

Images of the Great Marsh

By Will Broaddus, Salem News Staff Writer, Dec 31, 2010

IPSWICH — Dorothy Kerper Monnelly of Ipswich dedicated her book of photographs of Essex County's salt marsh to the landscape it depicts.

"To the Great Marsh," she wrote, "and other natural landscapes around the world, as they hold the truth for us and, I hope, for generations to come."

For anyone curious to discover what that truth is and how the marsh holds it, photographs from Monnelly's 2006 book, "Between Land and Sea: The Great Marsh," will be on exhibit at Governor's Academy in Byfield from Jan. 3 to Feb. 4.

The show is a homecoming of sorts. Monnelly has spent 35 years photographing the marsh. And while she has presented her work locally in lectures and exhibits, this is the first full-scale show in Essex County devoted to photos from the book. Previous major exhibits were held in Seattle, Denver and the Massachusetts Audubon Visual Arts Center in Canton.

"Monnelly lives on the way to Crane Beach in Ipswich, within walking distance from the salt marsh in different directions," said Doug Stewart of Ipswich, who wrote an essay that introduces Monnelly's book.

"She goes out before the sun comes up to catch the mist. In winter, she drags her camera on a toboggan. It's a view camera, this big old box. She's really intrepid."

Holding the exhibit at The Governor's Academy, which is adjacent to the salt marsh, allows visitors to examine the photographs' subject matter simply by walking out of the gallery and looking across Route 1. However familiar the view may be, seeing it through Monnelly's eyes should provide fresh perspectives.

Her large-format camera, designed for slow exposures that produce crisp images, rich in detail, connects Monnelly's methods to those of Ansel Adams. Maneuvering a similar camera around California's Yosemite National Park in the 1920s and '30s, Adams created some of the most memorable images of the last century and reinvented photography in the process.

"We sought purity of the image — sharp optical qualities, in-depth focus. ... We were defining (we believed) a fresh aesthetic," Adams wrote in his book "Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs."

In addition to such "obvious similarities" between Adams and Monnelly — both also worked in black and white and paid close attention to "the specificity of light" — there are deeper connections between these two nature photographers, according to David Oxton, chairman of the fine arts department at The Governor's Academy.

"Another similarity is fondness for the abstract," said Oxton, who has taught photography at the academy for 18 years.

"I've always told my photo students that Ansel Adams' best images are beautiful abstract arrangements. We often appreciate the details in his images ... without fully appreciating the dynamic balance of shapes and lines within his compositions that make them so striking," Oxton said. "Many of Dorothy's images, especially her sand pattern and ice and snow photos, excite the eye in the same way."

Discovered within nature but seeming to transcend its limits, these visual patterns have a timeless quality, recalling the gradual, apparently endless working of tides by which the salt marsh was created. It's a temporal perspective that raises the question of how long the marsh will go on.

"The marsh accumulates very, very slowly," said Stewart, who counts development, pollution and a rise in sea levels from global warming as major threats to the marsh's continued existence.

"She's taking pictures of coastal scenery the way it must have looked 50,000 years ago. When I drive up Route 1 now, I see a lot of breaks in the marsh. That's disturbing, if it's because of human disturbance."

If you go ...

What: "The Great Marsh" photography exhibit by Dorothy Kerper Monnelly

When: Jan. 3 to Feb. 4, with reception and book signing Friday, Jan. 7, 6 to 8 p.m.

Where: Peter Remis Gallery, in the Performing Arts Center at The Governor's Academy, 1 Elm St., Byfield

Hours: Gallery is open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday; Saturdays from noon to 3 p.m.; and Sundays from 3 to 5 p.m.