

Art Review: Something For Everyone - “Artists & Writers: They Played In The Game”

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by Gabrielle Selz

“Artists & Writers: They Played In The Game” at Guild Hall through July 28

“Artists & Writers: They Played In The Game” at Guild Hall in East Hampton has something for everyone. Mixed in with an all-star exhibition of paintings and sculpture from the permanent collection are books, photographs, cartoons, vintage news clips, original T-shirts, assorted memorabilia, and artifacts—all centered on the famous annual East Hampton softball extravaganza known locally as just “the Game.”

Like the art colony it celebrates, the Game started spontaneously one hot summer day and grew into a tradition. When Willem de Kooning, Philip Pavia and Jackson Pollock had a picnic in 1948 and then played a pick-up game of softball, the Game was born. In the 65 years since then, it has been played every August in Herrick Park. In the early days, no distinctions were made between artists and writers. By the mid-’50s though, as more writers joined the fray and the playing became more competitive, the Game became a contest between those who practiced the visual arts and those who practiced the literary ones: brush against pen, as it were.

Since 1968 the Game has been played to raise funds for local charities, including East End Hospice, East Hampton Day Care Center and The Retreat, but it has always been played for fun. Still goofy and quirky after all these years—and despite its commercialism and its sampling of the famous (Christie Brinkley) and the infamous (Abbie Hoffman)—the Game, and now the show at Guild Hall, is about celebrating community spirit.

The exhibition opens with a long chronological history of the Game and highlights moments from history to the present: like the time the first grapefruit was pitched (1954 by art critic Harold Rosenberg to sculptor Philip Pavia); the year the first woman went up to bat (writer Silvia Tennenbaum); the summer the first politician joined the team (Eugene McCarthy in 1969); and when the first “Real Housewife” (Countess LuAnn de Lesseps in 2011) played for the artists side.

Guild Hall’s larger Moran Gallery is chock full of works from the museum’s permanent collection of celebrated artist players. There’s a large abstract painting by de Kooning from the period after he’d

moved permanently to East Hampton, infused with the richly colored sea light that had originally attracted him to the East End.



"Untitled" by Willem de Kooning, 1970-72. 55.75 x 36.75 inches. Gift of Ron Delsener, Guild Hall Museum Permanent Collection. Photo by Barbara Jo Howard.

Nearby is a gorgeous late Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, 1951 that is semi-figurative; a Franz Kline black and white calligraphic abstraction, *Untitled* from 1953; an architectural collage of rectangular shapes by Conrad Marca-Relli from 1965; and, from 1976, the Larry Rivers pop-historical *Big B Signs Up*, a lithograph of two hands clasping a quill pen created by Rivers to mark the U.S. Bicentennial and honor Benjamin Franklin's signing the Declaration of Independence. Though referencing a far more serious endeavor, this expression of liberty is in its own way like softball, another classic American tradition.

One of the masterpieces in the exhibition is a large painted chromed steel sculpture by John Chamberlain. *Quamking* from 2008 is as spiky and colorful as a giant sea urchin, and what's

startling about this late Chamberlain is his brilliant use of color, as masterful and complex as any painter's.



"Quamking" by John Chamberlain, 2008. Painted and Chromed steel, 18 x 27 x 18 inches. Private collection NY, Courtesy of Caroline Schmidt Fine Art LLC. Photo by Barbara Jo Howard.

Next comes both a phantasmal oil painting by Ross Bleckner, *Untitled* from 1991, and an abstract landscape by Joan Mitchell, *Sides of a River 1*, 1981, which is on loan from the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York. Mitchell's lithograph is a mass of dense marks on the top and bottom of the paper that can be read as a riverbed. Who knew Joan Mitchell could swing a bat and played in the Game?

One of Eric Fischl's evocative and mysterious solar etchings, *Untitled (2 figures)* from 2006 is included, as well as a surrealist sea-scape from Leif Hope, the driving force behind the Game today and the one who conceived the exhibition.

Wandering through the exhibition is like traveling through time. There's work by both Ernsts, father Jimmy and son Eric, and both Solomons, father Syd and son Mike, whose shimmering, diffuse watercolor, *Saffron Sea* from 2012, captures, like de Kooning's painting, the quality of light mixed with the sea that permeates our environment.



“Saffron Sea” by Mike Solomon, 2012. Watercolor on mulberry papers infused with epoxy, 30 x 30 inches. Photo by Barbara Jo Howard.

Without having a theme for the exhibition other than an artist’s participation in the Game, co-curators Elena Prohaska Glinn and Christina Mossaides Strassfield have pulled together a show that is surprisingly coherent. This is no small feat for a show that spans six decades and includes more than 70 artists of varying styles. It would have been nice to include alongside each piece a tag that told the viewer what year(s) that particular artist played in the game, thus lending an additional layer of context to the exhibition, but other than this small cavil, this reviewer was delighted by the selection and cohesiveness of the show.

Perhaps the lucidity of the exhibition is due, in part, to the fact that a majority of the work was done by artists who are connected by their love of this community and the natural beauty of the environment. Of course, there is a lot of softball included in the exhibition, too.

Favorite samples are two works done by the wood sculptor Randall Rosenthal, *Sweet Memories*, 2009 and *Artist and Writers*, 1996. Both are created in Rosenthal’s signature style, carving everyday items—in this case a three- ring binder of softball memorabilia and a book of signature announcements for the Game played in 1996—from a single block of Vermont pine wood, then hand painting it. The finished effect is more photorealist than trompe l’oeil and an amazing melding of subject matter and technique.



"Sweet Memories" by Randall Rosenthal, 2009. Vermont white pine, acrylic and ink, 12.5 x 22.5 x 3 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Displayed in the smaller Spiga Gallery are compilations of vintage news clips and photographs from the East Hampton Star, Newsday, The New York Times, Dan's Papers, among others, that document the Game and those who came to play and cheer over the years. On one wall, a flat screen shows actual Game footage, on the opposite is a delightful cartoon by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. called *Artist/Writer*. It is a large lithograph of face-to-face, spar off between a writer and an artist.



Artwork by Kurt Vonnegut, no date. Lithograph, 35 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Ed and Magda Bleier. Photo by Barbara Jo Howard.

The far wall is covered with an array of artifacts: artist-designed T-Shirts, caps and logos, all created in celebration and to raise funds for charity. The front table holds signed books and screenplays by some of the writers who played in the Game: Roger Rosenblatt, George Plimpton, Richard Reeves, Silvia Tannenbaum, and Carl Bernstein, to name a few.

In the end, people are typically brought together by the simple things they enjoy doing in company. Out here, that's going to the beach, sharing a good meal, art and a famously fun-loving softball game. We're not a complicated community but we are a unique one, rich in talent and landscape. It's nice to have a show that not only celebrates the history of the Game, but, at the same time, reminds us of the exceptional legacy of art and community that exists in the Hamptons.

BASIC FACTS: “Artists & Writers: They Played in the Game” exhibition opens remains on view through July 28. Guild Hall is located at 158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.guildhall.org.

The 65th Annual Artists vs Writers Celebrity Softball Game will take place on Aug 17 at 2 p.m. in Herrick Park in East Hampton, NY. Admission is \$10. For information, visit www.artistswritersgame.org.

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