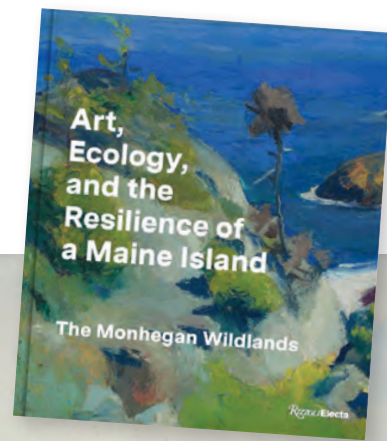


By Carl Little



## Monhegan Island Revealed

*On my family's first visit to Monhegan Island in 1991, the weather was wet and gray. My wife and I and our two kids, then three and six, sought refuge in Cathedral Woods where we found fairy houses built by "elves" and a fir canopy that caught some of the rain. It was October when visiting artists in large part are replaced by birders, their binoculars aimed at the foliage in search of stop-overs on the Atlantic flyway. — Carl Little*

Thanks to the ground-breaking exhibition *Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands* and its accompanying catalogue, this writer's appreciation of those woods grew by several growth rings. Through art and science, the curators and essayists trace the dynamic evolution of the flora and fauna while acknowledging a special stewardship.

One of the heroes is Theodore "Ted" Edison (1898–1992), the youngest son of the famous inventor. Childhood visits with family led Edison to property purchases and then advocacy to preserve the island's "wildlands." While acknowledging the age-old tension between "immensity and solitude"—seeking visitors and year-round residents trying to make a living, he thoughtfully bridged the divisions to establish

the Monhegan Associates in 1954 "to preserve for prosperity" the island's wooded depths.

The catalogue features a range of perspectives, from Maine State Historian Earle Shettleworth, Jr., to summer resident Tish Miller. Professors from Bowdoin College and the University of Maine weigh in on conservation issues. Channeling his Penobscot ancestors, John Bear Mitchell, a lecturer of Wabanaki and Multicultural Studies at UMaine, recounts a trip to the island to catch swordfish as it might have taken place centuries ago.

The island once again earns its status as a colossus of American landscape painting. Since the first artists visited Monhegan in the

mid-1800s, generations of painters have found inspiration in its hardy fishermen, working harbor, dramatic headlands, Cathedral Woods and other iconic island subjects. Nearly every school of art has responded to the place: White Mountain, Ashcan, Impressionist, Abstract Expressionist, Realist.

Along with the usual suspects—Rockwell Kent, Edward Hopper, Jamie Wyeth, et al.—the exhibition offers a special shout-out to some underappreciated artists. Several watercolors by Samuel Peter Rolt Triscott (1846–1926), a year-round islander, underscore his brilliant sense of color and design—and place. Likewise, Stow Wengenroth (1906–1978): his lithographs remain among the finest of their kind in the history of Maine and American art. Geraldine Tam (1920–2016) also receives her proper due for exquisite botanical studies.

Today, the island is not as accessible to artists as it once was—housing stock and rentals are limited and, if available, expensive. Yet new artists continue to discover the place, through the Monhegan Artists' Residency program, a workshop, or a plein air visit. At the same time, thanks to the vision of islander Doug Boynton, the Monhegan Island Sustainable Community Association is helping to ensure that houses remain "year-round and affordable in perpetuity."

In addition to a number of vintage photographs, the exhibition features a series of wide-angle archival pigment ink prints by Accra Shepp, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Commissioned to scan this "liminal" place, Shepp waxes eloquent in an afterword about the "gnarly tangles" of the tree roots. "It seems as if the entire forest is working together to keep itself upright," he writes.

Gnarly tangles also comes to mind viewing a group of woodcuts of dense interwoven branches by Barbara Petter Putnam. The images, drawn on site, describe, in her words, "the progress of the disease [dwarf mistletoe] that is devastating the white spruce."

The resilience in the show's title comes to the fore in Dr. Robert P. Smith's fascinating study of the "rise and fall" of deer ticks on Monhegan. Introduced to the island in 1954 as a tourist attraction, white-tailed deer carried Lyme disease across Muscongus Bay. Through research and ultimately an intervention, Dr. Smith and his team managed to rid the island of this dangerous vector.

Curators Barry A. Logan, Samuel S. Butcher Professor in the Natural Sciences at Bowdoin; Jennifer Pye, director of the Monhegan Museum of Art and History; and Frank H. Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, pulled out all the stops in organizing this landmark exhibition. A bone harpoon, many vintage maps, and a bird's eye view of the island



Above, from top and left to right: Accra Shepp, *Large Mossy Puddle Bog, Pebble Beach Trail* (detail), 2023, archival pigment ink print. Courtesy of the artist. Bone Harpoon, Monhegan, Monhegan Museum of Art and History. Barbara Petter Putnam, *Monhegan-5*, 2023, print on Mura Kajji (a Thai Kozo paper), 14 x 14". Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Lynne Drexler (1928–1999), *Evergreen*, 1980, oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 23 3/4". Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Opposite, from top: Cover of exhibition catalogue. Mary King Longfellow, *Untitled*, watercolor, ca. 1900. Monhegan Museum of Art and History.

by Molly Holmberg Brown join a formidable sampling of paintings and other visuals from the last one hundred fifty or so years. All of this material deepens our understanding of this sea-girt island—and, most notably perhaps, its trees.

Carl Little is the author most recently of *Blanket of the Night: Poetry (Deerbrook Editions)* and the monograph *John Moore: Portals (Marshall Wilkes)*.

*Art, Ecology, and the Resilience of a Maine Island: The Monhegan Wildlands* runs at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, December 12, 2024–June 1, 2025 before traveling to the Monhegan Museum where its dates are July 1–September 30.