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## Mill Gets New Lease on Life as an Emerging Arts Space

By: Kathryn Boughton

**WASSAIC, N.Y.-In 2004, Wassaic residents didn't know what they would do with the crumbling Maxon Mills site. The granary, which incorporates part of an old Greek Revival hotel where workers once lived, is reputed to be one of the oldest grain elevators in the nation. Five years ago, it was under consideration for state and national historical registries, but pressure was building in the town for the structure to be destroyed because of its perilous condition.**

Enter New York City architect Anthony Zunino, who acquired the building under one of his corporate identities, Zutoloria, and began restoration of the structure. Still under reconstruction in 2009, the old building is now poised to be the basis for a revitalization of the Hamlet of Wassaic.

Last summer, Mr. Zunino's daughter, Bowie, and her friends Eve Biddle and Elan Bogarin staged the first Wassaic Project, a weekend-long festival of the arts that attracted artists from as close as Wassaic and as far away as Europe. Between 300 and 500 persons converged on the town for the event, which included a community garden day, a bluegrass festival on the porch of the newly renovated Maxon Mills building, and an art show that featured everything from installation pieces to paintings and photography. In the nearby Luther Auction Barn, long since abandoned by livestock destined for sale and now owned by Mr. Zunino, the trio staged poetry readings, performance art and screened videos.

Ms. Biddle, Ms. Zunino and Ms. Bogarin will bring the Wassaic Project back to the hamlet this August, but before that there will be a benefit art exhibition, "Outside In," in Maxon Mills this Friday and Saturday to raise money for the project. The show will continue through July 25. The benefit show, which honors the agrarian past of the mill and auction barn with a landscape-based theme, is a group exhibition that, in the words of its creators, "explores the inherent tension between nature in its pure, undisturbed state and the constraints or manipulations put upon it by humans."

"The art all represents different takes on the traditional landscape, everything from the wood used in sculptures to traditional landscapes to industrial landscapes," explained Ms. Biddle, a New York-based artist.

"Outside In" pays homage to its former granary exhibition space, where grains were once brought from local fields for storage and feed processing, its organizers explain. "It's a very unusual place," said Sally Zunino, who with Liz Parks and Sally Morgan of Morgan Lehman Gallery in Salisbury, curated the show. "There have been three crews in there for over a year-even shoring the building up has been a big deal. My husband has left the conveyor belt and odd metal features that were part of the mill, trying to keep it as true to the original as he could. People are amazed at how fabulous it is when walking through. It's huge and has so many rooms and is a very interesting space for art."

The rooms will be filled with art on all seven levels for the new exhibition. Artists invited to exhibit range from emerging young artists to well-established local artists and include David Allee, Jan Aronson, Jeff Barnett-Winsby, Judith Belzer, Carl Berg, Joellyn Duesberry, John Funt, Bryan Nash Gill, Karen Hesse Flatow, Sarah Hardesty, Peter Hoffer, Caitlin Hurd, Celeste Joye, Michael Kovner, Carol MacDonald, Erika O'Brien, Peter Ophem, Bill Sietz, Mike and Doug Starn, William Stone, Caroline Swiszc, Kit White and Spencer Young.

Mrs. Zunino said she and her fellow curators first reviewed the works of the artists online and then decided who they would like to invite to exhibit. "We worked so well together," she reported. "We decided what we wanted, but had no idea what would fit." But when the women convened last week to transport the art into the building and dispersed it over the seven levels of the mill, they were astounded to find they had not only the right number of pieces, but artwork that seemed to be enhanced by the individual rooms in which it was placed. Judith Belzer, formerly of Cornwall, for instance, submitted some of her wood-grained "Inner Life of Trees" series that will fill one of the smaller rooms in the grain tower, the wood patterns contrasting nicely with the wood interior of the tower. In the Murder Room, a series of paintings by Karen Hesse Flatow, based on "An American Tragedy" by Theodore Dreiser, will be displayed. The paintings trace the story of an ambitious young man who impregnates one of his subordinates at a factory even as he schemes to marry a wealthy young woman. He plots to murder his pregnant girlfriend and is ultimately convicted and executed. A number of the paintings in the room quote letters from the novel and Liz Parks said the room in the granary where the works will be displayed will feature a chair and table of the type used by the murdered girl when writing to her lover. "They are incredibly well-executed paintings," observed Ms. Parks.

William Stone gets playful with some of his entries, taking older paintings by other artists and altering them to suit his own vision, while creating his own works out of wood. Caroline MacDonald is showing some new works that have moved beyond her former traditional landscapes to offer vivid vistas saturated with color, while Minneapolis-based artist Caroline Swiszc incorporates man-made objects into her landscapes.

Ms. Biddle said she and Ms. Zunino fell in love with the space when their first viewed it and recognized how it would enhance the art they want to exhibit. "It is so beautiful," she said. "It is a natural magnet-spacious, peculiar and inspiring. We have no 'white walls' here. When the artists see it, they get creative quickly. I think it is exciting the way the art interacts with the space."

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"We will open with a ticketed preview July 3, from 4 to 8 p.m., as a fund-raiser for the free festival in August," said Mrs. Zunino. Tickets for the event, which will feature art, music, food, drink and a raffle, cost \$25 to \$500. The opening is being sponsored by Berkshire Mountain Distillers and Serevan Restaurant, who will provide food and drink.

Ms. Biddle said it is hoped that the Wassaic Project may eventually grow into an artist residency program that draws people to the area and boosts the local economy. "We had about 500 people here last year," she observed, "and they were staying in the area and eating out." And, she added, the region has a rich history. The mill, she noted, is surrounded by other evidences of former industry: the Borden Milk Factory and an old iron smelting mill.

For more information and a complete schedule of events, visit [www.wassaicproject.com](http://www.wassaicproject.com). For more information contact The Wassaic Project, 840 Broadway #5, New York, NY 10003, or call 9177484801. Maxon Mills is located at 35 Furnace Bank Road, off Route 22 in Wassaic.

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