

## Maximum Serendipity - By André van der Wende

### Abstracting Nature

at the Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown, Ma.

May 27 -June 19, 2011

When Berta Walker hangs a show lugubrious never enters the conversation. Beauty does, sincerity of truth, and serendipity certainly. Joy tends to fill her rooms and if there is a dark cloud at least you'll know it will be beautifully painted. But with her 2011 inaugural show *Abstracting Nature*, initially billed as a "tantalizing mixture of juxtapositions and abstractions of nature," something greater happened when chance opened a window to illuminate the depth of continuity within Provincetown art.

This was not the first time Walker had paired the historic with the contemporary, but when the 86 works that make up *Abstracting Nature* started to coalesce into a satisfying installation, a synergy of history began to reverberate and ping-pong through the gallery's various rooms; an energy of serious artistic proliferation from one generation paired to another, invigorating one another through the resonance of history.

While there's an historical subtext, the exhibition is more about creating aesthetic links through serendipitous moments that constitute the artistic persistence of the last 100 years. It's about yesterday, today, and tomorrow, an arc of creative history freely associating. "I believe it somehow adds another "ink" to the visual truth of what the "Provincetown School" represents. And as I study the show, I feel it represents a celebration of individuality, styles, color, light, freedom, vast stretches of Mother Earth's beauty and blood surrounding this tiny town," says Walker.

"There's a "continuum", if you will, that I some see and feel in this show - from (Charles) Hawthorne to (Edwin) Dickinson to Salvatore Del Deo and (Varujan) Boghosian; (Hans) Hofmann through to (Selina)Trieff, (Bob) Henry, (Paul) Resika, (Brenda) Horowitz; through the Provincetown Modernists...The originality and light is evident in each and every work of art. The Provincetown School of Magical Light...each and every person somehow feels connected to the whole; the whole of the history of the Provincetown Art Colony."

Channeling the individual voices of the work so they sit in harmonious unity with those around them, Walker talks about it as serendipity. "It's absolutely true that the art itself guided the installation. It's as if, when I'm studying the art and contemplating the possibilities, I get direct voices from the art itself telling me just what to do...I always say, the art is bossy and I am never done till it says I'm done!"

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink* would call it "thin slicing," the ability through experience to discern and disseminate something highly skilled on a split second, unconscious level. Berta Walker's skill at hanging a solid show is well known but in this case she was not only able to compliment work that looked good together but still had the strength to inform, question, and reveal nuances that were previously hidden or less amplified if the work were to exist in an isolated state.

Did Walker really intend to place Sky Power's *Kiss Me* (2011) diametrically opposite Bob Henry's *Light: House* (1992)? Henry's painting depicts an horizon of lips, multiple, disembodied and floating as they crest over a trapezoid-like structure below. I've seen this painting many times and it still causes my lips to curl into a smile even if there is that vaguely palpable unease.

Power's bursts of color send forth their own seductive kisses of misty hot pink and a searing lemon yellow that pulses and props up all the work around it; a stately Brenda Horowitz paired with a lovely wiggly dock painting by Karl Knaths. Next to Henry, mimicking some of Henry's formality (or the other way around), there's a near perfect Jim Forsberg from the early 1950's, a satisfying abstraction evocative of Provincetown roof lines and windows.

In the opposite corner, next to Sky Power, a disarmingly spare painting of minimal tribalism from Oliver Chaffee aptly titled *Cat Mask*. The scattering of African tribal sculpture in the room, with its ability to be ancient and modern all at once, are perfect reminders of cross-cultural pollination and the telescoping of time that also happens to segue beautifully with Chaffee's later foray's into primitivism and simplified form.

Quite by chance Chaffee dominates the show as the quiet linchpin; the unofficial overseer with a gentle willfulness and insurgent energy anchoring the show as a bridge from one generation to the next. His chameleon dash of 7 works throughout

*Abstracting Nature* are a lovingly impertinent ode to Modernism's propensity for shedding skins to suit one's needs. Like any good Modernist his quest was founded in the principal of searching for directness in order to attain essence. The Modernists quest is singular, searching, some would say selfish, but it certainly makes for easy viewing, and if Walker's anything to go by it's alive and well in Provincetown.

Chaffee, who died in 1944, studied with Charles Hawthorne (who's represented here by a fine watercolor that's as fresh as last week) in the early 19th century, and in turn mentored hundreds of artists in his lifetime including Blanche Lazzell. Provincetown with its rich legacy of schools and mentors is crucial to this idea of a Provincetown oeuvre.

Although Hans Hofmann is not in the show, this titan of teaching permeates the proliferates proceedings through several of the artists he taught that are still working today (Selina Trieff, Bob Henry, Paul Resika). His impact is indelible. As Hofmann begets Resika and Resika begets (Donald) Beal, on it goes, a seemingly deep and bottomless pool of one generation informing the next. You begin to see the connections and feel the thread that has bound Provincetown artists through the years. It is not a "style" per se, but a sense of purpose and serious intent in the work and toward the town that they covet. If there is a "Provincetown style" then it is a style of diversity.

That's what the Provincetown school of art is, says Walker; "preserving traditions while preserving the freedom." The infusion of light is reflected and refracted through generations of artists, through the great many teachers and mentors. What Hofmann imparted was not a stylistic continuity so much as a philosophical one by placing emphasis on an individual's relationship to color, structure and how to paint a visually arresting statement. So much of the work here is connected by its strident visual framework, and an inner light transposed via the outer light. Future generations simply illicit a new response to an established stimuli that has always been here. Safe to say that each and everyone could not help but sway to its light and hallowed vistas.

While certain artists can be linked to 19th and 20th century artistic currents - impressionism, modernism, abstract expressionism, and pop art - their work is still

informed by the hum and vibration of keen light that disseminates itself over the tip of the Cape, as though there has always been a kind of strange inoculation from outside forces. In Provincetown artists have always thrived on parity of the individual not slavish encampment to schools of thought.

Deborah Forman, author of the recently published *Perspectives on the Provincetown Art Colony*, calls Provincetown “a microcosm of twentieth century American art,” basically a paraphrase of Berta Walker’s brief of “Presenting the History of American Art as seen through the eyes of Provincetown”. What *Abstracting Nature* essentially does is keep that lineage going.

A lot of Walker’s pairings are linked through formal kinship - a pair of African bronzes are a fine counterpoint to the Classical bent of Romolo Del Deo’s contemporary bronze casts, and Gil Franklin’s sinuous sculptural refinement of the human figure - but they generally go well beyond such skin-deep comparisons. Karl Knaths’ *Cosmos*, Erna Partoll’s *Tomatoes*, and Douglas Culhane’s global sculpture *Evolution*, all share a close proximity and love of the circular orb-like form, but in the case of Knaths and Partoll there’s a shared visionary nature to the work that connects the two to a more ethereal, mystic plain.

Right next to the Knaths is Varujan Boghosian’s *Break Through*, a typically eloquent construction where a mask-like face breaks through the back of the canvas panel, that makes a wonderfully psychological tie-in to Knaths’ mandala-like forms. Boghosian’s elegantly restrained, vaguely surreal parlor games of the subconscious, offer poetic refrains that contextualize an internal dialogue into an exquisitely soulful tableaux. When an early uncharacteristically large cabinet-like Boghosian, *Eurydice Juggling* (1964), is placed next to Emily Farnham’s canvas *The Visitor* from 1938, you are astonished to find someone else that traded in the ambiguities of reality and the mind, suggesting perhaps they share kindred spirits in art of Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte.

That said there are some wonderful paintings simply to be celebrated for their having been seen: *Horse Leech Pond, Wellfleet* (1941) a sumptuous monoprint from Ross Moffett; Elspeth Halvosen’s fragile box construction *A Heart’s Mystery* (2011); while Paul Resika does magic with a sequence of triangles in the marvelously

buoyant *Regatta* (2009-2010), Resika's work of late absolutely brimming with effortless vitality.

This is an unabashedly feel good show where humor is rife and connections are delivered in a wonderfully understated, sideways manner. When Donald Beal's enormous abstract still life sits next to small primal Chaffee, it's a testament to both that Chaffee's modest canvas holds its own next to the grandeur of Beal's *Blossoms* (2006) with their color and assertive gestures of paint. Beal's canvas is free of rhetorical cant, never drawing attention to itself, so that their equanimity as expressionists is complete.

This show is about connections built more around aesthetic experience, than historical, while still allowing us to explore both. Walker never lets the air of the work and shows it to us first for what it is: individuality amidst a solidarity of mission. In Provincetown the arts are fused with the community at large in a way that's active and self sustaining, directed toward a malleable interchangeability that's evident in a span of work like this. This is a fine show and given the limitations of availability and space, a foundation for a great one. Never claiming to be the apotheosis on the Provincetown story, it's precisely its tantalizing openness that generates much of its excitement.

"The whole world as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color," Hofmann said. Color is everything, and with color comes light filtered through direct engagement with the environment. As a liberal arm in a conservative state, Provincetown's hazy, brittle light reflecting off the dunes and water has been an elixir for artists well before Charles Hawthorne began his first classes in 1899. It's a town that doesn't rest on its laurels. It acknowledges and embraces its past but like the sand that surrounds it, the art shifts and changes. Not better, just different, but the change of appearance doesn't disguise the fact that there's always a foundation.

Leave it Ross Moffett to have the last word. "It is hardly necessary to say that art does not spring from aesthetic theory, that art does not merely represent itself. We may say, I believe, that art by virtue of its qualified relations expresses feelings that cannot be expressed in any other way, and that these feelings, in turn, appear to be a distillation of experience. Deep and profound art doubtless does not come from shallow wells. By art, feelings are resolved into an ordered contexture. Things fall into

the right place, at the right interval, in the right measure."