



ART REVIEW: Sea Fever in Two Exhibitions at the Quogue Gallery

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by Charles A. Riley II

To each his catnip. The scent of freshly cut grass conveys the promise of happiness for kids let out of school, grownups home from work, or weekend visitors escaping from the city. For boaters and fishermen and beachgoers on the East End, it's the misty bouquet of the briny deep blown off the sea by a southwesterly breeze.

For me, the smell of oil paint is the first sign I am about to enjoy some time viewing art. Top notes of linseed oil and Grumbacher are currently mingling with the illusion of salt air at the Quogue Gallery, where two cheekily different takes on the sea are offered by Quogue local Pieter Greeff (in the front gallery) and California-based Marshall Crossman (in the towering new addition at the rear).

Greeff is a lifelong Quogue-ite, based in the same home his father built in 1937—a year before the Big One blew through, which it survived. His beach, boats, clubhouses and bluefish are all just a bike ride away and the clean, healthy taste of these new paintings can be credited to that immediacy.

He surfs and sails a Hobie Cat, and not just puttering around in Peconic Bay but way out on the ocean, where, as J.M.W. Turner found while lashed to a mast, the power of the sea reminds the painter of who is in charge. He inherited not just the house but the love of painting from his mother, Adele Greeff, whose landscapes are in the permanent collections of Guild Hall and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington. Her son, who went on to Harvard, recalls visiting Jackson Pollock's studio in Springs. He recalls Pollock commanding him, "Hey kid, follow me," and Greeff got to watch him use an eggbeater to mix paint in a can.

Aptly enough for a seaside theme, Greeff tiptoes the coastline between abstraction and mimesis, matching sky and surf in flattened planes under the tight control of contours. The unreal is interjected via the colors that are not *out there* but in the head, and dreamily archetypal symbols.

I was immediately drawn to *Night Fishing* because it makes a sly allusion to the monumental Picasso made in Antibes in 1939. The whole wall of nocturnes, including *Chowder*, an amusing piece with four floating fish heads over a dancing black kettle, drifts into this oneiric mode. The style dabbles in Surrealism (and I thank Chester Murray, who started the Quogue Gallery, for this comparison) not just as Picasso wielded it but also in a way reminiscent of the British painter Mary Fedden. The fantasies captured in the nocturnes and especially *Chowder* or *Outside* could be used as the cover for a particular batch of stories in the "Arabian Nights" in which a poor fisherman whose luck has gone out with the tide starts hallucinating that the fish are talking to him.



“Night Fishing” by Pieter Greeff, 2014. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.



“Chowder” by Pieter Greeff, 2014. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.



“Outside” by Pieter Greeff, 2015. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches.

A suite of *Interior Landscapes* are abstract, small canvases that read like maps or Native American glyphs, or an osprey’s view of town. They barely relate to the rest of the show, a mark of versatility.



“Interior Landscape Red” by Pieter Greeff, 2014. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

Another impressive side of the painter shows up in precisely geometric views of *Beach Steps* and the large, enigmatic earlier painting *Children’s Corner*. Both deploy a chalkier palette (grays warmed with tan) across tightly ruled architectural studies of considerable technical skill. The *Children’s Corner* is a delightful trick of optics in which shadows turn positive and negative spaces inside out. It’s the “penalty box” at a local beach club where unruly children are consigned to sit out tantrums. The artist cites Tom Wesselman as an influence, and Wesselman’s fastidious Pop attitude is evident in the way the trapezoids lock together.



“Beach Steps” by Pieter Greeff, 2008. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.



“Children’s Corner” by Pieter Greeff, 2001. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.

Greeff has his own approach to the requisite seascape as well, gracefully holding tight the *Shinnecock Sunset* with a Maurice Denis sliver of gold and fingers of blue. The keen, appraising eye of a surfer and catamaran launcher lends authenticity to the churning waves of *September Sea* and *Breakers*. These homages to what the poet Wallace Stevens called “the heaving speech of air” (his beach was at Key West) point the way to the next half of the show, in which Marshall Crossman celebrates the west coast.



“Shinnecock Sunset” by Pieter Greeff. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.



“September Sea” by Pieter Greeff, 2013. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.

Both Greeff and Crossman play foreground against horizon. Crossman’s *Pacifica 10* lays out the compositional strategy found in many of her seascapes. From top to bottom a certain serenity yields to a more active surface. At the top, a single steady gesture divides sea from sky, the horizon as margin defining here the separation from what Yves Bonnefoy brilliantly calls “l’arriere pays” or the place beyond.



“Pacifica #10” by Marshall Crossman, 2014. Oil on canvas, 36 x 44 inches.

At the bottom edge the curls of fractured color zig and zag five or six times in one deft stroke—these are the pleasures of watching a virtuoso in action. The sine waves building and diminishing in amplitude as the hand moves left to right are among the rewards of the show. Crossman works wet into wet, and the stroke is really the pulling of thick paint with the edge of a piece of matte board, more supple than a palette knife. The improvisatory meets the physical in the

complex *Pacifica 20* with its amazing touches of cobalt and sudden secco passages amid all that wild water.



“Pacifica #20” by Marshall Crossman, 2015. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

Some artists keep color under control out of fear of the bedlam that breaks loose when conventional harmonies are disturbed. Crossman intrepidly summons the spectrum in one figure—dissonances and rules be damned. A second-generation Bay Area figurative painter based since 1977 in Pacifica, California, she is originally from Omaha and studied at Colorado State. Her studio is a mere 75 feet from the water, where she finds the poetry of people and waves in their perpetual motion. The more abstract her quivering bathers become, the more enjoyable the painting.

From the *Beach Series* of frolicking couples in the waves, the most blurred are the terrific #87 and the monumental in feeling #143. These works present dynamite uses of impasto twisted and modeled into figures, recalling, as many of the seascape brushstrokes do, the way de Kooning observed the shimmering clammers out on the flats of Accabonac Creek.



“Beach Series #87” by Marshall Crossman, 2005. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches.



“Beach Series #143” by Marshall Crossman, 2008. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches.

Here is the artist’s insightful statement relating the work to the high-toned Bay Area figuration movement: “I have always enjoyed the figure, and until my very recent Pacifica Series, it has consistently been a part of my work, but for me, the figure never has superseded movement.”

What could be more challenging than putting the sea on canvas? Ask Turner, Manet, Monet, Daubigny, Whistler, Glackens, Hassam, Cropsey, Courbet and Friedrich, with later attempts by Hiroshi Sugimoto and Vija Celmins.

William Shakespeare, John Masefield, Edgar Allan Poe, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, Proust, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens tried with words. One of the most deeply moving sea poems of all time is Paul Valery's "Cimetiere Marin" (The Graveyard by the Sea) which ends:

How intricately the sea's surf disappoints
itself in unseen glitter of diamond points.
Peace seems self-conceived. Settling as though
into an abyss of emptiness the sun pours
out its artistry on an eternal cause.
Time's an instant, and Dreaming is to know.

BASIC FACTS: "Pieter Greeff—Faces of the Sea" and "Marshall Crossman—Water's Edge," August 20 through September 30, 2015, at the Quogue Gallery, 44 Quogue Street, Quogue, NY 11959. www.quoquogallery.com

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