Donated Wyeth work brightens future of Maine Lights Program

By Beth Rowan

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Shown here is the "Iris by The Sea," a limited ...

When Island Institute Executive Vice President and art director Peter Ralston conceived of the Island Light program in March 1994, he could never have envisioned the bright response in the form of support from individuals and corporations across the United States.

In fact, implementation of the initial stages of the program, which aims to transfer ownership of Maine's lighthouses to the Institute for historic preservation, was painfully slow.

Now, with stage one through the Legislature, Ralston and staff can pursue the passage of stage two with gusto. Many acts of support have served to boost the Lights Program, but none can compare with the rare and generous act of Southern Island artist Jamie Wyeth.

Wyeth, a nationally recognized painter who follows in the footsteps of his father Andrew Wyeth and grandfather N.C. Wyeth, has used Southern Island's light as the subject of many of his works. Having lived at the light near Tenants Harbor for several years, Wyeth felt moved to dedicate an original painting to the Maine Lights Program and to supervise the production of the 300 fine art prints created for fund-raising purposes.

It was after a casual conversation turned into a several-hour brainstorming session that Wyeth and Ralston pounded out the idea of a Wyeth work benefiting the institute's Maine light effort. Friends since their childhood in Pennsylvania, Wyeth and Ralston were comfortable sharing dreams and visions-and the dream of maintaining Maine's lighthouses in a practical and efficient manner appealed to them both.

After Wyeth's offer and the initial decision to create the prints, which at Wyeth's request also would benefit the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the challenge of finding the perfect printmaking sources began.

Wyeth created the dedicated work, "Iris at Sea," with the printmaking process in mind, desiring that the finished print hold the texture, emotion and beauty of the original painting. His prior inability to locate such quality printmaking had stood in the way of releasing his work in print form.

Alter extended research by Wyeth and Ralston (himself a well-known fine art photographer), a light was found at the end of the printmaking tunnel. Nash Editions, a California-based outfit founded by famous musician-turned-art-enthusiast Graham Nash, used a new process (ironically slugged IRIS), which held much promise.

After securing the perfect paper, Somerset 100 percent cotton sheeting from a 400 year old mill in England, the IRIS 3047 Graphics Printer was used to create the sample print. Wyeth and Ralston were pleased with the result.

Subsequently, 300 fine art prints were created, each UV coated in a special silk-screening process, ensuring the lasting integrity of the reproduction. Signed and numbered by Wyeth, the prints were readied for purchase at the price of $2,500 each.

The benefit project was officially launched in October at Decateur House in Washington, D.C. For one week, the nation focused on Wyeth's painting and on the effort by the Island Institute to take over and preserve some of our country's most treasured landmarks.

Among those attending the show's opening reception were Vice President Al Gore and wife, Tipper: Governor Angus King and wife, Mary Herman: Maine senators Bill Cohen and Olympia Snowe.

"This has been a real windfall for us," said Ralston of the Island Institute, commending Wyeth, the National Institute for Historic Preservation and MBNA (a substantial contributor to the cost of print production) for their efforts on behalf of the unprecedented fund-raiser.

"In this era of federal cutbacks and belt-tightening by nonprofit and state entities, all of us will have to be more imaginative, creative, entrepreneurial and cooperative in order to provide services that make a difference in people's lives-there are not two ways about it." said Ralston, adding that he hopes the "Iris at Sea" benefit will serve as a model for such efforts.

The Print of "Iris at Sea" is on display at the Lighthouse Depot Gift Store on U.S. Route 1, Wells, Maine 04090. For a prospectus or more information please call 207-646-3128.

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