



*The approach to Wheaton Island is typically by plane, local taxi, and eventually Bo Bartlett's row boat.*

## World of Wheaton

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Photography: Greta Rybus

Location: [Wheaton Island](#)

People: [Betsy Eby](#), [Bo Bartlett](#)

Learn More: [Center for Maine Contemporary Art](#), [Wheaton Island](#)

It is not difficult to learn about Betsy Eby. There are books. There are articles galore. She and her husband, artist Bo Bartlett, recently

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released a documentary film called *See*, which follows them on a highly visual cross-country adventure gone ironically awry. Over the past year the traveling exhibition, *Betsy Eby: Painting with Fire*, has been moving viewers in Columbus, Georgia, Augusta, Georgia, and most recently, in Maine, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) in Rockport this past summer. After poring over her work, I went, equipped with my own questions, to Wheaton, the Maine island where she lives and works with Bartlett in the summers. I wanted to hear her speak about her art, but also about her life. I wanted to see this woman in action, in silence, at work in her studio on a speck of land in the Atlantic.

To get there, I have to take an airplane to Matinicus, traversing the 20 miles out to sea across the sky. When year-round resident Ann Mitchell picks me up from the Matinicus International Airstrip and I put on my seatbelt, she laughs. “You’re not in Maine anymore,” she jokes, which is to say, “seatbelts are not necessary here.” While we bump along beat-up roads to “Chris’s dock” I ask Mitchell questions. She and her husband returned to the island, where he grew up, after he “retired.” Now, at 70, he manages 800 lobster traps, the state maximum. “Is there a state-run ferry service?” I ask. “Yes, but it only makes four trips a month.” My question, “How many people live here year round?” is met with a pause. Finally, “Not many.” To



be clear: after a decade in Maine, none of this seems especially extraordinary to me. The wild part is what happens next.

Mitchell stops the car at a row of century-old fishing shacks. She points across a narrow inlet to an island. “That’s Wheaton,” she says. “And there’s Bo.” Bo Bartlett. The artist. Rowing across the water toward me in a small white boat while his wife, Betsy Eby, stands upon a dock in the distance, her hand across her forehead to shield her dark eyes, her yellow dress blowing in the wind. If you’ve never seen Bartlett’s work, I suggest you seek it out—now, if possible. Then, let me tell you: in this moment, I feel as if I am living inside of one of his paintings. I feel as if I’ve gone to an alternate universe, but I have only come to Wheaton.

“Let’s go to Portugal,” Betsy Eby says soon after my arrival, plucking a straw sun hat from a wall in the living room. The house is simple, bright, light. Wind blows through it like a porch. Over the past one hundred years, this structure has sheltered squatters, goats, and a couple called the Schultzes who lived in it from 1940 to 1960.

Bartlett purchased the island in 1999. Eby joined him in 2004.

“Portugal” is their name for the east-facing side of the island, where nothing but ocean separates them from Europe. There are large, smooth rocks for yoga in the morning. There is a bench for sitting in the evening. This is where she begins and ends her days, Eby tells me, as we look out to sea. Then, it’s back to the studio.



Almost everything in her studio is white— even the strips of cloth that have been shoved in the rafters for decades were painted in a renovation. “I wouldn’t let them touch the bird nests though,” she says, pointing to three bundles of twigs. Getting to work on a painting currently hanging in her studio, Eby, in fluid movements that betray her decades- long yoga practice—and possibly her attraction to encaustic, a significantly physical painting method—ties an apron around her waist and slips into adorably clunky shoes. Encaustic uses heated wax, damar resin, pigment, and fire. As she heats wax the room fills with a warm soil smell. She takes down a panel from the wall and gets to work torching the surface of the painting behind a black mask, taking it off to mix and apply more pigment. A master of these earthy materials and this ancient method, Eby builds histories as she coaxes out abstract forms, mark by mark, layer by layer, creating two-dimensional expressions of mass and line and motion with detectable pasts. Like trees with their rings, it’s as if her paintings on panel have lived lives by the time she’s through with them. They have tremendous depth. Her paintings tell stories, and I can’t help but wonder if, while we talk, our earnest, heady, hearty conversation is becoming a part of the life of this one.

The musicality of her work has been discussed in multiple articles, including the introduction to the book *Betsy Eby*, in which Tom Butler writes: “Her encaustic paintings reflect not only windblown



natural elements, but also fleeting musical notations that are liberated only to be eternally captured.” Our talk touches upon composers (Eby is a classically trained pianist), childhood, process, inspiration, philosophy. I get the sense that all conversations with Eby cross genres this way—she has the wonder of a perpetual student and the insight, intelligence, and generosity of a good teacher. I could listen to her all day—not just because of the fascinating things she says, but for the way she says them in her soothing, alto voice.

As with most artists, light is a serious concern for Eby. During my visit we spend a good deal of time on the subject, especially because recently, she and Bo gave up their residence on the West Coast because there wasn’t enough of it. Now, they split their time between Columbus, Georgia, where Bartlett grew up, and Maine. Nature is another of her obsessions. Eby spent the first years of her life in northwest woods of old-growth timber, but around the time school began she moved with her family to the suburbs. Now, she is forever trying to get back. As a young girl in Beaverton, a suburb of Portland, Oregon, she retreated into music instead of the woods, but remote Wheaton has nature in spades. Life here is so weather dependent, and daily chores so time consuming, that she doesn’t miss her piano as much as she might otherwise.



“To be surrounded by the water like this, you have to slow down and you have to put a lot of effort into everything that you want to do during the day,” Eby explains, although in only a couple of short hours I’ve already gotten this sense. There is a lot of talk of tides. To furnish the home, Bartlett salvaged as much as he could— even their dining room table is made of a wooden door that washed up on shore. “This place is like the best summer camp for adults imaginable,” Eby says, “but with lobster. And blueberries. It’s rugged, so you have to stay strong.”

And you have to be willing to ask for help: “Living out here you rely on a lot of people. Considering that we live on an island by ourselves, it’s amazing how many people we end up interacting with.”

Over tea and blueberries picked along the path to Portugal, Eby and Bartlett recall some of the many instances when their small but steadfast Maine community offered them help without even being asked. Recently, when their refrigerator broke down, local fishermen dropped by with coolers filled with lobster. They’re still not sure how the word got out, but it always does—that inlet across to Matinicus is narrow, and the docks are often filled with fishermen and families. They also have strong connections to shore. Within the vibrant, artistic community of mid-coast Maine, they’ve made good friends who visit when they can, and who probably wonder, often,





how these two pioneering artists are faring on their island. Mostly, though, Eby and Bartlett seem to enjoy the solitude, the time and space to make art, and the time they have with each other.

Eby lives so much in the present, she is almost surprised by questions about her past, and smiles to remember a second-story flat in an old Victorian in Seattle where she taught herself to paint. Eby had studied art history in college, but didn't begin to make art herself until after a near-fatal car accident in her early twenties. "I came out of [the accident] with a hunger to make art and to dedicate myself again to music," she tells me. "And this was 1990 in Seattle. It was in the time of grunge. The city was so raw. As an artist you felt like anything was possible." She worked a series of odd jobs, saved up enough money to take night classes at Pratt Fine Arts Center, and created a makeshift studio in the bone-chilling basement of that house. "I was so hungry. All I could do to survive was express myself this way."

She speaks in the past tense, but even today, so far away from an old Victorian in Seattle, her obsession is palpable. "I think that making marks is my way of making sense of the world," she says. Her voice is reaching now, questioning, as if this explanation is still new to her. "There's so much that doesn't make sense to me. You turn on the news and it's ugly and cruel and violent. The things we create, at least, we have that much control over."



At the golden hour, we take one last walk around the island, scaling giant swells of rock and watching the ocean crash against them.

Again, I feel as though I am inhabiting a Bo Bartlett painting. Except that I can not forget that there is the rowboat waiting in the rising tide, and Ann Mitchell in Matinicus, and the pilot in the Cessna 206 making his way across Penobscot Bay to scoop me up.

At the last possible minute, I pile my things in the rowboat, say my goodbye to Betsy Eby, and Bo Bartlett pushes off the dock with an oar.

“It’s been real, Bee,” he says, smiling up at her. And, amazingly, it has.