



TALKING WITH: Paton Miller Discusses Hamptons Artists & Curating “East End Collected”

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by Pat Rogers

Southampton artist Paton Miller is an established fixture in the Hamptons art scene. Born in Seattle and raised in Hawaii, Miller found himself in Southampton after enrolling in Southampton College’s art program in the seventies on a full scholarship, awarded based on paintings made while traveling through Asia.

Even before graduating, [Paton Miller](#) knew he had found a home and has been here, more or less, ever since. It is no wonder that when the [Southampton Arts Center](#) was on the cusp of being born and forming its new program, as the Parrish’s relocation to Water Mill was impending, the committee asked Miller for his input into what the community might like to see.

His response?

“Well, in that you’re starting an arts organization, I think it’s important that you become beloved by the area and how do you do that is by being relevant to the area,” Miller recalled saying at a think tank meeting at a private home in Southampton Village. “You can do an obscure and esoteric shows later, but for the beginning, this is such an artistically rich area, reflect it.”

Miller then offered: Launch a group show of art by East End artists held by collectors. Southampton Arts Center took him up on the idea and asked him to curate the exhibition. Now in its third year, “East End Collected” evolved from the original premise to refocus on work by artists of the East End whether new work, beloved work or art held by a collector.

Pat Rogers of Hamptons Art Hub sat down with Paton Miller at his Southampton studio to discuss the exhibition, his process of finding artists to invite to fill the cavernous Southampton Arts Center and how being an artist himself impacted his role as a curator.



“Self Portrait” by Paton Miller, 2017. Oil on panel, 16 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

PAT ROGERS: You were invited by the Southampton Art Center to curate “East End Collected” and have now curated three annual editions. What’s your biggest challenging in curating the group exhibition of East End artists?

PATON MILLER: The challenge has always been: that’s a big space. The other challenge is making it look good. I think as the three years have gone by, I think I’ve gotten better at staging the work. The work is consistently good but it’s a big space and every year I end up with more walls than I know what to do with. Luckily every year, somebody brings way more than I asked.

One year I had that situation and I’m staring at this wall, and I’m out of work. The phone rings and it’s [Lutha Miller](#). Lutha said, “I hear you’re doing a show, can I be in it?” I was like, “Your timing couldn’t have been better.” Then he sent me some images, and I picked out what I wanted and his work was in.



From the “Skull Series” by Lutha Leahy-Miller. Courtesy of the artist.

So there’s an ad hoc quality to this kind of curation which suits me. As soon as “East End Collected 1” ended, I started on [number two](#), and right after two, I started on number three. Now, I’ve already started on number four even though I don’t know if I’m doing it. Even if I don’t do it again, I had three shots at it and it was great.



“East End Collected3” at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

PR: How do you go about selecting the work?

PM: This area is so interesting. I think because we all have been living out here for a long time we take it for granted. One thing that helped me be really aware of what kind of situation we have here is that I lived in Molokai for three years.

Molokai, Hawaii has 5,000 people on it, not even a stop light. If you want to retire from the world, Molokai is the place to go. Nancy [Miller, Paton’s wife] and I went there in 1990. It’s a beautiful place and you could live there and raise your kids but as an artist, I needed to be here in Southampton because my personal round peg fits in this round hole. This is the spot for me.

I feel like this is my good luck town, and I've been able to take a very difficult and unlikely profession and make a living here. So we came back, and that was in 1993, and we've been rowing this boat now for all these years.

PR: A lot of these artists you know because you've shown with them before. Do you know others because you're introduced? How do you meet artists?

PM: When I think about the artist that have shown at "East End Collected," a lot of them I have exhibited with, but sometimes someone will say, "Hey, do you know so and so?"

Like Mark Webber. I didn't know Mark Webber at all, and he was in last year's show at "East End Collected2." When I saw the work reproduced I liked it, and I needed sculptures. The space requires sculptures. You saw the show; the sculptures really help.



Sculpture from the "Portal Series" by Mark Webber. Courtesy of the artist.

The curating is the spacing and the placement of the art and it's really something that I love doing, and it's a challenge every year. I start with some major pieces and I build around it. The sculptures, of course, are another element in the space.

For me, there's been a lot of things that I've really enjoyed that the byproduct of doing shows is being even more involved in the community which I very much enjoy. The people at the Southampton Arts Center, Amy Kirwin and Julie Fitzgerald, are just amazing to work with, and the Southampton Arts Center moves fast. It's like the Bruce Lee of institutions.



"East End Collected3" at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

PR: They're doing a lot of things; amazing things. This isn't the first time that you've curated shows.

PM: No, but this is the biggest scale. I curated an exhibition across the street from Hank's Pumpkintown in Hank's giant barn. It's so big that a potato truck looks like a Tonka toy in the middle of it. Andre Hurley, who grew up with Hank and is a good friend of his, had an idea of curating a show there with me and because of his friendship with Hank, Hank said, "Sure." We had

like 1,000 people come to the opening. It was up one night, and people sold works.

I've curated a few other shows, but these three shows [East End Collected] are more professional. This is another level, and I don't know if I'll get opportunities to curate again...It's not like I have a shingle hanging out there that says Paton Miller, a curator. I fell into it kind of by accident, and I think I've done a good job these three years. I'll keep doing it as long as they'll have me.



"East End Collected3" at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez.
Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

PR: How do you think that your background as a painter filters into the way that you curate? Do you think that there's an impact there?

PM: When you're younger you have to be focused on your own work, it's almost maniacal, but you have to be. I'm 63 now, my blinders have gotten bigger, and I like work that I've never liked before.

There's a lot of work that ends up in these shows that are very much different from what I do, and you know what? Now it's a job to see this work and that's amazing. One of the things I love about this area is the diversity of the art here.

PR: "East End Collected" seems to be as much about community as it is the art. Do you feel this way?

PM: Yes, without question. Those three years in Molokai was almost like going to Siberia culturally. It was a wonderful time, but it really taught me the lesson that artists need a community. There's always an exception but for most people they want a community. You can see when I have exhibitions, my friends show up and support me, I support them, it's like a big Kumbaya thing.

PR: It was interesting to discover, when I was looking over the artist names for all three shows, there's not one that's repeated. Every single show is completely unique.

PM: That's not by accident.

PR: The other thing that is pretty amazing when you look at the artists in the three years, there were so many connections. You saw fathers and sons that were in the show; you saw siblings, you saw husbands and wives.

PM: This year, we have the Cuttica boys, Franco and Lautaro [Keudell]. I didn't pick them because they're brothers. Their father, Eugenio, was in the show before, and I've gotten to know them. It's like, "Okay, they're brothers but, wow, both their works are great." It's all about discovery.

My mind works like an artist mind; I'm not an encyclopedia. And the way it works is organic. The well never seems to run dry. Certain artists out here are actors on the stage who are well known,

then there are some who are really good who no one knows, and that to me is really exciting. I haven't repeated anybody—that's part of the point.

PR: In the course of curating the shows, have you rediscovered people that you haven't connected with in a long time or discovered artists you didn't know were here?

PM: Yes, of course, I think just about everything you can imagine has happened. I've met new artists and I've gotten to know artists I haven't seen in a long time. Maybe the biggest thing is knowing the artist and thinking you know the work and then getting to know the work better.



"East End Collected3" at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez.
Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

PR: It is really interesting to see the cross-section in the shows. You're looking at the community; it's a wide selection and a small sampling at the same time because there are anywhere from 33 to 40 artists. The shows are very, very graceful. They make sense, there's visual conversations that are going on, there's unexpected ...

PM: ... juxtapositions.

PR: Yes, exactly. It's interesting because you get to see the artists selected and their work but it's installed in conversation, in a way that you imagine that you are getting to see a vibrant community right in front of you.

PM: Thank you, I'm glad you see that because if you don't make that happen, you won't succeed at curation. Someone said to me at the opening of "East End Collected3," "I love the show, but there's no theme," and I said, "Well, there is a theme." He said, "What is it?" and I said, "The theme is us."

It's so simple. That's the whole point.

The whole point is us here now. Because it's so ubiquitous, people forget that we are right now in the middle of this great, booming, artistic area and if you just have everybody working in their own studios, it's easy to miss. But when you have these collective shows that bring artists together you can kind of go, "Wow, this is from just this area." It's sort of unusual.

The diversity is a theme in itself. The fact that you can have someone like [Mark Webber](#) next to someone like [Mark Seidenfeld](#). Good work works everywhere.



"Aphrodite and Her Sisters" by Mark Seidenfeld. Photograph. Courtesy of the

artist.

You know that whole thing with 'I don't know if it goes above my sofa?' Guess what? A good painting looks good anywhere. You could hang it in an alley with a mongrel dog next to it, it looks good. That's the nature of good work.

PR: Is there anything else that you want to say about the experience or the show?

PM: It's been a pleasure; it's been an honor getting to know everyone. I've always said this, Southampton's my good luck town. I've had nothing but good luck here.

It's a constant discovery because behind all this art there's people making it and they're all really smart, and they're funny, and they're entertaining, and they're interesting. This is the deck of cards we have out here, and it's a pretty good deck of cards.

What I think happens is this, if you think about the generation before us or maybe it's two generations before us, now you know I worked in Fairfield Porter's studio for all those years and I donated a watercolor, a Fairfield Porter watercolor that Anne Porter had given to me to Guild Hall. I was told that it was one of the few Porters that they have in their collection and what that tells you is that 50 years ago a car ride to Porter's studio would have resulted in a donation by the artist, who all wanted their works in museums.

The point is it's very hard to know what's happening now and it's even harder to know what's coming at you, to have your ear on the rail.

There were fewer artists out here when I moved here in '74, but you still have to do your best to try to perceive what is happening now, because imagine if someone was able to take a van back around 1950, go to Pollock's house, go to de Kooning's, go to Porter's house. You had to give them a couple of hundred bucks, you could have made world class collections. But the people in charge 50 years ago didn't know who these guys were or, if they did, they didn't think they were any good. This is normal.

Think about it, 50 years ago people were still really hanging on to the academy and a more conservative type of painting. They might have been experts in John Sargent, who's an amazing painter, but if you get John Sargent you might not get de Kooning.

That is something that I think is hard to do but I think it's something that you have to try. I think these shows are showing that the level of quality work here is extremely high. I think the museums out here should be showing them more. I'll throw the gauntlet down and say I think that's something that is a responsibility for a regional museum. I think it's part of their charter, to exhibit the work of what's happening here and now.

Now, how do you know what's good and what isn't good? That's the trick, right?



“East End Collected3” at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez.
Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

PR: Yes.

PM: Well, part of it comes from experience is being here for a long time and seeing the artists who you know who are working day in day out, year in and year out. I’ve been here for 42 years, some of these artists I’ve known almost that whole time and no matter what come rain or shine it’s in their bones. They’re bona fide.

The flat times, the times when you’re distracted, the times when maybe you don’t ... like de Kooning, he would just go in there and work; he was a house painter for years, that guy knew how to work. He always said that house painting helped make him the artist that he was because this guy had a work ethic that was unbelievable.

If you’re an artist as I am and you have these opportunities to do things like this; like [Gus Leiber](#) would. He’s had a long career; he’s a distinguished painter. You have really young artists then you have Gus Leiber and if you’re in the fraternity of the arts these are your colleagues.



“Model in White Gown” by Gerson Leiber, 1981. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches. The Gerson and Judith Leiber Collection. Courtesy of The Leiber Collection.

[Nathan Joseph](#) was in last year’s show; he’s one of my favorite people on Earth and I get to show his work. It’s quite a privilege that I’ve been given to do this. It was just luck. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Some people pointed out to me I’m probably making as many enemies as friends of the artists. It’s not that I don’t choose them; it’s that I can’t think of everybody.



“Kimonosuite” by Nathan Slate Joseph., 2012. Pure pigments, steel, 49 x 16 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Part of these shows is that working thing; it helps people see the work. Pieces are sold, too. It helps artists meet each other and that's a good thing.

PR: The show brings everyone out of their own respective enclaves to connect.

PM: At the opening, there were almost 1,000 people that showed up and there was such a good vibe. It was like throwing the shackles of winter off. People were just so happy to be out and it's a great show and the place looks fantastic.

At one point, I was at the top of the ramp [inside the building] and I had a chance to look out over the sea of people. I didn't go outside, but I was told that it had flowed down like water down the stairs outside and up and down the street.

At the top of the ramp, I had a moment just to enjoy the sight and everybody was smiling. Artists were having great times talking about their work to interested people and the synergy that was happening was really something. It was great. It was great to see that, feel that, be part of it.



"East End Collected3" at Southampton Arts Center. Photo: Daniel Gonzalez.
Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center.

BASIC FACTS: "East End Collected3" remains on view through May 29, 2017.

A Closing Concert with Mambo Loco takes place on Saturday, May 27, 2017 from 7 to 10 p.m.
[Tickets](#) are \$15.

Southampton Arts Center is located at 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968.
www.southamptonartscenter.org.

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