

# **Montauk Waves from the Shore**

Posted on 10 June 2014 Sag Harbor Express [www.sagharboronline.com](http://www.sagharboronline.com)



*“Leviathan,” by Aubrey Roemer, waved in the wind on Sunday, June 4 during Montauk’s annual Blessing of the Fleet. Photo by David Rey.*

**By Mara Certic** [sagharboronline.com](http://sagharboronline.com)

Whether skillfully strung on a ferry or quietly decorating an unassuming dinghy, flags are everywhere during Montauk’s annual Blessing of the Fleet. But this year, when the adorned yachts, trawlers and skiffs left the inlet and traveled west toward Culloden Point on Sunday, they were met with a different sort of flag: 77 blue portraits of assorted Montaukers painted on handkerchiefs, pillowcases and napkins waved in the wind on the beach as lost friends and fishermen were remembered at sea.

The flags are the creation of Aubrey Roemer, who escaped to the South Fork a few months ago. The artist, who studied at the Pratt Institute, was living in New York City when she found herself stuck in a rut and decided on a whim to move the 118 miles east to Montauk. Ms. Roemer, who knew very little about the East End, had been warned by city-dwelling friends that “the locals can be really cold and salty,” she said.

She ignored her friends’ admonitions and checked into the Atlantic Terrace Motel, right on the beach overlooking the ocean. She had no specific plans to create an art project, she said, until she met her first locals.

“I came here with no anything, and the locals weren’t jerks to me; they actually made me feel really pretty awesome,” she said. March interactions with bartenders, fishermen and other hardy souls inspired Ms. Roemer to create a series of portraits of the local residents who welcomed her with open arms.

Ms. Roemer began painting the people she met in the sleepy, off-season town, and hopes to complete 500 portraits by the end of the summer season.

Each portrait is painted with a blue, water-based paint onto a piece of fabric foraged from around town. T-shirts, bed sheets, and tablecloths are just some of the canvases that the artist managed to obtain through people she met at the Community Church and other local spots.

Ms. Roemer's artistic routine is about as laidback as the hamlet she now calls home. Models of all ages are invited to her makeshift studio—the basement of a friend's house to be photographed. Then she spends around 20 minutes casually chatting to them while painting their likeness, or what she calls “a perceived gestural expression.”

A long ream of fabric sits permanently on her worktable, effectively creating mono prints of each face as the paint soaks through the original canvas. The ream, which she refers to as a “scroll,” contains a copy of every portrait she has done and intends to do.

Ms. Roemer's inspiration is an ocean dotted with white caps, but in her work, the white caps are by people. “The people are going to punctuate the white more aggressively here. Every single person I've painted is on here,” she said of the scroll.

Her installation on the unnamed beach to the west of the jetties is just one of three she hopes to do by the end of the summer. The complete project, “Leviathan,” will culminate in an installation on the beach in Eddie Ecker County Park. Her vision is for the flags to be attached along the hangar dock, while the scroll of mono prints will be installed along the waterfront on posts. She hopes that spectators will approach it both by land and sea, as the double-sided nature of the project allows for a multifaceted installation.

Each painting has two distinct sides, she explained. “One side is going to stay wonky and weird, the other side I'm going to tighten up. They're totally just loose and awesome.”

She was inspired to entitle her project “Leviathan” when it popped up in a word-of-the-day e-mail. Although the word derives from the name of an Old Testament sea monster and it is now synonymous with any large sea creature (Psalm 104: 25-26: “So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein”). “I just thought it was really appropriate,” she said.

She explained that the strongest metaphor of the project is that of “crashing whitecaps,” adding, “there's something about blue and white in this town.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ef-batvqLw&sns=em>)

Ms. Roemer's quiet respect and understanding of her new home has added a thoughtful element to the project. In addition to all of the smaller works, the artist is creating one large portrait—roughly the size of the bed sheet that she is painting it on—of Donald Alversa, a 24-year-old fisherman born and raised in Montauk, who died in a fishing accident last September.

And last week she created a likeness of Tyler Valcich, a 20-year-old from Montauk who died in May. She presented it to his parents. “I understand the acute pain from the loss of someone in a tight-knit community,” she said. A memorial portrait is, she said, “the least I can do.”