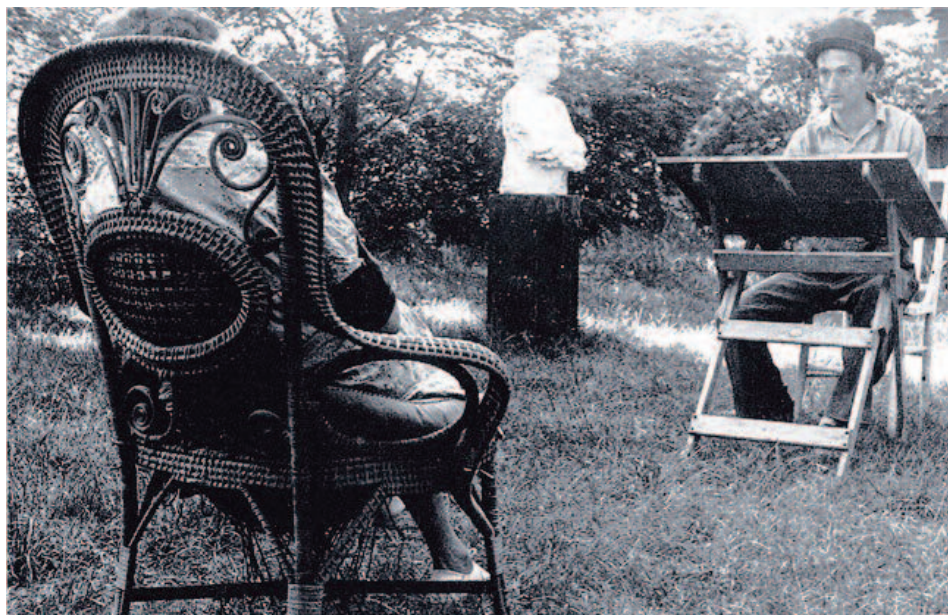


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ART When the Young Lions of Art Roamed the Wilds of Long Island

BY DOROTHY SPEARS



Larry Rivers in Southampton in 1954.

THE youthful artists and writers who discovered the eastern end of Long Island in the 1950's and 60's encountered potato fields, endless green marshes, empty beaches and inviolable dunes. They made an artistic haven there, and what they saw and felt informed their plays and novels, their paintings and sculptures, for decades after.

Quite a bit of that idyllic landscape is now gone, and many of the famous — Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, James Jones, John Steinbeck — are gone as well. But there remains a circle of friends, now in their 70's or older, who continue to paint and write in the ever more crowded, less peaceful Hamptons. Their tales of that earlier era, when the Montauk Lighthouse was just a quick jaunt away, and most restaurants closed for the winter, serve as a reminder not only for what has been lost but also for what continues to en-

sure.

It was the natural light that first impressed the painter Jane Freilicher, now 82, whose lyrical landscapes rejected the prevailing Abstract Expressionism. “We had a kind of magical first drive,” she said. “A bunch of friends and I were driven out in a convertible. We arrived at dawn, and it was very beautiful, very bright and green in the sunlight.”

She spent her first East Hampton summer in “a little cottage up the road” from the art dealer Leo Castelli that she rented with several friends, including the painter Larry Rivers. “We used to go to a lot of parties at Castelli’s,” she said, “and watch Bill de Kooning paint on the porch. He was always very accessible to younger painters.”

It’s a memory shared by the photographer John Jonas Gruen, whose wife of 58 years is the painter Jane Wilson. “He kept encouraging Jane with little verbal pushes,”

Mr. Gruen said of de Kooning during a recent lecture about his book “The Sixties: Young in the Hamptons,” made up of photographs of the couple’s friends.

Among them is the abstract painter Mary Abbott, now 85, whose early work combines de Kooning-style brushwork with the playful weightlessness of Cy Twombly. She recalls shuttling from her studio in a former Southampton ice house to de Kooning’s various residences in the East Hampton hamlet known as Springs. “I’d take my ’34 open Ford to Springs for the afternoon,” she said. “I’m afraid I drove back kind of drunk a few million times.” Asked what “open” meant, she laughed and said, “No windows.”

Arthur Laurents, 88, whose theater credits include the books for “West Side Story” and “Gypsy,” said, “We were all very young, and we ran about like mad.” He bought his property in Quogue in 1953. In those traffic-free days, he thought nothing of driving east to parties in the Hamptons, or the playwright Edward Albee’s house in Montauk.

“Edward had this dining room that was all mirrors,” Mr. Laurents said. “I remember looking in the mirror and thinking, ‘Look at all these drunks.’”

Sipping an iced tea in his Montauk study, with its floor-to-ceiling window facing the ocean, Mr. Albee, 78, chuckled, “The dining room still has the same mirrors.”

He recalled his first visit to Montauk, in 1961, to deliver “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” to the actress Uta Hagen in the hopes that she would star in it. While Ms. Hagen read the play, Mr. Albee fell under the spell of the rugged Montauk landscape.

"I vowed that when I had the money, I'd buy a place out here," and in 1963, thanks to "Virginia Woolf," he got the chance. "Of course it didn't cost much back in those days," he said. "I got almost four acres on the ocean for forty thousand bucks."

Through Sept. 16 Mr. Albee is the curator of an art exhibition, "Some Sculpture: Albee's Choice," at the LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton.



Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter in Water Mill, N.Y., in 1959

"Everywhere we went, there was Edward," recalls Mr. Gruen. "He never said a word. He just looked up with those eyes of his, taking everything in." Mr. Gruen is among those who believe that "Virginia Woolf" was based on Mr. Albee's tumultuous relationship with his long-ago partner, the composer Bill Flanagan. "They'd have these vicious fights at parties," Mr. Gruen said. "It was very public. They were both terribly intelligent."

Asked about this theory, Mr. Albee scoffed. "I don't think I'd pay much attention to that," he said. "I had arguments with everybody."

Flanagan died in 1969 at 46. Mr. Albee has since opened the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center — better known as the Barn — a residency program for artists, writers and composers on his Montauk property. "It seemed an appropriate thing to do," Mr. Albee said in his

study, where pages of a new play were neatly stacked on the couch. "He was my mentor, and he helped me starting out."

Other mentors of a sort were the painter Fairfield Porter and his wife, Anne, a poet, who lived in Southampton. "They were the grand introducers," said the painter Robert Dash, 72. "First you stayed at the Porters, then you found places of your own." Porter died in 1975 and his widow now lives in Hampton Bays.

Mr. Dash bought his nearly two-acre plot in Sagaponack from a farming family in 1966. A year later he began what would eventually become the garden known as the Madoo Conservatory. Madoo ("my dove" in old Scottish) has become a darling of lifestyle and gardening magazines, as well as a popular destination for summer tourists.

"I was attracted to the soil," explained Mr. Dash, whose biweekly columns for *The East Hampton Star*, "Notes From Madoo," were published in book form in 2000 by Houghton Mifflin.

Sagaponack has drawn Mr. Dash and the authors Linda Bird Francke and Peter Matthiessen, unlike many other East End artists and writers, to abandon the city and live there year-round.

Mr. Matthiessen was once known for making his final swim of the year on Nov. 1, said his fellow swimmer James Salter,

81, whose 1975 novel, "Light Years," draws on summers spent in Amagansett in the 1960's. "Peter would bring his truck to the beach," Mr. Salter said. "It was like a tailgate party for the intrepid. The wives would watch."

"We'd stir the martinis," corrected his wife, Kay Eldredge, a playwright, over iced teas on the couple's screened porch in Bridgehampton. (Mr. Matthiessen was traveling in Africa and could not be reached for comment.)

Ms. Francke, 67, said it was the long, cold winters that established a sense of camaraderie among East End year-rounders. "The gathering place was Bobby Van's in Bridgehampton," she said, referring to the local restaurant. "In winter it was the one pool of light in all of Bridgehampton. They had a writer's table that actually anyone could sit at. Bobby Van played the piano. He was Juilliard-trained in classical music, but he'd play Cole Porter and Gershwin. You knew the bartender, Cal. The waitress was Nancy. They saved you the bones from the prime rib on Sundays to give to your dogs. Truman Capote was around, but he was weird, seated in a corner all by himself. Truman was not a joiner."

Mr. Dash agreed that Bobby Van's "was a great place to hang out when you couldn't paint, and you had nothing to do. You'd go there and sit with your carpenter or your painter and you'd have a beer. Somebody would put money in a pot for who would see the first snowflake."

Mr. Salter mentioned another local bar, Billy's Triple Crown, which was in Bridgehampton until the late 1980's. Billy DePetris, the owner, had been a star pitcher on the Bridgehampton High School baseball team when Carl Yastrzemski, the son of a potato framer, was the catcher. Both went to the big leagues, but DePetris soon pitched his arm out, Mr. Salter said, so he opened a bar filled with baseball memorabilia.

Mr. DePetris invited all his clients — many of them local workmen — to a yearly party to celebrate baseball's Triple Crown, which Yastrzemski won while leading the Red Sox to the World Series in 1967. "If you didn't go to that party," Mr. Salter said, "it was said you would never get a plumber."

You knew spring had arrived, Ms.

Francke said, when the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, her Sagaponack neighbor, was seen “wheeling his wheelbarrow to Liberty Farm, filling it up with veggies.”

At Sagaponack’s one-room schoolhouse, where Ms. Francke sent her two daughters, spring arrived with a warning. “The police would come and give the kids a lecture,” Ms. Francke said, “about summer, about how they had to watch out for people coming in from the outside.”

“how the automobile has changed our life. We used to think nothing of going to Amagansett or Montauk.”

Mr. Laurents said: “They buy these lovely old houses. Then they knock them down and they build these monsters.”

Mr. Salter said: “The correct word here is wealth. It’s wealth that has changed the landscape and the general tone of the place.”

The changing landscape has posed a

morning she sat in her Water Mill studio, where a large picture window faced the shoreline and fields. The light on the grass was probably the same as she’d been painting for decades. But rising up from what was a potato field is an enormous white house; behind it, too close for visual comfort, is a house of similar size.

“I used to look at the stars at night,” Ms. Freilicher said. “Now I look at the lights from the neighbors.”

Adjustments have been made. Ms. Freilicher paints slivers of the view. Mr. Gruen and Ms. Wilson often rent their Water Mill house for the summer and travel to Europe. Because beach parking lots tend to be full at midday, Mr. Salter and Ms. Eldredge now go in late afternoon. Mr. Dash has become a proponent for land preservation, joining the Peconic Land Trust. Mr. Albee belongs to the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, which he described as “the only organization that matters out here.” Nearly everyone avoids left-hand turns onto Montauk Highway because of the traffic.

“It still manages to be very uplifting in some way,” Ms. Freilicher said. “The air and the light. If you don’t look too hard.”

Mr. Laurents said: “I have such peace here. When you look at the ocean and the sand, and you see the sky, you realize how unimportant you are. And that’s a great thing to know.”

Mr. Gruen, whose photographs of historic Sag Harbor houses are at the Gallery in Sag Harbor through Sept. 1, said: “Someday I should write a book called ‘Old In the Hamptons.’ Because it’s been in the Hamptons that Jane and I have really felt the pleasure of growing old.”



Elaine and Willem are kneeling in front of the sculpture 'Woman' by the artist Leo Castelli's home in East Hampton.

That sense of community is dissipating, Ms. Francke said.

“It’s just crazy,” Ms. Freilicher added,

particular problem for Ms. Freilicher, who has made her 50-year career on the view from her window. On a recent summer