

Artist Finds Passion in Preservation

By Pat Rogers

When Lillian Ball speaks passionately and at length about environmental preservation in general and a specific wetlands preservation project she was intimately involved with (and spearheaded) on the North Fork, it's not obvious that she's an artist.

She drops terms like maritime freshwater interdunal swale and *Iris prismatica* as if everyone should know what they mean. And, if Ms. Ball has her way, these phrases and a few others will become as familiar as piping plover and tiger salamander already are on the South Fork, thanks to others similarly dedicated to preserving fragile ecosystems and protecting endangered species on the East End.

But Ms. Ball isn't only a conservationist; she's also an artist who has exhibited around the world. And while waging a battle to preserve a 12-acre parcel of land near Great Pond, she switched the focus of her art to reflect her new passion. She transformed her experience into art that is currently on view at Art Sites gallery in Riverhead, and lectured on her art-environmental activism at Guild Hall in East Hampton earlier this summer as part of a series dealing with environmental artists.

"It's been a wonderful experience for me," Ms. Ball said, noting that the Southold preservation project was her first venture as an activist. "This made me switch my work around it. I hope that it provokes people to think, and really consider, what kinds of things can happen and how we can have an effect on the world."

The solo show at Art Sites features video installations and digitally-altered photographs. Hanging discreetly on a wall is a binder filled with documents and information on the preservation efforts that inspired the artwork for the show, "Leap of Faith." It will remain on view through August 27.

"The whole project is art, a kind of social sculpture," Ms. Ball said. "I didn't coin the phrase—the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys did, but that's how I think of the preservation project."

At first, Ms. Ball didn't realize the preservation efforts would be transmuted into art. In fact, she created no pieces until the project seemed like it might come to its ultimately successful conclusion. The land was purchased and preserved with the help of the Peconic Land Trust, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Southold Town Trustees, other groups, and lots of individuals, Ms. Ball said, adding that Suffolk County has made commitments to preserving other nearby parcels.

"It wasn't until we had some success—the trustees voted to revoke the permit they had granted—that images came to me," she said.

One of those images was of the *iris prismatica*, an endangered plant known to grow only in Southold Town on the land that was ultimately preserved. Another depicts native cranberries that flourish in cranberry bogs in North Fork wetlands.



Lillian Ball talks about her art with a visitor.

Fields of phragmites and other invasive plants that choke the fragile ecosystem alongside native plants also appear in this new body of work. Another image shows simple property line markers made of wood sticks and neon-colored plastic tags.

"It seemed like the property line markers are everywhere," Ms. Ball said. "They're used to show clearing limits and where the property lines are. So I began taking photographs. I couldn't get the images out of my mind—they were so strong."

Sometimes, Ms. Ball's interpretation is a literal one: photographs she has taken become static art or are incorporated into flashing images inside multi-media installations. One work features changing images of construction inset in a line of hay bales. The bales are intended to keep construction debris from entering wetlands on both forks of the East End. Hay bales are also featured in photographs.

"They start to grow their own

leaves and eventually decay," Ms. Ball said. "They begin to almost take on a sculptural form. I really went looking for them."

Images of the preservation effort—punctuated by sound—flash at the bottom of a five-foot hourglass, reflecting that time is running out for preservation. Still other images that diary different perspectives on the Southold preservation experience are projected onto a circular arrangement of sand.

The sand medium was selected to draw attention to the fact that a maritime freshwater interdunal swale is not deeply layered sand, like those near ocean beaches, but a layer without an anchoring system that cannot sustain structures like houses over time. (The freshwater interdunal swale forms when freshwater aquifers meet with dune surfaces, which remain sufficiently saturated for plants to begin to grow.)

Ms. Ball's "Leap of Faith" series represents the first time she has specifically incorporated environmental activism into her art, even though concerns about the environment have been creeping into her multi-media sculptural works for years. One series focused on plumbing and the scarcity of water. Another series explored waste disposal and the interiors of things. Yet another examined human hygiene and care of the human body.

Ms. Ball, who divides her time between Southold and New York City, has had solo exhibitions in New York at the Sculpture Center, Socrates Sculpture Park and the Queens Museum. She has exhibited in England, France, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Canada and other countries. She is a member of the Eco-Art Network. Some of her work can be viewed at www.lillianball.com.

"Leap of Faith" will remain on view at Art Sites through August 27. Ms. Ball will give a talk on the art-environmental activist connection on Saturday, August 26, at 4:30 p.m. at the gallery. Art Sites is located at 651 West Main Street, Riverhead. For information, call 631-591-2402.



Works by Lillian Ball are on view at Art Sites in Riverhead.

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