

# GALLERIES

## PORTRAIT OF AN ART GALLERY

### BERTA WALKER GALLERY

PROVINCETOWN



BY RENA LINDSTROM

Everyone who knows American art knows that Provincetown is the oldest continuous art colony in the country; and those who know art in Provincetown know the Berta Walker Gallery. The gallery has been central to maintaining the continuity between older and younger Provincetown art-generations, both artists and collectors. And Berta Walker herself, with her deep personal and familial history with modern and contemporary American art, steeped in the tradition of Provincetown, experienced in the New York art world, knowledgeable and committed and generous, is one primary reason why art still looms large in the culture and economy of this small town.

The Berta Walker Gallery (BWG) combines the physical sophistication of New York with the welcoming spirit of Provincetown, and always, with exhibitions that reveal the symbiotic, generative relationship of Provincetown to modern American art. Only last week, at the National Academy of Design in New York, I stood before a familiar, beloved 1939 Edwin Dickinson painting, first encountered at BWG in 1999 in the Gallery's groundbreaking exhibition "Hawthorne, His Students, Their Students." Collectors far and wide know that at Berta Walker Gallery they will always see something interesting, something challenging, something important. With great care and thought, Walker has put together many inventive and inspiring exhibitions, often juxtaposing the great new with the great old: Paul Bowen and David Smith; Sam Messer and Willem de Kooning; Jim Peters and Jim Dine; Robert Motherwell and Jean DuBuffet; Robert Henry and George McNeil. She is a masterful curator—from conceptual development to exquisite installation. Painter Paul Resika has said that Berta's eye is her art.

According to art collector Nick Brown of Truro, Berta Walker is "the arbiter of the Provincetown gallery scene." Especially in her representation of contemporary artists, he says, "she is a superior marketeer, maintaining the price support for their work, enabling her artists to keep practicing their art. She really appreciates and fosters the creative force in that person."



LEFT: BERTA WALKER WITH HER GREYHOUND, MAGIC. ABOVE AND BELOW: INSIDE THE GALLERY.



Berta Walker was born to the art world. Yet she never intended to be an art dealer. Arrival at that mastery and commitment has followed a winding journey of artistic inheritance, self-direction, and good luck. Her father, from Minneapolis, moved to New York at the age of 21. Along the way, he met and married her mother, Ione, a dancer and painter from Pittsburgh. Both her parents were deeply involved art patrons and collectors. They formed the Hudson Walker Gallery on 57th Street from 1938-40, but war intervened. During that period, her father was Marsden Hartley's dealer, shepherding his career as Berta Walker would later do for many of her artists. She absorbed a passion for art at home and from the many artists she grew up around in Provincetown, where her family and grandparents had spent their summers, beginning in 1916.

Berta Walker's ebullient spirit, her energy and passion, made her a natural promoter. She began her career in advertising in California; then, returning



PAUL RESIKA, "THE BLACK BOAT," 1999-2000, OIL ON CANVAS PANEL

to New York, she worked in programming and special event management at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Opportunity Resources for the Arts, a national, non-profit placement service for the performing arts, tapped her to establish their new Museum and Visual Arts program.

Meanwhile, in Provincetown, Berta's father, Hudson D. Walker, was involved in the founding of the Fine Arts Work Center in 1969, along with many influential artists and writers including Richard Florsheim, Jack Tworck, Myron Stout, Phil Malicoat, Sal Del Deo, and later Stanley Kunitz to create one of the most important artists' residencies in the country. Early on, Berta volunteered to create fundraising events for FAWC. She was elected Chairman of the Board in 1976, and in that role, orchestrated many successful fundraising events in New York, Boston, and Provincetown.

After organizing a major benefit for FAWC for the inauguration of the prestigious new Marisa del Re Gallery in New York, Walker was persuaded to join the gallery as its director. Although she had never installed a work of art outside her own home, she happily discovered her innate sense of how to present art. In 1984, Berta was lured to the oldest gallery in New York, the Graham Galleries, to launch and direct Graham Modern Gallery. Her single most important experience, she believes, was working with Bob Graham, Sr. "one of the senior, most honest, and most insightful art dealers in New York. He had incredible energy and courage!" She spent five eventful years at Graham Modern where she exhibited Provincetown-connected artists such as Selina Trieff, Carmen Cicero, Nancy Fried, and Paul Resika. Berta recalls, too, her good fortune in working with Marty Diamond who ran a gallery upstairs from the Graham, showing early modernists. "He single-handedly forged the futures for Lazzell, Holty, Weinrich, and others, before closing his gallery in the '80s," she said.

When it felt like time to leave New York, Walker took the summer of 1989 "to ponder in the protective energy of Provincetown." That fall, she

was asked to become the Acting Director of FAWC. It was a serious financial moment for the Center. She worked there for a year, finding new sources of income to keep the doors open, and then helped FAWC to find a new director. That spring, an opportunity arose to rent an already-existing gallery space in Provincetown. Not at all sure she

could run a gallery alone, she dove in and Berta Walker Gallery began.

Walker describes her focus at BWG as showing "the history of American art as seen through the eyes of Provincetown." Add through the eyes of Berta Walker, for indeed, she is an enthusiastic impresario, staging exhibitions and guiding her stars into the limelight. One of those stars is Nancy Whorf, who Berta encouraged to move from her well-established reputation as a folk art furniture painter to focus exclusively on her formal painting. In 2001, Whorf was honored by a proclamation from the town naming her "Nancy Whorf di Provincetown"—the painter of Provincetown. Walker has also fostered the work of abstract painter Erna Partoll, challenging her to work "past anything she had imagined." Others include unusual and large talents such as outsider/folk artist Lee Musselman and sculptor Pasquale Natale. She introduced painter Selina Trieff to rave reviews in New York and continues to exhibit her abstract figurative images emerging from rich fields of color. The list is long.

At first, she says, the gallery was perceived as having an edge, "I presented a new and experimental artist every week," she explained. But the older she and her artists got, "the more traditional we became."

PAUL RESIKA AND BERTA WALKER, RECEPTION AT GRAHAM MODERN GALLERY, NYC, 1985.



PHOTO: ELLEN PAGE WILSON



HUDSON AND IONE WALKER



NANCY WHORE, DAVID MAYO AND BERTA WALKER AT THE BOSTON ARTS FAIR, 1991.



BERTA GIVING THE WHITE GLOVE TREATMENT TO A PETER HUTCHINSON CONSTRUCTION.

Happily, other excellent galleries opened, presenting contemporary work. Many artists the BWG introduced are now showing in those galleries.

Ultimately, Walker thinks, dealers must present art they believe in; and in that presentation, comes the trust of the audience to follow the gallery. She is committed to supporting her artists unconditionally as they go through different paths of exploration in their own creative career. Donald Butterfield of Boston and Provincetown, who discovered such artists as Robert Beauchamp and Robert Henry through Walker, and who counts several Resika paintings among his collection, says, "I trust that keen ability of Walker to know each artist and know how to help them get to their best work. It's very important that a painter's work be edited. Not every painting is a great painting. Proper editing permits the artist to focus on what is excellent in the work, to keep moving. Berta does that for her artists. She directs them, in a way. I've heard Resika say, 'she created my style.' I understand what he means."

Alix Ritchie, collector of Provincetown art and publisher of the *Provincetown Banner*, most aptly explains why art lovers and art collectors always find their way to Berta Walker Gallery: "She is knowledgeable and infectious and consistently shows excellent work by excellent Provincetown artists in a way that really showcases the work, in a way that invites everyone to participate and learn and respect the work." ▲

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