

In Plein View

Painter Joe Terrone is drawn to the contemplative solitude of nature

BY LAUREL MARSHFIELD | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN



Rehoboth-area artist Joe Terrone, in his home studio, paints scenes of nature, or buildings and other man-made objects framed by nature.

Joe Terrone is standing pensively in the middle of his large yet somehow cozy artist's studio. A devoted plein air painter since the 1980s, he's been asked why, since there are no people in his paintings, he doesn't mind in the least if strangers strike up a conversation while he works outdoors at an easel.

"Well," he says after a pause, offering the simplest of explanations, "I like people."

At first glance, that might come as a surprise. Gazing around this converted garage at the paintings on every wall, or leaning side-



Sparking Creativity

A new program of the Rehoboth Beach Writers' Guild presents works of art to writers who then create poems or essays inspired by the art. This Joe Terrone painting led guild member Tom Horton to write this essay:



The light is benign — full daylight, not too much sun. I'd call it Indian Summer if I had to name a season. The place has seen better days, busier days when perhaps a working boat occupied the water and workmen filled the building and smoke rose from the chimney. And yet it is hard to think that scene could have been more beautiful than now, with its own settled, melancholy beauty, reflected in perfect detail in the undisturbed water. The artist knows this. He suggests the better, busier days in his title: "There Was a Day When."

This painting comes to me at a time when my 95-year-old mother is in the same boat. She's been a new baby, a new young woman, a new bride, a new mother, a new grandmother and then a new widow. Now she is like the scene in the picture. She has seen a lifetime of service; she is "fully depreciated" by any accounting method; and yet, who cannot see how beautiful she is in her decay?

The Japanese term *wabi sabi* captures this beauty in words. It applies to objects that are in the process of breaking down and reverting to the state of nature; their imperfection a mark of their impermanence but also a reminder of the dynamic, valuable life that has led to this moment.

I look into this picture and see all the accumulated dignity and utility of the place, the beauty acquired in its life of service immanent even now.

I look at my mother in her bed, exhibiting more shades of gray than of red and orange and I see almost a century of love and service, all still there, all latent in her body. I think, there was a day when. ■

ways against those walls, or stored in rafter-level bins like oversize books, a theme is readily apparent. All of them depict scenes in nature — or buildings and other man-made objects framed by nature, such as rocking chairs on the porch of an old inn, with bushes and flowers in the foreground. But absent are people, save for one painting in which a snowy field is barely punctuated by two tiny figures in the deep background, walking away from the viewer.

There's a good reason for this, Terrone says: When included in a painting, "people change the dynamics," inevitably becoming the focal point, the subject. But his interest is capturing the "spiritual experience of being alone, contemplative, out in nature."

Art, he elaborates, should embody a mood. And in his realistic yet loose, quasi-abstract style, this involves "getting the light right," since it's that quality in an outdoor scene that expresses the emotion he wants

to convey. The Pratt Institute-trained painter admits that an artist seldom knows whether the emotional reaction he hopes to evoke in viewers will occur, but he was afforded a chance to gauge just that recently. In June, four members of the Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild studied his painting "There Was a Day When" and used it as a literary starting point. (See above.) "I was on Cloud 9," he says of the writing his tranquil image inspired. "They all got what I was trying to do. You don't really get that — people don't express themselves that way. So you're never really sure that you're connecting."

The work, which portrays a limpid canal flowing beside an abandoned shack once used by the fishing industry in southern Maryland, certainly did. As with his other paintings, Terrone reinforced the serene mood he was after by simplifying both shapes and colors.

Controlling those aspects of the images he creates is something he

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learned not at art school but, ironically, through teaching. “I grew up in an art school period when they didn’t believe in teaching foundation classes. You were just supposed to be creative,” he explains. As a result, “I didn’t know how colors related, what a value was, how important ‘temperature’ was in painting.” In preparation for classes and workshops he taught in New Jersey and, later, Denton, Md., Terrone discovered the painting-concept essentials he would have to explain to students. “I’ve learned so much from teaching,” he says of what has become “another passion of mine.” Indeed, these days he offers classes, workshops and private lessons by appointment.

Exploring his primary passion is something the Rehoboth-area resident was able to do more fully starting six years ago. Prior to that, he divided his time between his 9-to-5 weekday occupation and his nights-and-weekends avocation. He owned a photo retouching business (one that Photoshop eventually made obsolete), and

often felt deeply frustrated by his limited free time for painting.

“I’d drive for an hour on Saturday mornings, and just start painting anything,” he recalls. But trying to coax one’s creativity to flow on a schedule wasn’t working. “It doesn’t happen that way,” he says of his attempts to translate the feeling a landscape would evoke to an image on canvas. That difficulty speaks to what he sees as the distinction between “doing art, and being an artist.”

But an artist is what he has become. Terrone and his retired-teacher wife, DiAnn (they have three adult children), moved to coastal Delaware from Glen Rock, N.J., a year ago. Since then, Terrone has been hard at work, creating a new website and producing locally themed paintings (his works are priced from \$450 to \$2,100). The Rehoboth Art League and Turnbridge Point, a B&B in Denton, have displayed his paintings, and this month he’s featured in the group show “Ocean to Bay” at Peninsula Gallery in Lewes.

On Display

Joe Terrone’s work will be on display in July at Peninsula Gallery in Lewes. The exhibition, which also includes works by Howard Eberly, Brian Murphy and Damon Pla, opens July 9 with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. and continues through July 20. For more info, visit peninsula-gallery.com. To learn more about Terrone’s paintings, visit JoeTerrone.com. ■

And at that former garage studio, just behind the house he shares with DiAnn, two small, enthusiastic dogs, and a shy, geriatric lovebird, Terrone may be inching toward a thematic shift in his work. “You will probably,” he predicts, “see more people in my work.” ■

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