



Jackson Pollock: Painting a picture of long island

Jackson Pollock would have turned 100 this weekend. Chris Coplans travels to New York state to explore the locations that inspired the artist during his short and turbulent life

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I was standing on two of Jackson Pollock's most celebrated paintings when Helen pointed and said to me: "That's Lavender Mist and there is Autumn Rhythm." I peered closely but could see neither lavender nor autumn. I could see mist and rhythm. Aficionados of the great American artist will no doubt wonder why I was standing on his paintings. Once they've got over that, they will point out that it is physically impossible to stand on both paintings at the same time: one is in New York and the other in Washington DC.

The explanation lies in the fact that I was in Pollock's studio. The location was the town of Springs, on eastern Long Island's South Fork – a couple of hours' drive from New York JFK airport. Pollock would have been 100 this Saturday. He moved from Manhattan to Springs, just outside East Hampton, in 1945.

Pollock and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, were lent the deposit to buy the home by Peggy Guggenheim, the New York heiress, socialite art collector and benefactor who may or

may not have seduced Pollock. He converted the dilapidated barn that stood in the garden into a studio, where he created some of his best-known works.

The home and studio, which is open to the public and will host a Pollock centenary exhibition later this year, lies in a glorious garden that falls away on to scenic wetlands. It's the perfect setting: serene and peaceful. But although all this beauty inspired Pollock, he was not a man at peace.

Pollock began painting with his canvases laid out on the studio floor, experimenting with what was to become his "drip" technique. And that's what makes this studio so powerful: because there, on the rich wooden floorboards, is the evidence of this deeply unhappy genius's fragile emotional state.

Pollock's passion and fury dominates the floor. Photographs, mainly of Pollock in the studio are hung on the studio walls. On one wall, below the high window from where the light would have fallen directly on to and nourished Pollock's prostrate canvases, is a simple shelf. The shelf holds his tools – tins of household paints that he used instead of artist's paints. He described it as "a natural growth out of a need".

As I walked over this kaleidoscope of merging patterns of colour and form in the company of the director of the Pollock Krasner House, Helen A Harrison, I couldn't help feel that I was trampling on Pollock's delicate emotions – even though I was wearing a pair of bright blue plastic protective slippers.

It's fair to say that Pollock liked a drink. On 11 August 1956, heavily intoxicated, the artist drove his Oldsmobile convertible down a curving Springs road at high speed with his mistress, Ruth Kligman, and a friend of hers, Edith Metzger. He hit a tree, killing himself and Metzger. He was just 44. He is buried nearby at the tranquil Green River Cemetery along with his wife.

Some of his drinking dens are still open in Springs, including Jungle Jim's (now Woolfies) and Sam's, on New Town Lane. The charming Springs General Store is where Pollock traded *Untitled: Silver over Black, White, Yellow & Red* (1948), to settle a grocery bill. I had reached Springs by driving along the string of glorious beaches along the south shore. Further along are the Hamptons, the cluster of seaside communities that attract Manhattan's rich and famous during the summer season. In high summer East Hampton is a place of horrendous traffic jams, queues for restaurants, celebrity spottings and gaggles of wannabees. Out of season, though, it's fine. There are some fabulous dune-backed beaches, and behind the dunes are the mansions of the A-listers.

I chose to stay on Shelter Island, which is wedged between the twin forks of eastern Long Island, about eight miles north of Springs. The only way to access the island is via two small car and passenger ferries that operate on the north and south of the island. It's a beguiling place, with the brooding somnolence and isolation common to islands accessible only by boat.

More than a third of the island is given over to the Mashomack Nature Preserve, an emerald-green carpet of salt marshes, lonely bluffs and pebble beaches. As I wandered through the wetlands, a magnificent solitary osprey, one of more than 30 pairs that have come to nest here in recent years, emerged from some hidden spot, working its five-foot wingspan to propel it towards the ocean.

The year-round population of Shelter Island is just over 2,000, although at the height of the summer this can swell to over 10,000 a day. There is only one town on Shelter Island: Shelter Island Heights, a delightful little colony where the north ferry arrives and most of what constitutes "tourist infrastructure" is located. I stayed at the excellent Chequit Inn, with a buzzing bar and restaurant, decent rooms and a beautiful veranda overlooking the town and bay. Around me, the rest of the town constituted a breezy collection of Victorian buildings, smart whitewashed, clapboard homes, many with homely wrap-around porches, distinctive shale roofs and clipped lawns.

William de Kooning, that other giant of the New York School rented a studio nearby in East Hampton. Although the two artists were not friends, they respected each other, Pollock remarking of de Kooning's arrival on Long Island that "we've just had a painter here who's better than me". When de Kooning first saw Pollock's drip paintings, he said: "Jackson Pollock has broken the ice."

If Pollock created his greatest works in Springs, it was New York that made him. Peggy Guggenheim gave him his first one man show at her Art of the Century gallery on West 57th Street in 1943. New York's MoMA started collecting Pollock in the 1940s, and gave him a memorial exhibition in December 1956.

So, with the intention of getting up close and personal with the artist, I headed to Manhattan, where the Abstract Expressionist movement was almost entirely based.

I stayed downtown at the SoHo Grand, on West Broadway, a stylish hotel frequented by artists, fashionistas and troubadours and close to where Pollock and the other impoverished "action painters" lived, worked and played, in their early Manhattan years.

Pollock and many of the other Abstract Expressionists studied at the venerable Art Students League of New York, a delicious building on ritzy West 57th Street. I wandered around its musty rooms and studios, including one that Pollock was reputed to have painted in.

MoMA, though, is his spiritual home, with more than 100 of his paintings in its collection. Surprisingly in his centenary year, there is only one Pollock currently on display, Number 31, (1950), although I was told that this was likely to change during the year.

Meanwhile, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Room 922 contains three Pollocks, including Autumn Rhythm, which I didn't stand on this time. Instead, I relished the absence of distractions imposed by figurative paintings and seized the chance to immerse myself in the massive canvas.

As I emerged from my trance, I recalled Pollock at his most reflective: "There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or any end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was."

To see more of Chris Coplans's images, go to coplans.co.uk

Travel essentials

Getting there

Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859; virginholidays.co.uk) offers four nights' room-only at the Soho Grand Hotel from £725 per person. The price includes flights from Heathrow on Virgin Atlantic and transfers.

New York is served by a number of airlines from the UK, including Virgin Atlantic (0844 874 7747; virgin-atlantic.com), BA/AA (0844 493 0787; ba.com), Delta (0845 600 0950; delta.com) and Continental (0845 607 6760; continental.com).

More information

Men of Fire: José Clemente and Jackson Pollock will run from 2 August-27 October at the Pollock Krasner House (001 631 324 4929; pkhouse.org).

Chequit Inn (001 631 749 0018; shelterislandinns.com/chequit).

Metropolitan Museum of Art (001 212 535 7710; metmuseum.org).

The Museum of Modern Art (001 212 708 9400; moma.org) developed an iPad app for its Abstract Impressionist exhibition last year. Apart from images of works by Pollock, there are audio interviews with curators and experts. The App also includes a superb interactive map of the major Abstract Impressionist sites in Manhattan and Long Island.

Discover Long Island: discoverlongisland.com