

## Outsider: MDI Artist Finds Inspiration in All Seasons

WRITTEN BY MELINDA RICE

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Rob Pollien treks into a snowfield, his snowshoes striking sharp and metallic against exposed rock. He stops mere feet from a cliff's edge and peers left and right along the rugged shoreline, then across Frenchman Bay toward the Schoodic Peninsula. Shakes his head and starts back up the slope.



"It's hard to say what I'm looking for. Something just clicks; I know it when I see it."

This day, a warmish one in February, he tromps around a bit, trailing the scent of turpentine. There's an 11-by-14 canvas tucked under one arm and a pack full of art supplies on his back.

Finally, taken by the way snow has flowed through some rocks near Great Head, he doffs the snowshoes and pack. Out comes an easel, paint box, palette, brushes and the turpentine.

Painters working outdoors are a common sight on Mount Desert Island – in the spring, summer and fall. Mr. Pollien is the rare artist who tackles Acadia in situ in the winter.

"The winter is so amazing. If you come down here in December you can quite literally watch the shadows move. Winter painting can be hard that way," he says. Light moves fast. Colors change."

And then there's the weather to deal with.

"The wind, when it's cold, is hard to deal with," he says. The coldest day he ever tried to work outside, it was -2 F and he was trying for a painting at Otter Cove. "I didn't last very long. That was just terribly cold."

To deal with such conditions he'll bundle up and use chemical heat packs inside fingerless gloves for himself, and use a little extra solvent for his oil paints.

A full-time artist for the past three years, Mr. Pollien has a studio in his Town Hill home and paints there daily, but gets outside to work as often as he can – 100 days or so a year.

But don't call him a plein air painter.

"It means a very specific thing," he says. "A lot of plein air is very immediate; I'm not interested in that sort of quick take."

When he tackles a painting outside, the first day he'll block in the values, then try to get three or four more sessions at the same spot, at the same tide, same time of day, same conditions. "If I'm lucky I'll get three or four more days; if I'm not ... well maybe it's finished never."

He carries a camera as part of his regular kit and records the scene. But he's not after an image of a pretty place.

“What I’m trying to communicate in my work is the gestalt of being here. Sounds, weather, light, season – all these things inform me about it. I’m looking for the essence of being here, not some kind of anecdote about a rock or a tree.”

This day Mr. Pollien sets up his easel within sight of a spot where Frederic Church did a famous painting. He can easily identify that spot, but his own work takes a different direction – physically, thematically, stylistically.

He likes the sense of history, though. “Painters sort of started the whole MDI thing.”

It was artists like Mr. Church and Thomas Cole who first recorded the beauties of MDI, enticing those who saw the paintings to visit and establish homes here.

Mr. Pollien himself first came to the area in 1992 as an artist in residence at Acadia National Park. He had a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied during the time that famed Maine landscape painter Neil Welliver was chairman of the program. Then he went to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

“I came up to school and started painting. It was so different,” he says.

Early on he’d been enamored of pop art. In Skowhegan he’d set up an easel somewhere and start painting – a dory, a farmhouse, someone’s tractor. “It was just so nice.”

He moved on to painting urban landscapes in Philadelphia, then relocated to Maine in 1986 to teach at the University of Southern Maine and the Maine College of Art. The year after his residency in Acadia, he moved to MDI for good.

And “the restlessness of painting inside drove me outside.”

Since then, he’s received a Maine Arts Commission Individual Artist Fellowship in painting and his work has developed a following.

It was included in the 1997 book “Art of the the Maine Islands” by Arnold Skolnick and Carl Little.

His success is all the more remarkable in light of a skiing accident in 2003 that left him with a traumatic brain injury. Afterward the painting process was “difficult and less familiar.” The accident and recovery are not a topic he’ll dwell on. In 2004 he won a Carina House Residency that provided him with five weeks on Monhegan Island to paint, an experience he says that set him back on his feet artistically and personally.

Mr. Pollien is now represented by the Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland and his paintings are sold locally at the Islesford Dock Gallery. And this year he’s got a piece going to the U.S. Embassy in Lesotho as part of the U.S. Embassy in Art program.

These days he paints “mostly shoreline landscapes ... with a weird sideline of crows. They’re fascinating animals, so smart.”

Mr. Pollien says his work now is “a little more quiet and substantial” than it used to be. “But more recently it’s swinging back in the other direction, it’s more immediate.”

He has a lot of pieces going at any one time.

Stepping back from the painting he’s working on at Great Head, he tilts his head, steps back, steps closer, uses a paper towel dipped in turpentine to make a correction, then starts making tiny brush strokes.

Overall, he says, he’s trying to refine his process.

“That’s what your life as an artist is all about.”

To see more of Rob Pollien’s work or follow his blog, visit [pollien.com](http://pollien.com).

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