

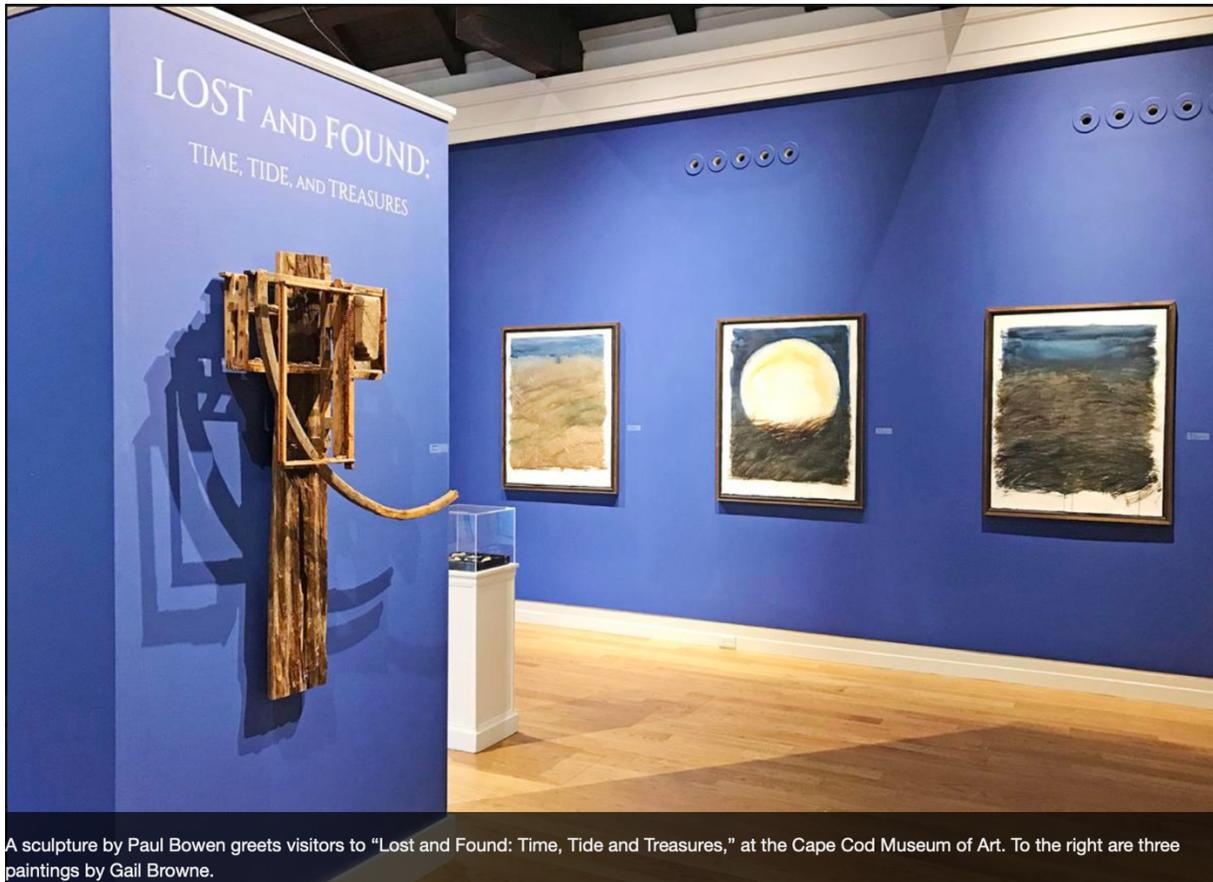
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Beachcombing Collections Inspire Art Exhibit And Book

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A sculpture by Paul Bowen greets visitors to "Lost and Found: Time, Tide and Treasures," at the Cape Cod Museum of Art. To the right are three paintings by Gail Browne.

"Lost and Found: Time, Tide, and Treasures" at the Cape Cod Museum of Art celebrates the history of Provincetown and the collector in all of us. The show features six artists with ties to the tip of the Cape and to each other, all of whom have relentlessly collected bits and pieces from the Provincetown

shoreline and used them, either directly or indirectly in their work. The artists featured in the show are Amy Heller, Gail Browne, Judy Berkowitz, Paul Bowen, Betty Bodian and Varujan Boghosian.

The show was meant to coincide with the release of the book of the same title but COVID necessitated postponing the opening of the show until this year while the book was published last year. Sadly in the interim, artist Varujan Boghosian passed away. The show is dedicated to him.

Ms. Heller and Ms. Browne co-authored the book as well as curated the show.

At a panel talk celebrating the show's opening, four of the six artists were present and talked about their work and about their love of beachcombing. While not all of the artists use the physical found pieces in their work, the artists present all professed to be inspired by their collections and by the act of collecting. At the book talk Ms. Browne described the catharsis of beachcombing this way: "Stepping out on the beach everything else leaves you, you're there. There's mystery involved in it. You feel transported back hundreds of years."

"We collect what calls to us," said Ms. Browne whose own collection of beach finds includes an assortment of clay marbles, pottery shards and glass bottles. In her artist's statement Ms. Browne describes the attention to detail that an artist needs to capture "the slightest differences in shape and color." The same attention to detail hones the skills of a beachcomber. The show features several small works by Ms. Browne: gestural studies done in walnut ink of flats and paths leading down to the water's edge. Her larger works include a trio of paintings of nature: dunes, wind, rain and a large full moon created using homemade inks on thick creamy paper. Another triptych by Ms. Browne shows the vertical column-like lines of dock pilings and their equally bold horizontal reflections in the water, rendered in high contrast as block prints.

Amy Heller's introduction to beachcombing came in her childhood while accompanying her mother, who was an avid collector of beach treasures. Ms. Heller described herself as being drawn more to collecting natural objects: shells, horseshoe crab molts and skate egg cases, many of which have made their way into her photography. Ms. Heller photographed the objects from her co-contributor's collections, carefully and inventively arranging them for the book.

During the panel talk Ms. Heller explained that she and Ms. Browne met in a clay class Ms. Browne was teaching. Ms. Heller noticed a collection of pottery shards in Ms. Browne's gallery window and was drawn to them, bringing back memories of beachcombing with her mother. The two became friends and decided to collaborate on a book, inviting four other beachcombers who happened to be artists with connections to Provincetown and each other to share their work and their collections.

One of Ms. Heller's pieces in the show is a collage of 16 different photographs of sand patterns at the water's edge, arranged in a grid. They are like snowflakes in that all 16 of them are different. The photographs appear again, individually between the different chapters of the book.

Along with her photography, Ms. Heller includes a photograph of a ceramic doll's leg found by her 8-year-old self. One can imagine the thoughts that find must have sparked in her young mind.

Paul Bowen's pieces in the show are sculptures made from found wood, much of it rust-stained and nearly petrified from centuries underwater.

"Cape Cod and Provincetown in particular has stolen part of my soul," said the artist who has spent 30 years living in Provincetown before moving to Vermont, "I am hopelessly in love with the beach and beachcombing."

Mr. Bowen described beachcombing as magical, "the hunt for 'it' whatever 'it' is, that ineffable object that will change your life in some way or another." His dedication to beachcombing is so intense that Mr. Bowen told a story of finding a shard of pottery, a piece of a vase, white with pink roses. The artist returned to the spot where he'd found the first piece and over five years, collected enough fragments of the vase to piece it back together. His collections on display include an entire wooden case full of ceramic pipes.

Attracted to the lure that is Provincetown, "the weather, the history, the art," Betty Bodian moved to the area in the mid-1950s.

During the creation of a new parking lot in the mid-1960s, construction equipment dredged up several decades of silt from Provincetown Harbor. While out walking near the area, Ms. Bodian began finding

old bottles, which she said she started going out every day to look for. “There I was with this treasure,” she said. “These things underfoot that would never have touched our consciousness otherwise.”

The collection of colored bottles influenced Ms. Bodian’s paintings, inspiring her to study the notion of transparency and the technique of glazing. Her pieces at the museum include paintings of large figures rendered in an ethereal, dream-like fashion with an emphasis on different shades of blue and pastel colors.

Several fanciful collages by Varujan Boghosian, who died last September, are included in the show. In the pieces Mr. Boghosian combines wallpaper, end papers from old books, old toys and other odds and ends with sometimes humorous results. In one piece, a wooden mannequin head is perched up in the sky like the sun beating down over a forest of metal trees. The minimalistic scene is against a backdrop of wooden blocks fitted together to provide a “canvas.” In a wall text, Mr. Boghosian describes his favorite beach find, a tiny lead lion with a mane enhanced by years of rust growth. The lion so inspired him that he created a self-portrait collage using an image of a lion, an old photograph and other ephemera. “He was a visual punster,” said Ms. Heller.

Like Mr. Bowen, Judy Berkowitz uses her treasures directly in her art. Chains, nails, circular saw blades, a flattened tin can, metal hinges and other industrial pieces are combined with fragments of wood to make found art sculptures. Her collected objects include some larger finds such as wooden oars, fishing baskets and colored ropes.

Ms. Heller said she met Ms. Berkowitz while out on the beach. “Her collection was so different,” said Ms. Heller, “she was looking for nautical items.” Several of Ms. Berkowitz’s found oars are displayed in the museum’s Ocean Edge gallery, where an entire wall in the small gallery is used to display her sculptures.

In her artist’s statement, Ms. Berkowitz says she is considering returning some of her pieces to the sea.

While the art will appeal to gallerygoers, it’s the collections that will fascinate everyone. A huge glass bottle full of ceramic pipe stems, a vase full of glass and clay marbles, an assortment of large pottery shards from storage jugs, fragments of doll pieces and tiny tea cups, a tall vase of beach glass. Finds

like these were possible for years because up until 1930 the Provincetown harbor also served as the town dump.

Not only are the six collectors beachcombers and artists, they are also historians and cataloguers and solvers of mysteries when it comes to figuring out what something once was, who might have used it and how it wound up in the harbor.

Photographs in the book show collections of old coins, metal gears, wooden handles from old pocketknives, paint brushes, oar locks, old keys and the teeth of domestic animals, which were also buried in the harbor.

Much of it are remnants of industry and of the many long wharves that once dotted the harbor. “Before it was a place for recreation, the waterfront was a place of industry” said Mr. Bowen. “It was a smelly place with fish processing and boat building going on.”

Charged with choosing a way to present the photographs, Ms. Browne took a chronological approach. Collections are arranged in chapters starting with indigenous peoples, whaling, fishing, piracy, et cetera.

“There were thousands of objects going back hundreds of years,” said Ms. Browne. “I had to make sense out of the collections.” The objects themselves dictated the story from indigenous people to whaling, the town’s first industry, then to fishing, the arts and tourism.”

The book also includes reproductions of old postcards, black-and-white photographs and stories from the artists about particular finds: a rug freed from beneath the sand by beachcombers who worked by car headlight when it got too dark to see, a ruby stick pin revealed from beneath a layer of green-encrusted concretion.

A true labor of love (Ms. Heller dedicates the book to her mother), the book took several years to complete. Ms. Heller said she started photographing the collections back in 2007 but that it wasn’t until around 2018 that work got underway in earnest with the book being published last spring. Although she took the almost 500 photographs of the collections that appear in the book and Ms. Browne wrote the majority of the text, Ms. Heller called the project “a true collaboration in every sense of the word.” While

she recorded interviews of the artists many years ago, together she and Ms. Browne conducted more recent interviews. “We both did historical research,” said Ms. Heller. “Gail was the conceptual designer and gave the book its look and feel. Schiffer Publishing gave us artistic freedom with our whole concept.”

While finding six beachcombers who are also artists might be considered a coincidence, Ms. Heller described the connection between beachcombing and art as intrinsic. “Being surrounded by the sea and the sand, the wharves, the flora and fauna, the Cape light, et cetera, one is surrounded by the history of the culture and the place, and much is revealed in the objects.”

Ms. Heller described the featured artists as a group with a special bond because they were inspired by the beauty of Provincetown. “The artists and their beachcombing collections were inextricably linked, so we needed to explore what the inspiration was for each artist.” She recalled the late Varujan Boghosian telling her and Ms. Browne, “you never really know how all of this will inspire you, but it will.”

Without revealing any secret locations, Ms. Heller said that the beachcombers in “Lost and Found: Time, Tide, and Treasures” all follow unofficial rules for beachcombing, which include not digging with shovels or anything that will disturb the flora and fauna. Most beachcombing is done on the flats at low tide, she said, but can also be done either by walking in the water or along the shoreline. “Much of what is found lies just beneath the surface” said Ms. Heller, “and sometimes storms uncover quite a bit, but sometimes a storm will bury things and make it harder to find things.”

Ms. Heller described beachcombing as something of a meditative practice. “Most of the beachcombers in the book seem to have an almost ‘sixth sense’ and they can see changes on the surface of the sand that usually reveal hidden treasure.”

Ms. Heller said she hoped that people who purchase “Lost and Found” as well as those who visit the exhibit “will get a glimpse of what connects the artists and their collections, learn some of the history of Provincetown, and come away with an appreciation of a place that is so special to us.”

“The book is a love letter and homage to old Provincetown,” she added.

“Lost and Found: Time, Tide and Treasures” will be on view at the Cape Cod Museum of Art through January 2. The museum is at 60 Hope Lane in Dennis.

The artists’ panel discussion, featuring Ms. Heller, Ms. Browne, Mr. Bowen and Ms. Bodian, is available on the museum’s website.