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From Colonial era to modernist, house tour showcases the art of fine living in Westport

Mike Lauterborn
Published 2:38 pm, Monday, December 3, 2012

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1 of 10 [◀ PREV](#) [NEXT ▶](#)



Elise Black poses beside one of the many pieces of her artwork displayed throughout her Darbrook Road home, which was featured Sunday on the Westport Historical Society's 26th annual Holiday House Tour. Westport CT 12/2/12 Photo: Mike Lauterborn



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The homes ran the gamut from cozy saltbox to sensational modernist design, and were decked out in festive finery for the [Westport Historical Society's](#) 26th annual [Holiday House Tour](#) on Sunday.

Six homes were featured, and each is either currently or previously owned by an artist or art collector, with decor reflecting the artist's work and personal style. [Joni Andrews](#), a past president of historical society and current committee member who has been involved with coordinating the event in some capacity the past 18 years, said the tour does not always have a theme. "But having said that, last year was all houses related to Westport's farming history, tying in with an exhibit," she



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Saturday, Feb 16, 1:00 pm
Prudential Center, Newark
-  **A Passion Test Workshop**
Saturday, Feb 23, 10:30 am
Blue Firmament Holistic Center, Rockville Centre
-  **NY Metro Reptile Expo**
Sunday, Feb 24, 10:00 am
Westchester County Center, White Plains

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added.

This year's artist theme grew out of the fact that WHS had sponsored an art sale back in the spring honoring longtime volunteer [Molly Donovan](#), who had been influential in a range of arts and culture activities in town, according to Andrews.

Besides the 1700s saltbox and mid-century modern house, the tour opened doors for visitors to an expanded farmhouse, custom-designed ranch overlooking the Saugatuck River and a log lodge.

"People really look forward to the tour every year and the post-tour Twilight Soiree," said Andrews. "This year, the attraction is the creativity of the artists, like Elise Black and Beverly Ellsley, in their own homes," she said. "Elise, for instance, is a multi-media artist who uses her found items and techniques in her home's design."

Standing in her colorful library on Danbrook Road, Black -- a painter, sculptor and designer -- elaborated about her home. "We moved here in 1991, with one child at the time, and over the years did gradual work to the outside," she explained. "In 2005, we started a renovation to add a studio, so I could put all my mediums under one roof. We took down certain walls and added oversized pocket doors, to improve the flow, and removed window treatments to enhance light. We added a flat rooftop deck, too, to offer a treehouse effect.

"I entertain a lot and now there's a Zen-like energy," she added. "You can physically feel the difference."

Black's architect, Howard Lathrop, principal at Sellars-Lathrop, spoke about some of the features the artist desired. "The mission was to create a gallery space above the existing garage and a double-height studio in which she could build large sculptures," he noted. "She also wanted early-day north light. We put in a roll-up garage door, fiberglass panels, an energy-efficient roof and walls, thermal pane windows and heavy insulation. I was very pleased with the result -- the house stands apart in Westport in terms of its modern features."

Five minutes away, [Ed Gerber](#) was showing off his saltbox home on Cross Highway, a very different structure from Black's. Built in 1764 by [Eliphalet Sturges](#), the home was once owned by 20th-century illustrator [George Hand Wright](#) and his family. When Gerber acquired it in 2010, it was owned by the Boylans. [Frank Boylan](#) was Gerber's godfather and a friend of Gerber's parents.

"I spent many years prowling around this house, and ultimately felt I wanted to own it and save it when it became available through Frank's estate," Gerber said. He worked with the town to secure it as a landmark.

Now, the house, which slopes this way and that from settling over more than two centuries, contains not only original illustrations by Wright, in tribute to the artist, but also cherished items Gerber's family had long owned. One example of the latter was a piece of furniture Gerber called the "stork table." As he explained it, "My grandparents went to Bridgeport on one occasion, to an estate sale coordinated by [P.T. Barnum](#)'s niece. They bought the table, which probably would have had a large vase with a fern in it on the top. They replaced the vase with a Chinese lamp and displayed that instead."

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