

New York Art Critic, Ed Rubin, Takes to the Road for a Sampling of New England Country Living

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Editor's Note: Regular ARTES contributing writer and critic, Ed Rubin, travels all over the world in search of extraordinary art and theater experiences. Like the rest of us, though, he finds that sometimes a break in routine is in order. Ed recently traveled to Newport, Rhode Island, just to explore and discover what this famous nautical city, in the country's smallest state, had to offer. Here is his fun-filled and useful report—good reading for anyone planning a 'stay-cation' and hoping for a little salt water adventure, mixed with a dose of old-world, ocean-front mansion elegance.

Newport, Rhode Island, widely renowned for its Jazz Festival every August and its Gilded Age, turn-of-the-century mansions—many of the most awesome overlooking the Atlantic—is filled to the brim with hidden and not-so-hidden treasure. Saying that this small enclave of some 26,000 year-round folk (swelling three-fold, plus, in the summertime) is an embarrassment of riches, is a gross understatement, for around every corner await astonishing surprises, many of mesmerizing proportions. fine arts magazine



Harbor, Newport, RI, at peak of the season. Photo: Keith W. Stokes

On a recent, 2 night, 3-day visit there, I dined and wined—well, actually, vodka is my preference—and toured some of the city's finest wonders.

Right off the bat, after checking into The Clarkeston – yes, I'd gladly stay there again – I took my father's advice: "See everything in one fell swoop, get the lay of the land, then return to those places you want to see in depth." I hopped on the Viking Tour's Trolley for a guided tour and for ninety minutes was treated to an eye-popping, history-rich lesson in "Newport 101".

The town's many Gilded Age mansions cum museums are its biggest draw, as everybody dreams – gilt by association – of being rich. Around three hundred thousand of those dreamers visit the



The Breakers, Cornelius Vanderbilt's 70-room Italianate Newport 'cottage'

art-filled troves every year. Two of the most popular—*Rough Point*, the 49-room home of Doris Duke until her death in 1993, and *The Breakers*, the Vanderbilt's 70-room summer Italianate "cottage" designed by Richard Morris Hunt (1827-1895) were at the top of my list. Hunt also designed the façade and the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. His last work, the Breakers, was built in 1893-95, and is over-the-top in royal grandeur. The main hall is fifty wide-by-fifty long-by-fifty feet tall, and a John La Farge (1835-1910) stained glass skylight hovers over the grand staircase. Rough Point, however, its rich interior filled with French furniture, Chinese porcelain, Turkish carpets, and paintings by Gainsborough, Van Dyck, and Renoir— all collected by the tobacco heiress, herself— has a homey, lived-in feel. So personal and present is Duke's taste that one almost expects her to suddenly waltz into the room. For those interested in fashion, *The Sporty Style of Doris Duke* exhibition is on view through November 5, featuring a selection of Duke's clothes and photographs documenting her surfing, swimming, playing golf and tennis, as well as scuba diving and bowling.

Another architectural classic was Richard Morris Hunt's first major Newport commission—The *John N.A. Griswold House* (1864). It is the main building of Newport Art Museum & Art Association's three-building campus, and houses the museum's permanent collection and exhibitions, both focusing on the work of Newport and southeastern New England artists— contemporary and 18th, 19th and 20th Century. Its walls are a lively walk through the history of American art, populated with paintings by Fitz Henry Lane, George Inness, William Trost Richards, John La Farge, and Gilbert Stuart. Also on view, following in the footsteps of their respective fathers, are works by John Allen Twachtman (1882-1975), son of John Henry Twachtman, and Gilbert Stuart's daughter, Jane (1812-88).



John N.A. Griswold House, home of Newport Art Museum & Art Association

On the contemporary scene, during my early June visit, I viewed still-current, solo exhibitions by artist China Blue and Trent Burleson, whose work occupies the museum's largest gallery, with around 22 bird paintings, most dated 2010. This uber-prolific artist is obviously a factory unto himself! Many of his birds soar in full flight, diving for berries and insects amid beautifully-rendered foliage. Though reminiscent of Audubon, they are post modern in their soft colored tones and slightly blurred execution. Viewing Burleson's paintings, as museum curator Nancy Whipple Grinnell suggests, is as though we are seeing them "through a gossamer veil." His exhibition ends August 17th.

Firefly Projects is China Blue's 'fragility of life' installation, occupying a chamber-like gallery on the first floor. A small, dark room, it is lit with twinkling blue lights, while sounds, robotics, and several electrifying photographs create an other-worldly feel, where the artist brings us back to our 'collecting fireflies in a jar childhood.' Commanding pride of place are two 7 ½-foot artist-constructed trees, on whose thin wooden branches perch flashing LED fireflies, all faithfully synchronized to mimic a mating dance. Known internationally for her interest in the intersection of science, art and technology, the iconoclastic Blue has recorded vibrations emanating from the Eiffel Tower, as well as sounds permeating Venetian canals, the latter with recording devices fixed to the underside of a gondola.



China Blue, with an installation piece from *Firefly Projects*. Photo: David Hansen

The two biggest surprises – who knew such museums even existed – are the *International Tennis Hall of Fame & Museum* and the *National Museum of American Illustration* at Vernon Court (1898), a Beaux Arts adaptation of a 17th century French Chateau. The mansion was designed by Carrère & Hastings, architects for the New York City Public Library, the U.S. Senate Office Building, and the Frick Collection in New York, and features the work of the most illustrious illustration icons: Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, NS Wyeth, JC Leyendecker, Charles Dana Gibson, and Howard Chandler. Sharing the spotlight through the summer, along with Norman Rockwell's America exhibition of 70 paintings, is another surprise—writer Tom Wolfe's humorous pen and ink illustrations from his book, *In Our Time*, a compilation of essays originally printed in *Harper's Magazine*, during the 70's.



International Tennis Hall of Fame & Museum, Newport, RI

The International Tennis Hall of Fame and Museum—with its 13 manicured grass tennis courts—shares grounds with the recently renovated 1880 Stanford White Casino Theatre, where Orson Wells, Helene Hayes, Lillian Gish, Will Rogers and Oscar Wilde tread the boards. How's that for theatrical history!? The museum itself, in the historic Newport Casino, was designed by McKim, Mead & White in Victorian shingle-style, and chronicles the history of tennis from the 12th century to the present, in its 18 galleries. It overflows with tennis memorabilia— photographs, videos, art, fashion, trophies, and attire—many donated by the game's biggest stars: Gussy Moran's once "scandalous" 1949 Wimbledon lace-trimmed tennis ensemble and a Chris Evert portrait by Warhol – he is everywhere – are among them. While I am still skeptical of interactive anything, I did find the museum's touch screen research kiosks addictive!

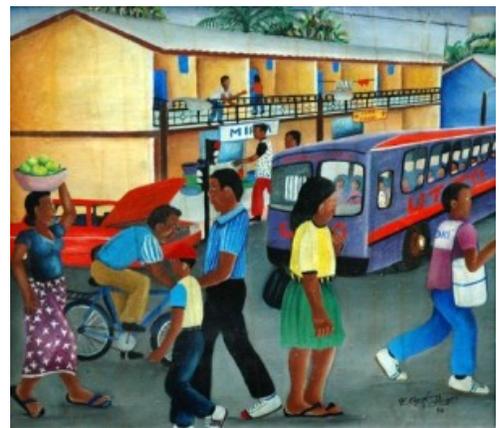
The most serious museum-quality gallery in Newport— some say in all of New England— is *William Vareika Fine Arts*. I happened upon this little bit of heaven – think of it as a mini Metropolitan Museum or even a room or two at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts – at the tail end of the stunning John La Forge: *In Paradise: The Painter and His Muse* exhibition, curated by William Vareika, gallery proprietor. Enough of the show remained, though, to set my head spinning! The gallery specializes in the purchase and sale, of 18th, 19th, and 20th century American paintings, watercolors, drawings and prints. One is apt to run across the work of John La Farge, whose estate they represent, as well as the work of William Morris Hunt, John F. Kensett, Winslow Homer, Worthington Whittredge, Alfred T. Bricher, William Trost Richards, William S. Haseltine, George Bellows, John H. Twachtman, Childe Hassam, John S. Sargent, and Martin Johnson Heade— all American artists inspired by Newport’s unique society and the sublime natural environment of Narragansett Bay.



John LaFarge, Snow: January, Southerly Wind, Cloudy Sky and Sunlight (1879), o/c. Courtesy Wm. Vareika Fine Arts

While my days were spent running with the big boys, on Newport Gallery Night which occurs the second Thursday each month from 5:30-8pm, I managed to get up close and personal to some of the local artists, thanks to my guide du nuit, Katie Dyer, the proprietress of *Cadeaux de Monde* (Gifts of the World). Her domain is an eclectic, green, fair trade, international folk art gallery, including several of Newport’s own contemporary artists.

My tour started at Cadeaux with Nina Hope Pfanstiehl, a local jewelry and ceramic artist, demonstrating various jewelry wire wrapping techniques. Also catching my attention – it practically jumped off the wall – was *Carrefour at Adjame*, an exquisite city scene painting by *Cote d’Ivoire* painter Cloyery Georges. Interesting, also, was T.M. Dyer’s abstract pen and ink drawings lining the walls of Galerie Escalier, a section of Cadeaux dedicated to New England artists.



Cloyery Georges, Carrefour at Adjame (2010). Courtesy Cadeaux de Monde (Gifts of the World)

Harbor Fine Art Gallery—in a 1704 wooden building in the historic downtown area for 3 years now—specializes in Rhode Island artists, primarily plein air painters, whose subject is Newport and its surroundings. Artist Betty Anne Morris owns and operates the gallery, also featuring original glass art and jewelry. It functions as a studio, as well, where visitors can

experience artists immersed in creating new pieces. Laura B. Fernandez's stained glass fishes, Edward Fey's ship paintings, and Kathy Weber's peopled beach scenes are veritable showstoppers. Following a plein air workshop, Morris—previously a leather and freeform basketry enthusiast and purveyor of antiques—very successfully dedicated herself to outdoor painting. She recently converted the top floor of the gallery into The Borden House *B-no-B*, meaning a soft queen size bed there and breakfast at one of many nearby eateries.



Edward Fey, *The Sooloo of Salem, Mass* (2010). Courtesy Harbor Fine Arts Gallery

Artist Didi Suydam and husband, sculptor Peter Diepenbrock, founded *Didi Suydam Contemporary* 12 years ago, and feature fine art and studio-designed jewelry. The gallery is architecturally light and airy, modern and minimal, and housed in an historic firehouse. It is also a showcase for their own work. While Suydam's jewelry was displayed elegantly in the back of the gallery, it was her stunning black and white digital photography in front that held my eye. *PaTh* (2005), an other-worldly photograph of storm clouds—with a graphic 'T' symbol placed slightly left of center—is the artist's attempt, as she explained to me, "to visually convey the metaphysical notion of alternate or coexistent, concurrent realities. The image and the presence of the symbol," she adds, "may also be interpreted as a metaphor for the passage from the life experience to an afterlife experience."



Didi Suydam, *PaTh* (2005), digital print, 40x40" Courtesy Didi Suydam Contemporary

The Lady Who Paints Gallery houses both the studio and gallery of Rosemary Kavanagh O'Carroll and is one of the most unique art-viewing spaces in Newport. Part warehouse, gallery, and a little bit salon, it is dedicated solely to her own work, most based on her life experiences. The very Irish O'Carroll – reddish brown hair and freckles add to her charm – is a consummate story teller, verbally and in paint, following her passions wherever they lead.

In Grenada, Spain, she explored a cave below Alhambra, where, "There were flamenco gypsy dancers and I was totally fascinated. The woman dancing was intense and raw. There weren't any windows in the cave, no air to breathe, but it was the real thing. I pulled out my sketch book and started going to work," O'Carroll told us. "I took photos of her different movements and worked on the paintings in my studio back in America. To document migrant

workers, I flew down to Florida, rented a car and drove to Homestead, where they toil in the fields.” Both trips yielded a series of paintings.

Since *The Lady Who Paints* was the last stop on our whirlwind treasure hunt, I was able to sit and chat for a while. It was a lovely way to end the evening. But this all was just the tip of the iceberg. Hopefully I would be able to return soon, to discover even more!

By Edward Rubin, Contributing Writer

Newport Contact Information:

Below you will find the websites as well as the telephone numbers of the B & B that I stayed at, the room was large and airy, and the home cooked breakfasts scrumptious, the 3 restaurants I ate at – I had a different lobster dish at each one – and every museum and gallery venue that I visited.

While prices fluctuate season-to-season (summer is the high season), accommodations, eateries, and entertainment can be found to fit every pocket, from baked beans and beer to champagne, caviar, and a yacht in the harbor. Newport’s official website www.gonewport.com also has a wealth of information, from travel packages, special deals, and events, to where to stay, eat, shop, and things to do.

The Clarkeston www.innsofNewport.com 28
Clarke Street (800) 524-1386

Viking Tours www.vikingtoursnewport.com
(401) 847-6921

The Breakers 44 Ochre Point Avenue
www.newportmansions.org (401) 847-1000

Rough Point 680 Bellevue Avenue
www.newportrestoration.org (401) 847-8344

Newport Art Museum & Art Association 76 Bellevue Ave. www.newportartmuseum.com
(401)488-8200

International Tennis Hall of Fame & Museum 194 Bellevue Ave. www.tennisfame.com (401)
849-3990



Rosemary Kavanagh O'Carroll,
Flamenco Dancer (2010).
Courtesy The Lady Who Paints
Gallery



Bannister's Wharf, Newport, RI. Photo: Newport
Breeze

National Museum of American Illustration www.americanillustration.org (401) 851-8949

William Vareika Fine Arts Gallery 212 Bellevue Avenue www.vareikafinearts.com (401) 849-6149

Cadeaux du Monde 26 Mary Street www.cadeauxdumonde.com (401) 848-0550

The Lady Who Paints Gallery & Studio 94 Bridge Street www.theladywhopaints.com (401) 450-4791

Harbor Fine Arts 134 Spring Street
www.harborfineart.com (401) 338-4462

Borden House B no B 134 Spring Street
www.bordenhousenewport.com (401) 338-4462

Located in an old fire house, 25 Mill St.
www.didisuydamcontemporary.com (401) 848-9414

The Lady Who Paints Gallery and Studio
www.theladywhopaints.com (401) 450-4791

Newport Jazz Festival www.newportjazzfest.net
(800) 745-3000

Great shopping and yacht watching at
www.bannisterswharf.com

Gas Lamp Grille, 206 Thames Street www.gaslampgrille.com (401) 845-9300 \$\$

The Cliff Walk Terrace at the Chanler Hotel 117 Memorial Blvd. www.thechanler.com (401) 847-1300

One Bellevue Fine Dining & Seafood Restaurant at the Viking Hotel One Bellevue Avenue
www.hotelviking.com for Reservations (401) 848-4824 \$\$\$

Flo's Clam Shack, 4 Wave Avenue www.flosclamshack.net (401) 847-8141 \$



One of many Norman Rockwell originals
on view at Nat'l Museum of American
Illustration, Newport, RI