

Berta Walker Gallery

15TH ANNIVERSARY

BY ANDRÉ VAN DER WENDE

Berta Walker loves Provincetown's art, people, and past; especially she loves its interconnectedness. "I cannot live in this community and not participate," she says. Anything else seems to baffle her. "We become one. If you didn't know that before coming to Provincetown, you learn it after you arrive."

Walker has turned a small-town insular gaze to her advantage, such that her vision as an art dealer is anything but myopic. Her gallery mission is voiced in the motto that has guided her for 15 years, "Presenting the history of American art as seen through the eyes of Provincetown." She aims for nothing less than documenting the role that artists associated with Provincetown have played in the major movements in American art in the last 100 years. She makes the past vital to the living artists she represents, replenishing the present with a curatorial finesse that is highly regarded.

She is part of a broad familial legacy of artistic entrepreneurship and overachievement that stems from her great grandfather, Thomas Barlow Walker, founder of the prestigious Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Her maternal grandparents began summering in Provincetown from 1916, running with the Eugene O'Neill set. Her father Hudson ran the Hudson Walker Gallery on 57th Street in New York City from 1938 to 1940, becoming Marsden Hartley's dealer. Her mother, Ione, was a dancer and painter.

Berta admired her father as "a great, great guy." A quietly generous patron of the arts, president of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and a cofounder of the Fine Arts Work Center, Hudson Walker was sometimes described

as "the silent mayor of Provincetown's art world."

Whether it was watching Hans Hofmann and her father walk up and down Commercial street with a petition supporting Tony Vever's controversial 1960 show of nude monotypes at the Sun Gallery; hawking Ed Wiener's contemporary jewelry as a teen on the summer streets; or baby sitting for the Rothko or Motherwell families, Berta's formative years growing up in Provincetown stimulated the creative circulation in her veins.

"Oh it was fabulous being brought up with artists around me, with art hung in every nook and cranny!" She lived with paintings by Hartley that now hang in museums. She witnessed an endless parade of artists, absorbing their diet of beer and backgammon, cigarettes and animated conversation.

Returning to Provincetown required a 30-year detour through advertising and museum administration in New York City, including 20 years at the Whitney Museum where she did much behind-the-scenes—organizing appearances by the Jefferson Airplane, Philip Glass, Mabou Mines, jazz musicians Gil Evans, Jimmy Ciuffre, and Earl "Fatha" Hines. She arranged poetry readings, corporate dinners, membership drives, and fashion shows. "In those days," she recalls, "I usually had post-event parties at my apartment, which was on Fifth Avenue near the Whitney. The management of the co-op saw the photos of the Jefferson Airplane on the cover of Life magazine and learned that they would be coming to my home after 11 p.m. They panicked and made me hire extra security. Long hair was frightening."

Her curatorial nimbus was not triggered until she was invited to be the director of the Marisa del

Re Gallery in New York. "I'd been working on a major fundraiser for the Work Center in Provincetown as Marisa opened her beautiful, huge gallery in the Fuller Building. I found myself installing shows for her and writing the press releases."

Early on, during a hurried and chaotic installation of works on paper by André Masson, Walker noticed the palpable effect of one work reacting with another on the opposite side of the room. "I walked between them and honestly I heard a conversation!" She often talks of this "conversation moment" between art and objects. "When the conversation flows, the show is set." It is the moment that confirms her instinct to her conscious self.

It speaks of the way in which she divines art, intuitively and openly, without historical or philosophical imperatives to trample upon aesthetic ones. It also explains why she adores Nancy Whorf for her knowledge of off-season Provincetown, Selina Trieff for her anthropomorphic barn animals, Salvatore Del Deo for his crisp horizons and emphatic fishermen, and Paul Resika for his cherished misanthropy. She loves forthrightness and appreciates mystery (Varujan Boghosian, Robert Henry, Erna Partoll), which is different from opacity. She tends naturally to avoid spurious, over-intellectualized work.

She met Resika when she became the director for Graham Modern on East 78th street. She discovered the art of Carmen Cicero, Selina Trieff, and Robert Henry during those years and it was the beginning of what is now a 20-year friendship and association. In the summer of 1989 she retreated to Provincetown to reconsider her options away from had become "the malaise of the city."

By fall Walker, who had been chair of the Work Center for 10 years while living in New York, was called upon to resolve a fiscal crisis and step in as its acting director. Coming back to Provincetown was exactly the fresh challenge Walker needed after Manhattan. "I came home," she recalls. "There is no other Provincetown. I know the great opportunity you get from living here."

By spring 1990 she opened the Berta Walker Gallery in a space at 212 Commercial Street. She was 46 years old. Soon she bucked trends and high rents by purchasing a space in the nether regions of Bradford Street. Fifteen years later, it's hard to imagine the gallery at 208 Bradford, with its constant cycle of John Kearney's chrome animals out front, ever being anywhere else.

If her father was the Silent Mayor of Provincetown, then Berta Walker is its Pied-Piper. It's easy to get caught up in her excitement for art and noble causes. She urges people and potential buyers to make their own choices to buy paintings or otherwise give support to the arts. "I want people to come in here and make their way through the energy. If they love it and want to take it home, all I have to do is give them permission. That's really my thing. Above all, they must love it and buy for that reason alone. Original art is alive. Its energy assuredly interacts wherever it resides."

Berta Walker inherited her father's philanthropic propensity, involving herself on an endless carousel of appeals, fundraisers, and silent auctions for the Fine Arts Work Center, the Provincetown



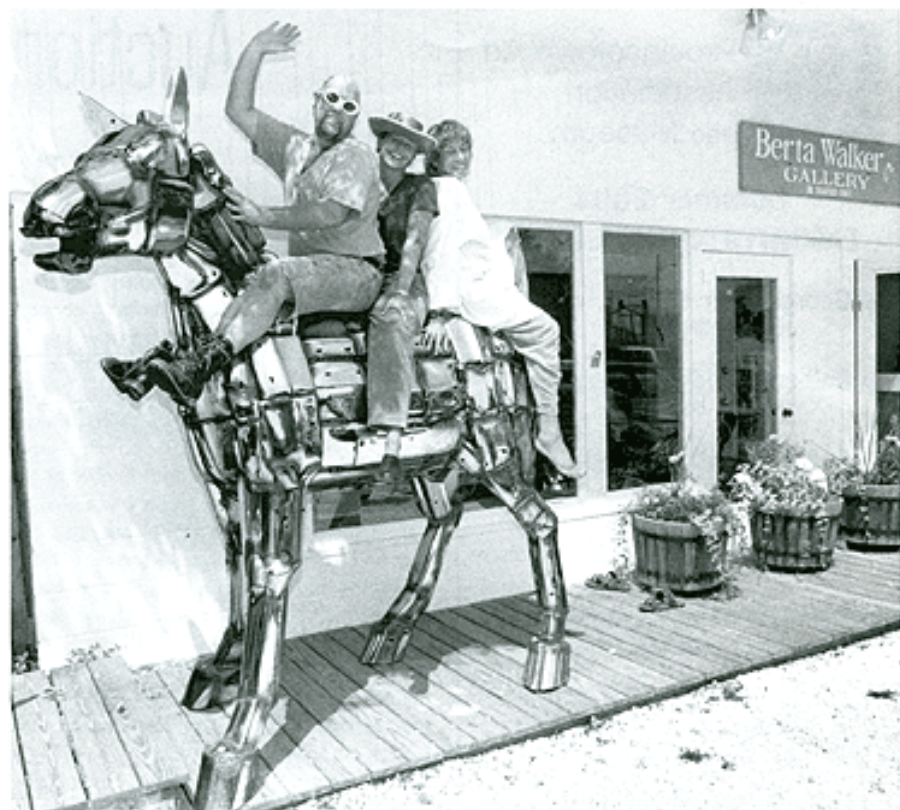
LEFT: BERTA WALKER AT GRAHAM MODERN GALLERY GREETING JUDY COLLINS AT A SUSAN CRILE OPENING, 1985. FACING PAGE, TOP: BERTA WITH ARTISTS LEE MUSSELMAN AND POLLY BURNELL IN FRONT OF HER GALLERY IN PROVINCETOWN; BELOW: BERTA SHOWING RICHARD ANUSZEWICZ AND CARMEN CICERO PAINTINGS TO CLIENTS.

town Aids Support Group, the Provincetown Repertory Theater, WOMR radio, and most recently celebrating her 15 years by fundraising for the reconstruction of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. She believes the new facility will showcase Provincetown's "inalienable right" to claim to be America's most important art colony. "We've ushered in many of the art movements in America through great art teachers like Hawthorne, Henschel, Dickinson, Hofmann, all of whom lured or spawned other great artists."

All those years in Manhattan were not wasted. Walker, with her refined business acumen, is nothing if not a savvy marketeer. She may like to float on clouds of aesthetic delirium but she's a pragmatist first. Whether she knew it or not, she discovered that she is a born dealer. In conversation she uses the word "integrity" second only to word "truth." Her tone is often an impassioned and giddy drift along multiple currents that almost always lead back to these tenets. As a dealer and admiring fan, she looks to comprehend the honesty of the artist's search.

It's typical of Walker's hubris and slight of hand that she would have you believe her gallery and herself are mutually exclusive; she insists that the talent of her artists are the reason of her gallery's success. She is content to do "this thing that's extraordinary to do, a hands-on contact with the creative spirit. The artist has the courage to tap his or her potential. When artists want to make their change, I am right there with them. That is my job because that is their truth."

Not only does Walker possess an uncanny sense of what is "right" or "true" about a painting. She's a master curator, often installing seemingly incongruous statements with disarming subtlety and harmonious effect. She would never describe herself as an art historian; but she has no problem referring to her gallery as a history lesson. "I love that people come here and think I'm a museum, because I am." The gallery has mounted several museum-quality shows tracing the arc of Provincetown art: "Hawthorne, His Students, Their Students," "Generations in the Arts" which involved over 40 multigenerational artistic families, and



"Collaborations," all tackled questions of influence and dissemination, not with an historian's eye but an advocate's glee. "Collaborations" lead to several partnerships, including the magic pairing of Boghosian and Resika.

She has learned about American art history by hanging its best example together. She credits the parallel knowledge of Josephine Del Deo "who lived it and wrote it," she says. "She's my Sensei, if you will."

Walker has a decisive fondness for the Modernists; Oliver Chaffee, Karl Knaths, Blanche Lazzell, James Lechay, Agnes Weinrich, and of course Hans Hofmann. She warmly speaks of a show held last year with Hofmann, Lazzell, Hart-

ley, and Chaffee, all hanging together in her gallery, interacting. "I learned lots from that show. I could see in Hartley's prints and Chaffee's Vence paintings, their direct connection. Chaffee is our first Modernist. I could see Hofmann's influence on Lazzell's later work. It all flows when it's put together. I didn't know it before I put up the art. I probably read it, but I don't get it through literature. I get it through living the visuals with the conversation going on with these four artists. They all connected."

She represents at least six former Hofmann students; not one paints like the other. Here she credits a great teacher who managed to communicate his lessons in such a way that each artist could create their own personal language. "I can see the whole of Hofmann going through Resika, Lazzell, and Trieff. What a gift Hofmann is."

Walker points to the front gallery at "Butterfly," a marvelous Resika in yellow, green, red, and purple. "All my talking has been to that painting. I just realized I'm having quite a conversation with it! Look at the energy of that painting! That's the vortex I was just talking about," she says gesticulating and pointing excitedly to other work around the gallery, "sending it from this art, to that form, to that art form!"

"I mean there it is, connected. Its soul is smack in the center! Green is the color of love, the heart shakra." Look at the red, she continues. "That color is pure passion."

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