

The POWER of PLACE

Coastal Sussex settings — or the objects found there — supply these artists with inspiration

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAMELA AQUILANI



As someone who's spent much of her life in Maryland and Delaware, Nancy LaMotte is sadly aware of the violent storms and treacherous shoals that have wrecked countless ships along the Atlantic coast. But when she spotted a small piece of greenish-gold glass on Lewes Beach in 2006, LaMotte realized one of the best-known of the foundered vessels — the *Severn*, a British merchant ship that ran aground in Roosevelt Inlet in 1774 — had bequeathed an artifact she could transform into a unique piece of commemorative jewelry.

Years later she still revels in the journey of her find, which was once part of a gin bottle shattered into shards that were then churned by currents and pummeled into the sand for more than 230 years, emerging as smooth, gem-like sea glass tossed up onto the shore.

“I love taking really old pieces of glass like this one from the *Severn* and making something beautiful,” she says. “I also love it because it's directly linked to the history of America. Once you familiarize yourself with the glass bottles and tableware and other things sea glass comes from, you feel more connected to the people who lived at the time.”

LaMotte, who collaborated on the popular 2004 book “Pure Sea Glass: Discovering Nature's Vanishing Gems” with her former husband, Richard LaMotte, could scout for that glass on ocean and bay shorelines anywhere. But like photographer Andy Gordon and painter Laura Erickson, she's one of many local artists who draw most of their inspiration and creative materials from the Delaware beach communities they call home. This story takes a look at how coastal Delaware informs their work. ▶



ABOVE: Artist Nancy LaMotte sifts through sea glass, shells, fossils and other materials found on local beaches before stepping into her Fenwick Island-area studio to create a wide range of decorative crafts.

LEFT: Glass from the wreck of the *Severn*, which ran aground near Roosevelt Inlet in 1774, will become the focal point of a piece of modern jewelry.



// I'M LOOKING FOR HARMONY; I'M ALSO LOOKING FOR SOMETHING EXCITING."



LEFT: In addition to shooting evocative landscapes, photographer Andy Gordon creates abstract images of coastal-related objects, some of which he finds among the vintage artifacts at Jayne's Reliable, a store in Dagsboro.

ABOVE: Gordon's creative artistic processes bring the feeling of a light breeze and flickering sunlight to this image of marshland along Whites Creek in Ocean View.

FOCUS AS A PATH TO TRANSFORMATION

Andy Gordon, who lives near Ocean View, has become known for coastal-themed photographs that create an intriguing sense of immersion and motion. You only need to gaze at his windswept depiction of Whites Creek marshland for a moment before it seems as if the breeze is caressing your own skin. You're likewise apt to feel warmth on your face as you study his carefully crafted image of the sun breaking through clouds above the calm waters of the Indian River Bay.

Gordon's ability to convey these sensations comes from decades of developing photographic processes that, in his words, "amplify the motion of the image, thus bringing it to life." With landscapes, that sometimes means shooting with a tripod and a slow shutter speed to create a sense of motion that draws viewers into the setting, as if they're experiencing the scene instead of simply seeing it. He also photographs found coastal objects for still-life images that employ "focus stacking," which involves taking photos with varying degrees of focus, then combining them into an image with a vastly greater depth of field than could otherwise be achieved.

"I might do a couple of test shoots and then come back to it after sorting out technical or compositional issues," he says. "This can take days, weeks, months, or in some cases, years."

During the most intense periods, Gordon notes that he's "considering every element of the image, from quality of light to subtle shadows to background detail."

As a result, it's easy to imagine the objects he photographs in more fanciful forms: A close-up of cylindrical rose petals as the entrance to a vast labyrinth. A fallen maple leaf as a dancer in motion. Rehoboth's own "Zoltar" looking more like a prisoner than a prophet as he gazes out from behind the glass of his fortune-telling machine on the boardwalk.

What's also important, Gordon says, is the serendipitous concept of "punctum," which he describes as "something in an image that captures your attention. It doesn't have to be a big thing ... just something that's a little off. Sometimes it's an aberration. Although I'm looking for harmony, I'm also looking for something exciting."

As an example, he describes a sudden and random occurrence as he shot black-and-white photos of a basketball game. "There was beautiful light isolating the subjects ... but then one of the kids broke free in a motion that was captured by the lens. It was the most compelling element of the photograph because it had a sensory intensity. That element that pricks you. That's punctum."

CONNECTIONS TO THE PAST

Back in her studio near Fenwick Island, Nancy LaMotte shares a similar appreciation for the unexpected qualities of sea glass and the people who used it in its original form. One of her most dramatic memories occurred in 2014 when a friend took her to an island in the Chesapeake Bay that had been deserted in the 1920s due to rising water levels.

"More than 300 people had lived there and gone to their own churches and schools," she recalls. "As soon as we pulled up in the boat I realized the whole beach was full of sea glass. Seeing it all and listening to the story about how the people had to leave made me feel like I was looking at leftovers from a community or even a civilization."

In the years since then she has transformed pieces she found on that island — which included baking powder jars and Turlington medicine bottles well known for their embossed lettering and artful violin shape — into aqua, soft green and lavender pendants. Today they can be found among her extensive collection of colorful necklaces, bracelets, earrings, brooches and other pieces that artfully — and beautifully — combine metals, crystals and gems.

"I can't go anywhere near the water and not find myself looking down — I must miss some great sunsets," she says with a laugh. "Every piece of sea glass is unique. I always build the jewelry around its existing shape because I think of sea glass as something made by people but refined by nature." ▶

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LEFT: Laura Erickson captures the peaceful ambiance of a fine summer day at the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal, one of her favorite local settings.

BELOW: Erickson's acrylic paints convey the anticipatory feel of calm waters beneath a gathering storm.

// **IN MY OWN JOURNEY TO FIND PEACE, I'VE FOUND IT COMES FROM BEING IN NATURE."**

INSPIRING SETTINGS

The coastal environment is also the prevailing inspiration for Laura Erickson's acrylic paintings, which tend to be infused with light to convey a sense of calm energy. That's a thoughtful choice based on the way she feels when she visits some of the area's most picturesque places.

"In my own journey to find peace, I've found it comes from being in nature. ... So I love walking past Tower Road and love all the trails around Gordons Pond," she says during a relaxed discussion at her studio in a former warehouse just east of Route 1 near Rehoboth. "These local settings are a huge part of my work."

Erickson tends to paint on large canvases, where ocean, bay and inland waters are captured in varying shades of blues and grays under expansive skies. While she loves a perfectly beautiful day at the beach as much as anyone, she's drawn to weather-related drama that can bring an element of subtle conflict to her work:

"I like overcast days and days when it's a little rainy or foggy, and am inspired by the idea of finding peace and beauty in an image that's not in-your-face beautiful."

Erickson also enjoys searching for lesser-known settings within a short distance of the built environment that offer surprisingly vast views of nature. A favorite is the Thompson Island area, which features beaches, dense forests and marshlands just a short distance west of Route 1.



"What I'm really looking for are special places where you see reflections of clouds on water, trees in the distance, and the path of water winding through the marsh. When I'm working in the studio and feel stuck, the first thing I do is go outside because the beauty in this area is an endless source of inspiration."

LIFE CHALLENGES AS A CREATIVE FORCE

All three artists speak eloquently about the personal experiences that inspire their work. As someone who has known significant stress when trying to create enough works to meet the demand in local galleries, LaMotte now works on a smaller and more intensely creative scale.

"As sea glass became more popular, I also felt I needed to put more artistic flair into it, with more figurative pieces that really speak to people," she explains. "Today I never want to hear somebody say, 'I just saw a piece like that at another booth.'"

For Gordon, who has lived with chronic back ailments for decades, the meticulous and time-consuming work that goes into creating his art has become essential to recovery.

"The beach is my happy place. I started coming here at 6 years old and living in the ocean for hours at a time. When you're in severe pain, it's as if you're in the middle of a storm, but my process has grounded me and brought me peace."

For Erickson, the sense of calm that's conveyed through her paintings of local scenes is driven by wisdom gained thousands of miles away.

"When I went to the Santa Reparata International School of Art in Florence ... for a semester during college, I thought, 'Well, I'm in Italy now, so I have to be perfect,'" she says. "Fortunately I had a great professor who helped me realize that your work is never going to be perfect, but that it should always be an organic releasing of your emotions."

She also learned that the amount of time spent with a brush in hand has little to do with the value of her creations.

"When he told me he admired one of my paintings, I essentially told him it couldn't be my best work because it had only taken an hour. He responded, 'No, it didn't take an hour. It took 21 years of your life and all of the experiences that have influenced you.'"

That advice rang true near the end of the semester when Erickson and her fellow students went to Venice for the world-renowned Biennale. Following a session of plein-air painting, which requires artists to paint an outdoor scene quickly and freely to capture the fleeting feel of the light and color, she realized "it turned out to be one of the best pieces I've ever done."

When pressed on that point, she goes back to a common thread in conversations with all three artists about the driving force of their inspiration.

"Ultimately I believe art is really about conveying the artists' emotions, and about how you feel when you look at what they've done. As an artist, I've gone through a spiritual journey to find peace, and always hope I can convey the sense of serenity in the unparalleled beauty of these local places." ■

Chris Beakey is a frequent Delaware Beach Life contributor and the author of "Fatal Option," an Amazon bestseller distributed by Simon & Schuster.

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