

M HARDING ART

Sharing where I go and what I see

Monson, Maine July Newsletter

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Monson, Maine – A place to stop and stay awhile

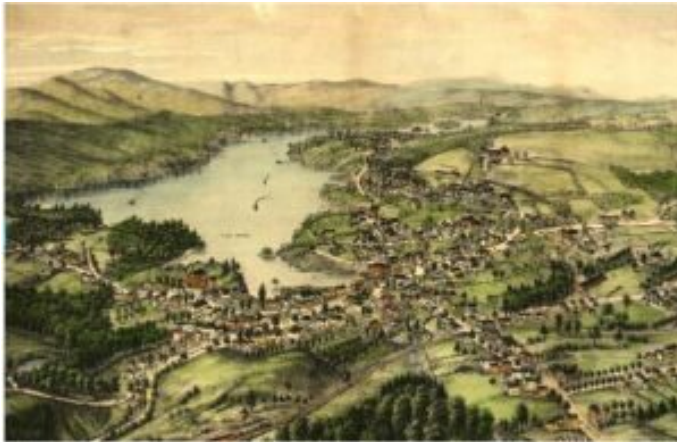


A View of Lake Hebron

Earlier this summer, artist Barbara Sullivan suggested that I consider a visit to Monson, Maine. She would be teaching a fresco workshop at Monson Arts the week of July 12th and artist Michael Stasiuk would be teaching a found object sculpture class there at the same time. I know both artists very well and have visited their studios and shown their work, but here was an opportunity to visit them in their teaching environments in the beautiful North Maine Woods.

Barbara also encouraged me to contact a few other people that I might enjoy meeting while exploring the area. On her list were Dan Bouthot, director of Monson Arts, photographer Todd Watts, his wife, ceramic artist Jemma Gascoine, and painter Alan Bray. Needing no further incentive, I marked my calendar and asked my friend Susan MacDougall to join me on this two-and-a-half-day, multifaceted road trip.

Monson – A little history



The town of Monson is located three hours north of York and 20 minutes south of Moosehead Lake. The area has been a year-round vacation and outdoor recreation destination since the mid-nineteenth century. In the recent past, one would easily pass through the center of Monson without taking a second look, anxious to reach the ultimate destination of Greenville at the foot of Moosehead Lake.

The town of Monson was founded in 1822. Shortly thereafter, a large vein of black slate was discovered.

Soon immigrants from Finland, Sweden and Wales came to Monson to work in the quarries. The Monson Historical Society proudly preserves the records of these early settlers. The slate business declined after WW1 and was replaced by a successful furniture factory which employed over 250 local people. That business ultimately failed in the early 2000s. Like many small Maine towns, Monson has seen better days. Artist Alan Bray, who grew up in Monson, recalls that no matter the ups and downs, the town always had a “can do” spirit and a strong sense of community.

In recent years, the town has been in decline, people moved away and houses and storefronts became derelict and even abandoned. One of the few remaining signs of life were the many hikers who stopped in the town for supplies before the final one hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail, ending at the summit of Mount Katahdin.

A Transformation – Enter the Libra Foundation

The Portland-based Libra Foundation is committed to projects that benefit the people of Maine. Their mission is “to strive for innovative ways to enrich Maine, empower communities, and enhance the quality of life of all Maine citizens.” Initial funding came from Betty Noyce who received a lucrative divorce settlement from Robert Noyce, co-founder of Intel Corporation. A good motto might be “Divorce Well and Put it to Good Use.” Libra foundation website.



Monson General Store

In 2017, the foundation chose the town of Monson as an ideal location for an artists' residency and Monson Arts was formed. The foundation purchased thirty-plus buildings and properties in the town, restored and retrofitted them using the skills and labor of the local community. The main street, that not long ago, was lined with boarded-up storefronts and peeling paint, suddenly gleamed with white clapboards and welcoming open flags.

The buildings are now used for studios, offices, galleries, and housing for [Monson Arts](#) which offers visual artists' and writers' workshops and residencies throughout the calendar year. I highly recommend that you [read this article](#) by Amy Sutherland, photographs by Michael Seamans that appeared in the September 2019 issue of *Down East Magazine*. It gives a full account of the people and challenges involved in this amazing project.

A warm welcome in Monson



The Quarry Restaurant, Chef Marilou Ranta, Students enjoying lunch overlooking Lake Hebron

Barbara Sullivan informed Dan Bouthot, director of Monson Arts, that we were coming to visit and that I would be sharing all that I would see and do with the readership of my newsletter. Because the residency program was not in full swing, Dan generously offered us a place to stay.

We were warmly welcomed, and immediately invited to have lunch with Barbara and Michael and their students. Marilou Ranta, owner and chef of the [Quarry Restaurant](#), prepares three meals a day for workshop leaders and students, while also opening her gourmet restaurant to the general public. We had heard nothing but rave reviews about the cuisine.



After lunch Dan gave us the grand tour of [Monson Arts](#). We began in the Studio Building where Barbara was teaching the art of fresco to four students. The second floor of the building has six private writing studios and a comfortable common area overlooking Lake Hebron. Just down the street is another beautifully restored building that houses offices for Monson Arts and a gallery.

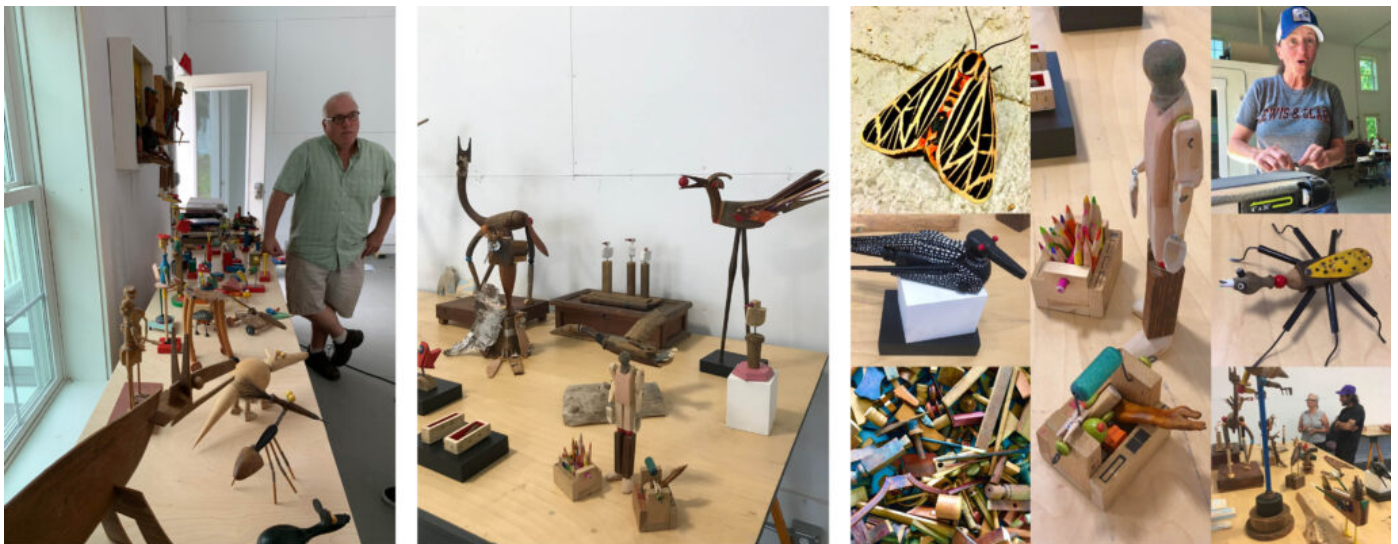
Currently on view in the gallery is "Always Home: Wabanaki Traditional Arts," an exquisite display of baskets and other fine crafts. Upstairs are more studio spaces, all designed and laid out with flexibility in mind. For more information on the exhibition [Click Here](#)

Michael Stasiuk

Our tour continued down and across the street to the sculpture studio where Michael Stasiuk was sharing his skill and knowledge of found-object sculpture. The space is a renovated barn with extremely high ceilings suitable for creating large-scale work – not necessary for Michael’s workshop but an inspiring space to work in all the same. Michael has almost “rockstar status” in New Durham, New Hampshire, where he has taught elementary-school students for the past 32 years.



Based on the intense focus of the adult students enrolled in his workshop, his inspiration and teaching skills are appreciated at all age levels. He generously shared the contents of his “wooden scraps” bins and displayed joinery samples, construction techniques and finished pieces.



[Click Here](#) to view an interview with Michael which appeared on *New Hampshire Chronicle*, and here is a link to [his website](#).

Barbara Sullivan

We circled back to see how Barbara's students were progressing. They were hard at work layering wet plaster and grinding pigments with glass mullers. Barbara is incredibly creative and certainly the only person that I am aware of who works in the age-old medium of fresco. Her portable frescos include domestic objects such as kitchen appliances and woodshop tools, food, and wonderful creatures such as animals, birds and insects. Through the end of this year, Barbara has a one-person show at Gemma Gascoine's gallery just down the street, subtitled "Fresco Bas-Relief Sculptures of Common Everyday Situations." It is pure delight. To learn more about Barbara, please [read this article](#) by Carl Little and [visit her page](#) on the Caldbeck Gallery website where she exhibits.



Below: "Bed" Shaped Fresco, approximately 42" x 50"

Gascoine and Watts

Next door to the General Store is Jemma Gascoine's ceramic studio and gallery. Jemma exhibits her work as well as other ceramic artists. She also teaches and curates a gallery on the second floor. She willingly shares information about her sculpture, and other work which includes beautiful, functional bowls and platters, many with bright-colored glazes. She retains her charming lilting British accent, even though she has been in the U.S. ever since she met and married photographer Todd Watts over twenty years ago. [Jemma's website.](#)



Jemma and Todd are central figures in the Monson arts community. Berenice Abbott who is best known for her iconic photographs of New York City in the 30s, met Todd a native New Yorker in 1973 and he subsequently printed all of her portfolios in his New York Studio. Abbott, who died in 1991 at the age of 93, lived in Blanchard from the mid sixties until 1981 when she moved down the road to Monson. Abbott convinced Todd to buy the house next door to hers in 1974 and in 1999 he and Jemma Gascoine moved into that house, installed a ceramics sculpture studio and constructed a building to house a state-of-the-art photography studio across the road.



On our second morning, Todd gave us a complete tour of the large studio which is equipped to make both digital and analog prints. Photographers come from all over the world to work with Todd in his studio. Todd explained, "the artists feel like they are on safari when they come to Blanchard." Beginning this year, Monson Arts will include a photography residency, the Abbott Watts Residency, in Watts' studio, thus greatly expanding their offerings in digital and analog photography. Todd Watts [Website](#)

Susan and I were immensely impressed with Todd's large format prints that were hanging in the studio. Art critic and writer Edgar Allen Beem describes Watts' photographs as "wildly colorful, fantastical images aimed not at capturing the natural world but at conjuring a mystical, metaphorical reality. He doesn't take photographs, he makes them." I encourage you to [read Beem's full article](#) about Watts and Gascoine which appeared in *Down East Magazine*.

Warning: Slippery Rocks and Roots!



Since the students were hard at work, Susan and I decided to explore more of the town and to get some exercise. The Appalachian Trail Visitor Center is in the center of town and it is where the through hikers on the Appalachian Trail check in before they continue into the Hundred Mile Wilderness, the final stretch before reaching Mount Katahdin. It is described as the wildest section of the Appalachian Trail, and one of the most challenging to navigate and traverse. We decided not to pursue that direction.

Instead, we picked up some local maps and trail descriptions, all of which included the disclaimer "Warning –slippery rocks and roots." We chose [Little Wilson Falls](#), described as an easy to medium hike that terminates at the upper falls which plunge 39 feet into a slate gorge. It was a misty, slightly wet day and we hummed "slippery rocks and roots, slippery rocks and roots..." while we paid close attention to our footing. The trees along the trail were old growth, very diverse and beautiful and the undergrowth in areas was carpeted in moss and lichen.

The other hike that we did (attempted) was the [Borestone Mountain Audubon Sanctuary](#), just a few miles outside of town. The first part of the trail is a lovely walk through old growth forest that leads to a pond and staffed

visitor center. Beyond there it gets a bit steeper and the final ascent to the summit is best on your hands and knees and grabbing onto metal handholds. We made it just shy of the summit, but were pleased enough with our effort and the views of the ponds below.

For outdoor enthusiasts, there is plenty to enjoy in the area including a boat excursion on Moosehead Lake. The retrofitted 1917 steamship *Katahdin* has daily tours of the lake. One can also take a boat shuttle from Rockwood, on the western shore of the lake, to [Mount Kineo State Park](#). The trails are described as easy with rewarding views at the summit. (That's on my list for next time.)

Alan Bray



Alan Bray, "Trails" 2020, casein on panel, 18×22

Our final stop on our way home was a visit with Maine artist Alan Bray who grew up in Monson and now lives several miles south in the town of Sangerville. Alan paints in casein, a milked-based tempera that, because of its very quick drying time, is not easy to work with. He is one of the few Maine painters who uses it and the skill and patience that the medium requires is well-suited to his landscape paintings.

From what I have read about his work and from our conversations, I realize that he is totally committed to his local landscape and the natural world. His subject matter is the woods, fields and mountains in his immediate area. The paintings are as much about the spirituality of the places as the reality.

We so enjoyed visiting with Alan and hearing his tales of growing up in Monson, a town he is very proud of. To learn more about Alan, here is a link to [his website](#) and two interviews, both very interesting and insightful. [Interview 1](#) and [Interview 2](#)

Our drive home was easy and full of conversation as we remembered all that we had seen and done.

This entry was posted in Newsletter on July 30, 2021 [<https://mhardingart.com/2021/07/monson-maine-july-newsletter/>] .
