

June 17, 2013

## John Alexander Exhibits At Guild Hall

Publication: The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press

By Michelle Trauring

Hands on his hips, John Alexander stood in the middle of Guild Hall's Moran Gallery, looking at the back wall.

It was blank. Eight of the Amagansett-based artist's newest oil paintings depicting nature at its finest were hung on adjacent walls. But a familiar theme—one that earned Mr. Alexander a bit of notoriety in the 1980s among the New York art scene—was noticeably absent. The exhibition was missing his biting, satirical portraits. It was missing a look at man at his worst.

"Oh, the people pictures?" the artist asked in his Gulf-states drawl. Ominously, with a smirk, he added, "They're coming."

The artist's infamous figurative work was born in the 1980s, he said, after quitting his comfortable job teaching painting at the University of Houston and moving to Manhattan in 1979, leaving his Texas life and childhood behind.

In those days, choosing New York over the Lone Star state was unheard of ("Texans tend not to move," he said), but the artist said he's never looked back. Except when it comes to painting the bayous, the swamps, the flora and the fauna that he explored as a young boy.

"As I've gotten older—I've still got a ways to go, but now I'm getting closer to 70—I find that my work and my thought process and my life is going back in time to my childhood as inspiration," he said. "I think it's kind of natural for people, as they get older, to do that. In the late hours in the studio, when it's quiet, I tend to be thinking back more than I've ever in my career. And I'm comfortable with that."

He paused and mused, "Maybe I just don't like, in terms of the environment and nature, what I see as the future and I'm happier thinking backwards."

Mr. Alexander's hometown, Beaumont, Texas, was once described by *Time* magazine as a "bleak, Gulf Coast industrial town." His father, who was 68 when his son was born, was a retired engineer in the oil business and a great naturalist. The pair would roam the wilderness, and it broke the boy's heart when it began to decline.

"It grew almost overnight. It really happened rather quickly," the artist said, "and it truly affected me emotionally because this nature, this world of nature that I loved so much, I was beginning to see destroyed. There's always been, in my work, this tension between the beauty of nature and something scary and wrong. All these years later, 50 years later, it still permeates my work. This tension between the natural world and man's destruction of it."

The artist's passion for painting is inexplicable, he said. In Beaumont, there was not one gallery or one museum in town, nor one piece of art hanging inside his home, he reported, adding that, yet all he ever wanted to do was make art. And it's all he's ever done, with the exception of a liquor label startup, Crystal Head Vodka, in partnership with actor and friend, Dan Aykroyd, in 2007.

Thanks to encouraging parents, Mr. Alexander chased his childhood dream through college before settling at the University of Houston to teach. Then, one day in 1976, his life changed when a “little gray-haired man” walked into the back of his studio during a lecture.

It was the artist’s hero, Willem de Kooning.

“I actually, I think for the first time ever, I was truly startled beyond words,” he said, babbling a few lines of gibberish. “I thought, ‘How am I going to stand here and talk about my art in front of this great master?’ I kind of thanked everyone and that ended the talk. There we were, standing facetoface in my studio, in my backyard in Houston. And he was so personable and so friendly and put you at ease so fast, so we decided we’d go sightseeing.”

Their first stop was the Rothko Chapel in Houston, an intimate sanctuary founded by John and Dominique de Menil that exhibits 14 paintings by the late abstract artist Mark Rothko. Only the two men were there.

De Kooning stood for about a half hour, staring at the brooding paintings that Mr. Alexander had seen many times, so he exited and wandered the grounds, letting the abstract expressionist have his solitude. When de Kooning came outside, they sat down on a bench overlooking Barnett Newman’s “Broken Obelisk.” There, de Kooning became very emotional.

“He started talking about the first time he met Rothko on a park bench in New York and their friendship,” Mr. Alexander reported. “And it was, for me, in ’76—I was 31, just kind of getting started with a real professional career, and I’m sitting there with this hero, listening to him talk about the old days—it was one of the greatest moments for me as a painter, in my development as an artist.”

The following day, after another afternoon of sightseeing, de Kooning invited Mr. Alexander to visit his East End studio in Springs.

“I went, ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’” he recalled.

Several months later, Mr. Alexander packed his bags and hit the road with fellow artist Dan Rizzie, whom he met in Texas, and the two made tracks to the East End.

“Oh my God, you have no idea. It was a classic road trip, believe me,” Mr. Alexander said. “In those days, you have to understand, there were no red lights. You could drive through Bridgehampton and still see the water. It was just different. And I thought, ‘Where the hell are we? This is the strangest place, but hauntingly beautiful.’”

Spending the day with de Kooning in his studio was a “grand way” to enter the Hamptons, he said. After his trip here, he settled into a barn studio in Amagansett not long after moving to Manhattan.

On Friday morning, he turned off the fans drying his final piece for the Guild Hall show, “Lost Souls”—his take on George Washington’s crossing of the Delaware River—loaded the painting into a box truck and headed toward East Hampton. At Guild Hall, he backed the truck up onto the museum’s brick walkway and hopped out with his friends Jim Lawler and Cory Bailey.

“Here we go,” he said, heading inside as the two men delicately lifted the 10footlongby6 ½foottall painting featuring a whole cast of strange beings—from popes and businessmen to birds and fish. Some of them are sporting masks.

“They’re drinking, they’re staring, they’re climbing, they’re wrapped in weird garments. It is, indeed, a boat full of lost souls,” said Mr. Alexander, who was honored with the 2012 Guild Hall Academy of the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award in the visual arts this past March. “The masks are simply to hide their identities. You could look at this portrait and think, ‘I hate that guy. That’s a

judge, that's a high school principal I didn't like, that's an uncle who's a weirdo, that's my next door neighbor. It's my governor, it's your governor, it's a senator, it's Congress.' The masks make them look sillier than they already look. Because you look pretty stupid with a beak mask on. It's hard to be, like, sexy."

He laughed, and continued, "I just can't help myself. I just love to do those things every once in a while. And, obviously, I love to do pictures involving the natural world and all it encompasses, but the idea of sticking a few of my friends into boats is kinda fun."

With a playful darkness, he added, "My enemies."

Photographer Gary Mamay watched the installation, taking a break from shooting photographs in the rest of the room.

"At least he didn't put us in this thing," Mr. Mamay remarked to Mr. Lawler. "At least I don't think he put me in this thing."

"Yeah, I hope I'm not in it," Mr. Lawler said.

"Oh, I've got one of you. I've got more than one of you," Mr. Alexander said to Mr. Lawler. He then pointed to Mr. Mamay, "I've got him, too. I've got him holding the flag with the United States senator."

The men dissolved into laughter as Mr. Alexander took his position in the center of the room, his hands back on his hips.

"It looks good," Mr. Lawler said over the artist's shoulder. "It looks very good."

Mr. Alexander considered the painting, cocking his head to one side. He nodded and turned away with a smirk. The exhibit was complete.

An exhibition featuring a new body of work by John Alexander opened on Saturday, June 15, at Guild Hall in East Hampton and will remain on view through July 28. Suggested admission is \$7. Museum hours, through June, are Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. For more information, call 324-0806 or visit [guildhall.org](http://guildhall.org).