



Hale exhibit explores kaleidoscopic wonders of national parks



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By Doug Norris Features Editor | 0 comments

MATUNUCK — The wilderness calls to Rhode Island artist Kathy Hodge. She is drawn to its diverse landscapes and natural history, the interplay of light and texture, and the people who share her love of intimacy with nature.

Hodge has served as artist-in-residence in 10 of America's national parks and forests. Some of the work from her various residencies is on display in the gallery at Hale House, the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society property located off Route 1 in Matunuck.

"The most beautiful places, like Glacier National Park or the Rocky Mountains, are the hardest to draw," she said. "Everywhere you look it's like a picture postcard. So I have to find something in those places that's a little bit different to focus on rather than the scenic view."

Hodge's images are vibrant and luminous, distinctive in their evocation of color, shape and movement. New Englanders will enjoy her interpretation of the Outer Cape in which the dominant sweep of sand carries the painting in a place that can sometimes feel all light and line. The dunes themselves take on a life of their own, living things that move with the winds, shape-shifting daily in front of the sea and horizon.

Wild at heart

Rhode Island artist Kathy Hodge has served as an artist-in-residence for the National Parks Service and the National Forest Service at some of America's most spectacular wilderness areas. Pictured (above) is "The Seal," painted after Hodge's residency at Chugach National Forest in Alaska. "Badlands: Drainage" (at left) was painted following a residency at Badlands National Park in South Dakota.

"A lot of times I begin by looking out at the overall earth forms," she said. "Out west the earth is more uncovered. Here in New England everything is more covered up. There's a layer of development. Out there you can really see how the mountains rise up sometimes straight out of the prairie. And of course the big sky. Also, actions are more dictated by nature out there."

Hodge said that in the more remote west she pays closer attention to the possibility of thunderstorms or sudden weather, the distance between places and resources. The first week of every residency, she is usually accompanied by her husband. They explore the terrain together. She takes along her art supplies, but does most of her sketching during the second week, after she has lived in the space for a while. Most of her actual painting happens after the trip in her home studio, where she works from sketches and photographs. Every assignment is unique.

"It's different in every park," she said.

Hodge first resided in Rocky Mountain National Park in 1993, spending two weeks traveling the trails, exploring and sketching, and painting mountains and moraines from the porch of the William Allen White Cabin. She has meandered among the sand dunes around Provincetown, on Cape Cod, working from a dune shack without electricity or running water. She has climbed dunes "ten times as high" at Great Sand Dunes in Colorado. Hodge has scaled rock in Glacier National Park, immersed herself in the hilly coastland of Acadia in Maine, marooned herself on deserted Sand Island in the Apostle Island National Lakeshore, visited and painted the spaces between formations in Badlands National Park and lived among the crevices of Mesa Verde, rendering the homes of ancient Puebloans.

"The residencies in which I have felt closest to the spirit of the park have been the ones with the most primitive accommodations," Hodge wrote in an artist's statement. "Light from a kerosene lantern, water from a pump, Lake Superior or a mountain waterfall. My actions dictated by the journey of the sun across the sky, the changing weather and tides, the conservation of water."

In 2011, Hodge went to Alaska for her first residency with a national forest. She spent a week kayaking and camping with forest rangers in the fiords of Prince William Sound at Chugach National Forest. This year she visited the Painted Desert of Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona.

"Unlike the forest and fiords of Alaska," she said, "the history of life in the desert and badlands of the Petrified Forest are an open book, from the detail of a fallen log, now quartz, to the petroglyphs of artists who came before."

Next year Hodge will be the artist-in-residence at Grand Canyon National Park. One of the strengths of the residency program, she said, is the opportunity for "the sharing of viewpoints" with park staff who are committed to preserving the environment and can bring her more deeply into the surroundings, "from hitching a ride with a ranger over Medano Pass Road checking campsites in the Great Sand Dunes, learning how to read and obliterate the signs of impact, to canoeing with a volunteer ranger in Apostle Island and learning about the lighthouse, to interacting for a month with my ranger neighbors in the Badlands and stumbling across a rich fossil site to share with the paleontologist there."

Lori Urso, executive director of the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, said there is a natural connection between the Hale property and contemporary art, especially the art of landscape.

"Contemporary art was one of the passions of the Hale family," she said. "They were a family of writers and artists, who loved the natural beauty of this area, and Edward [Everett Hale] was deeply committed to preserving wilderness for its own sake and for people to enjoy."

Urso said that Hale even insisted on being taken from his sickbed to Congress in order to testify in favor of the Weeks Act, which essentially established the national parks system in America. She pointed to a portrait of Hale staring out from his old study in the opposite room.

"I know that as he sits there and looks at this he's feeling really good about what's going on in his house," she said. "It's a century later, but it's his advocacy that allowed [Hodge] to do this."

"A.I.R. — The Works of Kathy Hodge from Artist Residencies in Our National Parks and Forests" will remain on display at Hale House Gallery for the next two Saturdays, from noon to 4 p.m. or by appointment. It will also be open on Sunday, Oct. 14, during the final 2012 program at Hale House, a live musical performance by The Honey Dewdrops held in conjunction with Music at Lily Pads. For more information about Hale House and Pettaquamscutt Historical Society programs, call 783-1328. For more information about Hodge's A.I.R. work and journals, log on to www.kathyhodge.com/paintings/residencies.