

By Nicole A. Bonham Colby

KETCHIKAN, Alaska – Artists flock to Taos for the clear air. Artists flock to Ketchikan for a “real life” that complements their art.

Along with dozens of other world-class small arts towns, Ketchikan has the requisite natural beauty, diversity of culture, and historic charm that attract the creative soul. So it’s not surprising that the southern Panhandle town often tops listings of eclectic, small arts communities and is home to painters and sculptors, poets and writers.

While many arts-friendly towns become pretentiously gentrified, or relegate their artists to the fringe, Ketchikan’s art is up front and center, dominating the commercial fishing port and former logging capital. To the uninitiated, the town may seem an odd candidate for a thriving local theater troupe and ballet company, popular poetry bash, and lauded literary magazine.

But the folks of Ketchikan, with a traditional working-class pride and Gold Rush history, appreciate their arts and aren’t afraid to spend the time and money to cultivate a creative local culture.

Some suggest it’s the solitary nature and spaciousness of the Alaska geography that speaks to the creative mind. Others say it’s the strong infrastructure of a vibrant arts council, theater and dance companies, and community of avid musicians. Whatever the cause, folks like marine artist Ray Troll and linocut artist and children’s book illustrator Evon Zerbetz have long chosen to make their homes in the Panhandle town. Through the years, writers and poets have holed up above Ketchikan’s rainy streets and misty harbors to churn the yarns living in their heads. Not surprisingly, the island’s natural environs play a prominent role as muse.

“My hometown is on an island in the rain forest of southeast Alaska,” Zerbetz writes on her website. “My imagery is driven by questions and discoveries in this natural world, alternating between science and whimsy, the deep forest and the deep ocean.”

Just down the street from the scattering of galleries that carry the works of Zerbetz and others, the local bookstore Parnassus – housed in a former bordello district on pilings above a salmon spawn stream – serves as an ad hoc headquarters for traveling writers and readers, and is occasionally called out in the thank-you notes of authors’ published works.

But art doesn’t stop with the galleries and bookstores. It’s evident everywhere you look, from the hand-carved totems along the city streets, to the town’s signature waterfront. Flanked by the 1890s-era Tongass Trading Company and its neighboring hotels and bars, the waterfront and Dock Street are the subject of countless paintings and photographs, perhaps most notably that of painter Byron Birdsall.

But, again, despite the striking landscape, curious demographics, and century-old architecture, the secret of Ketchikan’s arts influence lies more in the human aspect. Artists themselves and those who appreciate art both find a welcome home with the Ketchikan Area Arts & Humanities Council. Headquartered at the Mainstay Gallery on historic Creek Street, the council serves in an umbrella capacity providing organizational support for events like the winter Torch Nights Performance series, annual ARTScool summer camp for children, and Inside Passages literary magazine.

On the annual calendar, locals and visitors collect downtown each summer for the Ketchikan Blueberry Arts Festival in August, when children race slugs and adults line up for seconds on blueberry dessert. Booths and displays from area artists fill three levels of the parking

garage at the State of Alaska office building. On special occasion, a giant blueberry is spotted mixing with the crowd.

In the springtime, the annual Wearable Arts Show – running since 1986 – leads the events schedule, with the occasional Ketchikan entry moving on to national and international showings. Even in arts circles as far away as New Zealand, the Ketchikan Wearable Arts Show is well known, yielding elaborate renderings that often carry the nature theme of a real life in Southeast Alaska.

How many towns of small size offer a professional acting troupe and theater company? Ketchikan does, with the popular First City Players. To round out the long list of local arts organizations, the Ketchikan Theater Ballet teaches dance to hundreds of local residents each year and sponsors world-class, visiting dance events for the public.

Across the street, the Ketchikan City Library plays regular host to an acclaimed list of traveling authors, like bestselling author Jodi Picoult and then Alaska poet laureate Shiela Nickerson. Such regular visits are a surprising coup for a small town library on a tiny island along the Alaska Panhandle.

Between visiting and local artists, the annual Festival of the Sea, regular gallery walks, Giggletee Dance Festival, and an all-American Fourth of July complete with fireworks over the harbor, this is one small town that lives its art each day.

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