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Photographers and Filmmakers Using Drones to Reach New Heights

By CHRISTINE GIORDANO NOV. 13, 2015

A group recently congregated in a grassy field at the LongHouse Reserve gardens in East Hampton for a photography workshop, watching intently as a white drone the size of a seagull hovered nearby, its lights flashing and four propellers buzzing. It sounded like a small hive of bees.

The nature photographer Dell R. Cullum thumbed the inch-long joystick controls, and within seconds, the drone soared to 190 feet. It shared its view from a camera about the size of a matchbox to an iPhone screen below. From the elevated vantage point, the trees had a cotton-puff quality, the long spine of the LongHouse's roof could be seen in its entirety and the 20-person crowd — mostly photographers and videographers — looked like a cluster of dolls.

“I bring it to an area to get a shot I normally can't get,” said Mr. Cullum, 52, who uses drones to hover over water without creating an invasive ripple, or to make aerial or panoramic movies, or to photograph tall objects, like lighthouses, up close or from the top down.

While critics are weighing whether the drone buzz is gadget titillation or a true contribution to art, demand is picking up, said Matt Hindra, director of a video production company in Wainscott. “I have a lot of clients who are asking for aerials because they know the technology exists and because we live in such a beautiful place,” he said.

Drones can switch up perspectives in new ways. For example, Mr. Hindra soon

intends to play around with images of fishing. Instead of photographing the back of a fisherman looking out at the water, he plans to use a drone to capture the fisherman's expression from the ocean side, just as he reels in his catch.

Drones can save money for filmmakers, too. "Now, instead of having to use a crane, which lower-budget films could never afford, you could potentially use a drone and get those shots," Johanna B. Kelly, a production designer, said minutes after Mr. Cullum's class.

In nearby Sag Harbor, high school art students are also experimenting with drones. Last year a group of them posed for a series of black-and-white photographs taken by one. Standing on a windswept beach, they wore loose tunics printed with body-sized images of their faces while wearing angular white masks.

The photo, now in storage at Pierson High School, had been enlarged to approximately 3½ by 5½ feet and was part of an exhibition at the John Jermain Memorial Library in Sag Harbor this year. It has a stark and haunting quality.

Another enlarged photograph from the student series shows clear water surrounding colorful beach umbrellas and a person on a surfboard, all in the water.

"From the sky, the water was really clear that day. You could see down to the bottom," said Isabella Di Russa, 15, one of the young artists who had participated in the project.

"It was kind of hard, looking through the small screen," said Danielle Schoenfeld, 17, who was referring to the screen on the phone. "But the art you can make from it is really cool."

There is some question, however, as to who gets the credit.

"In a way you feel discredited from taking the picture," said Phoebe Madison Miller, 15. For the library show, she and a fellow student, Sophia Borzilleri, 14, choreographed a piece and used a drone to make a video of a new form of shadow dancing, capturing long shadows on the beach.

Professional videographers are also taking advantage of the drone's mobility.

Andrew LePre, 25, who owns a video production and photography business in

Cutchogue, said the drone's sweeping perspective can give a video an enhanced "feeling of home."

He created a short film of some of the most cherished places in the Hamptons by flying a drone through windmills, along bridges and above the treeline to view hidden ponds. When he created a music video of a wedding on a farm in the North Fork, he used the drone to circle over the happy couple as they walked.

As with most shiny new flying gadgets, there have been some mishaps.

In October, a building photographer's drone made headlines when it crashed into a building on Main Street in Sag Harbor, bumped a boy's leg and burst into flames.

Mr. Cullum's drone has been snapped at by alligators, assailed by a territorial swan and chased by birds of prey.

And when the student artists were learning to fly their drone, there were unfortunate tangles with tree branches and auditorium curtains.

Artists can quickly recoup the costs of buying a drone by taking real estate photos, but once they become commercial, drone fliers need pilot's licenses or Section 333 exemptions from the Federal Aviation Administration, giving them permission to fly an unmanned aircraft, said Mike Bosse, a lawyer in Portland, Me. The F.A.A. requires that drones steer clear of airports and fly lower than 400 feet, and it may soon require them to be registered.

Suffolk County is quickly preparing to enforce Long Island's first countywide drone law, which will require permits for drones launched from or landed on county parks and beaches. Some towns, like Huntington, have their own specific drone laws. And New York State is preparing a law to restrict airspace below 400 feet over private property.

Drone-blocking technology is currently illegal because it may also jam the signals of emergency medical personnel, Mr. Bosse said.

While the laws are evolving, drone artists continue to experiment, with the drone being a popular Christmas gift, said Matko Tomicic, executive director of

LongHouse Reserve. “Who doesn’t want to fly?” he said.

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