters gazing across streets filled with cars at a row of storefronts or grassy parks when around seven artists set up their easels to make paintings on location as part of a group trip that connected Russian and American painters.

The Sag Harbor outing was the second part of a two-state painting excursion that started in Maine and moved to The Hamptons in October and November 2016. The trip culminated in an exhibition of works made during the two-week trip at Grenning Gallery, which specializes in contemporary realism inspired by classical realism. "Russian-American Painting Alliance" is on view November 5 to December 4, 2016 at two locations in Sag Harbor, NY.



"Main Street, Morning" by Irina Rybakova, 2016. Oil on canvas, 19.50 x 23.75 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

The group was made up of 10 artists with not every American painter making both parts of the trip. The collective made so many paintings of note that the Grenning Gallery secured a second temporary space to showcase the works selected by gallerist Laura Grenning for the curated exhibition “Russian-American Painting Alliance.” The two-location exhibition is being presented in Sag Harbor at Grenning Gallery and at a pop up presented at Christy’s Building Art Center, located around the corner.

Artists from Russia are Olga Karpacheva, Viktor Butko, Irina Rybakova and Oleg Zhuravlev. American painters are Ben Fenske (b. Minnesota; based in Sag Harbor, NY and Chianti, Italy), Carl Bretzke (St. Paul, MN), Stapleton Kearns (NH), Leo Mancini-Hresko (Waltham, MA), Tim McGuire (b. Buffalo, NY, based in Florence, Italy) and Jesse Powell (Carmel, CA).

The exhibition presents a rare opportunity to examine the difference between the Russian tradition of plein air painting and the Italian approach as applied by American painters. Nearly all the American painters have studied or, in some cases, taught at the Florence Academy of Art in Italy. Many continue to teach in the United States either through their own studios or through formal schools.



"Sag Harbor Beach" by Oleg Zhuravlev, 2016. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

The link between the Russian and American painters was established in 2013 through the Russian-based and sponsored cultural exchange program “Green Noise.” The annual program aims to connect plein air paintings traditions in Russia with those around the world by inviting artists from different countries, selected each year, to work in Plyos, Russia.

Set along the Volga River in the Ivanovo region, the reclusive city was a favorite summer painting location for renowned Russian landscape painter Isaac Ilyich Levitan (1860-1900). Several paintings he made in Plyos are considered break-throughs in the history of Russian landscape painting and the spot is esteemed by artists around the world who are steeped in the landscape tradition, explained several of the American painters interviewed about the recent Maine and Hamptons excursions.

"I jumped at the chance to be able to visit Plyos and to see the same views that Isaac Levitan did," said Powell in a phone interview about the 2013 trip. "Plyos is like the Russian Giverny."



"Village View" by Viktor Butko, 2016. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

While not Italian-born, American painters based in Italy were invited to participate in the 2013 "Green Noise" program as they were each living and working in Italy and had studied, and taught, at the Florence Academy of Fine Art. American painters participating in both the 2013 and 2016 trips included Ben Fenske, Leo Mancini-Hresko, Jesse Powell and Tim McGuire.

The experience in Russia was a positive one by all accounts (except for the challenge of the pouring rain that showed up daily, said Mancini-Hresko). Fenske wanted to return the hospitality and organized the 2016 trip to Maine and the Hamptons, said Grenning. Half of the Russian

painters in the 2013 "Green Noise" program came to America for the recent trip—a first visit for many of the artists, said Grenning.

One of the draws of both the plein air painting trips was the chance to work alongside artists from different painting traditions, said Powell, who had also painted in the Eurasian country of Georgia in the Caucasus before the 2013 trip. Despite the language barrier experienced on both journeys, the commonality of being in the company of artists who all paint en plein air (and finish paintings on location as is part of the traditional practice) helped bridge gaps across the language divide.

Another attraction for both groups of painters was the opportunity to witness and learn from an art exchange between Russian, European and American traditions. The differences in the training, cultural touchstones, aesthetics and art traditions can be seen in the paintings in the exhibition. Comparisons can most easily be drawn when viewing the paintings made by the Russian artists.

The application of paint reveals a significant divergence. The Russian artists are trained in Russian Impressionism and their paintings on view feature confident brush strokes and a thick application of paint that can appear sculptural. In the Russian tradition, the brushstrokes and the ways the paint is applied are where emotions are transferred from the artist to the painting after the composition has been constructed structurally, explained Mancini-Hresko.



"Stonington Harbor from Church Street" by Leo Mancini-Hresko, 2016. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

There were exceptions in both cultural camps. Russian painter Viktor Butko favors a sparser application and frequent includes large fields of color in his compositions. While most of the American painters favor thinner applications of paint than the Russians, the exception is Ben Fenske, whose paintings feature thick application of paint that is true to Impressionism. Fenske has studied at the Russian Academy of Art and the Florence Academy of Art in Florence, Italy and the Studio of Joseph Paquet and Bougie Studio in Minnesota.

For the Americans, the opportunity to watch the Russian painters at work provided insight into their training and encouraged some of the painters on the trip to experiment with their own techniques, said the artists interviewed about the trip. Another difference that encouraged the artists to stretch was the size of the canvas. The Russian painters tend to work large with some of the American painters following suit. A typical canvas size for American painters is 10 x 12 inches when painting en plein air, said Powell.



"Moonrise" by Jesse Powell, 2016. Oil on canvas, 12 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

“I was trying to understand how the Russians consistently appeared to paint with so much paint yet completed fairly large paintings outdoors very quickly,” wrote Carl Bretzke in an email interview. “Surprisingly, it was less paint than I had actually thought. They were very good at transferring paint from brush to canvas utilizing the right paint consistency and fairly light brisk brushstrokes.”

The crossover between the Russian and European traditions is especially clear in one installation at the Christy’s Building, where paintings by Russian painter Olga Karpacheva are displayed alongside those made by Ben Fenske. Both artists paint in an Impressionism tradition with the works providing natural compliments to each other.



"Stonington, Maine" by Ben Fenske, 2016. Oil on canvas, 25.60 x 31.50 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.



"Allen Cove" by Olga Karpacheva, 2016. Oil on canvas, 23.75 x 31.75 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

Aesthetically, the influence of photography in American landscape painting is prominent in the works on view. Most contemporary American painters use photography as a tool in making the work, said Powell, which affects compositional choices. A subtler influence of photography (and viewing art online) is a preference for graphic elements by the art viewing public. This also has an effect on the paintings being made, said Powell.

One of the unexpected pleasures in viewing the exhibition is the variety of views captured by the group. There are paintings portraying crashing waters from above; paintings featuring land, sea and sky; natural scenes set in woods; abandoned cars; roof top views and village storefronts.

In fact, there was only one scene that was painted by all the artists, said Grenning. One of the most challenging of the trip, the scene featured a boat on its side on the shore with water snaking behind it and a village rising on the opposite shore. In the painting on view in the exhibition, *Abandoned Boat - Stonington* by Carl Bretzke, 2016, the boat may draw the eye first but the light infused water pulls the viewer into the scene, moving around the boat and deeper into the painting in an intriguing visual journey.



"Abandoned Boat - Stonington" by Carl Bretzke, 2016. Oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

The only evidence of the artists interpreting the same scene can be found in paintings portraying a harbor in Stonington, ME made by Fenske and Butko. Installed in two different rooms at the Christy's Building, the works are easily viewed together. Due to the different painting styles and lighting from different times of day (midday and twilight), it's not immediately clear the vista is the same for both paintings.

"The way the artists handled the same views is one of the interesting things about looking at the paintings made on the trip," said Grenning after discussing the two works. "There aren't two paintings that look the same from the trip and the variation is quite pronounced."



"Cloudy Day, Stonington" by Viktor Butko, 2016. Oil on canvas, 27.75 x 39.25 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.



"Overcast Harbor, Stonington" by Ben Fenske, 2016. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 31.25 inches. Courtesy Grenning Gallery.

For all the artists interviewed, the American painting trip was an enjoyable one with time spent in the camaraderie of artists cited as some of the most satisfying moments. It's likely the fellowship of artists will continue as the Americans have been invited to paint in Russia next year, said Bretzke. It's also likely the Russian painters will return for a second painting trip here, said Grenning.

For now, the paintings from the trip serve as a reminder of the connections fostered among contemporary painters studying different art traditions and coming from different cultures. The paintings on view are beautiful and serve as a reminder of the vitality of en plein air painting, an approach that continues to stand on its own and where retiring to the studio to complete the painting isn't a necessity.

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