



The Sea at Two Extremes in Photos at Alex Ferrone Gallery

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by Charles A. Riley II

It does not take a curatorial genius to bring together two photographers on the theme of the sea, but it requires something close to genius to intersperse the utterly antithetical images of calm and storm on each wall of an exhibition. That frisson of antagonism makes “Calm Before the Storm” at the [Alex Ferrone Photography Gallery](#) in Cutchogue a roaring success.

The running gag at the opening was the artists introducing themselves: “I’m the calm one,” Shelter Island’s [Christine Matthäi](#) would offer with a winsome smile. [Dalton Portella](#), well-known in Montauk for his photographs and also for his music (he is a guitarist and composer) and surfwear, played the Prospero behind *The Perfect Storm*, a show-stopper at the threshold to the show that could have been a cover candidate for Sebastian Junger’s adrenaline-fueled maritime prose.



“The Perfect Storm” by Dalton Portella.

The emotional, visual and compositional trill between these two modes is like a mix of Debussy’s tempestuous “La Mer” (Portella) and Arvo Part’s tribute to master mariner Benjamin Britten. Just as shifts back and forth from major to minor are the essence of dynamic development in music, the contrast between the two artists makes the show move in all the right ways.



“Mashomack Light” by Christine Matthäi.

On one memorable wall, Portella’s brash *Fury II* and *Fury X* bracket *Moonrise*, the most absorbing work in the exhibition if only for its exquisite subtlety (there is no visible moon in the chromatically rich sky over the basin of silver, which dips at a tangent to the bottom edge). Credit the depth of Matthäi’s *adagio*, like the beautiful single-finger melodies in a Beethoven piano concerto, with the potency to hold its own against the drama of Portella’s momentous waves with their audacious

flourishes of spray. The effect of the trio of works tightly grouped was marvelously and surprisingly effective.



“Fury II” by Dalton Portella.



“Moonrise” by Christine Matthäi.



“Fury X” by Dalton Portella.

Time and again the Matthäi works held this viewer in their spell. The powdery whites and layered atmosphere of *September Sea* resonates along with the Wagnerian gold of *Sagaponack Liquid Gold II* (the diptych was a conceptual masterstroke, the intervening white wall the perfect vertical answer to the horizontals). Matthäi’s *Continuum of Light* stroked mesmerizing striations of cool and warm tones from edge to edge like the whispering brush of an Agnes Martin painting.



“Sagaponack Liquid Gold” by Christine Matthäi.



“Continuum of Light” by Christine Matthäi.

These were more than just mimetic souvenirs of the glories that surround the fortunate East End sunset and sunrise worshippers (one of her favorite spots is [Mashomack Preserve](#) on Shelter Island, where she will stay so long waiting for the perfect moment that she has sometimes fallen asleep on the shoot). They slip so seamlessly from form into formlessness and back again that they recall the amazement scientists must have felt when Einstein demonstrated the sisterhood of energy and

matter through light.

The Einstein allusion is apt enough not just because of his connection to Cutchogue, where the show is located, but also the German background of the artist. Christine Matthäi left Germany for New York and now spends part of the year in the Bahamas as well. Among many other earlier photographers, I thought of the great Dresden master Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966), whose nature-inspired work between the wars would wander through groves of birch or deep into the petals of flowers.

As Matthai points out in an artist's statement, "The symbol of water represents our subconscious, that which lies beneath the surface, our limitless divine nature. Our subconscious sea is where creativity exists and from where, through the seed of thought, ideas manifest in the physical realm."

Just as his photographs are the antithesis of her quiet idiom, Portella in person is the charismatic product of Miami, Florida, and Ipanema Beach in Brazil, where he spent the Seventies after moving there from Miami. From there, at 18, he moved to California, then attended classes at Parsons in New York, and started coming out in 1980 to Montauk, where he now lives and works full time.

He was the go-to poster designer for Miramax ("Pulp Fiction" and "Aviator" among other flicks) and had a commercial career in advertising as well when 9/11 came, along with a change of heart. He delights in the glorious rages of the sea. He spent Hurricane Sandy on the south side of Montauk, working to keep his lens wiped and battling 60 mph winds while trying to get the shot he needed.

Portella uses digital software to bring together the photographs of the waves and geographical features he has selected (the cliffs in *The Perfect Storm* were imported from a picture of the San Diego coastline). The painterly aspect of the wireless, pressure sensitive "brush" with which the work is doctored (an open secret) is technically fascinating, as is the decision to use certain papers, whether the eggshell, matte or lustre surfaces are suited to the edge, focus, colors and textures he is after.



"Golden Rage" by Dalton Portella.

Materials, technology and certainly composition are equally important in attaining the depth effects that make the tempests all the more daunting. While Matthäi reminded me of the wonderful Hiroshi Sugimoto seascapes (with the distinction that there is a strong uniformity to the gray masses of his sky or ocean where Matthäi uses a linear weave of horizontals), Portella recalled the "Monster" series of Robert Longo.



"Daybreak" by Christine Matthäi.

E.H. Gombrich, in the magisterial study "Art and Illusion," proposed a dinner party game in which guests would be challenged to assign either "ping" or "pong" to paired artists (e.g. Watteau was a "ping," Rembrandt a "pong," to use his example, or Matisse a "ping" and Picasso a "pong"). Gombrich would have masterfully played the "ping" of Matthäi against the "pong" of Portella to demonstrate the bilateral nature of our response to nature as well as art.

Alex Ferrone, an accomplished fine art photographer in her own right, has quixotically convened a salon-style circle of peers and connoisseurs in her gallery. Housed in a historic house just west of Cutchogue on the North Fork of Long Island, it is a cozy exhibition space with expansive ambitions.

Ferrone has a deft hand at aesthetic counterpoint that pairs off artists in each show. She is a subtle educator of those (like this writer) who need background information, enlisting experts such as Jim Lennon, a veteran photographer and teacher, as well as the exhibiting artists to offer luncheon gallery talks. She also sponsored a successful charity event for the Afya Foundation to provide supplies and support for victims of the Nepal earthquake. I am adding her gallery to my personal "watch this space" list and recommend that all those interested in fine art photography do the same.

BASIC FACTS: "Calm Before the Storm," photographic works by Christine Matthäi and Dalton Portella, September 5 through September 27, 2015 at Alex Ferrone Photography Gallery, 25425 Main Road, Cutchogue, NY 11935, 631-734-8545, www.alexherronegallery.com

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