



Left to right, Mary Monk, Billy Solitario, Renee Mitchell, Claude Ellender, Phil Sandusky, Louis Morales, Diego Largaia

Artist Adventure

Painting in the shadows of Walter Anderson

By John R. Kemp

ON A RECENT AUTUMN morning in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, seven New Orleans area artists boarded two small boats with tents, paints, brushes and thoughts filled with possibilities. From the inlet harbor, they headed out to Horn Island, the largest of the barrier islands along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. For three days and two nights, they opened their imaginations to the island's landscape, and to the "lilac and copper" bulrushes that danced to

the Gulf breezes that blew amongst the sand dunes.

On board were Abita Springs artists Mary Monk and Claude Ellender; Louis Morales of Mandeville; and René Mitchell, Phil Sandusky, Diego Largaia and Billy Solitario of New Orleans. Like Walter Anderson a generation earlier, the seven artists explored the island to capture the interplay of changing light and shadows among the dunes and wooded landscape as the sun arced across the island from

The sun went lower and the bulrushes turned to lilac and copper and I rose. . . my shadow danced with me – blue shadow against the copper bulrushes. – Walter Inglis Anderson

sunrise to sunset. The only sounds that could be heard were the wind, squawks of seabirds and waves endlessly washing up along the sandy beaches. Their mission was to complete on location as many paintings possible for an exhibition in late December and early January at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts.

Although the island has changed noticeably over the years, thanks to hurricanes and erosion, these were the dunes where the reclusive Anderson created his extraordinary paintings and drawings of the island's landscape and wildlife. From the mid-1940s until

his death at the age of 82 in 1965, Anderson, whose family resided in nearby Gautier, Mississippi, rowed and sailed his small wooden skiff across the nine-mile stretch from Ocean Springs to Horn Island. There he spent days alone exploring the island while sketching and painting everything from stands of pine trees to resident alligators and pelicans. To him this pristine island was an endless and unspoiled source of inspiration where he produced some of his finest work. Examples of his Horn Island days and his skiff can be seen at the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs.



Diego Largaia

Fortunately, Anderson left us not only a large body of paintings from this period but also 85 logbooks, describing his day-to-day experiences on Horn Island and on other nearby barrier islands. They were found tucked away in an old safe after his death. In these writings, he described the wonders of each visit. An April 1944 entry, for example, reveals the passion he felt for everything he saw: "I found smooth water inside the island and rowed steadily. The wind went down and the moon went down, and the stars were reflected in the phosphorescent water. I splashed in the water with my hand, and it was like an explosion of small stars." Another entry described his encounter with pelicans. "I stopped often to draw them and was as usual greatly impressed by their beautiful form, and by the tremendously musical harmonies of rising from the ground at my approach."

This was the setting for the seven artists when they arrived on the island. "I feel like Anderson was our Van Gogh," says Diego Largaia



Phil Sandusky

as he stands at the water's edge, painting shadows in a nearby dune. "He's arguably the best artist in the South and it's great to come to the main source of his work. One expects to see the island as he saw it and as he stumbled on things." René Mitchell, perched on a high grassy dune overlooking a small pond, also sees the island through Anderson's eyes. "I can understand why he came out here," she explains. "I take long walks and explore and see things for the first time. No earphones in my ears. I get to hear birds or see little critters walk by

and fish jumping in the pond. I love nature, and this gives me the opportunity to connect with nature, plus it's just so beautiful and there's a stillness to the place."

Claude Ellender and Billy Solitario, who organized the trip to the island, also felt Anderson's presence. "You can't come out here without thinking about his work," Solitario says while painting his Monet-like image of Ellender working from the top of a distant dune. "You see his symbols everywhere on the island. When you see a pine branch, you see the real thing but you also see how he

simplified it. When you see the island, you see his work at the same time." Horn Island's natural beauty also captivated Ellender who was there for the first time. "It's amazing he could do what he did all his life," he says while pointing to a picturesque little pond in the middle of the island. "I'm just amazed how beautiful it is. It is breathtaking out here. When I look at those trees (he points to a distant stand of pine trees), I see how he would abstract them. I can see exactly what he was looking at."

Others also noted the hardships Anderson endured on his retreats to the island.



Billy Solitario



Claude Ellender



Reneé Mitchell



Mary Monk

“Being out here has given me a better appreciation of Walter Anderson,” says Mary Monk as she paints in the details of a nearby grassy dune and swats away pesky gnats. “He came out here and put up with wildlife. He was an amazing man.” She then describes the raccoons who visited the night before, along with an alligator who strolled through their camp on its way to the water that morning.

To Louis Morales the hardships of gnats, rain and blistering midday sun paled to the island’s natural beauty. “Those challenges separate us from other artists,” he says. “We’re all looking at the

island through Anderson’s eyes and seeing exactly what he looked at. It’s just amazing how he just rowed his little boat over here.”

Although all seven artists were keenly aware of Anderson’s presence, none of them paint in Anderson’s iconic style. Each artist has his or her own interpretation of the same landscape. “While I much admire Anderson’s work,” explains Phil Sandusky, “he’s such a different animal than me artistically that he does not inspire my work. But I think he helps me better appreciate the beach environs and close-up experiences of marine life. It’s inspiring to me how dedicated he was.”

Each night after a full day of painting under cloudless skies in the scorching sun, the group gathers around a campfire to relax, eat, drink and to talk about their paintings. Solitario recalls their first night on the island and a magnificent moonrise that brightened the entire island: “After the sunsets, the island becomes small, as small as the ring of light from the campfire. As our voices grow louder with wine, it seems even they are contained by the firelight. Occasionally, invaders come in from the dark – two glowing eyes and a hunched back (raccoons). As the fire dies to glowing embers and voices retire to

their tents, the full moon rises and again the island grows. Its pearl-white light cools the sand dunes. I want to find color in the moon shadows but the darkness hides it and I am tired.”

The next morning shortly after sunrise and a quick breakfast, the seven artists moved out once again from camp with their easels and paints to explore new locations for another day in the sun and another view of Horn Island. “I’ve been painting from these dunes since I was a boy,” says Solitario, “and it still excites me.”

Anderson would be impressed. ■

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