

# The New York Times



July 26, 2009

## Many Views With a Shared Sense of Place By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

*CONTRASTS: Several paintings at the Islip Art Museum, like Peter Drake's "Siege of Syosset" focus on suburban scenes.*

Patchy is a good word to describe "My Long Island," a show of work by 75 artists now on display at the Islip Art Museum. It has a few high points, but much of the art is unexciting.

The immediate impression left by the exhibition, organized by Carole Jay, an artist and curator from Stony Brook, is that of a jumble of disparate images, most of them landscapes, seascapes, suburban scenes and the like. Clearly, for Long Island artists — most in the show are based here — the landscape remains a powerful symbol of place.

There's a great deal of painting, in oil, acrylic, watercolor and mixed media; much of it is pleasing to look at, but there's not a lot of variety. Peaceful images of nature denuded of people are especially prevalent, suggesting that in spite of decades of suburban development, pockets of pristine nature remain. This is an old-fashioned vision of landscape as wilderness.

One such image, Pat Ralph's "Sunken Meadow Dunes: Winter" (2009) is among the best of the paintings on view. I liked it as much for the obvious quality of the artist's technique — done with a minimum of gesture — as for the way she layers the paint to give a sense of snow covering part of the ground. Ms. Ralph draws beauty from a seemingly banal subject.

Although the caliber of drawing in this show is generally inferior to that of the painting, "Sagaponack" (2009), a pencil drawing of a landscape by Patricia Mamatos, is beautifully articulated, with confident, vigorous lines and dynamic contrasts of tone. It also has the qualities of warmth and depth essential to any good drawing.

Other artists focus on motifs that define the suburbs or suggest suburban sprawl. A Darlene Charneco mixed-media collage is made of clusters of toy houses, miniature fences and trees stuck on wood to suggest the ways in which humanity has reshaped the natural environment. The idea here is of suburbia as constructed nature, along the lines of a golf course.

***Peter Drake's "Siege of Syosset" (2007), a luridly colored photorealist painting of a tank firing on a row of quiet suburban houses, the sun setting in the distance, is challenging, vital and invigorating; the strong suggestion is that the way of life represented by this affluent American neighborhood is under siege.***

Not surprisingly, several artists in the show have made work in response to contemporary environmental issues. Much of it is wearily moralistic, purporting to educate us on topics we are already familiar with, like global warming and pollution. Social relevance in art has to be matched by some sort of conceptual freshness and clarity or aesthetic merit.

Among the better works reflecting an environmental consciousness are Diane Lennea's "Clouded (Cloud Machine)" (2008) and Tom Steele's "Strong's Potato Barn III" (2008), both visually striking photographs. And Barbara Roux's conceptual project, "Clear as a Bell" (2009), is an engaging study of the dangers of invasive plant species that combines living plants with text and images.

Along these lines, but even more interesting, is Chris Coffin's video "Water Drawing" (2001), the highlight of the exhibition. It shows the artist swimming in the ocean with a line of floating lobster-pot buoys attached to his leg. His movements define shapes, though not intentionally; anything specific is a product of the viewer's imagination.

What is special about Mr. Coffin's video is the way in which a prosaic activity, swimming, is cleverly used as an enlivening riff on conceptual art. It's a refreshingly original entry in what is by and large an uninspiring show.

"My Long Island," Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, through Sept. 6. Information: [islipartmuseum.org](http://islipartmuseum.org) or (631) 224-5402. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/nyregion/26artslip.html>