



Marsh Island Cedars by Linda Fantuzzo



Island Muse

Artists draw from
Kiawah's mystique

By Stephanie Hunt

Artwork courtesy of Linda Fantuzzo, Helena Fox, Mark Horton, Currie McCullough, Smith Killian Gallery, and Laura Liberatore Sweda. Additional photography by Rick Rhodes and Mark Permar.

“I did not love the country because it was something to paint, but painted the country because it was something to love.”

Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Charleston Renaissance artist, 1876 – 1958

Kiawah’s sublime beauty has a powerful undertow. With serene vistas, haunting live oaks, and pristine beaches, the Island lures residents and visitors, beachcombers and birders, golfers, fishermen, boaters, and, of course, artists. For centuries, painters like renowned Charleston Renaissance watercolorist Alice Ravenel Huger Smith have been drawn to this inimitable barrier island at land’s end that seems to hold back the immense ocean by sheer force of beauty.

What ignites the artist’s eye here? A maritime forest shrouded in fog or doused with amber twilight? And how with any precision does one render awe through mere pigment and brushstroke? It’s some sort of magic — a certain alchemy that translates ethereal vision to a tangible frame, making the breathtaking landscape accessible to all.

Meet several of the artists who, inspired by Kiawah’s wonder, seek to capture its spirit on canvas and, in turn, are captured by it.

Sense of Place Linda Fantuzzo remembers her first encounter with Kiawah, visiting the Island with her longtime artistic colleague and friend, Manning Williams, back in 1973. “It was such a wild, wondrous place,” the New York native says. “The utter extravagance of the marsh as one approaches the Island, that vast, pure landscape; it’s one of the reasons I moved to the Lowcountry.” The classically trained Fantuzzo, whose commissioned work hangs in The Kiawah Island Club, studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and in Italy, and has been a mainstay of the Charleston art scene for the last three decades. Best known for her still-lifes and sensuously textured, luminous landscapes, she relishes the freedom and spontaneity of plein-air painting, and is especially drawn to the wide-open Kiawah vista.

“Expanding savannas, cedars rising out of the tall grass and merging with the blue-green skies in October light, here, where the sky meets the land, is where I feel a true sense of place, and that place is Kiawah,”

Fantuzzo says. She’ll wander for hours before choosing a spot to set up her easel (“actually, the spot chooses me,” she notes), then paints in a “first strike” manner, working quickly to express her immediate response to the landscape before the light shifts and the shadows elongate. If the painting warrants, Fantuzzo may delve deeper in the studio, adding layers and nuance to imbue it with an almost spiritual quality, fine-tuning her mastery at evoking both the representational and the abstract.

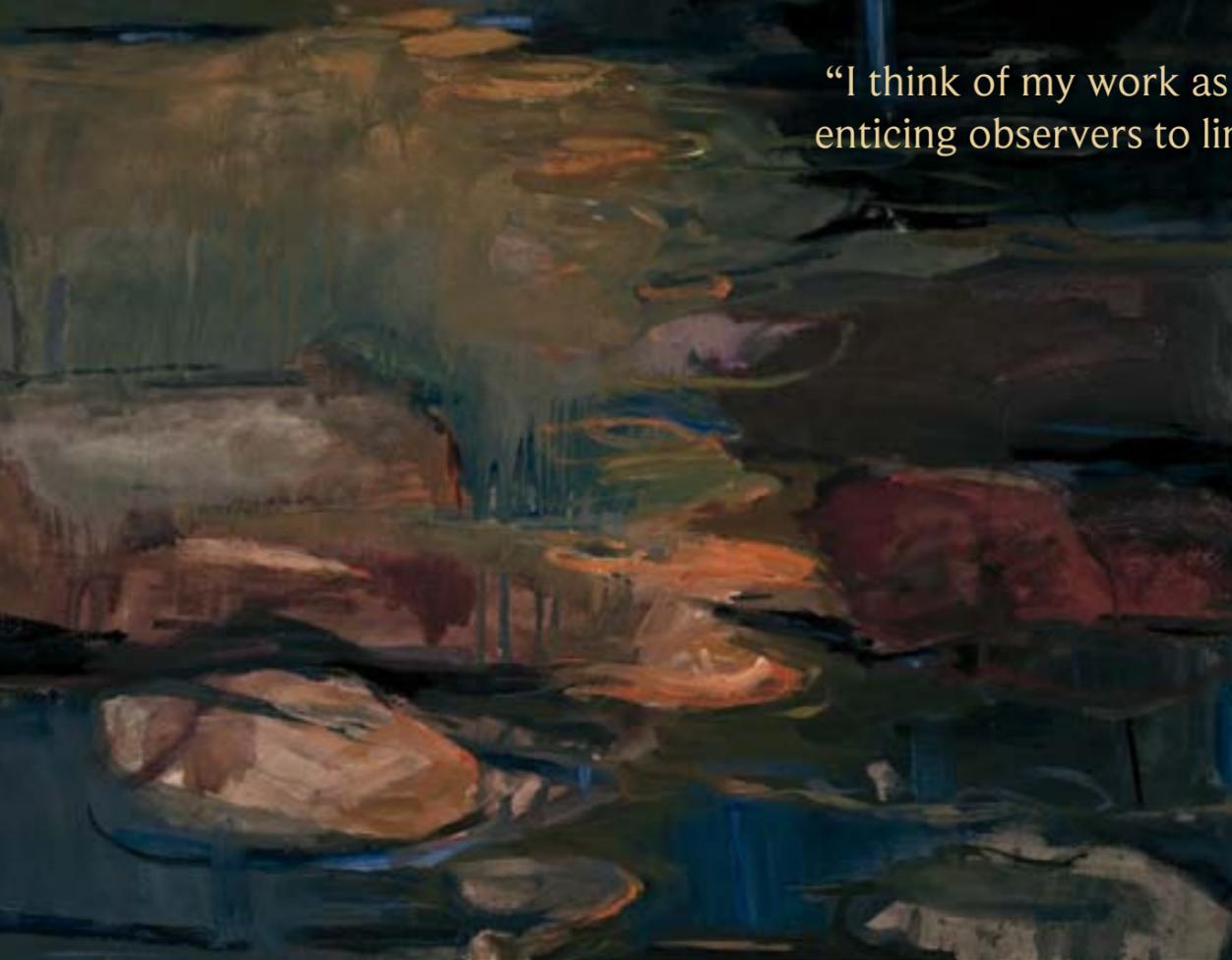
“I do have an emotional response to Kiawah’s landscape in particular, to the light, the freedom, the air,” she says. “Then those big herons and lurking alligators come up, and you almost have to pinch yourself. It’s very primal, untamed. You can still isolate yourself at Kiawah. Certain areas remain untouched and unscathed, and I’m glad they strive to retain that.”

Ever Changing At four in the morning as Charleston slumbers, Mark Horton gathers his camera, paints, and brushes and heads toward Kiawah. “I go out there as often as possible, usually before the sun comes up, to catch that early, early morning light.” Horton prefers to paint from photographs, and as he scouts and shoots, he studies the landscape, trying to memorize the ever shifting subtleties that he claims the camera just can’t capture. “Kiawah changes day to day, moment to moment,” Horton says. “There’s such diversity of subject matter, compacted and easy to get to. Every time I go, I discover a new incredible scene tucked away in an unspoiled pocket, or rediscover an old spot that looks totally new in a different season, in different light.”



Kiawah View by Mark K. Horton

“I think of my work as a bit dangerous, enticing observers to linger for a while.”



Water Garden by Laura Liberatore Szweda

In 2001, after 18 years as creative director in various New York City advertising agencies, Horton, a North Carolinian with a BFA from Eastern Carolina University, moved back to the Southeast, to Charleston, to paint full-time. His muted palette and formal, elegiac compositions are reminiscent of the Hudson River School painters. A fan of George Inness and the tonalists, Horton frequented New York’s museums to study those grand romantic landscapes, and he brings that classical eloquence to his Low-country paintings. “I aim for timelessness. I want my paintings to look like they’re 100 years old, yet be of the moment,” Horton says. “The challenge is to not be trite. A marsh scene at sunset is a recipe for disaster if it’s too sentimental.”

Early in his career, Horton focused on literal representation and detail. “Now I try to capture atmosphere, the spirit of a place, and simplify it down to shapes, tones, and values,” he says. “I’m on a constant quest to

simplify, simplify — to hone down to the essence of a scene, the focal point, to what drew me to it in the first place.” And there’s plenty Horton is drawn to on Kiawah: “the meandering marshes, the wildlife, the dark lagoons or scruffiness of winter, when trees look a bit battered...it feels like a whole different world out there.”

Mystery Revealed “I don’t paint pretty little pictures,” says multi-media artist Laura Liberatore Szweda. “I think of my work as a bit dangerous, enticing observers to linger for a while, and keep making discoveries.” Discovery is integral to the artistic process for Szweda, who returned to art school after her children were grown, earning a BFA from Maryland Institute’s College of Art and an MFA from the

University of Maryland, where she taught for years. Though formally trained in line and figure drawing, Szweda embraces the abstract and gets absorbed in the playfulness of painting. Her landscapes are not site specific, but observed then internalized. “I often don’t know exactly what I’m aiming for,” she explains. “Memory kicks in, and I try to evoke the essence of a place and let it emerge in the painting. I usually know I’ve gotten it when I’m able to title the painting.”

A Kiawah resident for the last ten years, Szweda and her husband discovered the Island while investigating retirement locations and were “assaulted by its beauty.” “Coming here from New England, the beauty was almost overwhelming,” she says. “For me it demands an artistic response.”

Szweda is awed by the distinct way sunlight bathes the Kiawah landscape. “The light becomes a breathing, living,

spiritual thing,” she observes, and she finds the play of light on water equally fascinating. Her fluid, evanescent style suggests water’s movement and mystery. “The ocean is my biggest influence,” she says. “I peer in tidal pools and imagine what’s beneath, what’s immersed, what’s captured; and I love the tidal creeks and the way you can see the earth breathing as they ebb and flow. Kiawah is an endless feast,” Szweda adds. “From the immense ocean to the tangled understory of tangled vines and trees, there’s so much mystery to explore.”

Visual Excitement For Southern realist master William McCullough, landscape painting is more than an artistic genre. “Landscape is the reason I paint, not the other way around,” he asserts. “I am moved by the effects of light on pines or ponds, it’s visually exciting. The painting comes second to the desire to explain and express what I love.”



Oyster Bateau by William McCullough



Third Cast by Shannon Smith

jungle in the foreground, an inland pond in the middle distance, which then develops into a horizon that opens out to a plain of pure color,” McCullough says. “Kiawah is the only place I know where you can find that.”

Bold Palette Shannon Smith grew up exploring the Lowcountry, including Kiawah’s endless marshes and hidden coves, with her mother, painter Betty Anglin Smith, and artistic siblings, painter Jennifer Smith Rogers and photographer Tripp Smith. But despite its familiar setting, Kiawah has an exotic appeal to Smith, who has painted professionally since earning her BFA at Clemson in 1994. “I feel like I’ve seen everything in the Lowcountry,” she says. “But the first time I got in a golf cart and rode The Ocean Course, it was as if I’d traveled someplace else. The wildlife, vantage points, and colors were amazing. It’s so exciting to see a familiar landscape in a new light.”

A radiant new light is exactly what Shannon’s paintings reflect. She plays off the local colorscape and “pushes it” to make her representational paintings more expressionistic. “I’m definitely drawn to the light, and I exaggerate the local colors to emphasize how light interacts with the subject, creating mood and drama,” she says. With a style that is loose and gesturely, classical yet also fresh, Shannon captures the awe of Kiawah.

Though not solely a plein-air painter nor strictly a landscape painter, Smith savors opportunities to be out in the Island’s fresh air. “It’s so peaceful there,” she says. “All of my senses become very awake and aware, the sounds, the smells, I become more involved in the element of nature.”

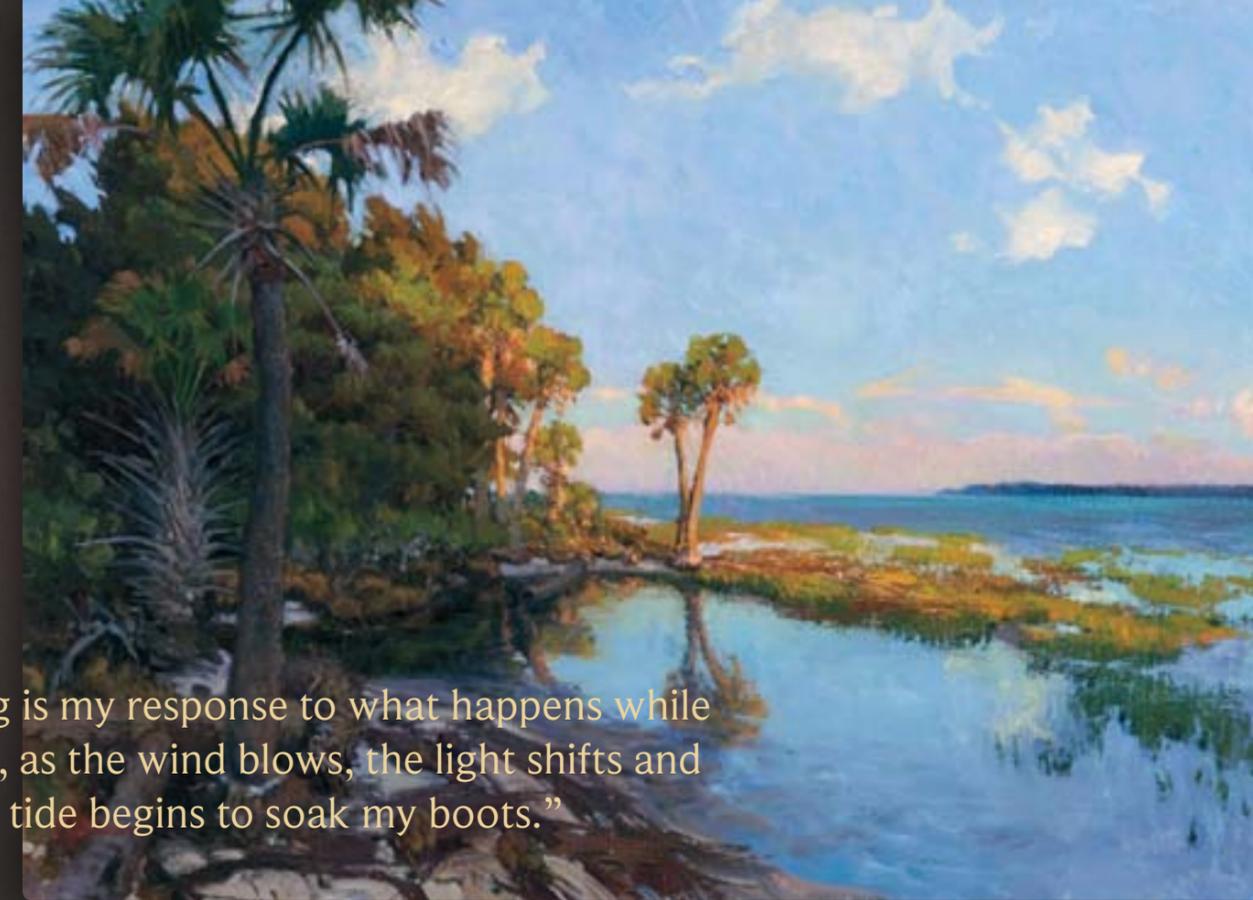


Evening Tide II by Shannon Smith

McCullough grew up in South Carolina, studied at the National Academy of Art and Design in New York, and now splits his time between his family farm in Kingstree and his Charleston studio. He first fell under Kiawah’s spell in 1966. “I was blown away, nothing was there, just a desolate beach covered in horseshoe crabs and all that wildlife – it was like going to another country,” he recalls.

Since the 1980s, McCullough has painted numerous Kiawah scenes, including a commissioned series of The River Course, and an image chosen for the cover of a recently published history of the Island. Though he paints throughout the Southeast and in France, he continues to find compelling subject matter on Kiawah. “It’s the simple matter of land meeting sky and sea in one spot, and that hasn’t changed with development,” McCullough claims. “They’ve done an incredible job of maintaining the Island’s beauty,” he adds. “There’s this fantastic amount of light reflecting off all that inland water and sea, and those great old growth forests. All you need is those key ingredients.”

With skilled strokes of genius, McCullough translates Kiawah’s large expanses of hard marsh, where earthy colors are constantly shifting, into intimate portraits of quiet grandeur. He revels in the harmonies of light and rhythm of shadows, and appreciates the varied dimensions of Kiawah’s broad vistas. “From one vantage point I can frame dense



Afternoon Delight by West Fraser

“The painting is my response to what happens while I’m out there, as the wind blows, the light shifts and the incoming tide begins to soak my boots.”

“I’m always inspired there. I go back every chance I get. Kiawah offers so many wonderful and accessible marsh views contained in one area,” adds Smith, who is partial to the Preserve. “It’s just gorgeous to me, the way it’s livable and yet very natural at the same time.”

Plein-Air Impressions West Fraser paints it like it is. One of Charleston’s best-known and most widely collected contemporary artists, Fraser is in his element knee deep in pluff mud, mixing colors while swatting mosquitoes, honing his keen powers of observation as the sun dances across the marsh.

“The painting is my response to what happens while I’m out there, as the wind blows, the light shifts and the incoming tide begins to soak my boots,” says Fraser, who transitioned from being a watercolorist working from photographs to plein-air painting with oils almost two decades ago. He paints maritime landscapes because it is what he loves and knows best. “I’ve got a collective attachment to the area, my family has been here for generations,” says the Charleston resident who grew up near Savannah and attributes a college summer spent working on Kiawah (counting mosquitoes, no less) as “one of his biggest artistic inspirations.”

That was decades ago, but “there are still absolutely beautiful natural areas on Kiawah that are typical settings for the material I use,” he adds. “I find all my compositions in nature – I don’t make them up. I’m drawn to really old trees along the river, and Kiawah’s hard marshes with cedar and long marsh expanses in Southeastern light.” However Fraser’s subject matter is not the trees and the marsh as much as it is the subtle nuances of light bathing the landscape. With deft touch and an exacting eye, his canvases convey an intimacy with Kiawah and the Lowcountry landscape. His love of the area is palpable.

“I’ve spent my lifetime here,” Fraser says. “For thirty years I’ve been studying salt marshes from a biological and artistic standpoint. I paint the landscape honestly and with loving intent.”

Whether painting *en plein-air*, from photographs, or from the fleeting, often mysterious impressions of memory, artists using mixed media and individual techniques have for generations evoked the magic and beauty of this Island muse. Their works, along with that of other artists – architects, gardeners, and land planners, chefs, photographers, poets, and writers – are powerful evidence that Kiawah stirs the artistic soul. Raw, unrestrained beauty, wherever it is found, rarely fails to inspire; and so it is that this quiet island sends out a raucous call to the creative spirit.