

Outdoor Painter

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Strength (and Fun) in Numbers



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By Andrew Webster

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In Port Clyde, Maine, an artist has put together a yearly summer getaway for painting friends that seems to be reaching critical mass. How can other artists do the same?

Lead Image: Port Clyde Harbor is within walking distance from the house of painters — even if one is loaded down with plein air gear

For more than eight weeks, a house called Nanatuck, located just a minute from Port Clyde's picturesque harbor, placed less than a mile down the road from the Marshall Point lighthouse, plays host to a [rotating group of plein air painters](#) excited to explore the landscape that inspired three generations of Wyeths.



Mary Erickson, the founder and organizer of the Nanatuck group

Now in their fifth year, the artists have the system down. Each pays a flat fee for a week, based on the size of their bedroom. Spouses stay free — but most artists use the trip as a getaway, a work trip. There are five rooms, and each room is responsible for cooking dinner one night during the week. The painters disperse in the mornings, paint all day, and gather back at Nanatuck for dinner in the late evening, after the afternoon light has been committed to canvas. The arrangement has resulted in some good memories, recharged emotional batteries, and fine paintings. All of the artists staying at Nanatuck make their living from painting pictures, and the band of friends is getting noticed by top galleries. A group show at a high-profile gallery is currently in the works.



“Shadows in Time,” by Mary Erickson, 2015, oil, 12 x 12 in.



“Leading In,” by Don Demers, 2015, oil, 10 x 8 in.

Many artists get away with friends to paint. What made this group in Port Clyde a brand, one that locals and galleries have noticed?

The key is the person organizing the group and finding the house. In this case, that is [Mary Erickson](#). She loved Maine and enjoyed painting there, and wanted to share it with her friends. It started small, five years ago, with just a few friends. This year, 45 artists passed through Nanatuck. Erickson does a lot of work organizing the schedule of arrivals and departures, overseeing the house, and making sure it all runs smoothly. The visiting artists are all expected to be self-sufficient and helpful, but it's still a big job. Erickson insists that she gets more out of the Nanatuck house than anyone. "It's a very sharing, enriching experience," she says.



"Recollections," by Mary Erickson, 2015, oil, 8 x 12 in.

The artists working out of Nanatuck stress the importance of the organizer — specifically, Erickson. "This works because of two things: Mary and Maine," says Daniel Ambrose, a Florida painter. "It's like family. It's better than family," he adds, laughing. "This is my fourth year. I think it's important that Port Clyde is close to some major metropolitan areas. We get affluent visitors. They appreciate the area and the beauty of it. And for the artists, the scenery is inspiring."

Debra Nadelhoffer, another Nanatuck artist, says the key may be that Erickson knows how to put the right people together. She compares the situation to a host who knows who to invite to orchestrate a great dinner party. "She has invited people that she knows will fit together — subconsciously, maybe," says Nadelhoffer. "And it just works."



A work in progress by Mary Erickson



The Nanatuck house

Nadelhoffer does something similar in Florida, on St. George Island. “Find a house big enough so people aren’t on top of each other and there is some kind of privacy somewhere,” advises Nadelhoffer. “Make sure everyone knows that they all have to pitch in and help. Be ready to share with others. You have to be able to get along. Nobody is a hot dog. Nobody is a star or acts like one. Nobody waits on somebody else. Everybody just takes off and goes out to paint — no waiting for everyone to agree on a spot or get ready. Nobody is responsible for anyone else’s lunch. You are free to just go paint.”

Erickson offered a few words of advice for those wishing to have a similarly positive experience renting a house with other artists. “I think it’s crucial that there are no prima donnas,” she says. “This is a comfortable house, but it is not fancy. It is not a high-end resort. Get a house that is not brand-spanking-new. You don’t have to worry about getting red paint on the white carpet here. We are careful to keep the house clean, but it’s important that we don’t have to worry too much.



"Fog at Schoodic," by Debra Nadelhoffer, 2015, oil, 12 x 9 in.



“Light and Fog,” by Eleinne Basa, 2015, oil, 8 x 12 in.

“Pick your closest buddies to start out. I started out with a few friends, such as John Caggiano. And then, anyone who is a friend of John’s is a friend of Nanatuck. And we all fit. We may start out strangers, but we end up all friends.

“Be open-minded. You don’t know what you are going to get when you get a group of people together. Be willing to go with it.

“Go into it with the idea that you will give and share. Consider it a family, with give-and-take.”

Erickson grew up in a big family. Now she has a big one again, in Maine, each summer. “Last year was the best summer of my adult life, and this one is great, too,” she says. “To be able to work with my peers and live what we do, and to do it in such an incredible place? It’s just great.”

[Andrew Webster](#)

Andrew, who worked for Streamline Publishing as an editor and more, graduated from The University of North Carolina at Asheville with a B.A. in Art History and Ceramics. He then moved on to the University of Oregon, where he completed an M.A. in Art History. Studying under scholar Kathleen Nicholson, he completed a thesis project that investigated the peculiar practice of embedded self-portraiture within Christian imagery during the 15th and early 16th centuries in Italy.

