

# Bald Head's 'No Boundaries' Breeds Creativity



BY DAVID FREDERIKSEN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARROW ROSS

**W**atch painter Wayne McDowell cultivate a landscape on canvas, and you might think you're seeing a NOVA re-run about the origins of life.

Lean, with long, white, wispy hair extending spider-like from his scalp, McDowell is energetic, almost violent, in his approach. He combines different colors before laying down lightning bolts of blue, green, brown and gray on a vast canvas whose center has gradually become a thick, oil-based primordial soup.

As the canvas quivers, the easel quakes and paint splatters, McDowell delivers the all-important creative spark—a single contour line—with a quick flick of his wrist.



Sergej Andreevski (Macedonia) left  
Eleanor "Ellie" Collins (England)  
upper right  
Gayle Tustin  
(No Boundaries Co-Founder/  
Co-Director—Wilmington, NC)  
lower right



Suddenly, a horizon is born, blue skies open wide and an invisible sun takes shape.

Stepping back, McDowell takes note of the unlimited possibilities his canvas now holds. "Whoa," he says, "that's a really big space!"

McDowell isn't alone in the act of creation. A veteran group of talented artists works alongside him, housed in three modest cottages on Bald Head Island. The small barrier island is minutes by ferry from Southport, NC—30 miles south of Wilmington, NC and 60 miles north of Myrtle Beach, SC.

North Carolina's southernmost cape island, located at the junction of the Atlantic Ocean and Intracoastal Waterway, Bald Head Island is an ideal setting for an artists' colony. The barrier island boasts 14 miles of ocean beach, 10,000 acres of protected salt marsh and tidal creeks, and a huge maritime forest reserve.

No cars are allowed on the island, which is dedicated to preserving its natural resources and peaceful ambiance. Visitors can only reach its shores via ferry or private boat. Though only 200 residents occupy Bald Head year-round, during the summer its ranks swell to between four and six thousand. In mid-November, though, the air is still, the island is quiet, and the beautiful maritime setting provides the perfect inspiration for the gathering of artists in its midst.

For McDowell, a Wilmington resident, the No Boundaries Art Colony—so called because of the colony's mission to be limitless in scope—is an "opportunity to talk and connect with other people who

understand the same vocabulary."

"Ninety-nine percent of my life is me and that bowl," says McDowell, pointing to a still-life of a bowl and table that he has rendered in solitude countless times. "So, once every two years, I get invited to come out and play."

Held each November, the No Boundaries Art Colony at Bald Head Island is a non-profit organization that brings together painters for two weeks of work, play and friendship-building.

The shared brainchild of Wilmington artists Dick Roberts, Pam Toll and Gayle Tustin, the colony, founded in 1998, hosts an international cadre of artists every other year, hosting only local artists in the off-years.

In addition to pursuing artistic excellence, No Boundaries is committed to community outreach. For the past several years, participating artists have held demonstrations at the Dreams Center for Arts Education, a Wilmington-based non-profit youth development program dedicated to providing a free, high-quality arts education to children in need. This November, Chinese painter Wei Ru and Barbadian painter Neville "Kamau" Crawford paid a visit to the young artists at DREAMS. No Boundaries artists also

**Against the backdrop of a balmy November day, two painters sit enveloped in the morning light, their colorful creations spread across a gray, weather-beaten porch.**



shared their talents with students at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and the Friends School of Wilmington.

Arriving by invitation only, No Boundaries artists receive free room and board for the duration of the colony in exchange for some of the artwork they create, which the island's management displays at its various corporate offices. Artists must pay their own airfare.

**In the distance visitors can hear laughter, jokes, stories and inflections from faraway places. Somewhere, a halyard bangs rhythmically against a flagpole shaft.**

"Pam, Gayle and Dick invited me," recalls 2006 colony participant Shawn Best, evoking the intimacy and personal connection with which the almost decade-old colony continues to operate.

Best, a Wilmington resident, said each year's gathering of more than two dozen artists is an object lesson in how, presented with the same environment, artists can render radically different visions of the world around them.

"It's just interesting to see how, when faced with the same set of information, different [artists] re-

spond," she said, glancing at her own work, a marsh landscape, then at a series of small canvases with black and yellow geometric shapes.

A recent newcomer to the plein air, or 'open air,' style of painting, which emphasizes nature and the outdoors as the backdrop for creation, Best said she spends many mornings alone in the marshes "responding to the light, color and the changes."

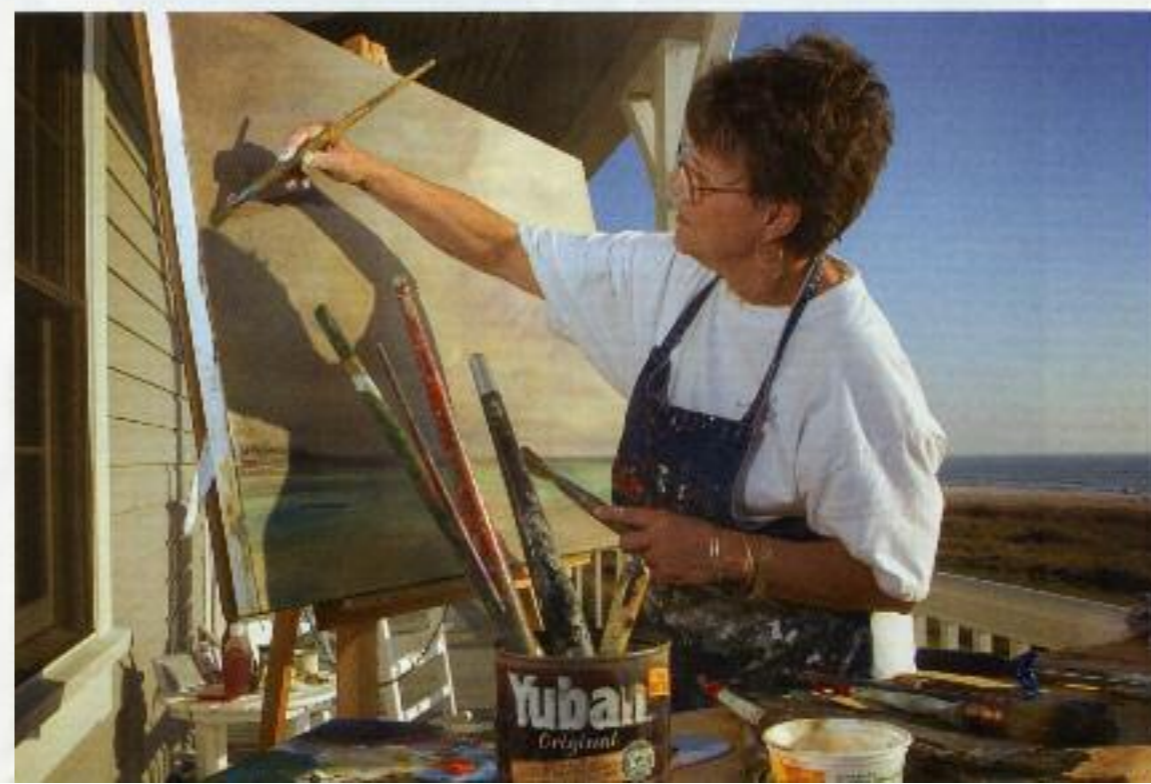
"It's a whole different way to paint and study," said the former graphic designer, art director and homemaker. "You're trying to capture light within a single moment of time."

Nearby, against the backdrop of a balmy November day, two painters sit enveloped in the morning light, their colorful creations spread across a gray, weather-beaten porch.

"It's just amazing to be able to have someone cook for you, and have all these interesting people to talk to and all you have to do is paint," says artist Rosie Newman. A colony first-timer, she hails from the Black Isle in Scotland.

Seated cross-legged in jeans and an oversized sweater, Newman leans into her canvas. With a long, narrow brush, she highlights three glass jars, one of which—a pickle jar—happens to bear her last name.

"It's a total coincidence," she declares, laughing aloud, her cheeks slightly sun-kissed.



Neville Kamau Crawford (Barbados) & Wei Ru (China) left  
M.J. Cunningham (Wilmington, NC) bottom left



Pamela Toll (No Boundaries' Co-Founder/Co-Director—Wilmington, NC) top right

Linda Dallas (Raleigh, NC) bottom

Bonnie England (Wilmington, NC) opposite

Newman's journey began after hearing Macedonian artist Sergej Andreevski describe No Boundaries when the two met at a similar colony in Scotland. "I remember thinking, 'Wow!'" she says.

Months later, Newman received an e-mail from Sergej's wife, letting her know No Boundaries was looking for a Scottish artist.

"That night I was so excited I went to bed with an atlas in front of me, saying, 'Where the heck is Wilmington, North Carolina?'"

Most impressive about her stay so far, Newman says, is the quality of outdoor light.

"Everything looks different because the light's so different... it's almost overwhelming," she says.

Sculptor and mixed-media artist Joyce Blunk escapes autumn's intense rays by taking cover in a tent shelter at the other end of the island. For her, leaving her Asheville home for life on an island means abandoning her comfort zone.

"It removes you from what's familiar... so you're forced to look at things in a whole new way," she says.

Blunk's three-dimensional compositions consist of what she calls "found objects"—a shoestring, the prickly head of a hairbrush, a skate egg case. The beach, she says, provides her with an unending supply of material.

"I alter the found objects and place them in a new setting," she says, pointing to three large pieces of hardboard backing with various objects artfully distributed on top.

The overall effect is a study in contrasts, but with an undeniable feeling of harmony—much like the colony itself.

A few feet away, amid the whirring of two industrial-size ventilation fans, Macedonian artist Sergej Andreevski stares intently at his latest creations—three acrylic compositions with bright colors that tell a story.

"To be with this group of people is great," he says. "I am very happy, and you can see it in my paintings."

He and another artist grab their bikes. Like children, they begin zigzagging their way back to the cottages.

"Everybody has a different personality. It depends on the mix, and we never know how it's going to come off," says co-founder Gayle Tustin of each colony session.

As a No Boundaries administrator and full-time working artist, Tustin, a Wilmington resident for 18 years, says she cherishes her time at the colony, always looking for opportunities to expand her art.

"I've just been obsessed with collecting shells over the past year," says Tustin, seated on a brown overstuffed couch next to a canvas bearing the rough outline of a huge conch shell.

Tustin says the colony is a shaping force in her life and work. "I hope I'm always growing. I feel like being an artist is an ongoing process," she says.

Back at the cottage where Wayne McDowell's still-evolving landscape



remains propped on an easel, the once-hectic atmosphere has cooled, and most artists have departed for lunch. Absent their owners, the various brushes, paints and palettes have become the true epitome of still-life.

In the distance visitors can hear laughter, jokes, stories and inflections from faraway places. Somewhere, a halyard bangs rhythmically against a flagpole shaft.

Overhead the sun beats down, and as warm breezes move about, the colony and all its creatures prepare for their next act of creation. ❄️

For more information, write to No Boundaries, Inc., 711 N. Fifth Ave., Wilmington, NC 28401.