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# Capturing the Summer on Canvas

by The Sag Harbor Express



By Marianna Levine

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“Local Landscapes,” a show opening at the Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor on Saturday, August 30, captures the serene beauty of a summer spent on the eastern end of Long Island. In fact the paintings will represent the idylls of this specific summer. “Some of the paintings are so new they’ll be hung wet!” Shea Keating, the Grenning Gallery’s manager enthuses. Several international artists, most of who are connected with Daniel Graves’ classical school, The Florence Academy of Art, have spent their summer painting the area’s countless beaches, marinas, and picturesque pathways. Keating describes one of the yet to be completed works as “a 48 by 72 inch painting of a local beach by painter Ben Fenske. The canvas is so large that he had to strap it onto the top of his car and drive it to what he likes to refer to as his “secret beach” in North Haven. The painting is so long that he can’t even place it on an easel. The canvas was constantly blown down by the wind.”

Another work by an artist named Ramiro is a small, black-framed painting of Long Beach. Seeing this familiar local beach so well executed on canvas brings out the romanticism of a vista most residents have long taken for granted as they fly by the road on their way to town. The sea is a choppy, deep Prussian blue, while the azure of the sky is dabbed with the purplish pink suggestion of a budding sunset. It is a snatched moment of summer familiar to anyone who walks along Long Beach in late afternoon.

Laura Grenning explains how this end of summer Grenning Gallery tradition began.

“Several of the artists we represent are anchored to this community through portrait commissions,” she said. “Often they are hosted by the family they’re painting, so they stay out here for weeks or months at a time. Life-long friendships are built, and of course it makes for a much better portrait in the end. However, landscapes are a great way for artists to get out of their studios and paint. The outdoors is what most people come out here for anyway. And it was a good way for me to test out new artists for the gallery as well.”

She also adds that several artists are put up by volunteers in the community making it an informal and creative version of a foreign

exchange program. The host families often get a painting in exchange for free room and board. So down come all the studied interiors, and dramatic full-length portraits that usually line Grenning Gallery's walls, and up go large and small paintings of every imaginable shade of blue. Each painting reminding one of how sunny this soon-to-pass summer was, and how delightful it would be to capture its essence by hanging it on one's wall.

Wandering into the gallery, housed within the historic Sag Harbor Cinema, one feels pleasantly transported back in time. The gallery resembles a nineteenth century Parisian atelier. The narrow gallery entrance widens into a larger reception area, which leads one up a wooden staircase into a skylit, turpentine-scented studio space. Although it is easy to mistake the displayed landscapes hanging there for paintings from an earlier era, little details in the work remind one that the artwork is indeed contemporary.

As a matter of fact, Grenning is quick to point out that the majority of her gallery's artists are in their 20s and early 30s, and that it is part of her mission to support living artists. Grenning feels that the style of poetic realism she chooses to exhibit is "the movement of our generation - marked by a high level of craft, humility in the face of nature, a desire to represent the harmony and balance found in nature, and a possession of the discipline and skill necessary to present it to the public. That's really what this show is all about." Grenning feels this is a twenty-first century movement and a positive reaction to the abstract, the pop art, and the conceptual common in twentieth century art.

Laura Grenning started her gallery ten years ago after a dramatic life-change, which led to a chance encounter with the painter Nelson White on, appropriately enough, a local beach. Grenning had worked as a stock market analyst in Hong Kong, but had always dreamed of returning to the United States and buying a house on Shelter Island. Once she had the house, she decided to resume the study of art, an interest she had put on hold while earning a living in another capacity. However, she had trouble locating schools that taught the realistic, classical style she sought to emulate. It was her encounter with White that brought her into contact with The Florence Academy of Art, and eventually led her to open a gallery to display and sell the work of artists who worked in the academy's style. At the time she felt, "this tradition was dying. It was a visual language that seemed to be unavailable, and I wanted artists to portray my contemporary life in this way." What Grenning has accomplished with her gallery space is to guarantee that realistic, well-crafted landscapes of her local community will be made and displayed for new generations to appreciate.

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