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COVER:

A Quiet Escape (detail)

by Beth Ellis

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A Painter Comes Full Circle

As a child, New England oil painter **Beth Ellis** watched artists work on the coast of Maine. Now she paints similar subject matter en plein air for her new gallery in the same town.

—
by **Bob Bahr**

Beth Ellis believes in synchronicity. “There are so many coincidences in my life,” she says. “I feel like I’ve come full circle, in a way. Dreams really do come true, and in many ways I’m not surprised by what has happened. It just all fits.” The Connecticut artist is referring, in part, to the opening of her gallery in Perkins Cove, Maine, four years ago. It stands near the spot where she first fell under the spell of plein air painting, when she was 14 years old, watching a group of artists interpret the seascape.

Ellis also points to her enrollment in Paier College of Art, in Hamden, Connecticut, as part of the same interesting system of coincidences in her life. She was driving to enroll in a different school to learn art education when her car battery died. The driver that came to help her was the son of the owners of Paier, and he convinced Ellis to sit in on some classes at Paier that very afternoon. The school’s traditional, foundational approach to studio arts placed Ellis on the path she still treads.

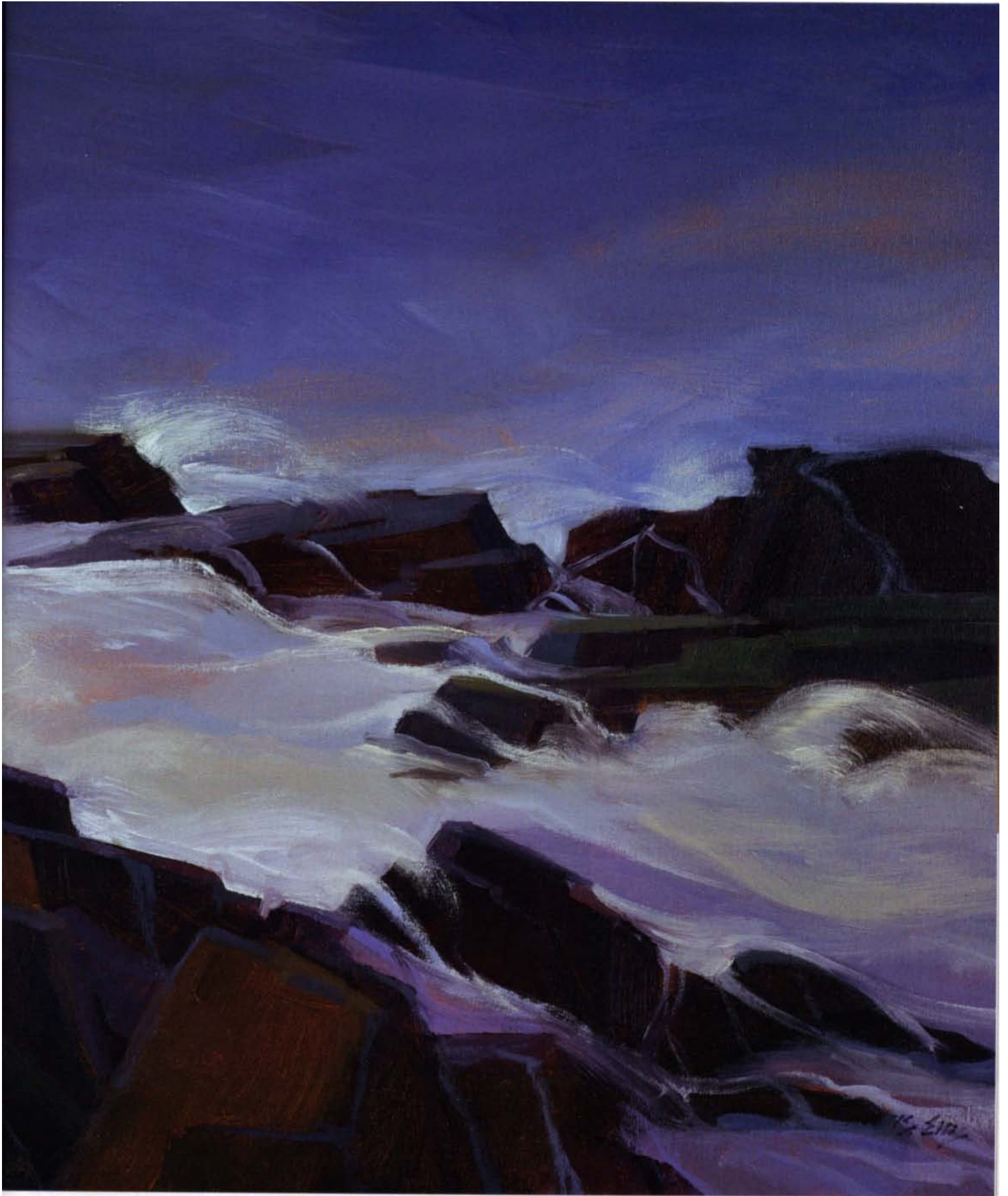
At first, she chose the practical career of a commercial designer and illustrator, which Ellis feels prepared her well for the next stage of her life: A trip several years ago to Maine reawakened the artist’s desire to paint. She understood clearly what she wanted to do. “I knew deep down I was a painter,” she recalls. Watching, listening, taking in the situation, then acting on intuition and letting it happen—this approach



Crescendo

2005, oil, 20 x 30.
Collection the artist.

Studio painting inspired
by plein air work.



"I feel like I have begun my painting as soon as I get to the spot because connecting with the subject is an important part of my process."

works for the big picture of Ellis' life and also for each of her plein air excursions. A painting begins with the artist soaking in the scene. "I spend some time walking around, slowing myself down enough to get connected to what I'm seeing," she says. "Sometimes this takes 10 minutes, sometimes it takes an hour. I feel like I have begun my painting as soon as I get to the spot because connecting with the subject is an important part of my process."

The artist may crop the scene using her hands, or she may use her camera. Once she has settled on a point of view, she quickly sets up her easel and then reminds herself to let go of preconceived notions. "You must be sure that you let yourself experience it as if for the first time," Ellis explains. "I tell myself, 'This is something I connected to intuitively.' I want to make sure that I am not just painting a picture. My intention is to understand what made me interested in the subject at that moment."

Then, the artist slows down even further. "The subject matter changes quickly with the light, so I have to take a mental snapshot," Ellis says. "This takes mental training. I am an artist who meditates so that I become more grounded and don't get distracted by other things. This is a huge part of who I am as a painter." Not surprisingly, Ellis searches the scene primarily to find a strong composition. Color plays a role in her decision, but "as a career designer, composition is a strong seducer," she says. "A big part of the composition is how the light is hitting the subject, and these patterns are what draw me in. I think about how the shapes break up the format. I'm always looking at how to put interesting shapes on the canvas."

Ellis worked in watercolor as an illustrator, but her paintings are in oil. "I was content with the level of impact that watercolor had, but now I am painting much bolder and

stronger," says the artist. "I felt that I needed a medium that could stand up to this." Ellis begins by drawing the composition with a fairly wide brush—up to a 1/2"—and concentrates on putting down large masses as opposed to drawing linearly. She concentrates on value in the beginning, laying down darks and mediums first, then building up to lights. Perhaps as a nod to her background in watercolor, Ellis enjoys combining transparent washes of darks with opaque applications of lighter and brighter colors—instead of letting watercolor paper supply the light in her pieces as she did in the past, she now



OPPOSITE PAGE

Intention

2004, oil, 60 x 36.
Collection the artist.
Studio painting inspired
by plein air work.

BELOW

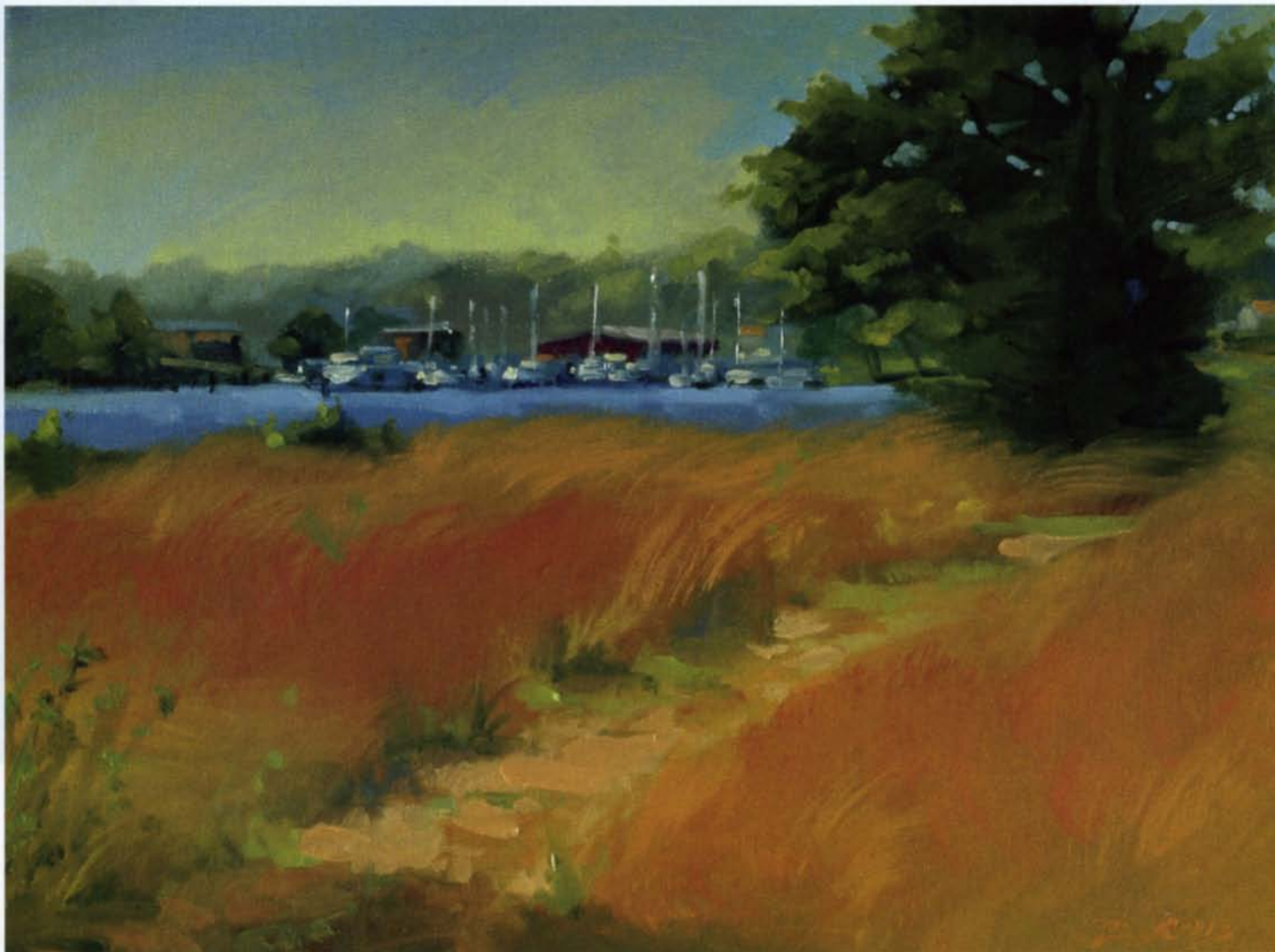
**Autumn's Charm
in Essex**

2005, oil, 14 x 18.
Collection the artist.
Painted en plein air.

BOTTOM

**A Special Day at
Little Beach**

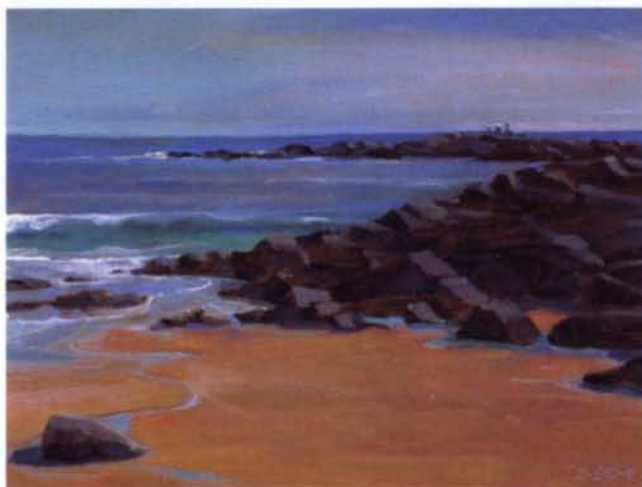
2004, oil, 12 x 16.
Private collection.
Painted en plein air.



applies thick layers of lights in oil. The artist revels in employing contrasts in a painting, be it dark played against light, big shapes against smaller ones, or—her favorite—warm colors against cool. “The warm colors contrasting with cooler ones—that’s what really provides the snap in a painting,” Ellis says. “It’s that play against each other that makes a painting work.”

She defines the shapes of the large masses by painting the negative space, which can coincide with her tendency to paint in the darks first. For example, Ellis paints a tree line by blocking in the mass of the trees, then shapes them by adding the lighter sky color—the negative space. Her palette is simple: a white, and warm and cool versions of yellow, red, and blue. This primary palette stems from the valuable instruction Ellis received from traditional-minded teachers at Paier.

Ellis emphasizes that she saves her lights until the last 10 or 15 minutes of painting. “I use them as accents that really





“Photos remind me of the specifics; [smaller, plein air] paintings give me the most important reminder: the feeling of the place.”

bring the painting to life,” she says. “During the first two-thirds of the process, the piece is dark in key. But I am always aware that the final lights are going to really make the painting.” Most of the work on a plein air piece is done on-site. But perhaps 20 percent of Ellis’ plein air paintings are slightly modified after her mandatory screening process. “I put my wet paintings on an easel indoors and look at them for few days,” she says. “I may add an accent or a highlight, but I’m careful not to lose the energy that happened outside.”

Her studio is not just for minor alterations. “I’m not strictly a plein air painter, but I find the plein air work strengthens my studio work,” the artist explains. “In my studio, mostly during the cooler months, I’m usually working from smaller plein air pieces—I’ll use them instead of, or in addition to, photographs. Photos remind me of the specifics; paintings

give me the most important reminder: the feeling of the place.” But some of the smaller plein air paintings don’t translate into larger studio pieces. “Sometimes the smaller the work, the greater the impact. I can’t improve upon some of the smaller, juicier paintings.” When Ellis does pursue a piece in the studio in a larger format, it is because she wants to explore the subject further, or because she is enticed by the challenge of making a larger representation of the subject just as lively as the smaller piece. One trick she employs is to paint with a larger brush to keep the strokes “pleasantly loose.”

Ellis loves painting pure landscapes, but September 11th suggested another area of growth. The artist knew someone who was lost in the tragedy, and what she saw at subsequent candlelight vigils—as well as her ever-present “high regard for people”—pointed her toward figurative work. “I did a painting of a young teenage boy holding a candle with tears on his face. I keep it as a reminder of that moment. From that point, I felt the need to bring people into my landscapes more frequently. I always say to myself, ‘What is my next growing edge?’ Back then I realized that I needed to start painting people as accurately as possible while keeping the fluidity of the entire painting in mind.”

About the Artist



Beth Ellis is a graduate of Paier College of Art, in Hamden, Connecticut. After more than 15 years as a commercial illustrator and graphic designer, Ellis devoted herself full time to painting in 1996. She is an elected member serving on the board of the Connecticut Plein Air Painters

Society and was instrumental in forming a successful five-year alliance between that group and the Connecticut Farmland Trust, whose mission is to find ways artists can help save vanishing farmland in the state. For eight years, Ellis was highly involved in the Glastonbury Art Guild. She has received numerous awards from juried events and was selected to be a studio artist at the Farmington Valley Arts Center, in Avon, Connecticut. Her work is available through the Beth Ellis Cove Gallery, in Ogunquit, Maine. The artist is currently finishing an instructional painting video, scheduled for release in May. For more information on Ellis's art, workshops, or upcoming video, visit her website at www.bellisart.com.

Ellis continues to fulfill her dreams. She long hoped to teach workshops on the Maine coast—another dream come true. She has been conducting painting workshops for several years now, although she limits their number to keep them from becoming tedious. Painting on the coast in Maine returns her to the days when she watched, as a child, artists doing the same thing. Ellis is acutely aware of her role in this continuing tradition. "I'm going back to the same locations those artists painted because those places that were important to them are important to me as well," she says. "And those scenes that I choose to paint also have special significance to other people who may end up acquiring the painting, thus giving it more meaning." Does this cross her mind while she is actually painting? "It more kind of crosses my heart," she answers. "It's a romantic feeling. If I am able to convey the depth of a place to viewers, and the place is important to them, then I am creating something that can live for a long time. There's also a historical aspect when painting scenes in Perkins Cove—a sense of pride in the tradition. That gives me a bit more of the inner fuel that keeps me going." ■

Bob Bahr is the managing editor of American Artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Quiet Morning at Perkins Cove

2004, oil, 24 x 36.
Private collection.
Studio painting.

BELOW

Summer Calling

2005, oil, 48 x 24.
Private collection.
Studio painting inspired
by plein air work.

