

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Pat Witt, at the easel, teaches landscape painting, plein-air style, at Burcham Farm on the shores of the Maurice River, 2000. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Artist Laureate

A treasure our region hold dear, Pat Witt, releases a book detailing her storied career in the arts.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

On Sunday, October 28, 2024 I had the pleasure of attending a book launch at the Levoy Theatre in Millville, N.J., involving the story of Pat Witt and the Barn Studio that she founded in 1962.



The Art Spirit, The Story of Pat Witt and the Barn Studio of Art is a collection of her paintings and a narrative of her life as an artist. It is a companion to the award-winning movie of the same name, produced by Art C in 2003. In 2018 the original film was re-edited and this version was shown at

the event. Art C's new documentary *Palace of Depression* preceded the feature film.

The Art Spirit, written by Sterling Brown who originally narrated the documentary, provides context and biographical information about Pat Witt and the establishment of the Barn Studio of Art. The text weaves in quotes from Witt, giving the reader the sense that Pat is telling the story through her words and her paintings.

I've heard much of the story directly from Witt over the years, but the primary thing missing is her humor. It is alluded to at one point in the narrative, but to say Witt is both fun and funny is a gross understatement.



Pat Witt opens a one-woman show in 2005 at the Riverfront Renaissance for the Arts. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Born a Vanaman and acquiring the name "Witt" through marriage seems one of her life's fitting twists. Witt is blessed with a gift for puns and a fabulously funny sense of humor. Her puns are a talent that even as a nonagenarian she can call up on a millisecond's notice.

About two years ago I managed to get her from her scooter into a golf cart to go on a little tour of my husband's outdoor glass creations. Somehow I succeeded in getting the cart wedged into our courtyard in such a way that I could not exit. Hopelessly stuck, I looked at Witt and said to her, "Where there's a will there's a way."

Without a moment's hesitation she responded in her melodic and pointed voice, "Where there's a will there's relatives;" this was punctuated of course by her lighthearted giggle.

On Thanksgiving Day friends can sometimes count on a morning phone call where all you hear is a squawking turkey call and then the connection is broken. Occasionally this is also punctuated with a chuckle. You know it's "Patsy," up to her old pranks.

Then there's her harmonica which plays a horrid but oh, so lovely version of *Happy Birthday*. I've no room to criticize; when I

call folks with my tuneless rendition of birthday wishes they often advise me, "Don't give up your day job!"

This year I apologized for not calling on her 97th birthday, to which she with lightning speed replied, "There's always next year." We laughed and I assured her I would remember.

Pat Witt was born in 1927 and began painting as a child with crushed berries and a feather, decorating her grandfather's barn stalls at his farm on the shores of the Maurice River. Her family recognized her promise as an artist and at 12 years of age made arrangements for her to take private lessons.

Later she met and married a US Millville Army Airfield serviceman. She moved to Augusta, Georgia and studied at the Harriet Hobert School of Art until she became pregnant with her first daughter Nancy in 1946, later giving birth to Carol in 1950. For each child she returned to Millville for their deliveries, and in 1952 the family took up permanent residence there.



Pat with daughters and granddaughter 2005. Left to right Nancy, Pat, Kelly and Carole. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

In the late 1950s she continued with her art studies. In 1962 she bought the Country Club Gardens shop from her cousin Edith Ackley Clunn and a year later she renamed it the *Barn Studio of Art*. A life-long visionary, Pat Witt was committed to her quest of bringing out art in everyone. Little did the community know how many artists would pass through the Barn's doors and find their "*art spirit*." More than six decades later the reality is that many talents have been revealed and nurtured at the Barn.

Meanwhile Witt's own studies continued. In the mid-1960s she received a Philadelphia Museum of Art scholarship to attend the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.

Eventually she earned a degree from Glassboro State Teachers College (Rowan University), running the Barn Studio by day and taking classes at night.

Witt took on a great number of teaching opportunities not only at the Barn Studio of Art but within the community. She directed an art program at the Millville YMCA from 1952-1965, and from 1969-1970 she was the executive director of the Ocean City Arts Center. All the while the Barn instructed a host of people. After leaving her tutelage many have pursued a career in the arts and a number have returned to pass on their teaching skills to today's students. By now five generations of artists have found inspiration at the Barn.

The Barn Studio is dedicated to being a noncompetitive space for adults and children to explore art and nature. In each of their students the school hopes to foster exposure to the arts, an awareness of the environment, and a sense of nature, creative thought, and questioning. Everyone at the Barn embraces the Socratic Method by answering questions with questions, such that a student discovers answers through both thought and action.

There is a sense of oneness with nature and students develop a sense of place. They proudly call themselves "Barnies."



As a result of macular degeneration, Pat only sees things in her periphery. She started doing work she calls "galaxy paintings" as well as splatter art. Photo: Barn Studio of Art archival.



Pat Witt explores the use of light in her marsh paintings. Photo: Barn Studio of Art archival.

Witt has often good-humoredly called herself a “ditch master,” word-playing on the school of Dutch Masters. This term evokes her affinity for the marshlands of our Delaware Bayshore region. She has fostered a true appreciation for wetlands, often leading plein-air classes on our vast coastal marshes. Witt has shown works at countless galleries where she has also taught the importance of wetlands environmentally and has advocated for their protection. Her love for our region is infectious, so much so that she calls the resulting accumulation of artists’ works as belonging to the *Maurice River School of Art*.

Her love for the evening skies and sunsets are a hallmark of both her and her students’ work. Her paintings remain much sought-after.



Sunset painting by Pat Witt, Nantuxent Creek, c. 1997.

It is through our shared interest in our region's natural beauty and the Maurice River that Patsy and I have cemented a relationship for over five decades. Although I do not paint, her scenes of sunsets and vast marshes are forever engraved on the canvasses of my mind, as vividly as the ones I have seen in person. Her enthusiasm has informed my own.

I've only touched on the surface of the treasures this book has to offer, and it has only touched on the surface of the way Witt has affected the hearts of so many in our community. If you love our region, love the arts, or love the Bayshore it's a must-read-and-own volume. ■

Please scroll for details on how to purchase: *The Art Spirit, The Story of Pat Witt and the Barn Studio of Art*



A great holiday choice – The book *The Art Spirit*, by Sterling Brown and Pat Witt and a collaboration of others, can be ordered by emailing Pat Witt’s daughter Carole Mankin – cwmankin@gmail.com. Mankin will make purchase and shipping arrangements. The book costs \$60.