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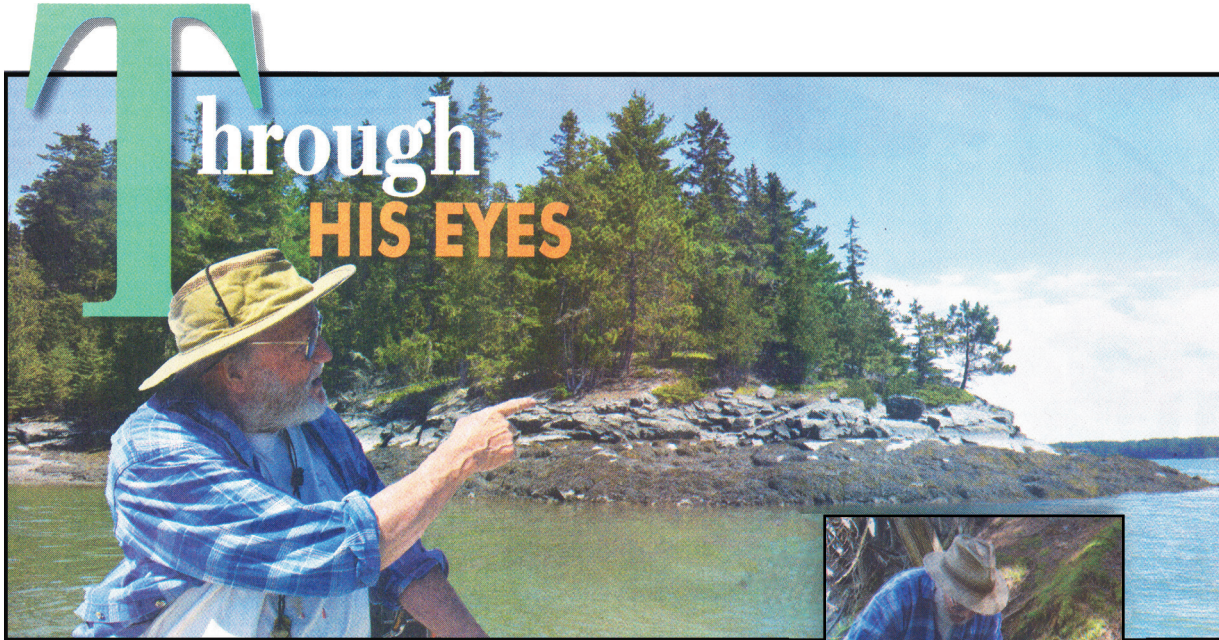
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Through HIS EYES

ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY STEVE FULLER

Located in the middle of Taunton Bay, 40-acre Burying Island has been New York City artist Robert Cenedella's summer retreat for more than 30 years.

New York artist rediscovers island and his father

BY STEVE FULLER — FRANKLIN

Burying Island sits in the middle of Taunton Bay, its 40-plus acres covered with trees and dotted with several small structures that blend in among the branches and leaves.

There is no electricity and water has to be collected from a spring along the northern shore. Residents and visitors must plan their trip to the mainland around the tide to avoid the mud flats exposed at low tide.

It hardly sounds like a place for a New York City artist, much of whose work has captured the character (and characters) of the Big Apple, to call home even for a season.

Yet it is just where painter Robert Cenedella and his wife, Liz, has spent their summers for almost 40 years, grateful for a break from the lights and noise that surround their Canal Street home in New York.

"You fell like your in a different country," Said Cenedella of the contrast between the two locations.

It is not the only occasion in which Cenedella, 77, has felt both a part of and apart from the places he calls home. He said he became "accustomed to not fitting



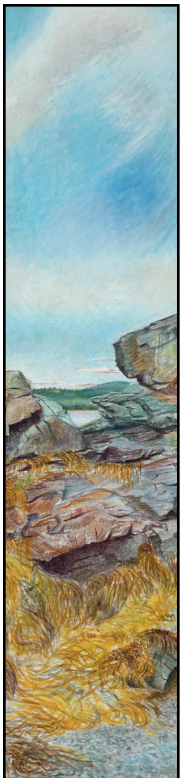
With no running water on the island, Cenedella and his wife, Liz, must collect water from a mall spring on the north shore.



Cenedella's 1965 painting "Southern Dogs" was created in response to violence against the civil rights movement in Selma, Ala. Cenedella switched the heads of the dogs and policeman, and he said it "caused a lot of discomfort."



The fist in many boxing paintings that Cenedella has done, his 1977 work "Father's Day" depicts his biological father (Russell Speirs, left) and his mother's husband (also named Robert Cenedella, right) slugging it out in the boxing ring.



Rockweed covers the shoreline of Burying Island in this 2004 "Slice of Maine" painting.



The outer walls of a log cabin can be seen clearly on this 2008 painting done on Burying Island.

New York artist rediscovers island and his father

Continued

in” at a young age, such as being forced to switch from his left-handedness to being right-handed and struggling with dyslexia.

Cenedella once overheard an argument between his parents in their Connecticut home about his father wanting to take Cenedella and his two sisters to New York. His mother blurted out, “Well you not going to take Bobby, he isn’t even yours.”

And so it was, at the age of 6, that Cenedella learned the man he believed to be his father — the black listed head of the Radio Writers Guild, also named Robert Cenedella — was not. It was only years later, as a young adult, that he learned who his biological father was: Colgate University English professor and longtime Cenedella family friend Russell Speirs.

It was through Speirs that the younger Cenedella later came to spend his summers on Burying Island, though it was not until after Speirs was dead that the annual visit began.

Speirs’ ties to the island stretched back to the 1930s. Two professor friends of his, Perley Perkins and Porter Perrin (Colgate alumnus and famed CBS correspondent Andy Rooney later called Perrin “probably the best teach i ever had”), were dating two sisters from Sullivan and had come to the island for picnics.

The island was on sale for \$1,200, but between the two of them Perkins and Perry could only come up with \$800. So they approached their friend Speirs, who chipped in the remaining \$400, which led to their shared ownership of the island.

Though Cenedella visited Burying Island on occasion — one photo taken there when he was 3 shows Speirs holding him alongside Cenedella’s sisters, mother and her husband — it did not figure prominently in his life when he was younger.

Instead he became immersed in art, which in a 2016 film about his career titled “Art Bastard” he called “the special part of life, the part of life that was above the gutter.”

When he was 4, Cenedella discovered the work of Rockwell Kent whose illustrations filled the pages of the edition of “Moby Dick” that his family had in their home.

“I remember as a kid being fascinated by that book,” Cenedella said during a recent interview on Burying Island. “I related to images from day one, I would say.”

As he grew up he used both words and images to share views outside of the mainstream. As a student at Manhattan’s

Music and Art High School he was expelled after writing a satirical piece about atom bomb drills. When the rest of the world went crazy for Elvis, Cenedella made a button featuring Beethoven’s face and caption “I Like Ludwig.”

He sold thousands of buttons, which were mentioned in *The New Yorker* and featured in Peanuts’ comic strip, and used the proceeds to put himself through the Arts Student League of New York (where he is now one of the school’s instructors).

Having the summer off like his late professor father — Speirs died in 1975, leaving his share of Burying Island to his son — Cenedella is able to spend his summers in the middle of Taunton Bay and has done so since the early 1980s. The other two families also spend time in their respective buildings there.

When the three professors would bring their families decades ago, they created a tennis court using clay from the island and a homemade roller. There was a backstop for a small baseball field, and Speirs would stage works of Shakespeare with an all-island cast.

These days snowshoe hares inhabit the mile-long island instead of Shakespearean characters, along with red fox, deer or moose. Cenedella said that wild-life varies from year to year, depending how cold the winter was and if the bat froze over, which determines which animals were able to make it across.

The island is told to take its name from a rumored Native American burial ground, though Cenedella said it could just as easily be called “Berrying Island,” as it is home of blueberries, raspberries, gooseberries and northern mountain cranberries, among others.

Though Cenedella’s work is varied — he said he is different from many artist who have a singular style and do only one kind of work — the paintings he creates in Maine distinctly differ from his other paintings.

Cenedella works without an easel on Burying Island, instead using skinny, vertical canvases (some are narrow as only a few inches and as tall as 5 feet) and hanging them from tree trunks while he works. He calls these paintings, of which he has done perhaps 100, “Slices of Maine.”

The Slices are bright, colorful, sunshine-filled glimpses of life on the island; a dead tree where a woodpecker has been working, two small boats with outboard motors among the rockweed-covered shoreline and an old stone chimney where



ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY STEVE FULLER

The Cenedellas' Scottie, Russell, takes a drink of water on a warm summer day.

Speirs' cabin once stood (the Cenedella's built a new building in the late 1980s, after camping in a tent for most of that decade).

Smaller in scale than other work he has done — Cenedella once painted a crowded, filled-with-faces 6-foot-by-9-foot mural for a New York restaurant — the artist said the slices make sense in the setting of the island.

“Clearly, being there, I’m not painting crowd scenes,” he said. “If i had a painting that was wide and tall, I’d never get the same effect.”

Much of the Work Cenedella has done over the years is provocative, such as his 1965 work “Southern Dogs” (which shows police officers with dogs’ heads and puts the officers’ faces on the animals) of “The presence of Man,” which shows Santa Claus nailed to a cross.

Painted in 1988, the latter work was not shown publicly until 1977. It prompted an outcry for religious groups, but Cenedella told the Associated Press that it was capitalism, not himself, that was “responsible for replacing Christ with Santa Claus.”

On a lighter and more local note, Cenedella in 2001 painted “The Tourist.” It shows a larger-than-life lobster seated at a dinner table with a steamed tourist sitting on his plate, about to be consumed. Designed as an irreverent L.L. Bean catalog cover, the work now hangs at Ruth & Wimpy’s in Hancock

To learn more about Robert Cenedella and his work, visit www.rcenedellagallery.com