
Budd Hopkins retrospective comes 'Full Circle'

By Susan Rand Brown / Banner Correspondent

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Modest by nature, Budd Hopkins loved friends and parties, and was even known to enjoy a mid-summer bacchanalia, Wellfleet-style, in a supersized tiled bath. He would certainly have wanted a good party for "Full Circle," his career retrospective opening at 8 p.m. on Friday, July 21, at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum at 260 Commercial St. And then there's the opening at Berta Walker Gallery, for a show of additional work by Hopkins chosen from the family's collection, at 6 p.m. on Friday, July 28, at 208 Bradford St. in Provincetown. Folks behind the scenes are aiming for those openings to be good parties and much more.

"An important part of Provincetown's illustrious art community for over five decades," is how Christine McCarthy, PAAM's executive director, describes Hopkins. The intention of the show, McCarthy writes in the generously illustrated exhibition catalog, is to spark awareness of the "significant contributions [Hopkins] made to American mid-century art." For too long, Hopkins has been known for his efforts to champion those who believed in UFOs, to the detriment of his reputation as an artist. This exhibit should help reclaim his place in American modernism.

His daughter, photographer Grace Hopkins, is curating the PAAM exhibition. She has been unraveling her father's early history since his death in 2011, and has been rewarded by discovering major paintings tucked away in his studios. Her father's friends contacted her with information about gifts they'd received of collaged studies for paintings, which helped to identify and date the larger works. Hanging the show this week, Grace got to see her father's paintings in PAAM's collection up close and personal. It was a body of work she'd previously known only in photographs.

"When Dad switched from abstract expressionist paintings to making collage, it became more about the way color reacted and not about the movement of the brush strokes," Grace says in the Wellfleet house where she spent childhood summers with her father and her mother, the art critic April Kingsley, now living in Harwich. Grace's parents met in 1970 when Kingsley was hired to write a scholarly essay about Hopkins' work. Reprinted in the PAAM catalog, Kingsley's critical insights have also come "full circle."

Budd Hopkins was born in Wheeling, W. Va., in 1931. He studied art history at Oberlin College before relocating to Manhattan in the mid-1950s and meeting other painters at the Art Students League and around town. Along with his friend Franz Kline, Hopkins came to Provincetown in 1956. He lived in a fish shed on a small pier, worked in galleries and painted in the loose, gestural style he shared with friends Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, the core of the abstract expressionist generation. Red Grooms painted his iconic "Cedar Bar" of this crew, who lived in downtown Manhattan and gathered at their neighborhood watering hole to talk art. In the painting, Hopkins, recognizable by his trademark glasses, is seated at the far right of the bar.

After most of his New York pals relocated to the Hamptons, Hopkins remained on the Outer Cape as a central part of the art community. He had found a collaborator and friend in architect Charles Zehnder, who, in the 1960s and '70s, built two Cape Cod modernist homes with studios for Hopkins, first in Truro

and then in Wellfleet. The latter house features small vertical windows and stacked wooden decks fronted by narrow horizontal slats, creating vistas with the linear shapes found in Hopkins' mid-career geometric paintings. The famed light surrounding the Cape also inspires the happy colors of the geometric paintings, each preceded by a collaged study.

In the mid-1970s, Hopkins was a founder of the fabled Long Point Gallery in Provincetown's East End, whose members, including Robert Motherwell, Paul Resika, Varujan Boghosian, Tony Vevers, Carmen Cicero and Fritz Bultman, shared a passion for the Cape. They called their loft-like space "an artists' place"; it was up a flight of stairs in a suite of rooms that now house the radio station WOMR. All of them were established in the New York art scene. Their goal was to maximize Provincetown's visibility as a vital artist colony.

Hopkins remained in Wellfleet, living and painting into the early 21st century, when he became ill. During five decades on the Cape, his paintings went through several cycles. Abstraction was followed by hard-edged, braced geometric shapes in bright colors, where the circle is a key image. This led to a sculptural Guardian Series, first painted onto wood (coinciding with an extended visit to the Parthenon), and then, with the Dancing Guardians, back on canvas. Hopkins eventually returned to smaller scale abstractions, using painterly brushwork and a simplified palette to render fragmented shapes. The work had circled back to its earliest beginnings.

One of her father's geometric paintings hangs in Grace's living room. She points to a multicolor abstract insert shaped like a long triangle. She calls these moments of expressionist energy an "activity," comparable to something that you'd register from the window of a moving car, and she explains that her father always unbalanced the geometric paintings with these more painterly elements. She recalls a wonderful memory from her early teens: one summer day, she was invited to join her father for a painting lesson in the studio. He pulled out a piece of canvas. He'd been making collages for the wooden Guardian figures, and hadn't used canvas for a while. "Then," Grace says, "he put down some color in a loose Guardian shape. Within minutes he was transfixed." This was the beginning of the Dancing Guardian series.

The painting "Ascension" is a mix of geometry and abstraction, gesture and fragmented form. Grace, curator and daughter, positions these fragmented Guardians in the exhibition as if they're dancing offstage, a circle rounded. And indeed, with the exhibit "Full Circle," it's likely that the ascension of Budd Hopkins within the canon of 20th-century modernism has truly begun.

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