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## Sharing a Studio, Sharing A Show

by Annette Hinkle



*Leo Painting in the Studio by Joe Altwer*

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As artists, Leo Mancini-Hresko and Joe Altwer share a studio space with Marc Dalessio in Florence, Italy where they perfect their talents by painting still lifes, portraits and landscapes. Both artists are former students of the Florence Academy, a school which trains artists to work in the mode of classical realism.

This week, the work of the two young artists will hang side by side in Sag Harbor at the Grenning Gallery as part of "Studio Tour 2011" a show that highlights both the tried and true as well as up and coming talent that can be found in the studios of artists now working in Florence. The show opens this Saturday, May 14 with a reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. and according to Grenning Gallery manager Cindy Neuendorf, the work represents the latest coming out of the artists' studios.

"Every winter we go to Florence at the end of January - we want to set our schedule for the season," explains Neuendorf who travels with gallery owner, Laura Grenning. "Marc Dalessio is our main artist and we'll most likely always have a solo show with him as long as he is producing new work."

"But we'll also be invited to see the work of new artists," she adds. "We'd often hear these names from other artists when they come to work in Sag Harbor in the summer. So we put them on the list of people to see."

This past January, it was Leo Mancini-Hresko and Joe Altwer whose work caught the eye of Neuendorf and Grenning on their annual Florence foray to see Dalessio's work. This will be the first significant show for the two artists at the Grenning Gallery.

“Leo had a wall full of paintings and we picked those that spoke to us,” says Neuendorf, who notes she and Grenning also had the opportunity to see Altwer’s current work in the same space, and were impressed by what they saw. “We went to about 10 studios. You can like everything, but when you come back and process it and look at the hundreds of images we took, those stand out. That’s when it comes down to the quality “These guys get the tools from their classical training, but from there, they’re able to tap into other abilities,” she adds.

Leo Mancini-Hresko is a Boston native, but he has lived in Florence for 11 years – ever since finding the Florence Academy while on a study abroad program. His offerings in this show include a vibrant mix of portraiture, and colorful landscapes of the European countryside – including Italy, Spain, France and Greece.

“I think the only thing I don’t have is American scenes,” jokes Mancini-Hresko who will be coming to Sag Harbor this July and is looking forward to spending time painting in his native northeast using the skills he has learned over the last decade in Florence.

Mancini-Hresko’s evolution as an artist mirrors that of many artists who eventually find their way to the Florence Academy. He had been drawing and painting since he was a child and always had his sights set on being an artist. Mancini-Hresko notes that while his parents were supportive – providing him with classes at the art museum in Boston and even enrolling him in a summer program at the prestigious RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) he felt strongly there was still something lacking in the technique he was being taught.

“I couldn’t find teachers that could teach me to draw the way I wanted to,” says Mancini-Hresko. “There’s a real swing back to realistic looking work and now there are certainly many more places to learn the technique. But 10 years ago it was hard to find.”

Mancini-Hresko eventually found what he was looking for in the Florence Academy while he was on a study abroad program – and it came about by accident.

“I just happened to walk by the academy and it seemed to be more what I was looking for and they encouraged me to stay,” he says.

So Mancini-Hresko began the evolution that continues to inform his technique to this day.

“Obviously when we train we try to keep things tight and limited in color. The program is extremely drawing based,” says Mancini-Hresko. “Because of that, my older work is less colorful and to me, a lot less interesting. I’m striving now to use more color and impressionistic lighting effects with more traditional realism.”

“I’ve started working with a much brighter palette,” he adds. “Before I would lean toward a very dark surface to make it look more moody. I’m now focused on light canvas and light shining through. I’ve also been concentrating on landscape. The more you paint and work from life the more beauty you see everywhere.”

“It’s an important evolution in painting, learning to paint all different sorts of things - and seeing beauty in many subjects,” says Mancini-Hresko.

“I’m painting things now I wouldn’t have a few years ago,” adds Mancini-Hresko who points to his 2007 portrait “Ranier” as one representing a turning point in his artistic evolution.

“That’s when my painting started loosening up and I stopped being so academic and started branching out,” he says. “I can’t choose or force the direction it goes in. I’m along for the ride. Whatever we have in us to create it takes over. But it’s exciting. I really like the work here.”

Being studio-mates not only provides the artists in this show an opportunity to bounce ideas off their peers, it also provides inspiration. One of Joe Altwer’s major paintings in this Grenning exhibition is a portrait of Mancini-Hresko at work on his own canvas, surrounded by his completed paintings. Altwer, 27, a native of California, is the youngest of the Grenning Gallery’s artists and he seems to be able to find inspiration everywhere he looks.

“More recently, my work has been about daily life – the cup of coffee,” he says. “Or I’ll notice something that looks really interesting and bring it into the studio or paint at home.

“I really love doing portraits, but doing landscapes always offers variety and I like working outside,” says Altwer who’s offerings include a snow scene painted in-situ in the French Alps. “It’s a little bit of a challenge. You set up your easel and paints and just when you’re ready to make the first mark, the paint is frozen. So then you have to add turpentine. But the views are actually incredible in the snow.”

Altwer has been living in Florence for four years and also studied at the Florence Academy. Like Mancini-Hresko, Altwer found the academy by complete chance while enrolled in a study abroad program.

Art wasn’t an initial interest for him as a child. Growing up in Half Moon Bay, California, Altwer admits he didn’t tap into his artistic interests until the very end of his high school career.

“I was mostly into skateboarding until then,” he says.

After realizing his passion for art, Altwer set out to pursue a degree in the field, but was left wanting more from the programs he found.

“I couldn’t find the strong drawing and painting program in the U.S. So I studied abroad and came to Florence, where I met Leo,” says Altwer who then enrolled at the Florence Academy. “The Academy teaches the strong drawing values. You don’t even pick up a brush until after two years.”

Now that Altwer has perfected his classical technique in Europe, he’s been having fun using it on scenes of his native California.

There are paintings in this show of the coastline which he painted while on a visit to his home state this past February – ironically while Neuendorf and Grenning were visiting his studio in Florence.

“The quality of light in Italy is amazing. In Florence, you’re in the middle of the country,” he says. “But in California, the coastline is constantly changing between fog and tides.”

“Ever since I left home for Florence, now when I go back to California, I see these views I’ve never noticed before,” says Altwer. “It’s really fun to see.”

One thing that hasn’t left Altwer during his time in Italy is his love of skateboarding. After he’s done in the studio, he often grabs his skateboard and heads out to the streets of Florence to hang out with an entirely different crowd.

“I go skateboarding with the Italians,” he says. “I can get by. It’s a little community with everyone speaking English and I pick up a little Italian.”

“Studio Tour 2011” also features paintings by Daniela Astone and Nelson White. The opening reception at Grenning Gallery (17 Washington Street, Sag Harbor) is from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. this Saturday May 14. The exhibit will run through June 12. For details, call 725-8469.

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