

ART off the GRID

Isolation has its value in this cross-border community, connected by creativity, passion and a love for the land

Story and photography by Janet Wallace

We're cousins across the water," says potter Donald Sutherland, referring to New Brunswickers and Mainers. It's the third weekend in September and I'm on the Two Countries, One Bay Art Studio Tour, visiting Sutherland's studio in Eastport, Maine.

The tour encompasses the shoreline of Passamaquoddy Bay, where the St. Croix River, dividing Maine and New Brunswick, enters the Bay of Fundy (see the map on page 47). To visit more than 50 artists, you take a ferry, cross an international bridge and drive some 200 kilometres.

"I've lived at the edge of the universe, out here in Eastport, for 15 years," says Sutherland. His art ranges from beautiful bowls to huge structures, self-described as "functional, non-functional and dysfunctional, at prices both reasonable and unreasonable." One rusty round piece, a couple feet in diameter, reminds me of an antique diving bell. Appendages emerge from it, and portholes enable an interior view.

A recent piece, a few feet long and a few feet high, is made with almost 500 pounds of clay; tubes perch precariously on legs. Looking through one column, the tunnel changes from circular to square. When viewed from the other side, the change in shape alters the way you see the space beyond.

The sculpture could be a metaphor for the studio tour itself. From one perspective, you see two countries separated by a border with armed guards. From another vantage point—and despite the ever-increasing border security, not conducive to neighbourliness—you see a group of individuals connected by their creativity and passion, their isolation and love of the land.

"Most of us realize how lucky we are to live in such a beautiful place," says Bertha Day, of St. Andrews, NB. Her work reflects images of wildflowers and coastlines in a blend of media, such as flowers painted with fabric dye on cotton, embellished with embroidery.

Across the road from Day's studio, at the Great Canadian North Art Gallery, Brian Allen Adams' brightly coloured paintings look reminiscent of Inuit art.

"The native people and the native feeling of the land are part of the essence of who we are as Canadians," Adams says. "I'm trying to bring out the spirit of who we are as a people."

In fact, the studio tour bridges three nations: Canada, the US, and Passamaquoddy. At Maine's Passamaquoddy Pleasant Point Reservation, Viola Francis blends the traditional arts of



"We all live so far away from everything," says Elizabeth Ostrander, whose sculptures are shown above and opposite. "We can connect by art."

beadwork and basketry, using her art to connect with groups of teenagers, elders and people with special needs. For example, in the Teens Against Violence Support Group, youth learn traditional crafts while they recover from traumatic experiences, gaining self-confidence.

In Eastport, Richard Klyver has also used art as a tool, in his case to empower youth with learning disabilities. Now he holds classes for the general public, and most of his students are Canadians.

Bronze heads of a boar, a lion and a baboon-like mandrill are set into the stone wall around Klyver's yard. A tall totem pole nestles into cedars behind the bronze foundry. His studio is filled with sculptures of animals ranging from moose, salmon and turtles to the more exotic gazelles, wildebeests and boars.

Klyver says that a strong and diverse arts community is evolving in this corner of Maine and the Maritimes. He believes there are more artists per capita here than anywhere else he's lived, including Soho, New York, in its heyday.

"Artists," he says, "congregate either in the middle of everything, such as in the heart of big cities, or at the end of the world."

Isolation has its value. "In winter everything shuts down," says Shanna Wheelock of Lubec, Maine—the easternmost town



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in the US. "We get a lot of still time. We have flourished more as artists here, in this hidden little corner of the world."

When Wheelock and her husband, a poet and philosopher, moved to Lubec nine years ago, they were labelled PFAs, or People-From-Away. (We laugh when I mention I was called a CFA—Come-From-Away—when I returned to the Maritimes after having spent years away.)

Wheelock's art is diverse, ranging from Japanese tea bowls, sculptures of fertility goddesses, woven animal masks and goblets decorated with tree roots. After her grandmother died she created a tapestry with strands of her favourite clothes, embellishing it with a brooch and a tiny handmade photo album.

Colours from her surroundings permeate her weaving, made on simple stick looms. "This area inspires us with the forest, the ocean and the people," she says.

The ocean and the fishing community around Chamcook, NB, also provide inspiration for Colleen Lynch. After learning the traditional skill of knitting twine into fishing nets, Lynch knitted silver, copper and brass into small sculptures. Metal etchings of fish slip into many of her designs.

"We can connect by art," says Elizabeth Ostrander, across the border at Eastport, while smoothing clay on a bust of a female satyr. "We all live so far away from everything."

Her studio is filled with sculptures and paintings. Rapture and serenity are expressed in the faces of meditating women and mermaids. The women she creates radiate a sense of gentle strength, resilience and an ability to nurture.

"I create the images I need to see," she says.



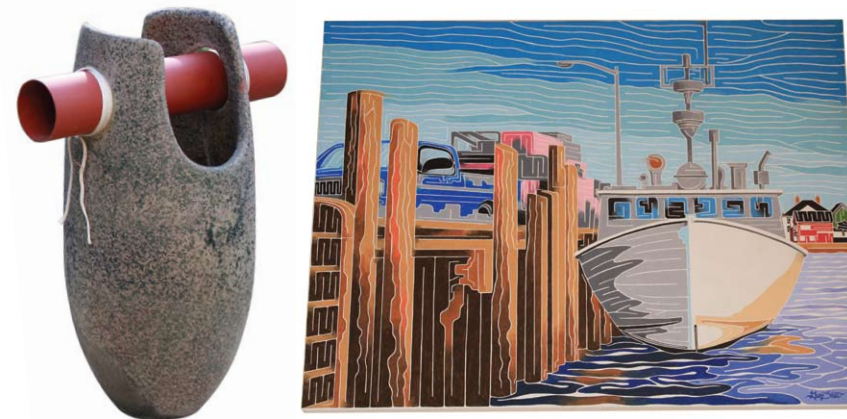
All in the family: Andrea Mulder-Slater and her mother, Jantje Blokhuis-Mulder, paint colourful floorcloths; Andrea's husband, Geoff Slater, is also a painter. Although not on the tour this year they have a studio in St. Andrews.

Studio tours allow people to see art being created and, perhaps more importantly, they allow for dialogue. Many artists discuss the need to express their emotions through their art. Spirituality, from Goddess imagery to First Nations Shamanism to Christianity, is invoked.

"Everything should have a mythological taint to it, even a religious aspect," says Sutherland—mentioning that he's an atheist in the same breath as saying that his pottery should be filled with the presence of divinity.

Many regional artists celebrate traditional crafts, such as rug hooking and wooden boat building. Jantje Blokhuis-Mulder and her daughter Andrea Mulder-Slater make colourful floorcloths, as well as abstract acrylic paintings and watercolours, at Jarea Art Studio, in St. Andrews.

Andrea's husband, Geoff Slater, creates traditional paintings but also vivid pieces using only one line of paint, his own technique. As with pointillism, the viewer's eyes mix the colours and fill in the white lines of unpainted canvas. "The negative



Donald Sutherland with his art, self-described as "functional, nonfunctional and dysfunctional, at prices both reasonable and unreasonable." Top, from left: pieces by Tom Smith and Geoff Slater.

becomes just as important as the painted space," he says.

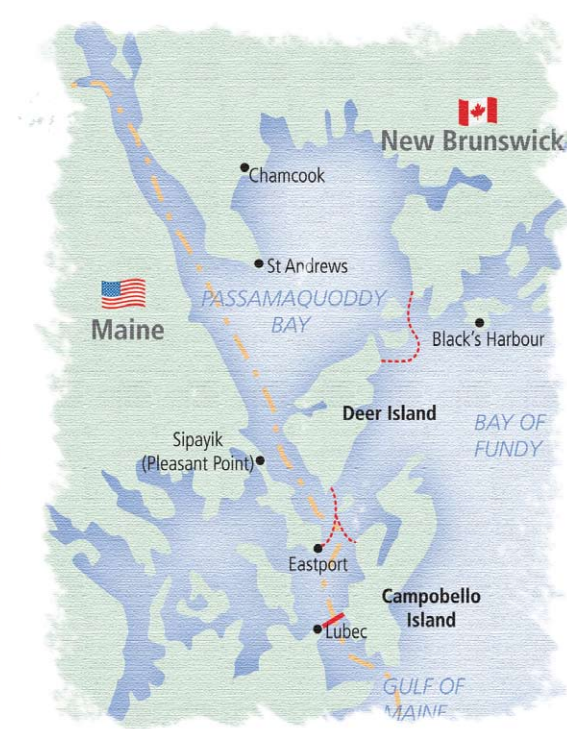
Slater jokes that kids help sell his work. They usually understand the technique as soon as they see the paintings; he has overheard children explaining the process to their parents.

He contributes to the local landscape through the 20 interior and exterior murals he's painted in town.

The artists don't just make art, their homes and gardens are filled with it, often from several people. In St. Andrews, Tom Smith has placed Raku bowls, vases and sculptures throughout the gravel pathways that meander around the trees and pond in his backyard.

Although Smith's forte is raku pottery, he also paints and makes collages. A young Japanese woman says, "After walking in [the gallery], I feel like I'm back in Japan." Smith has adopted and adapted the shapes and glazes of Japanese pottery techniques. International borders dissolve in the art.

This is welcome news to Eastport's Tides Institute & Museum of Art, the major force behind the studio tour. The institute's



goal is to "strengthen cultural ties within the greater Passamaquoddy region, between New England and the Atlantic Provinces, and to the wider world."

Throughout much of the tour, the other country is visible across the water. The landscape is similar on both sides, with forests of spruce, fir, tamarack, maple and birch, and an undulating rocky coastline edged by islands.

Donald Sutherland remembers when Canadians and Americans intermingled in his birthplace of Eastport.

"There was a tighter bond with the Canadians back then," says Sutherland, remembering the 50s. The Canadians were called "Overhomers," because whenever they met on the street, they would ask, "Are you going 'over home' now?" Before the Campobello-Lubec Bridge was built in 1962, residents of Campobello and Deer Islands came to Eastport regularly. While the women shopped, the men would have a few drinks because at that time, the Canadian islands were dry. After the bridge was built it was easier for people on Campobello to simply drive to Lubec to get groceries, rather than take the ferry to Eastport.

"The family names here are all in the cemetery in St. George [New Brunswick]," he says.

The Two Countries, One Bay Studio Tour is all about connections, linking the land with art, introducing artists to the public, and, perhaps most importantly, connecting individuals across political borders.

It's been said that art has no boundaries. Now I believe it. 🐾

Janet Wallace is a potter and weaver who lives by the Bay of Fundy in New Horton, NB. For details on the 2010 Two Countries, One Bay Art Studio Tour, September 18-19, go to twocountriesart.com or call (506) 529-8837 or (207) 853-4047.