

In Residence

Coastal retreats perpetuate the tradition of Maine island artists

CARL LITTLE

When the photographer and watercolor painter George Daniell (1911–2002) visited Monhegan Island during his first trip to Maine in 1938—he left Ogunquit in search of relief from a bad case of hay fever—he rented The Lobster Pot, a fisherman’s shack, for seven dollars a month (washroom facilities were at the nearby Monhegan House). He photographed the island and turned out, in his words, “countless splashy, undisciplined watercolors that I exhibited on my floor every night.”

Long gone are the cut-rate rents Daniell and other artists enjoyed back in the day. Yet thanks to the vision and generosity of a number of nonprofits, foundations, a government agency and many individuals, including artists, opportunities to paint—and write and sculpt, photograph, film and dance—on Maine islands exist for those who can’t afford the generally stiff rentals. In the past 20 years at least six residencies have been established on islands, from Westport, in the Midcoast, to Norton, way downeast. With distinct criteria and varying capacities, these programs offer experiences and opportunities for artists from Maine and from away—sometimes far away.

Great Cranberry

The newest Maine island residency can be found on Great Cranberry Island, at the former home of painters John Heliker (1909–2000) and Robert LaHotan (1927–2002). Lifelong partners, they created some of their finest work on the largest of the Cranberry Isles, a five-island archipelago off the southern end of Mount Desert Island. They also shared a vision that their island residence and studios should continue to be used by artists. Knowing that what they had been fortunate to have lay beyond the reach of many, they



Jo Weiss, director of the Washington Studio School, painting in the Heliker-LaHotan print-making studio, July 2007

created the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation in 1993 to fulfill their legacy. (When LaHotan asked his neighbor Gary Allen to be on the board of the foundation, he told him, “Get the lights back on. I want people back in there.”)

After Heliker died in 2000 and LaHotan two years later, the foundation’s board of trustees, led by Patricia Bailey, a lifelong friend of the artists and a professor of painting and drawing at Western Carolina University, began making plans to launch the residency. In 2006, the first two artists arrived; in 2007, the program welcomed eight.

The two-at-a-time residencies run three and four weeks and are open to “artists of established ability” wherever they may live, with preference given to those individuals who may not otherwise have an opportunity to work in Maine. Resident artists are encouraged to open their studios to islanders near the end of their stay and/or present a public program about their work.

Among last summer’s residents was Lilian Cooper, an artist from Amsterdam, who is currently involved in a 20-year project to draw the North Atlantic coastal rim. “I’m drawing all the edges,” Cooper told *Portland Press Herald* arts reporter Bob Keyes during her visit in July; “It wouldn’t be complete without Maine.”

In addition to a spectacular view of the Pool, the island’s only tidal estuary, the residence itself is a gem. Enoch B. Stanley, a ship’s captain, built the main residence in the 19th century. Heliker and LaHotan fixed it up and converted outbuildings into studios. They hosted a number of celebrated artists, including composer Samuel Barber and photographer Walker Evans. The island itself was a hotbed of East Coast artists. In addition to Heliker and LaHotan, the likes of Gretna Campbell, William Kienbusch, Dorothy Eisner and Carl Nelson made the island their seasonal art base.

Greg Rec, courtesy of Portland Press Herald

Great Spruce Head Island

The Porter family home on Great Spruce Head in Penobscot Bay has an equally significant place in the history of American art. The island served as inspiration for the painter Fairfield Porter and his photographer brother Eliot Porter. The setting is remarkable: “that far-off island in Penobscot Bay,” as poet James Schuyler referred to it, led to paintings by the former and photographs by the latter that are icons in their respective mediums.

Anina Porter Fuller, daughter of Fairfield’s and Eliot’s younger brother John, had been going to the island every summer since she was little. “When I arrived,” she recalled recently, “Fairfield would come down and meet me at the dock and help carry my art supplies up.” Wanting to share the island experience with other artists, Fuller struck upon the idea of hosting a one-week program. Inspired by a visit to the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle in the summer of 1992, she invited a group of artist friends to come to the island for a week. The retreat was a success, and the Great Spruce Head Island Art Week was born.

Fuller’s vision was of a residency without instruction. “It’s not a workshop,” she notes, “not a typical trip. This [experience] is so grounded, even for people who don’t come from Maine. They’re away from it all, in a special space.”

The residency is intense and almost nonstop, often beginning with explorations of the island and culminating with a sharing of work on the Friday night before the group departs. Painters and writers predominate, with an occasional photographer, musician and sculptor joining them. The decks on the main house double as studios. There is a nominal fee to cover food and transportation, but nearly half the 12 slots are covered by scholarships.

In recent years a number of Maine artists have attended, many of them learning about the program through word of mouth. Printmaker Siri Beckman, poets Linda Buckmaster and Elizabeth Garber, sculptors Squidge Davis and Sharon Townsend, jeweler Fred Woell, book artist Rebecca Goodale



Jim Lynch paints, in residence.

and painters Tom Curry, Brita Holmquist and Lydia Cassatt are among past visitors.

The residency permits husband and wife to attend together if they are both artists. In 2002 two couples were on island: songwriter/composer Gordon Bok, who carved small relief sculptures, and his wife, harpist Carol Rohl; and artist MaJo Keleshian and her husband, poet Sylvester Pollet. Among a group of 60 haiku-esque poems that Pollet wrote during his stay is one that relates to Rohl:

*takes one hell of an imagination
plus the right woman
to sail with a harp aboard*

Norton Island

It takes a bit of pioneering spirit to apply for the Eastern Frontier Education Foundation’s Norton Island residency way downeast. Among the criteria for attending is, in founder Stephen Dunn’s words, “an ability to live rustically and mostly alone for 18 days on an island in the northern Atlantic ocean.” Since its launching in 2000, the island program has accommodated 140 residents, “10 of whom,” Dunn reports, “left early, and 130 of whom are fanatic fans of the program.”

Having purchased the 150-acre island on the south side of Moosabec Reach, Dunn felt it was too magnificent a site for private use only and



Painters in residence



High Meadow, Big Cranberry Island, Looking Toward Mt. Desert,
Joellyn Duesberry, oil on linen, 2006

should be shared. “I was unaware of the vast world of residencies, to be honest,” he recounts. “I simply thought that this large, beautiful island in an out-of-the-way location would be a great place for artists, writers and musicians to congregate and work on their art.”

The residency has a landing next to Busters’ lobster dock in Jonesport. The boat ride across Moosabec Reach is less than a mile. Jonesport and Beals are visible from the northern shore; on the south side, which features large slabs of granite, there is open ocean speckled with islands.

Over three years Dunn built the “humble infrastructure” that makes the program possible. A workshop-barn offers an art studio and equipment for wood and metalworking, along with two attached studios. Seven one-person cottages for writers and a small conservatory with a piano round out the accommodations.

Dunn likes to point to the prize-winning authors who have been to the island, among them Kiran Desai, whose book *The Inheritance of Loss* won a Man Booker Prize in 2006. In a testimonial on the residency’s website, Desai offers a poetic description of an island sanctuary, “this perfectly hatched island among a whole shoal of pine furry islands.” She also reports editing “an entire manuscript of 450 pages” in a place “wild

and devoid of that sanitary, academic, uptight atmosphere of so many of these centers.”

MacNamara Foundation

Nevada-based advertising professional and educator Maureen MacNamara Barrett founded the Robert M. MacNamara Foundation in 1987 in honor of her father, an attorney and former FBI agent whose lifelong vocation was to help others recognize the importance of education. The year-round residency, with six-week sessions (the longest of the residencies described here) in winter, spring, summer and fall, was established in 2002 as a means for assisting artists to fulfill their creative vision.

The program is centered in a Pennsylvania barn relocated to Maine. The airy structure with studios is situated on three acres fronted by the Sheepscot River and backed by a tidal, saltwater marsh. A nearby family-owned compound of more than 250 acres provides additional accommodations and studio space for visiting artists.

Quilt artist Duncan Slade from nearby Edgecomb has been studio manager at the MacNamara residency for the past three years. The program seeks mid-career artists that need time to work on a project, he explains. On occasion the program will accept artists

who have either been away from their work for a while or are making a shift. The program, says Slade, seeks a mix of disciplines in each session. One cohort might consist of two painters, a videographer, a writer, a composer and an installation artist.

Among the Maine island residency programs, the MacNamara is among the best equipped for a range of artistic pursuits. Facilities include ceramics/pottery studios with kilns, potter’s wheel, etc.; a Mac digital media center featuring a variety of printers; and accommodations for artists involved in fiber arts, painting, photography, sculpture, woodworking and writing.

The artists are also free to roam: A recent resident, a printmaker from New York, spent nearly his whole time on the grounds of the nearby 68-acre Bonyun Preserve, which was opened to the public in 2006. “If people can afford to give themselves the luxury of six weeks and can see themselves in an environment where they’re going to be with a group of people at mealtimes,” Slade observes, “then a lot can happen.”

Artists have arrived from six different continents to work at the MacNamara Foundation. Among Maine-based artists who have attended are diorama artist John Kimball, fresco painter Barbara Sullivan, sculptor Phyllis Janto and mixed-media artist Patricia Wheeler.

F. Scott Hess, a Los Angeles-based painter, has been a resident twice, in 2003 and 2007. “I’ve worked as an artist for thirty years, with plenty of studio time,” he writes, “so I’m not just after the hours that the MacNamara Foundation affords its residents.” Rather, Hess enjoys the “shake-up” of his surroundings, finding the Maine coast a “soul-refreshing switch” from Southern California.

Hess also enjoys the community aspect of the residency. “As a painter I’ve spent massive hours of my life alone, facing the wall of my studio,” he explains.

Being thrown in with six strangers, all of them engaged in the same profession, but from different backgrounds and countries, and working in other mediums, he finds wonderful. “You have a chance to exchange ideas, argue about theories and become friends,” he says.

An unexpected fruit of Hess’s 2003 residency is the painting *Fresnel’s Boots*, inspired by a boat trip to Seguin Island. Hess doesn’t usually do landscapes, but the weather was superb, and the view spectacular: “a 360-degree panorama that sparkled and made you feel glad to be alive.” He had a video camera and recorded the trip. Having accomplished what he had planned to do at MacNamara in the first three weeks, he looked for something new to develop and settled on the lighthouse.

Acadia Artist-in-Residence

Set on another large Maine island connected to the mainland, the Artist-in-Residence or A-I-R program at Acadia National Park accepted its first artists in 1994. (The late painter and environmental activist Alan Gussow initiated the national “artists in the parks” program.) A-I-R carries on a rich tradition of art on Mount Desert Island that stretches from Hudson River School artists Thomas Cole and Frederick Church in the mid-1800s to Richard Estes and Joellyn Duesberry today.

Last year 11 artists took part in the residency program, two in the spring and nine in the summer/fall season. The addition of residency housing at Schoodic Point has allowed the program to grow over the past several years. Generally, spring artists are housed on Mount Desert Island and those that participate from August through November are housed at Schoodic.

Each visiting artist is expected to present one program for every week of his or her residency, with most residencies three weeks in duration. Spring artists tend to work with local school groups or do public programs. Summer and fall artists may interact with the YMCA, local school groups, the public, or the park’s residential education program, the Schoodic Education Adventure program.



Fresnel Boots, F. Scott Hess, 2003, oil on canvas

Monhegan

The oldest and longest-running Maine island artist residency changed its name this year after the space that served as its home for 19 years was sold. Started in 1989, the Carina House residency—now the Monhegan Island Artist Residency—was the shared dream of Peter and Raquel Boehmer and fabric artist Robert Semple, former owners of the modest structure on the island’s main thoroughfare. Knowing the expense of renting on Monhegan, they sought to provide time and space for Maine-based artists to work on-island.

Monhegan has nurtured one of the most remarkable legacies in the history of American art, boasting a virtual Who’s Who of artists, from George Bellows, Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent to Reuben Tam, Elena Jahn and Jamie Wyeth. “The five-week residency is designed to give back to Maine artists a part of their heritage, which includes a tradition of creative experimentation and exploration,” says Gail Scott, art historian and chair of the Monhegan Artists’ Residency Corporation (MARC), which oversees the residency.

Painters, photographers, sculptors and mixed-media artists have benefited from the residencies. In many cases the experience has led to a profound transition in their work. Painter Sarah Knock

of Freeport, who was a resident in 1989, was focusing on the figure when she arrived on Monhegan. By the time she left, she had shifted to landscape. “When I returned home, which was inland,” she wrote on the occasion of the exhibition “Carina House: The First Decade” at the Farnsworth Art Museum in 1999, “I found myself longing to be on or near the water on a daily basis.”

Loosely modeled on the McDowell Colony and Vermont Studio programs, the five-week residency is viewed as an opportunity for artistic development. Open only to Maine residents, the program seeks applications from artists with limited financial resources who otherwise could not afford an extended stay on Monhegan. This summer’s resident will stay at the Hitchcock House and have access to a studio in the Black Duck fish house.

It seems that every island in the Maine archipelago has, at one time or another, captured the heart of an artist, but the economics of the day are working against creative individuals making that special connection—aesthetic, physical, spiritual. While addressing this issue, the increasing number of artist residencies may also serve to inspire others to consider creating a Maine island artist legacy of their own.