

The Del Deo Family

SALVATORE DEL DEO'S painting depends on his ability, he says, "to make do"—*arrangiare*, as we say in Italian." He and Ciro Cozzi started the restaurant Ciro and Sal's in 1953 as former students of Henry Hensche, young, struggling artists preparing to cope with raising families. "What happened in '53," he recalls, "was part miracle, part brass balls, and, mostly, necessity." Sinks for the new restaurant were made by Sal's father, Romolo, a copersmith and tinsmith, who hammered the metal to a plywood frame. The dining room was a basement with a dirt floor. In time for Sal and Josephine's wedding, flagstones were set in wet cement, and the celebration, fueled with champagne and Chianti, took place on a seemingly shaky foundation.

The seasonal flurry of running the restaurant provided the compensation for Sal to spend entire winters painting, teaching classes at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and exhibiting regularly, ultimately at the Berta Walker Gallery. Josephine, a poet and historian, inspired by her love of the local dunes and wildlife, chronicled her experiences of dune life and spearheaded many conservation projects to protect both the natural environment and historic architecture of Provincetown. With a profound dedication as artists and residents, she and Sal were instrumental in the founding of the Fine Arts Work Center in the late '60s.

The Del Deos' son, Romolo, is a sculptor whose first art classes were taught by his father. A graduate

of Harvard, Romolo worked as an assistant to the noted sculptor Dmitri Hadzi. (Hadzi was profiled in 1997 in *Provincetown Arts*.) Romolo has spent many years in Italy casting in bronze. After living in New York for several decades, Romolo is now a resident of Provincetown. His interview with Mignon Nixon, featured here, describes how the natural environment of his home, with its constantly changing coastline, dunes and windblown sands, has influenced his work.

Sal's painting may be characterized by saying he makes the faraway feel up close. His restaurant, Sal's Place, was located in the far West End of town, where the Cape tightens into its final spiral. Here the distant lighthouse seems suddenly brought close, as if magnified. This effect is translated in the layered seascapes and landscapes of Del Deo's paintings, which are often presented in circular or oval shapes against the rectangle of the canvas, as if the image were seen through a telescope or the oval of an eye experiencing a visionary intensity. Within the aperture set within the frame, the painting reveals stratifications that, activated by adjacent tones, vibrate subtly and command close attention. "The Cape is not a pretty place," he says, "but it is bleakly beautiful."

Provincetown Arts Press is happy to announce the forthcoming publication of Josephine Del Deo's memoir of dune life, excerpted here.

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Dune Paintings

BY SALVATORE DEL DEO



DUNE CLOUDS
1970, oil on canvas
16 by 18.5 inches

Essentially a minimal “dunescape,” less atmosphere, more patterning. Degas said, “The air in the landscape is not necessarily the same as the air in one’s canvas.”



THE WRECK OF THE
JESSICA HOWLAND
1979, oil on canvas
20 by 24 inches

Our precious land is rightfully called the “graveyard of the Atlantic.” This image was very common years ago, less so today.

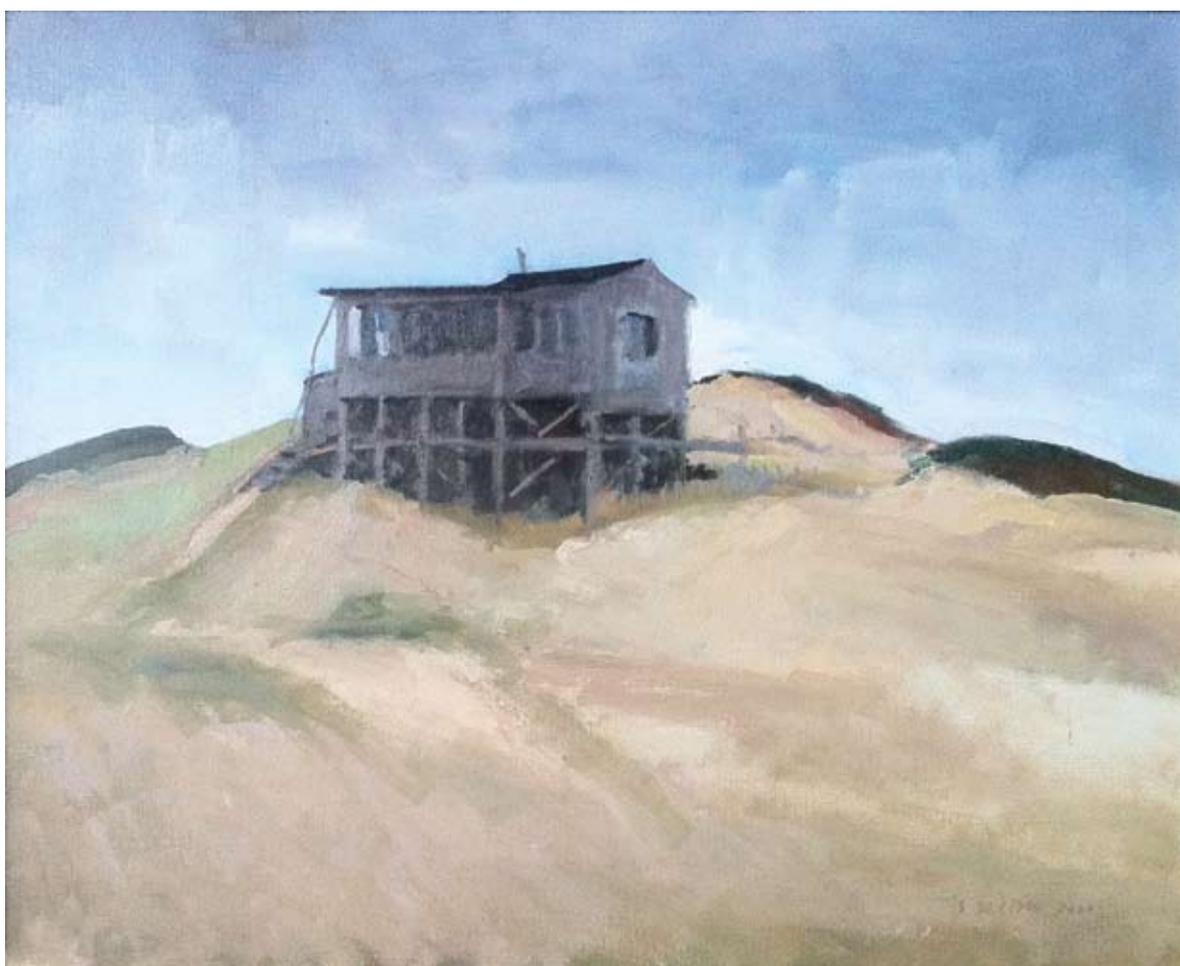
THE CUT
1969, oil on canvas
11 by 13 inches

Nature carving her imprint in the familiar landscape out at the Moors.



WELLS COTTAGE
2001, oil on canvas
20 by 24 inches

Another “temple,” this one owned by Ray Wells, stands up high and alone.





PILGRIM LAKE
1969, oil on canvas
22 by 26 inches

Again, I attempted to portray the scene from atmospheric to abstract forms.



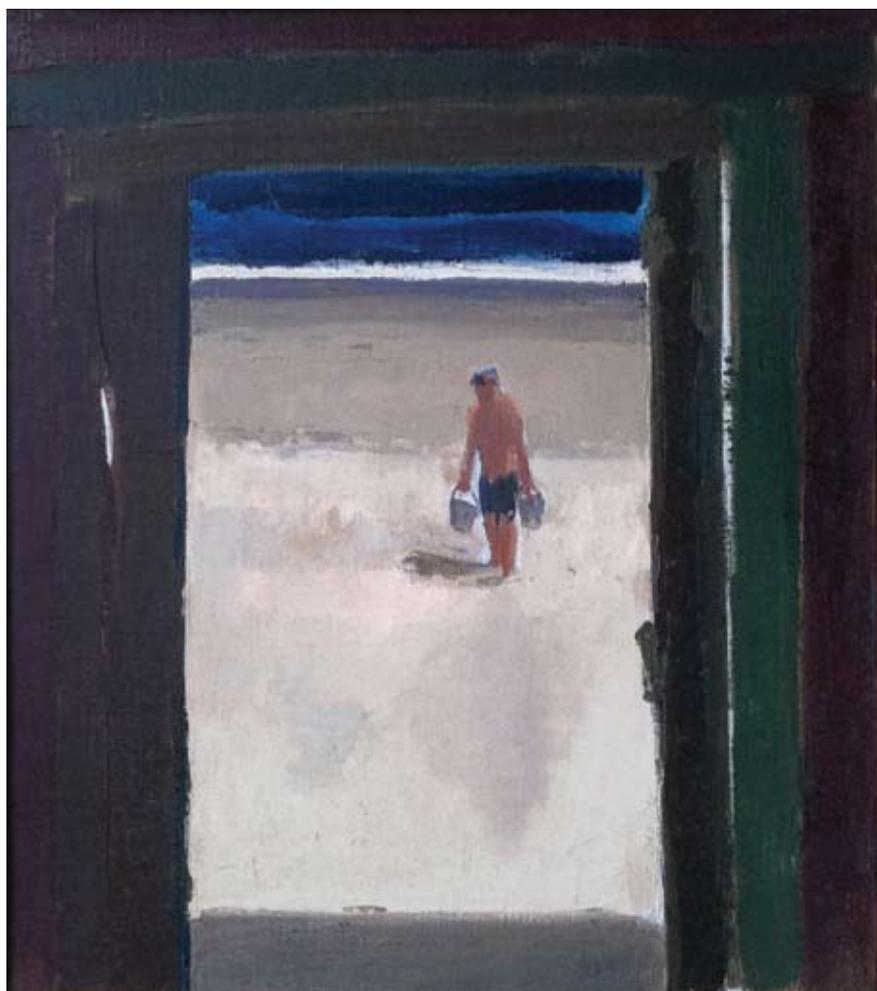
THE PRINCESS ASLEEP #1
1985, watercolor
23 by 30 inches

This is a large watercolor. Not satisfied with the tedium of the usual limited range in the paint tube, I decided to mix my own colors in large liquid batches, filling many jars. That way I could get more freedom.



FRENCHIE'S COTTAGE AT PEAKED HILL
1990, oil on canvas
11 by 20 inches

Sunset on the dunes, my favorite time to paint there. I've called these "shacks" my "temples at Peaked Hill."



DUNE CHORES
1969, oil on canvas
16 by 12 inches

Like the "Woman in the Dunes" of Japanese film fame, our dear friend Al helped bring water for the day to our "temple." Al Di Lauro, a city boy, adapted to dune rhythms with great gusto.

The Muse of True History on Watch at Peaked Hill

REFLECTIONS ON JOSEPHINE DEL DEO BY HER SON

BY ROMOLO DEL DEO

“Mrs. Del Deo is arguably the most important individual in the last half of the 20th century in the effort to preserve and pass on Provincetown’s heritage, cultural traditions and artistic patrimony.”

— David Dunlap, Editor,
Buildingprovincetown.com &
Architectural Critic *New York Times*

HARRY KEMP, the quintessential Provincetown bohemian and uncontested Poet of the Dunes, had a title for my mother, Josephine Del Deo, which he pinned upon her early in their long friendship and collaboration. In his inimitable and most prescient fashion, he dubbed her “The Muse of True History.” Ever with a mind for fellow dramatis personae, he recognized in the outspoken and talented young writer, weaver, and violinist, recently arrived from a stint acting at the Hedgerow Theatre in Philadelphia, a capable and willing ally for dramatic causes lost, and even those implausible but winnable. Their exploits were not from any playwright’s pen; they were the work of that singular poet, though Shakespeare was quoted liberally in the breach by Harry, in all states and conditions. Truly, they were pure Provincetown and fill the opening pages of my mother’s historical memoir, *The Watch at Peaked Hill*. Embracing from the start Harry Kemp’s dearest maxim, to preserve and defend Provincetown with word, deed, and instigation, she marched then, and continues to do so even today, over sixty years later, both metaphorically and literally costumed as “Truth,” the muse to Harry’s vision of Provincetown’s importance in the world and the world within Provincetown.

Just as Harry Kemp was the embodiment of Provincetown’s purest essence of authenticity, the dunes where he lived were the vessel of Provincetown’s spirit. You could not separate one from the other. And while many who have washed ashore in Provincetown attach their identity to the town, the harbor, the way of life embraced in this crook of cape, Josephine followed her mentor out to the dunes and let her Provincetown soul take root there. And as the dune landscape, at first seemingly so barren, is revealed to be teeming with life if one but takes the time to examine it, so the dune society, at first evident only in isolated hapless windblown shacks, revealed itself to Josephine in her memoir as temples, not unlike the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, Sicily. However, it was in these dune temples, not the gleaming Grecian ones, that Josephine found the academy of oracles that first shaped her and guided her in her life goals.

Harry Kemp, with his enactments and recitations, was the oracle of literature and history; Hazel Hawthorne Werner, who mapped the dune society and made the first attempts to organize the community, was the oracle of sociology; Charlie Schmid, with his intimate scientific knowledge of the wildlife, the oracle of natural history; and Frenchie Chanel, who nurtured the fragile dunes and protected its creatures, was the oracle of the environment and preservation. Of these influences, though Harry was first and seminal, ultimately, none was more lasting in friendship and effect than was the bond that Josephine made with Frenchie, the former Parisian gypsy and matriarch of the dunes. For while Harry, from his temple on the dunes, like Lear, challenged the North Atlantic tempest proclaiming poetry against the Nor’easters, Frenchie embraced the mischievous nature of the wind, as only a true gypsy can, and made of her life in the dunes a parable for how humanity is part of, and not apart from, nature.

She taught Josephine how to live on the dunes in harmony with the land, making a place of honor in her shack for the young writer and the love of

her life, the painter Salvatore Del Deo. In this way started a friendship that would last beyond Frenchie’s life, for Josephine still hears her direction in every task, from her concern for every tern chick nested outside on her beach to the care for her shack, which my father faithfully maintained and rebuilt for Frenchie. And every time my mother hauls her Olivetti portable typewriter from the jeep to the shack, and sits down to look over the shore, she hears Frenchie’s singsong voice, mingled with the wind, cooing to the birds and laughing at the proprieties of the world.

Perhaps this explains the dedication and the drive that has led my mother her whole life to protect the dunes, and, in time, extend that concern to spearhead civic projects that have done more to preserve this town than the contributions of any other resident. This vision of a Provincetown that would not become a casualty of development and exploitation first found expression in Josephine’s fight to establish the National Seashore Park. There were many protagonists, both for and against the creation of the park, and the chapters describing its foundation in *The Watch at Peaked Hill* drive home just how fragile the chances were that we would still be able to walk miles of natural dunes instead of the paved strip resort and landfill that outside business interests had drawn up plans for at the time. The movement to make the Province Lands the largest land grant to the founding National Seashore Park, from the tip of Long Point nearly to Pilgrim Lake, was the relentless goal of my mother and her close friend, the peerless Provincetown painter, Ross Moffett. Over the several years that they organized the popular opinion and mustered the votes in town hall to mandate this gift to the future of the town, Ross, like Harry Kemp before



JOSEPHINE, 1980 PHOTO BY SALVATORE DEL DEO



Salvatore Del Deo, *Dune Poet*, 1969, oil on canvas, 16 by 12 inches

him, saw in my mother the fire of a historian, seeking the dissemination of the truth. So it made sense that he turned to her to catalogue his amazing career and write his biography for posterity, a task to which she dedicated more than two decades.

But it did not take her so long because she was idle, but rather because in that same time she drafted the Local and the National Historic Districts of Provincetown, laboriously documenting every historical building in Provincetown and creating an archive, now dedicated in her name, in the Provincetown Library's current historically iconic home. A library so elegant and significant to the very architectural soul of Provincetown that it is hard to imagine that were it not for Josephine, the gracious silhouette and the welcoming amplitude of this edifice would have been lost to us. In the '70s the former church and failed arts center was a doomed structure, falling apart from ill repair and destined, despite its proud heritage as Provincetown's greatest church and second-largest building, to be desecrated into a hodgepodge of chopped-up haphazard commercial exploitation or even razed. It was Josephine, the Muse of True History, who rallied the town to save the building, and when others saw folly, she saw a prescient vision of the gleaming white building serving the town that we have today.

Like the fight for the National Seashore, or the Historic District, it was not an easy or direct path, and she struggled for years to save the building as a museum for the town's history, ultimately deriving inspiration to accomplish this feat by once again turning to Harry Kemp's legacy. He was the originator of the idea of building a replica of the *Mayflower* to celebrate the Pilgrim's first landing in Provincetown. But his brainchild was co-opted by the moneyed interests in Plymouth and the *Mayflower* only docked here

briefly on her maiden voyage to Plymouth. Josephine's idea to save the museum was to revisit Harry's inspiration by building an historic replica of a vessel that was emblematic of Provincetown's history and distinction, this time, the proud fishing schooner *Rose Dorothea*, which brought home the Lipton Cup and proved to the world that Provincetown's captains were second to none. The schooner was built from scratch right inside the building, all with scant funding and local volunteer labor, most notably that of the great shipbuilder Captain Francis "Flyer" Santos. It was a labor of love . . . and it worked. Her genius, learning from Harry's heartbreak, was to build the memorial in such a way that it could never be taken away from Provincetown and, simultaneously, make destruction of the building containing it unthinkable. *Rose Dorothea* became the anchor that held fast the building in Provincetown's storied past and preserved its future. She created a focal point that holds a vision of this town's past and present in our eyes.

Faithful to her oracles of the dunes in their sandblasted driftwood temples, Josephine rallied this raucous town around the cause of history and preservation, and amazingly it has taken seed. Today it is hard to imagine there was a time when Provincetown's historic beauty, its nature, and its past were, like the *Rose Dorothea*, on the brink of oblivion. We look out on a vision of Provincetown, its legacy and its future, and we see a vision that Josephine saw while on watch at Peaked Hill.

"The process of preservation is never finished; it continues for the patient and the brave to address and resolve in each succeeding generation."

— Josephine Del Deo, *The Watch at Peaked Hill*

EXCERPTS FROM

The Watch at Peaked Hill, 1953–2003

BY JOSEPHINE DEL DEO



Salvatore Del Deo, *Frenchie's Old Shack*, 1964, oil on canvas, 16 by 26 inches

The Watch at Peaked Hill, 1953–2003 is an account of Josephine and Salvatore Del Deo as they dwelt, seasonally, in a dune shack for a half-century. The Del Deos spent honeymoon summers in a shack owned by Frenchie Chanel. After absorbing the ethos of “dune culture,” Josephine became a passionate advocate for the remaining constellation of shacks at a time when the National Seashore took possession of most of the squatter’s rights of the historic settlers. The three-story edifice built of driftwood and scavenged materials by Charlie Schmid, with its catwalks and ladders, mirrors and skylights, with various whalebones perched on display, was both a museum and a temple. The National Seashore, unable to maintain the shaky structure, bulldozed it as a safety hazard. Along with Frenchie and Charlie, the poet Harry Kemp had a mythic relation to the dunes.

FRENCHIE

Sometimes she would complain bitterly about the sand fleas, her arms covered in bites, but then she would light a cigarette for solace and begin to tell us about her life in the streets of Paris, dancing and singing with a band of gypsies, performing for their living. We never questioned those stories about surviving in the sewers of Paris as they were such romantic scenarios. Who would not be struck dumb with nostalgia for another time by this hauntingly provocative femme fatale, a beauty from George White’s *Scandals* who came here, so she said, with Bette Davis and proceeded to bury her life in a shack she built out of scraps of driftwood from the beach and from other salvaged materials that the ocean serendipitously provided at her doorstep. What emerged was a magic moment of architecture perfectly suited to her eccentricity and her romanticisms. No one but an artist could have reinvented habitation in

such a way as to fit into the natural element as she did. She cajoled the Atlantic to stay at a respectable distance from her door, but she could do nothing with the sea of sand that advanced relentlessly, so she annually bribed “Pinky” Silva to bulldoze the ever-encroaching sand away from the shack so that her dune life could commence for another season.

Long before the plovers and terns were determined to be worthy of protection by the National Seashore, Frenchie trotted out to mark every nest with signposts of driftwood and heaps of impedimenta that surrounded the nesting mothers and warned off intruders. She spared hundreds of newborns over the years and was devoted to injured birds. . . . Astonishingly, I have seen her place her cheek against a wounded gull and talk to it, the bird calmly enduring her tenderness, never once flailing out with its powerful beak.

CHARLIE SCHMID

There was one among us whose devotion to the life cycle of the dune swallows received year-round attention; he was known as “Dune Charlie.” Charlie Schmid had no peer as a bird-watcher and his patient research earned respect at an ornithological symposium in Switzerland, which he attended with his diaries in hand.

HARRY KEMP

Harry Kemp was a dune-dweller of another color: he liked to live dangerously close to an uncomfortable paucity and to his collection of literary greats, especially Shakespeare, whom he kept damp and daily available in his tiny shack. A bed and books described his diocese. They sufficed to maintain his spirit for an entire lifetime. Swimming in the ocean in late fall was not uncommon for him, and on one of these occasions, he prompted Sal and his photographer friend Dan Bernstein to join him. After an ocean plunge, they shivered and shook their way back to the shack, and Harry offered them a burlap gunnysack with which to dry off. To fire up their spirits, he recited Shakespeare. According to Harry, this procedure gave off warmth no wood could provide.

HAZEL HAWTHORNE WERNER

Hazel Hawthorne Werner frequently rented one or both of her shacks, Thalassa and Euphoria, as she herself was then fairly along in her years and didn't always have the stamina to maintain them. She hired Sal and Eldred Mowery to help her. They spent numerous hours shuttling people and supplies back and forth and enjoying a few tête-à-têtes with Hazel when the various tasks were done and they could sit down to relax over a pretty stiff cocktail and listen to accounts of Hazel's dune life in times past. Such a general routine greatly endangered the return voyages in a vehicle that offered no reassurances that one would not fall out at the first huge dip of an unexpected dune declivity, even if dead sober.



ROMOLO DEL DEO IN HIS PROVINCETOWN STUDIO, PREPARING LOST WAX SCULPTURE (WITH DUNE SAND) FOR CASTING IN BRONZE, 2011
PHOTO BY LINNEA DEL DEO

A Face in Time:

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROMOLO DEL DEO

BY MIGNON NIXON

Mignon Nixon: You and I have known each other a long time. You introduced me to Provincetown and its artistic history when we were students. This winter you returned to Provincetown full-time after living and working for many years in Italy and New York, and I am visiting your studio here for the first time in a long while. It seems like a good moment to ask you how your work has been shaped by this place.

Romolo Del Deo: Living here is like living on a constantly changing natural sculpture, its shifting sands lose and gain over three feet of coastline yearly. Watching it accumulate into dunes and carve away cliff sides, I have always been aware of this sculptural environment. I frequently lived with my family in our dune shack on the back shore. Every day brought an exploration of how the constant windblown sand remade the world from storm to storm, how it etched its finish upon every man-made thing, until even the most unrelentingly unpoetic objects acquired a kind of second life as sandblasted sculptures. I would play with this reformatted detritus for hours on the beach, assembling cities, towers, and processional arrays, spanning the shoreline and defying the next rising tide. The windblown sand gets everywhere, and truly nothing and nowhere is safe from the presence of its grit. It sloughs in the creases of clothes, piles atop bookshelves, sifts down from the ceiling, and mounds under every rug. It is pervasive. When I was a child, Frenchie Chanel, the inimitable gypsy of the dunes, showed me how to wash dishes with sand, instead of water, and how to use it to cleanse and close even the cuts from rose-hip thorns and compass grass. In the dunes, it's helpful to think of sand not as an impediment to living but as a component part of everything there, upon which one builds and grows all things. Provincetown's Jay Critchley, well-remembered for coating everyday objects, cars, and buildings with beach sand, has made this fact of life here into a stand-alone statement. But my interest lies in the more subtle and insidious way that sand pervades life, which speaks to my work as a sculptor.



THE BEAUTY OF TIME (DETAIL), 2010, UNIQUE BRONZE, 19H BY 9W BY 60 INCHES, COURTESY OF BERTA WALKER GALLERY, PHOTO BY SKY POWER

MN: What any viewer would immediately observe about your sculpture is its involvement with the ancient and the archaic, with the deep time of antiquity and mythology. How did this develop?

RDD: I have always been fascinated by antiquity, especially that which was fragmented, broken, and particularly the weathered pieces. Part of this love for the broken and timeworn came to me early, through the annual ritual of unwrapping and arranging the family heirloom collection of Italian terra-cotta figurines. We used to create a nativity tableau crèche, known as a *presepio*, often over eight feet long and as high, built in papier-mâché as a reproduction of the ancestral home of my family, on the Mediterranean island of Ischia. Most of these figures, while retaining their dignity, had lost some appendages over the years of unpacking, propping up, and putting away for another season. And in some sense, I loved them more for their imperfections, which traced a familiar history of years past and reminded me of how time shapes life. As I grew older, and spent more time in my father's studio, I often preferred his broken statuettes and disjointed French mannequins to the more intact still-life objects.

The Tides of Provincetown: Pivotal Years in America's Oldest Continuous Art Colony (1899–2011) will be on view at the New Britain Museum of American Art from July 15 to October 16, 2011. Sal and Romolo Del Deo's work will be featured, and Josephine Del Deo wrote the catalogue essay for the "old master" section of the exhibit.

And here too, the sand invaded, for among these objets d'art were whale and shark bones, reshaped by weathering and bleached to a marbled whiteness.

My gravitation to metaphysical subject matter naturally led me to the work of Edwin Dickinson, who had taught my father, Salvatore Del Deo. Dickinson loomed in my childhood as an icon, sitting on our deck, painting and rotating his visor in a kind of sundial to the sun, even when it passed him from behind, a living painterly timepiece himself. The Dickinson world of delicate grays, shadows, partial shapes, and figures gave a vocabulary to my love and familiarity with broken forms and sandblasted objects. As my career has progressed as a sculptor, I have been drawn ever deeper into this world of partial shapes, revealed in patinas that mirror the processes of time. The tension between the newness of making something from one's hands and simultaneously giving it an instant antiquity, a presumed history, has come to drive my ideas about sculpture.

MN: The idea of "instant antiquity" makes a kind of fetish of age. By reinvigorating ancient techniques and using them to produce fetishes of antiquity, your sculpture might be seen as being engaged in a kind of classical revivalism. But I understand it in a different way. Your work seems to explore the idea that the past haunts the present through fragments, as Freud claimed. Freud collected ancient figurines and found inspiration in them for his ideas about how the past lives on in us through memory, often in a fractured form. You seem to be working with a similar notion. Would you agree?

RDD: I am, of course, interested in Freud's method of viewing the mind through the lens of antiquity, but Freudian psychology is analytical in nature, so it differs from how I approach the problem as a sculptor. Instead, I create my own objects and imbue them with the association to the ancient through techniques, both archaic and modern. For example, in my recent work, *The Beauty of Time* (unique bronze, 2010), I have used sand in my modeling to ravage the surface of a face. This particular sculpture, which is included in the current traveling exhibit on Provincetown art by the New Britain Museum of American Art, is a natural outcome of my longtime fascination with sand, both as a metaphor for and as an agent of time's presence. As in a

dune shack, the sand is now everywhere. And while this creates perils for the execution of the work in bronze casting, it also offers me a way to shape the sculpture with another set of hands, those of sand. The tension between the action of sand and my own mirrors, for me, the sense of time's presence and its press upon our existence. It presents a kind of geology of my sculpture. Like Provincetown, my work is being shaped by the presence of sand. And, like the land, its existence is a metaphor for time. It's not hard to imagine Provincetown as an hourglass, ticking away with each wave and each blast of wind, running down into an oblivion past memory and into a history of myth, like Atlantis. That is the beauty of time. And its most perfect metaphor is the passing grain of sand, itself a fleck of quartz that once was the mountains of another world when the earth was young and the land stood in one Pangean entirety. Continents tick away, beaches, civilizations, both monuments and debris. They wash ashore as one thing, then dissolve with the same persistence and before the same forces that once brought them forth. ❏

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MIGNON NIXON is Professor of Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. In 2010–11, she was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. She is the author of *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (MIT Press/October Books, 2005) and writes on contemporary art for *October*, *Artforum*, and other journals.

All artworks are courtesy of Berta Walker Gallery.