



## **ARTIST MAX MORAN CAPTURES THE MAGIC OF THE NORTH FORK**

*By Susan Whitney Simm*

Though rain put a damper on last Saturday evening's plans for some, Mattituck artist Max Moran enjoyed a stunning turnout for the opening of his first major East End show, "New York State... of Mind," being held in a new barn at Martha Clara Vineyards.

Bob Kern, the director at Martha Clara, was impressed. "I sent out over six hundred invitations to my patrons in Manhattan, and I don't think Bob realized how many people would attend," said Max. In fact, they not only attended, they also pulled out their checkbooks: ten of Max's oil paintings, depicting both pastoral North Fork scenes as well as streets in both uptown and downtown Manhattan, were sold.

Max's style, which he describes as "American regional," is at times impressionistic in its softness, as in his series of pale city rainscapes, while at other times pulsing with vibrant color, as in "Central Park Dusk." The best of Max's work is provocative and emotional, effectively capturing the essence of the moment. This is especially true of the rainscapes, where the

artist very successfully depicts that sense of timelessness we so often feel during gray, rainy days. Max is also a master at using light to create depth and recreate atmosphere, something he does beautifully in "East 93rd Street" (presently in a private collection) as well as in "Central Park Dusk."

Max recalled an extraordinary experience that occurred while working on the latter painting. "I remember that evening, as I was standing with my easel in the park, the sound of people coming up behind me. I could hear that sound nylon clothing makes when someone is walking and then felt warm breath on the back of my neck. It was a group of young, black guys. They came up behind me and looked over my shoulder. 'Hey, that's phat! That's really phat!' one of them said. 'Yeah, that's large,' said another. And then they wandered off into the night. Some of the nicest compliments I've gotten have come from guys watching me paint in Central Park."

Max has since spent several years "documenting" the North Fork, and his scenes of barns and old houses avoid, for the most part, that *postcard kitsch* so easily fallen into by artists who can't help but romanticize their subjects. "Robbins Island," a small study that focuses on an expansive, cloud-filled sky, is especially effective. The land beneath appears to be only an afterthought, until you realize that the eye is constantly drawn there again and again.

Born in Ohio, Max spent two years at art school there, where he was taught what he calls "a very grounded, academic way of painting in the American tradition." He then headed to Europe where he spent some time in Dublin, hanging out with poets, such as Seamus Heaney, and sketching.

"I had a car, and at that time in Ireland, if you had a car, you were very popular," recalls Max. "I also grew up fast with that hard drinking crowd. They paid me no mind, but that's when I got introduced to the paintings of Jack Yeats, the brother of William Butler Yeats. You could still buy one of Jack's paintings back then for \$1,000. Now they're \$50,000-60,000. Ireland isn't a Third World country anymore, but it still was back then."

After returning to the States from Europe, Max met up with an old high school professor who suggested he go to Martha's Vineyard for inspiration. So Max packed up his Volvo and headed east. "For a little island, it had great diversity in 1985." Max must have found inspiration there, for in 1986, in Edgartown, he had his most prolific summer, creating more than 50 paintings. "The brushes were singing and I was behaving."

But by the late 80s, Max had heard Manhattan's siren call, and soon

landed on an office floor, storing his paintings in a van, on Third Street between First and Second Avenues. "There's nothing like New York," he said. "It's just pure adrenaline." Max had a big, successful show in Soho at Z Square Gallery, and then the art market collapsed in 1990. Max thought, "What am I going to do? So I went out and did what I had done in Ohio so many years before: I picked up my easel, went out into the streets and started painting. And I realized how much people enjoyed watching the process. I actually started getting commissions from people that owned little bookstores, and it kept me going."

Then, early one Sunday morning, a gentleman approached Max and asked him to paint his gallery. "And which gallery is that?" Max asked offhandedly. "Hammer Gallery," came the reply. "And you are..." "Michael Hammer." "Whoa!" said Max. "That's a serious gallery, over on 57th Street."

Max did the painting, on a day when temperatures topped 100 degrees on the busy street and later realized, to his regret, that he had left an "m" out of the name Hammer, much to the owner's offense. He was also asked to remove the image of an old black man, jiggling coins for contributions, in the corner of the painting. He refused.

"I really regretted that decision at the time, but I also realized how important it was to me to document our environment. I really believe, as it says on my website, that an artist's job is to document the identity and culture of his day."

By 1991, Max had become thoroughly disillusioned with Manhattan galleries. "Galleries and artists have parasitical relationships. The galleries want 60-70 percent, they want you to be consistent, already have made it and they'll make you a celebrity artist, whatever that means. It's like getting into bed with snakes sometimes."

He also needed to get out to the country and wanted to find an alternative to Martha's Vineyard. "I have to leave Manhattan about every two months. I need to see a horizon line! Otherwise, my sense of distance gets messed up." Max decided to move out to Greenport, after being invited out as a guest, and began the long journey of documenting the North Fork. The current show is, in a way, a culmination of that 10-year process.

"The opening last night was a big success. It *ain't* the Hamptons, but still... It's a very exciting time to be here on the North Fork. And also a sad time. Because once you discover something, it's over. People don't realize it, but what's happened here in the last ten years happened on the Vineyard in the 80s. And when Clinton showed up, forget it. Everybody's

looking for the perfect T-shirt! It's going to be that way out here, too, even though I hate to say it. So I feel a need to document this area as it is now."

Max may be worried about the rural future of the North Fork – he's not alone! – but he seems very positive about the profession that, obviously, has chosen him as its eloquent spokesman.

"I love this country, and I feel passionate about the things I paint. Words can be manipulated but a painting cannot. It has a lot more truth because the language is universal."

*The work of Max Moran will be on display at Martha Clara through September 22. The gallery will be open from noon-6 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays.*