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## Truro painter Nancy Ellen Craig returns to the world with two shows

“I was told as a child that I was going to be famous,” the artist Nancy Ellen Craig told me in a 2013 interview.

And, well before her death on June 6, 2015, she was.

Her portraits include Norman Mailer, Edwin Dickinson, Hans Hofmann, Frank Lloyd Wright, Tyrone Power, Angelica Huston, Cliff Robertson, the Duke of Argyll, Princess Marie Luise of Prussia, Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Forbes, George Abbot, Irwin Shaw, John Ringling North, Princess Piminella Hohenlohe, Paul Cadmus, Prince Alexander Romanoff, Guinness Plunket, Marqués and Marquesa de Portago and many others.

“I was just doing it,” she said of her aptitude for portraiture. “And then I started showing in New York, and getting prizes. Within a few years I got the Altman figure prize. I got the top Audubon prize. The Metropolitan [Museum of Art] purchased a painting. I was in American Art and American Women. I was photographed by The New York Times.”

In addition to the Benjamin Altman Figure Prize of the National Academy of Design and the Audubon Artists’ Patrons’ Prize, Craig won the Allied Artists’ Gold Medal, the National Association of Women Artists’ Mary E. Karasick Portrait Prize and the Julien F. Detmer Award for Best Oil, among others.

“I started getting a little bit of fame, and left it,” she said.

Leaving her New York life behind, Craig came to Truro with Preston Carter in September 1962. It was here that the large compositions began.

“I felt so liberated coming here,” she said. “I had this barn, which I rented. I’d get these huge blank canvases and imagine things on them. It was exhilarating. It never occurred to me who’s going to show them. Finally, just before 2000, someone brought Berta over.”

Salvatore Del Deo had told Berta Walker about a wonderful artist who never let anyone into her studio and painted huge paintings that didn’t fit through regular doors, Walker recalled.

“But,” he said, “knowing you, you’ll really like her art,” Walker says. “So I called her and she allowed me to visit. Yes, I was truly amazed at the talent, scale, originality. And the charm of this tiny person with a huge and vibrant personality.”

Craig and Walker became friends, and created several major shows together over the years — which required the installation of double doors in the Berta Walker Gallery to accommodate her enormous canvases.

While Craig was famous for her portraits, what she wanted to show were the paintings she had hidden away in her studio, and proposed a show at Provincetown Art Association Museum, which was approved before her death last year.

Craig’s friend and confidant, David Henry Perry, curated the show for PAAM, “Nancy Ellen Craig: Looking Through Windows, Real and Imagined,” which opens with a reception on Friday and shows through July 7. In collaboration with the PAAM show, The Berta Walker Gallery is showing “Nancy Ellen Craig (1927-2015): Renaissance Dream Drawings,” also opening tomorrow and showing through July 5.

“She was on that portrait-painting treadmill, as she called it,” Perry said. “The paintings she did in Truro were really for herself — evident in the fact that over 400 were documented.”

Perry wanted to put together a personal show at PAAM, with insights to go with each painting. On one wall he features the last epic painting that she did.

“Or at least the biggest one that would fit through the doors,” he said. “With it are studies, sketches and drawings that she executed during the completion of that painting, to show her process.”

Another wall has three paintings of an Irish sheep auction she visited while staying at a nearby Guinness castle, painting the Guinness family. She did at least 40 sketches at the auction, which turned into seven major paintings and 10 drawings.

We will also see Craig in four self-portraits painted at her Long Nook studio, where she documented the four seasons out her window. In these paintings Craig appears in a reflection among the paints, brushes and studio clutter.

“She always paid attention to her environment,” Perry said. “And she was always looking for something. Her keys, her purse. She searched for identity, spirituality and stimulation — something to paint.”

Perry, who spent 30 years as an architect and exhibit designer, will also display a selection of sketchbooks — again so people can see her process. Craig kept sketchbooks her whole life, carrying one everywhere. Figures from these sketchbooks appear in a series of drawings that will appear in the companion show at Berta Walker Gallery. Drawn on a gold background with her signature checkerboard floors and vanishing point, these nine dreamscapes form a cohesive



Nancy Ellen Craig in seasonal self-portraits, “Spring” and “Autumn.”

collection of some of Craig's favorite drawings.

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What: Nancy Ellen Craig "(1927-2015): Renaissance Dream Drawings" & "Looking Through Windows, Real and Imagined" When: "Renaissance" reception 6-8 pm Fri. (BWG) & "Windows" reception 7 pm Fri. (PAAM) Where: The Berta Walker Gallery, 208 Bradford St., Provincetown & The Provincetown Art Association & Museum, 460 Commercial St. Admission: Free

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