

The Provincetown INDEPENDENT

EXHIBITIONS

A Love Letter to Provincetown at the Cape Museum of Art

Cataloguing the ‘magnificent obsession’ of six artists

BY ANDRE VAN DER WENDE · DEC 8, 2021

Anyone who’s spent time out on the tidal flats of Cape Cod Bay can attest to their allure. Stretching a mile or more at low tide, they can feel like a bubble in time, trapped between land, sea, and sky. The flats are also a repository for things lost, tossed, and forgotten, because Provincetown Harbor essentially functioned as the town dump until the 1930s.

For the six artist-beachcombers in the exhibition “Lost and Found: Time, Tide, and Treasures,” on view at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis through Jan. 2, that detritus provides both inspiration and raw material for their creative work.



A Paul Bowen sculpture greets visitors to “Lost and Found: Time, Tide, and Treasures.” (Photo courtesy Amy Heller)

Based on Amy Heller and Gail Browne’s book by the same name published in 2020, “Lost and Found” takes on the difficult task of condensing the 500 images by those artists — Heller and Browne, Judy Berkowitz, Paul Bowen, Betty Bodian, and Varujan Boghosian — into one show.

It succeeds by providing a tangible experience of the book's treasure-hunt theme. Examples of each artist's work line the walls. Display cases are filled with pipe stems, bowls, clay marbles, ceramic shards, whale bones, doll parts, and buttons. Historical context is minimal, and artwork happily cohabitates with artifacts, so that it sits halfway between museum display and art exhibit.

"Lost and Found" doesn't attempt a definitive accounting of Provincetown beachcombing. The represented artists are a loose conglomerate of friends. "We're six artists connected to Provincetown and our beachcombing collections, but we're also connected to one another," says Heller. "Betty, who's 92, is an old friend of the family." Now living in Brooklyn, Bodian has amassed an extensive collection of antique bottles from Provincetown beaches. Their sea-green color is the inspiration behind "the transparencies and glazes" of her paintings.

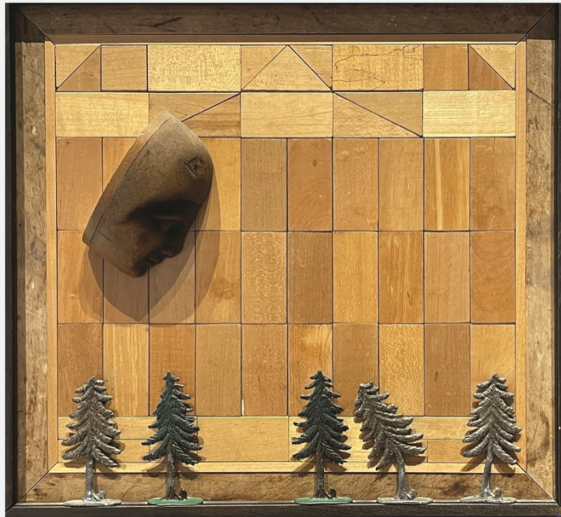


Riding the Crest is a 20-by-22-inch acrylic on canvas by Betty Bodian. The colors are inspired by her collection of antique bottles found on the beach. (Photo courtesy Amy Heller)

Heller herself is drawn to horseshoe crabs and black devil's purses, their shapes finding a satisfying home in her cyanotypes and backlit prints. "I've been going to Provincetown since I was a baby," she says. "I remember beachcombing with my mom, and she would find bottles and squeal with delight."

Browne has three large works on paper in the exhibition. Her walnut-ink paintings depict wharf pilings, boats on the water, and the bay's horizon line. The way in which beachcombing influences Judy Berkowitz's work is perhaps more direct. She repurposes wooden oars, tangled rope, and rusty saw blades into playful wall sculptures that honor the fishing industry.

Paul Bowen is similarly inspired. He started seriously collecting in 1977, when he first arrived in Provincetown. "It's since become kind of an obsession," he says. Though Bowen moved to Vermont in 2005, he still comes to Provincetown during the summers. "There are places that I still covet for material when I'm there," he says. "And I already have a lifetime's supply of materials! Most of what we find is 19th century, and people tend to collect very specific things — colored glass, broken crockery, and so on."



Overview is a mixed media construction by Varujan Boghosian. (Photo André van der Wende)

The late Varujan Boghosian, to whom the exhibition is dedicated, feels like a presiding spirit. His half dozen collages and relief constructions are highlights of the exhibition. They integrate beach treasures and other discarded materials to comment on the human psyche in what feels like a universal language.

“I call collecting a magnificent obsession, because it is magnificent, and it is an obsession,” says Heller. “It’s hard to explain to others. For me, the exhibition is a love letter to Provincetown. It’s not about collections so much as it’s about connections between people.”

Found Art

The event: “Lost and Found: Time, Tide, and Treasures”

The time: Wednesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 4 p.m.; through Jan. 2

The place: Cape Cod Museum of Art, 60 Hope Lane, Dennis.

The cost: \$10 admission