

Provincetown Art Colony Project: 1970-2005

BY RAY ELMAN



In September 1970, on the corner of Fourth and Perry Streets in Greenwich Village, I loaded all of my possessions, including 10 six-by-five foot stretchers and a carton of Baba Ram Dass tapes, into a green 1952 Chevy Carry-All van, with Ohm symbols spray-painted on the doors, and headed north to Provincetown, where I didn't know a soul. I was 25 years old.

Almost from the day I arrived in Provincetown I was befriended by artists and writers in the Outer Cape Art Colony. The first person I met was Steve Hickock, who briefly owned a cinema café in the west end of town called the Peeping Delia. The next day, while walking down Commercial Street, Steve introduced me to Terry Kahn, then a reporter for the *Provincetown Advocate*. Eventually Terry and I were best men at each others' weddings, and our friendship remains in good shape for our golden years.

My first night in Provincetown I slept on the bench seat of my van. One day later Trudy and Stephen Cook introduced me to Jack and Wally Tworkov, who offered to rent me their house for the winter. I spent my second night in Provincetown in a guest room behind their house. I didn't stay there for the season, but it was my first encounter with Jack and his work.

Over the winter of 1970-71, I came to know many of the fellows and friends of the fledgling Fine Arts Work Center (which at the time was located on the corner of Standish and Bradford Streets, across from where Napi's is now), including Roger Skillings, Bill Evaul, Conrad and Phil Malicoat, Anne Lord, Mike and Debbie Kahn, Jack Gregory and Joan Wye, Sharli Powers Land, Susan Baker, Keith Althaus, Jim Hughes, Toni Begman, Miriam Goodman, Bill O'Rourke, Joe Goodman, and Stanley Kunitz. Wayne Cardinalli was the first and only potter ever accepted to the Work Center. I still serve food in the bowls he gave me. In February of 1971 the Work Center allowed me to have a one-person exhibit in their gallery.

When summer finally arrived, the older members of the Cape Art Colony drifted back. It was mainly through tennis that I initially became friends with artists and writers such as E.J. Kahn, Jr., Sidney Simon, Leo Manso, Doug Heubler, Howie Schneider, Tony Vevers, Lee Falk, and Alec Wilkinson (who was still a classical mandolin player, and had yet to put pen to paper). Within a few years I would know all of the artists who eventually formed the Long Point Gallery.

At the time, it never occurred to me that there was anything unusual about a kid artist in his 20s having ready access to the pillars of a famous art colony. Looking back I realize that one reason that so many artists and writers have chosen to keep a residence on the Outer Cape is the camaraderie and easy communication that exists within the colony. In the inaugural issue of *Provincetown Arts*, B.H. Friedman (who had recently moved from Provincetown to East Hampton) wrote, "Provincetown has sidewalk vitality, and when the tide is out, there's constant traffic on the flats. In East Hampton everything happens behind high hedges."

In the spirit of celebrating the camaraderie, diversity, history, and continuing strength of the Outer Cape art colony, Chris Busa and I started *Provincetown Arts* magazine in 1985. Creating *Provincetown Arts* was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life, but when my son, Evan, was born in December 1989, I realized that I had too many balls in the air and had to let one ball, *Provincetown Arts*, drop to earth. Around that time I had started a new way of painting to document my wife's pregnancy. Until then I had been an abstract painter, but I wanted to make portraits of Lee showing off her swollen belly. The technique I developed started with a photograph of the subject, the image scanned into a computer and occasionally altered in Photoshop. This was before digital photography became practical. I would print and enlarge the image to 60 by 43 inches or 40 by 30 inches through a Canon CLC 500 copier. The Canon printed the image in continuous tone on multiple pieces of specially coated 11 by 17 inch paper. I developed a technique to adhere the paper to a stretched canvas. Finally, I used oil paint on top of the paper to achieve what I wanted out of the image.

THE BACKGAMMON PLAYERS

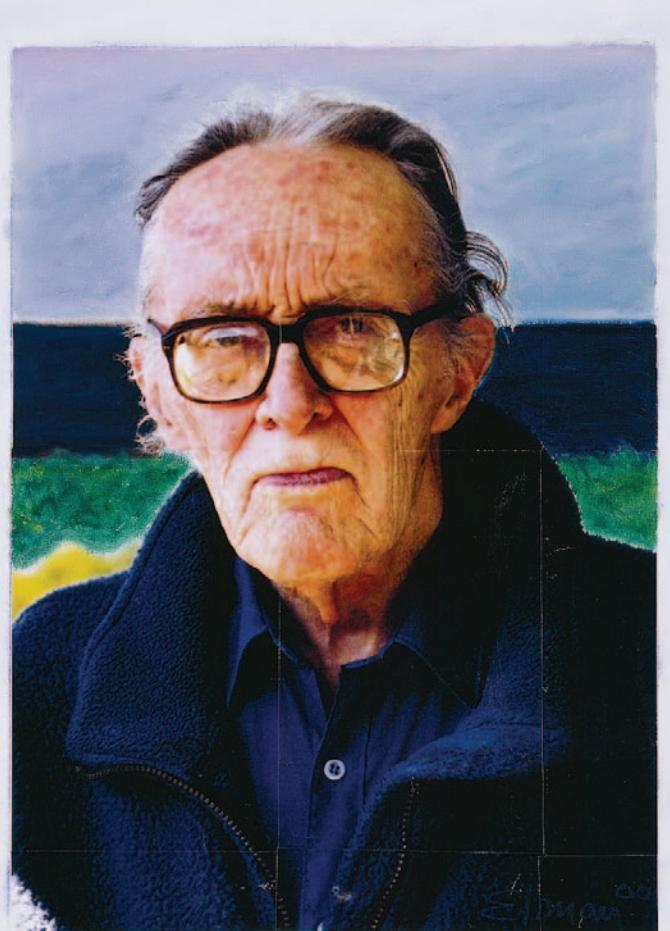
The first paintings documented Lee's pregnancy. The next few were all about our newborn son, Evan. Then I decided to document my life in the community by making portraits of my friends, doing what they like to do when they aren't working. The first painting in what became the Art Colony Project was a six-by-five-foot image of E.J. "Jack" Kahn, Jr., and Palmer Williams playing backgammon, the Pamet River valley in the background. The pose of the backgammon players is reminiscent of Cezanne's *The Card Players*; however, Jack's wife, Eleanor Munro, sent me an image of two warriors playing cards in a similar pose on an ancient Etruscan jug, so the construct is pretty old.

Jack Kahn, who holds the record for most words written for the *New Yorker*, held fast to a particular routine when in residence in Truro. Waking

around 8:00 a.m., he fried four sausage links in a small cast-iron skillet. After breakfast, he walked across the lawn to his writing studio, a dark, dank, falling-down shack that used to serve as a three-car garage. He would write until around noon, and then return to the main house for lunch. About 2:00 p.m. a diverse group of writers, artists, and psychiatrists would appear for their daily dose of round-robin doubles on Jack's clay tennis court. Jack, always the ringmaster, arranged teams based on his secret handicapping system, sometimes betting on the outcome. I loved playing in those afternoon games, less for the competition, more for the conversation. In both tennis and backgammon, you could count on Jack to make the same exact comment when events in the competition reached a familiar juncture. My favorite Jack Kahn line on the court was always delivered when Jack was in jeopardy of losing a set. "This may be more difficult than I thought," he invariably said.

Tennis ended around 4:00 p.m., whereupon out came Jack's backgammon board and Bloody Marys. The main game was between Jack and Palmer Williams, a senior producer of *60 Minutes* who had worked at CBS since the 1950s. They played almost every day and paid up on Fridays. Jack's son Terry taught me how to play backgammon, and shortly thereafter Jack deigned to play with me, mainly because I always lost. We played for 25¢ a point in the beginning, and I chose to view my losses as paid lessons. But in the summer of 1974, I surprised everyone by winning \$25 from Jack. Jack handed me his check and I told him, "I could use this \$25 for a nice meal, but I'm never going to cash it. I'm going to glue it in a collage titled *Winning at Backgammon*, and it's going to cost you \$500 to get it back." I still have the collage.

Once I had beaten Jack, I was invited into the main event, which became a *chouette*, a variation in backgammon in which one player competes against two or more players—me, Jack, and Palmer. On a typical day Palmer would beat me, I would beat Jack, and Jack would beat Palmer; so the money would rotate around the board and the payoffs or winnings at the end of a given day or week wouldn't amount to much. Palmer and Jack have both passed on, but I can still hear the



ABOVE: *BLUE FLEECE*, ALAN DUGAN, 2001, DIGITAL COLLAGE & OIL ON CANVAS, 30 X 40 INCHES; FACING PAGE: *THE BACKGAMMON PLAYERS*, E.J. KAHN, JR. AND PALMER WILLIAMS (DETAIL), 1990, DIGITAL COLLAGE & OIL ON CANVAS, 6 X 5 FEET

rattle of dice in the leather cup, and Jack saying to Palmer, "Can't you throw anything but double fives!"

I completed the painting of Jack and Palmer playing backgammon in 1990, and decided to use the same approach to create a pictorial study of life in the Outer Cape Art Colony. Over the past 15 years I have produced hundreds of paintings in the series, including approximately 15 paintings that meld into a 20-foot mural depicting the annual Fourth of July picnic at Corn Hill Beach, attended by many members of the art community.

The collection includes Doug Huebler repairing his house; Justin Kaplan in a kayak; swimmers Anne Bernays, Joel Meyerowitz, Michael Mazur, Mark Hammer, Chris Busa; Pamet River floaters Kevin and Flip McCarthy, Peter Alson, Alan Metter; surfers Sebastian Junger, Terry Kahn; fishermen Paul Brodeur, Jim Gilbert, Daniel Ranalli, Tabitha Vevers, Ted Kurland; gardeners Stanley Kunitz and Elise Asher, Gip Hoppe, Peter Watts, Sideo Frombolitti and Nora Speyer; beachcombers Varujan Boghosian, Paul Bowen; Robert Motherwell, Alan Dugan, Judith Shahn, Gail Mazur, Mischa Richter, and Alec Wilkinson enjoying their decks; Dan Okrent sailing his cat boat; Peter Manso in a race car; Morton Dean in a canoe; Norman Mailer making a movie; Carmen Cicero playing his saxophone; Larry Shainberg preparing to run; bicyclists Vivian Bower, Barry Bluestone; Anna Poor and Francis Olschafskie at the beach;

tennis players Mark Strand, Al Jaffee, Howie Schneider, Lee Falk, Johnny Lind, Dick Miller. And people at parties—lots of parties: Annie Dillard, Tony and Elspeth Vevers, Walter Bingham, Roger Skillings, Bess Schuyler, Joan and Jerry Cohen, Robert J. Lifton, B. J. Lifton, Linda Sturner, Joan Fox, Ellie Munro, and Becky Okrent.

I envision continuing this series until I can no longer work. Roughly 30% of the paintings rank as my favorites, but for *Provincetown Arts* I have singled out a few that come with stories I like to tell.

DOUGLAS HUEBLER

Douglas Huebler must be the artist most recognized around the world and least recognized locally. Doug is remembered as an essential American Conceptual artist, a founder of the movement. He was represented by Leo Castelli and later by Holly Solomon. He had major museum exhibitions. He was the chairman of art departments at Harvard and Cal Arts. Yet he was rarely asked to exhibit his work on the Cape. Certainly a major retrospective of his work is due at the Provincetown Art Association & Museum.

I met Doug and his son Dorne on a tennis court in 1971. Doug had a thing for the letter *D* and is survived by Dorne and his sisters Darcy and Dana, as well as by Katie, a daughter from his second marriage. Doug was extremely knowledgeable about art, but he never came across as annoyingly erudite. He usually sounded like the witty ex-Marine, ex-Michigan farm boy that he was. You would hear more pride in his voice when he mentioned the Marines than when he dis-

cussed an impending exhibition of his work at a major museum in France.

Much Conceptual art was dry, overly intellectual. Doug approached his work with high humor. One series of work centered on the career of a fictitious artist. Doug not only told the story, but produced paintings in the manner of his fictitious character. Another series, *The Great Corrector*, featured an art professor who improved the masterpieces of famous painters, showing how their flaws could be corrected. In *Buried Treasure* Doug produced a “just discovered” group of drawings by Hieronymus Bosch, conjuring the great canvas that the drawings only suggested.

The portrait I made of Doug is homage to his efforts to photograph everybody on the planet in a series called *Everyone Alive*. He declared his mission: “Throughout the remainder of the artist’s lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.” Some pieces in the series were accompanied by an aphorism, such as “Pictured above is one person who believes that birds of a feather flock together.” Doug owned the first house that Charlie Zehnder designed on the Outer Cape. As most people who have owned Zehnder houses know, they are great to look at and live in, but many of them leak. So Doug was regularly repairing his house, and I chose to capture him during one of his carpentry missions. The title of the painting is, *Pictured Above Is One Person Who Is Always Fixing His House*. (Note: Charlie Zehnder renovated my first house; it

started to leak shortly after the renovation was completed. After two years of failing to stop the leak—mushrooms were growing in my bedroom carpet—I sold the house and moved to Truro).

ALAN DUGAN

Alan Dugan burst on the poetry scene in 1961, his first book winning the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In his career he received two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, and a Prix de Rome from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Everybody loved his raspy voice. He wrote and spoke the truth with raw directness tempered by modulating wit. My portrait of Dugan presents a bittersweet life lived hard by the sea, borne up by a sense of great accomplishment.

I knew Alan Dugan for over 30 years, but I don’t think we exchanged 5,000 words. I know his wife, the artist Judith Shahn, much better. We were both members of the Provincetown Group Gallery when it was located on the second floor of the Provincetown Tennis Club. I don’t have a sack full of personal stories to tell about Alan, but I like this portrait because it is one of my best. In 2003, it was selected by the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery for their permanent collection.

SEBASTIAN JUNGER

I have made portraits of the older members of our Art Colony because I wanted to capture them while they were still vital. Sebastian is one of the exceptions. His vitality rockets from every pore. Though I am not an intimate friend, we share a



PICTURED ABOVE IS AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO IS ALWAYS FIXING THEIR HOUSE, DOUGLAS HUEBLER, 1993, DIGITAL COLLAGE & OIL ON CANVAS, 60 X 43 INCHES



passion for surfing. Over the years I have noticed him surfing at Ballston Beach, long before he wrote *The Perfect Storm*. An interesting thing happened when I photographed Sebastian. When I looked at the results I noticed that almost every picture had a posed feeling as though he was a trained male model. My experience of Sebastian is that he seems a bit timid, a bit unsure of himself socially, and the image I chose for his portrait painting seems more in keeping with the way I experience him. In 1988, when I accompanied Joel Meyerowitz to Annie Dillard's waterside house in Wellfleet to do that year's cover shoot for *Provincetown Arts* (one of PA's all-time best covers), Joel remarked that he didn't like shooting people who are used to being photographed because they offer preconceived expressions that they believe will show them in their best light. I think that's what I got with most of my pictures of Sebastian, who couldn't have been a hotter literary celebrity at the time, and why I selected a less-posed image.

KNOX MARTIN

I include my portrait of Knox Martin because I like the painting and because he was the one art teacher who made me believe in myself, changing my life. Knox is a picaresque figure. He kept bees on the roof of his Washington Heights studio; he is a "Clear" in Scientology; he maintains a menagerie of tarantulas, piranhas, scorpions, and boa constrictors in his New York apartment; and, as portrayed in my painting, he is a Samurai swordsman.

Knox did not spend a lot of time on the Cape, though he was friends with Cape artists such as Peter Busa and Tony Vevers. He taught at Yale with Jack Tworkov and at the Art Students League with Leo Manso. I have often heard him referred to as an "artists' artist."

In the '70s, when I had already decided I would live on the Cape for the rest of my life, I went to New York with my live-in girlfriend, dragging her up to 145th Street to visit with Knox. His apartment had not been cleaned in a while. Cigarette butts were ground into the living room carpet; food-encrusted dishes were stacked unwashed in

the sink; a dog dish containing old dog food attracted a swarm of buzzing flies. Our plan was to visit for a few hours and continue back to the Cape, but Knox said, "I went shopping for dinner and you must stay the night." I didn't want to insult my mentor, so we agreed to stay.

We asked Knox if we could help prepare the meal, but he insisted that we stay out of the kitchen. Soon he served swordfish steaks in home-made lobster sauce with large chunks of lobster in the sauce—to this day one of the best meals I have ever eaten. The experience always reminded me of the scene in *The Tin Drum* when Oscar visits an unsavory friend after the war and the friend invites Oscar to stay for dinner, pulling out two unwashed plates from under his bed. He wipes the plates "clean" with newspaper, puts pasta on each plate, and squeezes sauce from a tube over the pasta. Oscar concludes, "To this day it is the best pasta I have ever eaten." Over time I have realized I have never been served a bad meal by a good artist. I think it's because artists don't mind getting messy, have an eye for presentation and proportion, and know how to mix ingredients.

In the late 1960s I met Richard Alpert, who had been booted out of Harvard with Timothy Leary for experimenting with LSD; during a pilgrimage to India he changed his name to Baba Ram Dass. While I was living in New York, I went to several Baba Ram Dass events, becoming friends with George (whose last name escapes me), who was recording Ram Dass's talks on tape. After attending a few weekend outings at the Alpert family farm in New Hampshire, which included Sufi dancing on his father's private golf course, I decided that the next step on my spiritual path was to go somewhere where nobody knew me and I would be left alone to meditate and paint. The Outer Cape in winter struck me as the perfect place for me to pursue my goals. It was a big surprise to me that I was not the first artist to make that choice.

During my first winter on the Cape I read Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, which tells the story of Gurdjieff's journey toward enlightenment through his encounters with exceptional people along the path. When I started working on my Art Colony portrait series, it struck me that I was telling the story of my adult life through images of the remarkable people I have met in this community. Enlightenment may prove to be beyond my reach, but the Outer Cape and the people I know here may be as close to Nirvana as I get. I am content with that.

RAY ELMAN started the Outer Cape Repertory Film Society in 1971, ran the To Be Coffeehouse from 1972–73, and served for many years on the board of directors of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the Provincetown Group Gallery, and the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater. He and Chris Busa cofounded Provincetown Arts in 1985 (in 1991 the magazine became a publication of the nonprofit Provincetown Arts Press). His paintings have been widely exhibited and are included in numerous collections. He has written guide books and travel articles on cross-country skiing and scuba diving. He presently develops electronic learning programs.

ABOVE: SURFER, SEBASTIAN JUNGER, 2001,
DIGITAL COLLAGE & OIL ON CANVAS, 60 X 43 INCHES;
BELOW: SAMURAI SWORDSMAN, KNOX MARTIN, 2001,
DIGITAL COLLAGE & OIL ON CANVAS, 60 X 43 INCHES

