

CapeWeek



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ENTERTAINMENT & EVENTS / November 19 to November 25, 2010

The view from the dunes

Photo exhibit captures back-to-basics solitude of life in a Seashore shack

By LAURIE HIGGINS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Provincetown is famous for its light, and Stephanie Foster's photographs certainly illuminate its amazing depth.

But it was the sky that impressed her the most during the three weeklong residencies she spent in the C-Scape dune shack in Provincetown in the past five years.

"I was just overwhelmed by the sky," she says. "It's powerful. It's like an ocean, only in air, and it has a huge effect on you while you're there."

Foster, of West Harwich, will share her photographs and excerpts from the diary of her time there in **"The Dune Shack Experience,"** an exhibit at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis. The exhibit features 20 photographs digitally printed on archival museum-quality paper.

"Each picture that I selected I tried to make a little more unusual than just a postcard scene, so that they really show the different moods of the Province Lands, from mellow, to bright and happy, to moody," she says. "Last year I was there during a full moon, and it was exciting. I was running around from one dune to another."

The photographs are visually stunning and capture the wild variety of the vivid fall landscape. "Foggy Path" invites one down the sandy lane to the dune shack shrouded with fog, creating a sense of mystery that is thematically perfect. "Good and Evil" presents the contrast between the dark and shadowy dunes and a heavenly lit sky. Angry-looking clouds appear gray and ominous in "Shifting Sands," and one of the frequent



STEPHANIE
FOSTER



STEPHANIE FOSTER PHOTOS

"Good and Evil" contrasts dark dunes and a heavenly lit sky.

rainbows caused by the high moisture content in the air near the ocean is captured in "Dune Bow."

One of Foster's favorite photographs is "Sailor's Delight," which showcases a dramatic sky that is reminiscent of the sweeping Technicolor sunset in the movie "Gone With the Wind." There are also interior shots of C-Scape that allow visitors to the exhibit a chance to vicariously experience the dune shack lifestyle, which is life-altering, according to Foster.

When Foster was notified in 2005 that she won the lottery and would be awarded a one-week fellowship in the dune shack, she was thrilled, but the isolation and primitiveness of the rustic shack also intimidated her. The shack has no modern conveniences like running water, electricity or indoor plumbing. Water comes from a hand pump in the front yard, and the bathroom consists of an outhouse and plastic bag "solar shower."

Her husband, commercial photographer Frank Foster, offered to go with her, but she wanted to experience the solitary setting by herself.

"How often are you ever alone? Even if you live alone, you still are going to the post office, supermarket, your job and answering phones," she says. "You never have the silence that you have there, and it is unique."

Before her first residency, she wasn't sure if she would like it, and each time it took a few days to unwind from the busy pace of her normal life as a photographer, journalist and master gardener who sells flower bouquets at local farmers markets. But soon the days took on a routine she enjoyed. She would wake up when it was still pitch dark outside and turn on her flashlight so she could light the kerosene lamp to navigate her way down the narrow stairway with no railing.

After clapping and singing to scare any resident mice

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"Dune Bow" captures a rainbow on the horizon.

away, she would make a cup of coffee and go out onto the deck to assess the weather. Then she would layer up and grab her camera and a walking staff to ward off any coyotes that might be lurking in the early morning hours.

Foster chose to do all three residencies in October or November, after her busy growing season was over, and because she was there so late in the season there were rarely any other people on the beach. The sweeping dunes and seascapes in her photographs portray that sense of isolation from everyday life that was so much a part of her experience out there.

"Our world is so filled with convenience and time savers, and we're more overloaded today than ever before in our lives," she says. "When you're there, life is so basic. Your clothes don't matter, your hair doesn't matter, how much money you have doesn't matter. It's the way life was since the beginning of time. You want water to wash and to drink and simple food to eat, and to experience what you see before you, to watch the birds, to feel the breeze, to watch the clouds shift and the weather change."

Foster says the thrill of experiencing that gift of time and solitude makes re-entry to the real world difficult. When she first leaves the dune shack she doesn't want to talk about it, even with her husband, because she feels that turning the experience into words would trivialize it and she wants to carry that feeling of silence and solitude inside herself as long as she can.

"Everyone has an almost overwhelming experience there, and the caretakers say they see a little bit of the anxiety people have when they are being dropped off and then when they pick them up it's like their whole demeanor has totally changed," she says. "They're relaxed and comfortable and happy after a week experiencing nature, beauty and solitude."

Stephanie Foster's photographs are available exclusively through Addison Art Gallery, 43 Route 28, Orleans. More information: 508-255-6200 or visit www.addisonart.com.



STEPHANIE FOSTER PHOTOS

"Foggy Path" shows the sandy lane leading to a dune shack.

Shacks lottery

C-Scape is one of 17 shacks within the Peaked Hill Bars National Register Historic District. Sixteen of the shacks have been the property of the National Park Service since 1961, and one is privately owned. The National Seashore leases some of the shacks to two local nonprofit arts organizations: Peaked Hill Trust and the Provincetown Community Compact. Since 1996 these groups have operated artist-in-residence programs through a lottery system. For more information about the dune shacks or to apply for a residency: Peaked Hill Trust, P.O. Box 1705, Provincetown, MA 02657; Provincetown Community Compact, P.O. Box 819, Provincetown, MA 02657, or www.thecompact.org.



A tablecloth and flowers add elegance to dune shack life in "Dining in the Dunes."