

INTRODUCTION

After just one hour during my first visit to Monhegan Island, I could understand why this island has possessed a magical attraction for so many major artists of the 20th century. The light changed dramatically six times in sixty minutes – from white to yellow, from mauve to gray to near black, and then to spun gold and translucent pearl. Here was a paradise of inspiration for creative spirits.

With my daughter and niece in tow, I practically ran that day down to Lobster Cove and back up to Deadman's Cove, from the studio of Frances Kornbluth at one end to Kate Cheney Chappell's at the other. Artists en plein air were everywhere in sight along the route, men and women at easel with paintbrushes in hand. At the Lupine Gallery there was a wonderful exhibition of self portraits by artists belonging to an association that was called Women Artists of Monhegan Island (WAMI). I enjoyed as well the deceased women artists' show at the Monhegan Museum. That there should be an exhibition of the women artists of Monhegan off island, and one that should travel and have a proper catalogue, seemed immediately obvious to me. Longtime island visitors and art aficionados, Jerry and Monique Collins had planted the seed first, however, and have offered valuable insights.

When I racked my brain to come up with major women artists from Monhegan who had been celebrated nationally and internationally, so few came to mind, and too many of these were considered primarily 'wives of'. Looking at Wikipedia's description of the island, the only Monhegan artists mentioned are Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent and the Wyeths – Andrew, Jamie and N.C. I raised the subject with Kate Chappell and she agreed to be a co-curator (as well as one of the WAMI artists). Over the last two years with Kate's tireless efforts, we have designed the exhibition and put all the pieces together to properly celebrate 36 contemporary fine artists for whom Monhegan Island has been a continuing inspiration. Only seven of these artists even got a mention in *Monhegan: the Artists' Island*, by Jane and Will Curtis, the 1995 "comprehensive" history and review of the artists who frequented the island over the 20th century.

Since WAMI's by-laws permit only 15 members, the exhibition had to look beyond WAMI itself. There are many women artists who live year round or part of the year 'on island' who, for one reason or another, are not members of WAMI. In addition, there are recently deceased artists who by any measure are contemporary fine artists, and who ought to be included. Finally, 36 artists is itself an arbitrary number, dictated more by the modest size of the University of New England Gallery of Art, than any conclusion that only these 36 artists are important.

Why do I believe this is a crucial exhibition to mount at this moment in history? There is, it seems to me, an opportunity here to right a wrong. If this unique island has worked

its powerful influence upon some of the major male artists of the last century, surely its magic has affected women artists too. Here we demonstrate that women's artistic talents are just as good as their male counterparts despite a tendency in the past to relegate women to the category of "lesser artists".

Moreover, except for having the Monhegan experience in common, these 36 artists could not be more diverse, hailing as they do from all over the world and the United States. Age, income, marital status and professional artistic stature vary hugely; no two of these artists have the same life circumstance. Nor do they belong to a single homogenous school of art, or just one style or technique or medium. They do share the spiritual and aesthetic impact of the light, and views, sounds and smells of the island that is also their most special small hometown for part or all of the year.

I can only speculate how the Monhegan experience has affected their impact upon one another. They have been neighbors after all. They know each others' families, and some of the triumphs and tribulations. Perhaps they have influenced each others' making of art too. It is entirely possible that island friendships have caused an artist with great technical skill to be subtly moved by an artist considered more "naïve", and vice versa up and down the scales of art expressions.

How wonderful to be living at a time when the artistic contributions of these women can be appreciated at last. Gone is the gender stigma of the mid-twentieth century; gone is the economic limitation when often only the rich and privileged could dabble in art; gone too are the days when art as a commodity was only marketed to the elites. These artists are making works with great competency to be appreciated by all of us everywhere. And in the 21st century we can even unabashedly acknowledge the evidence of "soul" in the works of these women artists of Monhegan.

■ Anne Broderick Zill
■ Curator, University of New England Gallery of Art