

SANDY O'CONNOR: A TIPPING POINT
June 17 – July 18, 2021
Back Bay Room



CONTEXT & INSPIRATION



1. ATLANTIC WHITE CEDAR SWAMP, South Wellfleet

I want to begin with this painting of the Atlantic White Cedar Swamp because to me it's the most ancient and the most unexpected landscape you might think of when you think of Cape Cod.

This swamp is an isolated remnant of an ecosystem created after the last ice age. Over 50 years ago the Job Corps installed a trail that descends into a stunted oak and pine forest which leads to an elevated boardwalk. Park staff have continued to maintain it with substantial repairs completed last year.

INSPIRATION: On this afternoon I had the trail to myself. It felt solemn and ancient. At this particular spot I was standing on the elevated boardwalk. The water below was still, shallow and clear and the bottom was packed with layers of golden brown leaves — some tinged with bright orange from the setting sun filtering through the cedar forest.



2. HATCHES HARBOR AT RACE POINT, Provincetown

Hatches Harbor was once a 400 acre salt marsh. The dike I was standing on was originally installed in 1930 to lower the water level to eliminate standing water and breeding habitat for mosquitos. The plan backfired because it blocked the flow of saltwater and fish. In 1987 the Park Service initiated a program to restore the marsh and the process of revitalization is happening.

INSPIRATION: Pattern and color is what captivated me about this landscape. The repetition of rounded shapes in the sand formed by tidal flows and an elegant, complimentary palette of oranges and blues, enhance the composition. Big puffy clouds above...and fresh green grasses below...complete the scene.



3. FORT HILL AT NAUSET MARSH, Eastham

Fort Hill was the highest point adjacent to a meetinghouse erected by Pilgrim residents of Nauset, later called Eastham, shortly after they settled the area in 1644. Within 30 years of settlement, the Eastham forests were cleared and became the Eastham plains. Only at Fort Hill was there any semblance of soil. Dairy farming continued here until the 1940's, and now a forest creeps in once more. But as depicted in my painting, the pastures are still kept open as a reminder of yesteryear.

INSPIRATION: During changeable weather Fort Hill might be the best place on Cape Cod to witness the high drama of sea, clouds, wind and marsh as they ride into deep fall. This is a popular lookout spot for visitors. I've been there a dozen times through the years in all seasons. It's a panorama of big sky with open meadows rolling down to Nauset Marsh. Far out in the distance is a barrier beach with a rowdy inlet to the Atlantic Ocean.



4. PILGRIM HEIGHTS, North Truro
Overlooking Pilgrim Spring Salt Meadow

There is archaeological evidence that for at least five thousand years, this area was chosen by ancient inhabitants as a favorable place to live because there was access to fresh water as well as food sources and protection due to its elevation and forests. Early European settlers tried to live off the land here as well until it was over-cleared and the soil could no longer support farming, after which the landscape began to recover.

INSPIRATION: This view has all the elements of a classic Cape Cod landscape; meadow, marsh, pond, dune, blue ocean and sky. That day was very windy and clear. Tinges of gold and burnt sienna in the high grasses and meadows were a harbinger of another autumn come.



5. HIGH HEAD DUNES, North Truro

Overlooking East Harbor Towards Provincetown

Historically, salt marshes were impaired because roads and railroads, such the track built in 1910 along East Harbor and eventually Route 6, were built through them which cut off the salt water inundation that is necessary to maintain their ecosystems.

Today, East Harbor is a tidal estuary which continually flushes and provides nourishment and habitat for many species of marine plant and animal life. The salt meadows within the system slow down the impact of severe weather occurrence which is happening at a more rapid rate than ever before.

INSPIRATION: After climbing one of the highest dunes at High Head, I was rewarded with a breathtaking panoramic view. East Harbor and Cape Cod Bay were in front of me with Provincetown and the iconic Pilgrim Monument in the distance; the Atlantic Ocean to my right and High Head cliffs behind me. The late afternoon sunlight was blinding and made the atmosphere hazy. Violet shadows draped over long stretches of warm pink sand.



6. DAY AFTER DORIAN, Ballston Beach, Truro
After the storm at the over wash

At this site in 1891, a New Yorker, Sheldon Ball, constructed the Ballston Beach Inn which became a colony complete with cottages, a bowling alley and a community building which had a dining room and a ballroom. The Inn attracted primarily NY clientele who stayed for the entire summer season, many of whom returned over a period of five generations. The cottages were moved seven times because of erosion of the bluff. In the '60s Ballston Beach became part of the Cape Cod National Seashore and the last of the cottages was taken down in 1970. Since then, and up until Dorian, over-washes from storms have been recorded at least five times with seawater mixing with the freshwater marsh system.

INSPIRATION: I was one week into my residency when, during the early hours of Saturday morning, September 7th, Hurricane Dorian brushed by the Cape and Islands on its way up the coast to Canada. Later that afternoon, I was able to visit a previously over-washed section at Ballston Beach. I had a front row seat to witness the aftermath of the storm. Seawater from the ocean had receded leaving a dramatic moonscape covered with debris, foam and piles of sand. The sun was setting as thunderous waves pounded the beach. A heavy mist rose above the over-wash and into the atmosphere bathing everything in a pale gold light



7. HERRING RIVER at Chequessett Neck Road Dike, Wellfleet

This is a view of what is known as 'THE GUT'

Looking East from the Culvert Overlooking Great Island Trail Towards Cape Cod Bay

Historically the Herring River supported a vibrant coastal river ecosystem and one of the largest nurseries for commercial and recreational fisheries in the Gulf of Maine. It encompasses nearly 1,000 acres and over 6 miles of waterways. Wellfleet Town reports from the late 1800's indicate that more than 200,000 river herring were netted annually from the River. The ecosystem was dramatically altered in 1909 when efforts to control mosquitos resulted in the construction of a dike across the river's mouth at Chequessett Neck. This had devastating effects.

It is currently one of the largest tidally-restricted estuaries in the northeastern United States. For over the last 10 years, significant efforts have been ongoing by numerous partners to restore the River.

INSPIRATION: Despite standing on a culvert on a busy road and hearing the sound of water gushing below me, the view was quite serene looking across "The Gut" towards Great Island Trail. A beautiful sky reflected shades of blue and violet on the sand spit rising from the shallows, as white foam bounced on the surface of the water.



8. LONG POINT DIKE AT WEST END MARSH, Provincetown

Long Point Dike — also known as the Breakwater — was constructed in 1910 to prevent Provincetown Harbor from flooding but in fact, over time it's done the opposite. The West End Marsh is one of the prettiest, pristine marshes on the Cape. The dike created a substantial hydraulic impediment that acts as a physical barrier to larger fish and invertebrates that would otherwise inhabit a fully functioning estuarine ecosystem. It is also an attractive nuisance with well-documented stories of people falling between the rocks and getting stranded at high tide.

INSPIRATION:

I chose this image to close the series because it's the only man-made structure I painted. The massive scale of such a historic man-made structure, literally trying 'stem the tide' of a natural occurrence was intriguing. I could plainly see the contrasting ecosystems on either side of the dike. Drama is "baked-in" with strong line, form and movement.

I grew up in northern New Jersey on a very small farm where I played outdoors and explored the woods, lake and swamp on our property. I was always drawing and reading books about young girls who had adventures. I was discouraged from pursuing art by my parents who didn't see it as a viable career path. But I was a good student and wanted to go to college. I turned my attention to biology but was closed out of the required classes during my freshman year so I enrolled in environmental science classes. Earth Day had just started 3 years earlier so it was a new movement at the time. I went on to graduate with a degree in Landscape Architecture from Rutgers University. To my delight I was able to combine art and earth science into a career path.

While I was finishing my degree I interned in the Dept. of Energy at a National Laboratory in the Mid-West and contributed to research on mining reclamation projects in the Southwest. As interesting as the scientific aspect was, I enjoyed illustrating and mapping even more, so I pursued another degree in graphic design. This preceded a pivot into advertising and design full time. The highlight of my career was helping to build the global brand at Bloomberg, LP as an art director and then the company's first Director of Creative Services. The events of 9/11 in New York City compelled me to pursue an encore career in fine art and move to Cape Cod where I lived for the next 10 years.

After several years of working as a watercolorist and instructor, I applied for and was granted a visual arts fellowship from the Copley Society of Art with a residency at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in 2019.

During my residency I explored the impact of climate change on vulnerable landscapes within the Cape Cod National Seashore and in turn used my art and social media platform to document their ecological importance.

Historically art has served as a catalyst for activism. The Outer Cape, and especially Provincetown, has such a rich art history. I believe more efforts of this kind would be immensely beneficial as a means to communicate the importance of scientific monitoring and in turn inform decision-making to conserve and protect its unique beauty.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT FOR RESIDENCY PROJECT:

As I was learning about climate change in coastal areas, I came across the current research of Professor Robin McInnes of the Coastal and Geotechnical Services consultancy in Britain and his work with WatercolourWorld.org. Watercolour World is a free online database of documentary watercolors painted before 1900. This data base is intended to help scientists and environmentalists combat climate change by monitoring the evolution of the British coast since the late 18th century.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, British artists regularly sketched outdoors. Using portable watercolor paint boxes, they found a medium well-suited to their needs, capable of capturing fleeting effects of light and weather. Coastal scenes were a popular genre and today they provide a valuable record of coastal conditions over time.

Before the advent of photography, watercolor was used as a tool for documentation. In many cases proficiency was a pre-requisite for employment in fields such as cartography, the military, mission work, the sciences and surveying to name a few. For example, in the United States, the famous artist James Whistler was a Coast Survey engraver and the naturalist John Muir was a guide and artist on the epic "Survey of the 39th Parallel" across the Great Basin of Nevada and Utah.

Prior to starting my art residency I had a general idea of what I wanted to do as it related to documenting vulnerable landscapes but it wasn't going to be easy without identifying specific locations. Once I arrived in Provincetown, I needed to inform myself quickly.

On the day I arrived I emailed Brian Carlstrom, the Superintendent of the Cape Cod National Seashore, because I had read an article about a talk he gave which addressed climate change issues. Within minutes he emailed back with an introduction to Mark Adams. Mark is also an accomplished artist and understood right away what I was trying to do. He showed me a map of the Cape Cod National Seashore and with a red Sharpie he was able to pinpoint specific locations for me to explore which is how my project began.