

"YOU ONLY GET ONE BODY"

A Conversation with Laura Shabott

BY SUSAN RAND BROWN



Shabott at work COURTESY FINE ARTS WORK CENTER, PHOTO BY JULIA CUMES

PROVINCETOWN-BASED LAURA SHABOTT, multidisciplinary artist and graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, pinpoints art school as the launching point for a learn-by-doing journey that was followed, decades later, by her self-directed residencies at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. There, in the high-ceilinged, rustic spaces of studios 12 and 13—both part of the original Days Lumberyard on upper Pearl Street—using the same “catwalk” used by “push/pull” theorist Hans Hofmann in the mid-1930s, she created large-scale, figurative paintings and collages that will be unveiled at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in October 2025.

Laura and I have been talking about life, art, and community for over a decade, starting after I purchased one of her hyacinth paintings at Provincetown’s Four Eleven Gallery, where she was represented at the time. Shortly thereafter, I purchased two of Laura’s figurative pieces during a Provincetown Art Association

and Museum (PAAM) members’ show, including a 12-by-12-inch torso. This compact piece is strikingly notable for crimson-colored breasts approached with looping brush strokes, as if seen through both Hofmann’s and his acolyte Helen Frankenthaler’s eyes, and carried forward in Shabott’s own signature style.

Over the years, our conversations have taken place in each other’s homes, in studio and gallery spaces, sitting on the bay beach, and most recently, online. Laura has an infectious laugh, often punctuating her thoughts with an implied exclamation point.

SUSAN RAND BROWN: I’m inspired by how you describe your figure-based art [reading from Shabott’s artist’s statement]: “Sparked by a deep need to capture the life force with color, composition, and form, either working with a model who is sometimes myself or with objects and plants that mean something to me. The canvas, collage, or drawing contains the energy and the

history of the process.” It took many years for you to be able to capture the journey so precisely. Let’s talk about art school and what followed, and how that informed your sense of yourself as part of Provincetown’s creative “village.”

LAURA SHABOTT: As you know, I had two experiences with art school. I grew up in a complicated New Haven, Connecticut, family and wasn’t really ready right out of high school. After a first attempt to settle into a very different set of expectations, it took a decade plus for me to return. But whatever obstacles I had, the goal of being a full-time artist had never left me. That’s what generated my energy and my confidence. I was also doing giant life drawings and collages at the time, so the thread leading to figurative abstraction was there.

I was also making films at the Museum School, which led to acting. I played Lady Macbeth in one film [laughs]. After art school, in the mid-’90s, I lived in Provincetown on a waitress salary. I also started a gallery, making a deposit on the Beachcombers exhibition space [the Flagship’s former Dory Bar] for \$100. They gave me a chance. I was showing artists who had not been shown in town before, including renowned *New Yorker* cartoonist Mischa Richter, when he had a place on Bangs Street, and his grandson Sasha. I called it the Provincetown Group Gallery: A Renewed Tradition, keeping alive the memory of the original Group Gallery, which had recently closed. There was a little pushback from Group Gallery members. “I couldn’t get more Provincetown than this” was my thought, and I worked hard, having a new solo show for an artist every Friday. After two years, I sold the gallery to Blaine Bershad and Will Sherwood. Then I left for a while, returning in 2001 to live and work in town. That’s when the person you know today really began. One takeaway: I was a lot more persistent than I knew.

SRB: You’ve described yourself as “in the umbrella of the Provincetown arts colony.” Community is very important to you. The idea that “it takes a village” applies to your sense of the person you are today, as does teaching at Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill during the isolating days of the pandemic, the formation of the Outer Cape Art Collective, your involvement with the PAAM as contributing member and teacher, and your connection to the Berta Walker Gallery, where you are represented and have been a gallery assistant for eleven years. We’ve also talked about the current political moment, and the role of artists, of making art as part of a geographically isolated community.

LS: One advantage of Provincetown being both isolated and diverse in many ways is the abundance of talent we bring to the table. So many of us are multidisciplinary as artists, in a significant way that echoes the original Provincetown Players, where playwrights, actors, and set designers all played multiple roles, putting on plays in living rooms, and then in a former fish house owned by Mary Heaton Vorse. Theater people used the ramshackle structure facing the sea, and the second floor was occupied by an easel painter.

During the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, I had a comedic role in Jane Bowles’ *In the Summer House*, appearing before an audience at the Boatslip Resort holding a live chicken and playing a kazoo! Teaching art also involves a theatrical energy: Hofmann’s studio classes, when he ripped up students’ drawings, were very dramatic. So yes, as a community, we’re more apt to stretch out, grow, and communicate in response to what the moment presents.

SRB: Let’s talk about the Outer Cape Art Collective that started with online classes, during the pandemic, at Castle Hill.



Balancing, 2024, Flasche on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

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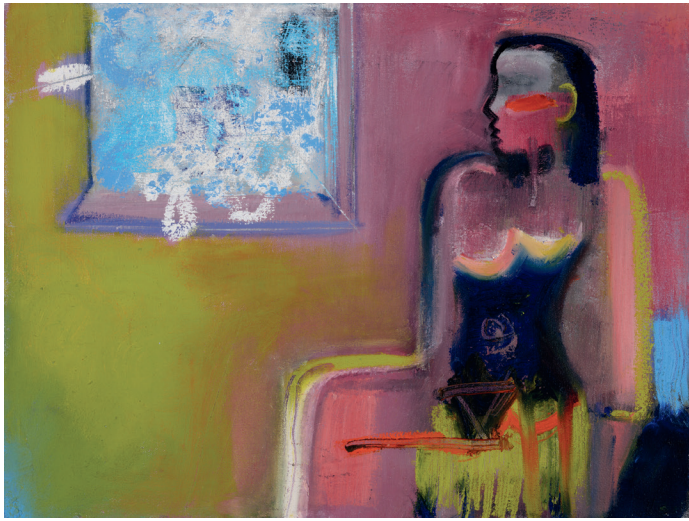
LS: I was teaching both collage and painting. Those taking classes were mostly women, serious about art—in many cases returning to painting after professional careers and caretaking responsibilities were behind them. I too had returned to art full throttle after what felt like a significant gap. We were a natural fit.

Post-pandemic, the group continued to meet online in an independent program I co-created with Alana Barrett called PROMPT. We offered open-ended prompts, like “home” or “identity,” with critiques and virtual open studios, and published a zine of the participants’ art. We showed them artwork by mid-century and contemporary artists, both men and women. The group bonded, and in March 2023, formed a collective. Since then, they’ve had two Outer Cape Art Collective shows at the Provincetown Commons and a group exhibition at Berta Walker Gallery this past April.

SRB: Lately you’ve been teaching at PAAM. How did that begin? What have you learned?

LS: When PAAM first asked me to create a class, I taught a sample figure-drawing workshop on Hofmann’s theory of push/pull, and it just clicked. From assisting at Berta Walker Gallery, I have seen how powerful Hofmann’s push/pull theory of creating the illusion of space on a two-dimensional surface was for his former students and wanted to share it. This approach to painting was strengthened in summer courses with Bob Henry, a Hofmann “alum.” In 2018, Bob and I did a public demo together at the Cape Cod Museum of Art, and soon after that, he said, “I don’t have to teach anymore. Laura can do it.”

SRB: Your summer PAAM classes are packaged as “artmaking through the eyes of,” beginning with Helen Frankenthaler, then



Susanna on a Winter's Day, 2018, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches



Beach Day, 2020-25, fabric and oil paint collage, 18 x 24 inches

Fritz Bultman, and ending with Lester Johnson. In each class, painters worked from a model. Bultman worked with collage. In introducing Johnson, your course description noted gestural art-making and action painting. Were there some broader objectives?

LS: When you draw from a model, you're sensing an incredible aura of that person. You are working with someone who is generous enough to be unclothed, so talking about the body often happens in class. The whole idea is that we inhabit a body and have a relationship to that body. You can order a new computer, but you can't order a new body!

People who take these classes want to have an authentic voice, a signature hand for making art. We all have a language of our

own, as individual as we are. Whether you are seeing through the eyes of Frankenthaler or Bultman or Johnson, you will see your own hand, the marks you make. And that's the challenge: to try different mediums and see that authentic self, your personality on the page, the way a musician can develop a signature sound across genres.

When I first returned to a full-time figure practice, that's what I did for myself. This past fall, I was asked to jury *Why Cape Cod*, a members' exhibition at the Cape Museum. The most important thing I looked for in an artwork was that sense of seeing a personality on the page, a life force or spark.

SRB: Recently I visited the A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, an artist-directed space formed in the early 1970s by women artists tired of being excluded from the Western canon and angry at being locked out of museum spaces. We've often talked about Selina Trieff, a figurative painter working with universal subjects whose show at PAAM should have traveled to other museums. What has your experience been? What do you advise?

LS: Galleries and museums make choices about which artists to champion. Even now, it's still true that fewer of those elevated to awards and museum shows are women. There is the example of Berta [Walker], who was tapped to lead Graham Modern when it opened in Manhattan in the mid-1980s. Using this trailblazing platform, Walker supported gallery artist Paul Resika and then gave exhibits to Selina Trieff as well as Bob Henry and Carmen Cicero. She moved to Provincetown in 1989 as acting director of the Fine Arts Work Center, opening her own Provincetown gallery in 1990.

Berta champions my work and works hard for her artists. And there's David Perry, retired architect and consummate collector from Boston and Truro, who is curating my solo show opening this fall. This was always my dream, to have a museum show. Now I can be a steward of the Provincetown and Cape Cod legacy, and inspire others. Part of what I do—my own form of gratitude—is to return something to those who have also brought, or will bring, something to Provincetown's arts colony. In the end, we only get one body! ▀

SUSAN RAND BROWN has regarded Provincetown as her heart's home since the early 1960s, when her family settled into the East End's gallery district. A contributor to Provincetown Arts for almost two decades, she also writes for Art New England and the Provincetown Independent.



Sacred Space (detail), 2025, ink, charcoal, and paint on canvas, 95 x 72 inches