

Chasing the Light

Jim Rehak's plein-air paintings are more than an accident of time and place

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN



Seaford artist Jim Rehak visits Nassau Valley Vineyards' Gallery One in Lewes, one of several local galleries that have showcased his paintings of outdoor settings cast in the dramatic or soft light shortly after dawn or at the onset of dusk.

Plein-air artist Jim Rehak will never forget the morning in October 2016 when everything came together just right.

He woke before dawn, drove from his Seaford home to Cape Henlopen State Park, and walked through the woods and along the ocean for several minutes, feeling increasingly doubtful about what he could accomplish. The canvas under his arm measured 15 inches by 30 inches — “a lot of space to cover,” as he says today. He also had absolutely no idea what he wanted to paint, and faced the likely prospect

of going home without anything to show for his time.

And then it happened: the discovery of a picturesque stretch of sand dunes, sea grass and ocean and, more pointedly, “a combination of light, shapes and colors that I immediately responded to.”

As it turned out, he adds, “I had no trouble covering that canvas. I got so involved in the painting that I got lost in it.”

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The resulting work, titled "Dune Brush," reflects that immersive experience: It could make almost anyone yearn for a peaceful morning walk on the beach. Although Rehak appreciates the final piece, what he cherishes more is the way he felt with the brush in his hand and the sun on his face as it came to life.

"The motivation isn't to just have a great painting," he explains. "The painting is what comes from the creative experience and what happens when you find a dramatic light and pour yourself into it. You become the landscape and the landscape becomes you. Being in that moment is what you remember, and the way you want people to feel when they experience the painting."

"I'm always looking for the right light; the right atmosphere, dramatic or soft — that's the trigger for most of my paintings."

That is the essence of the most accomplished plein-air paintings — a powerful evocation of outdoor light and atmosphere. The ability to create these experiences, Rehak says, depends on both thoughtful planning and serendipity. He talks at length about coming upon settings during the course of everyday life and feeling a spark of inspiration. Whether those settings become paintings usually depends on a second trip, shortly after dawn or in the early onset of dusk.

"Usually it's when I'm not looking for a spot and not looking for a light that I find something that really grabs me. I'll make a mental note and go back to that spot. I'm always looking for the right light; the right atmosphere, dramatic or soft — that's the trigger for most of my paintings," he says.

"I'll sometimes draw a preliminary sketch. But if the light is changing quickly I'll dive in with the paints to record that moment. That's when time flies."

Those moments have yielded hundreds of paintings that have been exhibited at Nassau Valley Vineyards' Gallery One, Hardcastle Gallery near Wilmington, Bishop's Stock Fine Art in Snow Hill, Md., and, prior to its closing in 2016, the Anita Peghini-Raber Gallery in Rehoboth Beach. His works have

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also earned best-in-show honors at the Rehoboth Art League, the Art League of Ocean City, Chesapeake College and Plein Air Brandywine Valley.

Though long removed from his college days, Rehak credits the Maryland Institute College of Art for the foundational experience that enables him to quickly capture the fleeting moments when the light is most inspiring.

“That’s where I learned my scales” he says, using an analogy to beginning musicians, “and developed the discipline in drawing and painting skills that I needed to master before approaching the canvas.”

While he knew that he’d always find abundant settings to inspire his work when he moved from the Baltimore area to the Eastern Shore of Maryland 28 years ago, he had to tap other skills to make a living.

“There weren’t any jobs for fine artists when I left college,” he recalls. “I ended up working as a creative director for a sign company. This was way before we had computers to do the work. I did the designs, the airbrushing, the hand lettering — all of it.”

Rehak ended up enjoying that work immensely, and was surprised by its rewards: “That job helped me evolve as an artist by helping me learn how to handle a brush,” he says.

He also continued to develop his drawing abilities, and convinced award-winning science-fiction writer Roger Zelazny to let him adapt his short story “Dilvish, the Damned” into a comic book. It was a heady task, requiring skills in illustration, storytelling and lettering as well.

Although the 10 sample pages he created were praised by publishers, the project wasn’t green-lighted. That left more time for his work as a courtroom sketch artist for three major trials covered by WBOC-TV in Salisbury, and for the pastels, charcoal portraits and caricatures he created on the Ocean City Boardwalk.

“Drawing is the foundation for the arts, and all of the skills I developed

doing these types of drawings helped me improve,” he notes. “Anyone who knows about painting can look at a piece and see the draftsmanship that’s demonstrated.”

Put another way, he says, “art is a visual language, and you have to learn to speak the language before you can express anything profound.”

Over the years he’s found caricature work to be easiest, and is happy to share his insights with anyone who’s wondered how these pieces capture such spot-on likenesses of their subjects.

“What beginning artists and a lot of other people don’t understand is that

getting a resemblance has more to do with proportion and spacing than almost anything else,” he explains. “Someone can draw a perfect eye, nose and mouth and still have a finished product

that looks nothing like the person.”

The same principle applies to other portraiture work. “When you’re doing a quick sketch in a courtroom, you don’t want to err on the side of being conservative. You want to use proportion to capture the resemblance.”

He still does caricatures and traditional portraits by special request, but his best days are spent painting the landscapes he encounters in the coastal communities of Delaware and Maryland.

“There’s such a wealth of subject matter in this area, and even though there are some great plein-air organizations that set up events around Annapolis, I rarely go — I’d just rather stay on this side of the [Bay] Bridge,” he says. “Seaford feels like the center for me. I’m 45 minutes from the ocean and 45 minutes from the bay, and I’ve got the Nanticoke River right here.”

He also values the area’s vibrant culture and the bonds that develop between artists and writers and musicians.

“I distinguish being creative and witnessing creativity as a spectator, but it’s all good. It points to our connection and common ground. Listening to music, reading a good book or attending a muse-

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Jim Rehak gets to work shortly after happening upon a picturesque scene of waves breaking calmly on the sand along Surf Avenue in Rehoboth. "Being in the moment is what you remember," he says, "and the way you want people to feel when they experience the painting."

um or gallery can all serve as a source of inspiration."

Another source is his desire to grow artistically.

"I'm always looking for new ways to develop and expand my network," Rehak says. "That means taking a few choice classes, trying a new approach, a new canvas size or different subject matter. I've toyed with the notion of painting some expressive portraits and figurative work ... which would make some sense since I'm experienced at drawing portraits.

"Growth as a person correlates to growth as an artist. The paintings I did many years ago reflect a different state of mind than the ones I do today. I know that when my art is exciting and interesting for me it's more likely to be interesting to the viewer." ■

CHRIS BEAKEY writes from his home in Lewes. His second novel, "Fatal Option," was published by Simon & Schuster in 2017.

Art on Display Jim Rehak will show some of his work at the "Silence and Solitude" exhibition beginning June 2 at Peninsula Gallery at 520 Savannah Road in Lewes. He will post other gallery showings and events on his website, jimrehak.com.

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