

the arts

Grenning Gallery's Sculpture Showroom "Draws" In Students

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"Sailboats Sag Harbor" by Ben Fenske

Sag Harbor - To judge from what's going on in the expanded studio space across from her Main Street gallery, Laura Grenning has resolved with the new year to ensure that the classical methods of the Old Masters that have defined Grenning exhibits for the last ten years have greater presence in Sag Harbor. Long associated with the Florence Academy of Art, the Grenning Gallery dedicates itself to promoting the work of emerging artists who draw, paint and sculpt in an academic style that traces its origins to Renaissance schools of portraiture and landscape art, and through these to the 19th Century academic masters, whose ateliers in Italy and France applied and refined those techniques, influencing, among others, John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase.

Those Old Master traditions applied to contemporary subject matter have always been on display at Grenning by way of exhibits featuring the work of artists who have studied at the Florence Academy and also by the use of the upstairs gallery as a studio where, on occasion, Academy artists can be seen working on commissioned portraits. With the opening of a new space on Washington Street, Grenning has become, in effect, a Sag Harbor Fine Arts Academy: a series of drawing workshops for beginners and professionals has already been started. A Jan. 5-6 weekend intensive workshop led by Stephen Bauman, and which may be repeated later on this year, as well as Sunday evening drawing sessions, directed by Thomas J. Shelford, are slated to begin Feb. 3.

Bauman's two-day intensive, "Introduction to Sight Size Drawing," demonstrated Florence Academy of Art techniques that aim to "equip each student to reproduce nature in its truest form," whether portraiture, still life or nude models. Drawing from plaster casts (strategically lit, stable subjects) students were instructed in the Sight Size Method, which relies on making "precise measurements regarding the position of the subject." The method is emphasized by Daniel Graves, co-founder of the Graves/Cecil Academy in Florence and differs somewhat from the method advanced by Shelford, a proponent of the "classical, progressive instruction of drawing and painting" offered by NYC's Grand Central Academy of Art (GCA), founded by Jacob Collins.

Shelford, who ran a December-January mini-series, exudes an intense but amiable intellectualism, not to mention attractive eclecticism reflecting years spent as an illustrator and website designer. He explains that plaster casts are typically used for introductory workshops because participants need to concentrate on line, light, and form without having to confront complications of surface texture or color. Attracted by classical realism's dedication to skills and beauty based on an aesthetic of balance, harmony, proportion and organic wholeness, and turned off by previous generations' obeisance to abstract expressionism, pop art and a culture that celebrates irony, alienation and self-reference, Shelford found a sympathetic

artistic home in GCA. He also found surprising contemporary resonance - an aesthetic based on "connectivity" - to the earth, to history, and, by way of the Internet, to a vast number of other human beings. The Sunday charcoal drawing classes will use a classical method that moves from "block-in [lines], massing in average [geometric and tonal] values, and modeling conceptualized form and [painterly] finish." (Summary handouts provide detail). Selected drawings from the earlier workshops will be displayed for sale starting Jan. 19.

Across the way, Grenning Gallery continues to exhibit what commitment to the academic tradition can mean. There, Marc Dalessio and Ben Fenske's "Latest Works" show that the Florence Academy is alive and well in Sag Harbor. The artists, long-time colleagues and good friends, worked both sides of the street this past fall, Main Street that is, amazing passers-by with their talent and speed. Some of the results are on view at Grenning in both the upstairs and downstairs rooms. Though both Fenske and Dalessio have had shows at Grenning before, this one, their second together, gives evidence of subtle mutual influence, though for sure their distinctive styles remain, so much so that seeing their work together on one floor means knowing who did what or the other – no IDs needed.

Gallery visitors may want to concentrate this time around on the local scenes - Dalessio's smooth-stroke en plein air paintings (more compelling than his theatrically lit portrait and figure works on display here) and Fenske's looser depictions. Dalessio's "Congdons Creek, Shelter Island", for example, with its surprising but just-right slip of off-center yellow-green sunlight that unites the composition and his Italian field scenes with their luminous, judiciously placed white flower dots that nicely pull together a canvas of roads, hill and sky accent his signature flat green trees.

Fenske's more impressionistic pieces – "Sailboat Sag Harbor", with its slim red slash on the horizon line that pulls the eye to the less busy side of the canvas; the huge, shimmering "Mashomack", brush strokes of every width, shape, texture patterning the trees; "Sag Harbor Main Street", sunlight sparkling like snow; and the striking almost abstract "Self Portrait With Setting Sun", with its hot facial strokes of red and orange set against a light blue sky - give only partial proof of Fenske's freer application of Academy rules - his domestic interiors sold out.

- Grenning Gallery is located at 90 Main Street, the Sculpture Showroom at 17 Washington Street. Call 631-725-8479 to register for the classes. The Marc Dalessio/Ben Fenske exhibit will remain on view through the end of the month.



"Condons Creek" by Marc Delessi