

Bermuda colours in Philadelphia

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By Heather Wood



At the helm: Work painted by American artist Joseph Sweeney while he was Masterworks' artist-in-residence, is now on exhibit at a Philadelphia gallery.

Planning to be in Philadelphia this month? Stop in at Cerulean Arts Gallery and Studio if you get homesick for a bit of Bermuda sunshine. American Joseph Sweeney has ten pieces on exhibit there, painted while he was Masterworks' artist-in-residence two years ago.

Q: I understand your most recent trip here wasn't your first?

A: The first time I was there I was a navigator on a Navy destroyer in 1970. We had just come in from the North Atlantic and it was very stormy. We'd just left the dark grey North Atlantic and going into the Gulf Stream was pretty amazing. It was warm and the sun came out and we thought we were in paradise. We anchored just below Gibbs Hill Lighthouse. [The area] was very brushy at that time; now, there's a lot more houses [but] I thought the colours were rich. [I returned in 2013 as Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Arts' artist-in-residence and] the water was just as blue, the sky just as clean. I painted, mostly in St George's but I got over to Dockyard.



American artist Joseph Sweeney when he visited the Island in 2013.

Q: What's your current exhibit about?

A: It's called Essence of Place. It's all about the look of the place. Most of my work is done outdoors. You can call it plein air, which is a hot phrase these days, I just call it painting outdoors. The show is three different painters [covering] three different locations. I've done Bermuda, Kerry Sacco has painted Lancaster County, which is the Pennsylvania Dutch area, and William Woods has painted Hawaii.

Q: What's the difference between painting outdoors and recreating the image from a photograph?

A: Photographs always alter colour. If you're there in person, you can actually mix the colour you see before you in oil. If you take a digital camera and hold it next to the sky, the water, the sand, [the colours will be slightly] different in the photo. [Paintings done outdoors] look a little more alive than most photographs. Of course, you can buy a \$10,000 camera and get the exact colour but [the average person won't have that]. So the whole point of being outside is to get the direct context of landscape.



Out and about: Joseph Sweeney when he visited the Island in 2013

Q: How did you go from being in the Navy to being an artist? The change seems a bit extreme.

A: After my military experience I wanted the opposite and went into the Philadelphia College of Art using [money granted under the GI Bill]. I've been painting since, basically along the north east US.



Work in progress: Joseph Sweeney is pictured here painting a St George's scene

Q: How did you know that you were able?

A: I drew in high school. Kids would say draw me a corvette or something and I would. I didn't paint but I knew I could.

Q: I'm assuming then that you're a respected artist? You've been well reviewed and have sold considerable work?

A: Yes, I've been around a while. I've sold a lot of work but in America [that type of respect doesn't exist]. If I could sink a basketball ... then I'd be respected. However in Pennsylvania, the tendency is to say less, not to toot your own horn.



Joe Sweeney

Q: What's the difference between Bermuda and US when it comes to painting?

A: For me and most people who come down, it's a totally different colour. I teach classes at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The classes I teach are in the spot where [President George] Washington crossed the Delaware and raided the Hessian troops. Sometimes it's rainy, sometimes it's cold but if you want to get fall colours ... The air is clean, the weather is crispier and it can be fun. I will go out with my gloves, boots and coat on.

It's not the same as Bermuda. I was there in February. It was in the 70s, there was a nice breeze coming off the water and I was in a T-shirt. The water is a rich, green blue. It forces you to change your palette.



An American in Bermuda: Joseph Sweeney's paintings of Bermuda are now on display in Philadelphia

You can find Cerulean Arts Gallery and Studio at 1355 Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia. Essence of Place runs until January 31. For more information visit www.joesweeneyart.com or www.ceruleanarts.com.