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3:00 pm
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Leaving is
Fundamental <
2:29 pm
- Status Ain't Hood**
Kanye West's
Graduation: A
Preview <
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- La Dolce Musto**
Who Put the Goth in
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Shore Leave

On the Road in Provincetown
by Eileen Myles
August 16 - 22, 2000

The general feeling in Provincetown on a Friday night is that you could bump into someone from any part of your life. Family member, ex-lover, someone you went to high school with—Commercial Street is a quintessentially American street. Framed by history, Provincetown is a virtual mall, as teeming as eBay, yet the ocean's just steps away. Even more crowded than other resorts, P-town is on a tiny spit of land that is sorely overdeveloped (just like New York), steadily driving out the local working class, shrinking the public schools, converting a defunct fishing economy into a service economy. Yet these same class conflicts are, at least for now, making for an oddly inflected, spirited, and authentically new/old bohemian art colony. The vehicular traffic pushes one way, heading west toward the breakwater, the end of Cape Cod where the Pilgrims landed. But the human traffic is pushing east, and we're going to see art.

Michael Carroll, a painter and the director of the Schoolhouse Art Center (494 Commercial, www.schoolhousecenter.com), tells me there's a Roman aspect to all of Provincetown's art legacy, a historical too-muchness, like a beautiful old graveyard that keeps heaping more and more on top of a never-quite-absent past. Schoolhouse, which is the heart and engine of a very New York-driven art scene exploding on the Lower Cape, is unique in that it's a for-profit gallery that also provides artists with space to work. Of P-town, Carroll says: "It's a place to sit still and do the same thing, wringing the same materials, shoving the same words into position, pushing again and again. It's very obsessive here," he grins.

Schoolhouse opened in 1998. Its building once housed the Long Point Gallery, which carried the ball for the old-boy network of abstract expressionism that held the town



Man in the mirror: Allen Ginsberg's 1987 *Self*

Portrait

photo: Allen Ginsberg/courtesy of Schoolhouse Center

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captive aesthetically for many years. Today, Schoolhouse is a web of nooks and hallways and exhibition spaces upstairs and down. In the Driskel Gallery, Allen Ginsberg's nudes are seeing their first light of . . . well, halogen. Still our first bard ("I remember when I first got laid, H.P. graciously took my cherry, I sat on the docks of Provincetown, age 23 . . ."), Ginsberg made photos that are a luminous equivalent to his telegraphic verse. Begin with his own touching nude self-portrait: He holds a black camera vertically at midsection, like an arrow pointing to his sweet, stroke-marked mug. Then your gaze slips down his slim torso to a vulnerable scar from gallbladder surgery. The men and boys that inhabit the Ginsbergian myth of love range from *Mark* (Ewart)—eyes shut and knee bent toward the viewer, a peaceful paw holding his belly, graciously flocked by ruffled sheets—to a rare seminude of the old geezer himself, Bill Burroughs, angular and resplendent on chenille.

As you enter Schoolhouse, a single painting on the back wall of the gallery faces the street. Doug Padgett's grand *Untitled* is a cartoony 19th-century vista of drippy, cellular stalactites hanging deep within a morphing natural interior that is oddly reminiscent of small paintings of the vaults of Dutch churches. Two or three human witnesses stand in the lower right and one crosses the bottom of the painting on a tourists' ramp; their hair flickers in the same yellow, blue, and red daubs that animate the painting's pulsating, ancient stone.

Like Padgett, who labored on his painting for a year, many of the artists in P-town this summer are quietly confronting time in their work. Melanie Braverman shows a single white cotton quilt behind glass further down the same wall. It's blocked off in red stitching that says: "Love, Death, Love, Death. . . ." The quilt is a relic from Braverman's large *Love and Death* July installation, which featured a fractured poem, written a few phrases at a time on a series of tiny open books framed in glass, all together, an elegantly paced memorial to a friend who killed herself in the fall. Under each phrase Braverman attached a small plaster vessel—a tiny eyecup for tears. The minibook sections are being sold off individually, and they are going like hotcakes. Folk art and irony frequently meet here, perhaps as a result of the locale's physical isolation combined with rabid tourism.

I stepped out into a twilight Commercial Street where foot traffic, scooters, and wobbly bikes surged, filling the narrow street. On holiday weekends it feels like the Day of the Locust. Pat de Groot has lived across from Schoolhouse for almost 40 years, and shows at the Cherry Stone Gallery in Wellfleet (70 East Commercial Street) as well as at Pat Hearn this fall. Her vision is impossibly simple and bold. She works quickly with a palette knife, making tiny Zen-like paintings of the rising and falling line between sky and sea. The line collapses into a small, thin scumble of blue or explodes in a fizzy spattering of yellowed white foam. On the opposite wall at Cherry Stone, sculptor Paul Bowen specializes in shipwreck, honing small pieces of found wood into conceptually edged constructions.

The window of the Albert Merola Gallery (424 Commercial), a smallish storefront about five minutes from Schoolhouse, holds Duane Slick's beckoning single hand and arm, one of a series of pearly acrylics on linen. In Merola's back gallery, there's a selection from its stable, which includes James Balla, Richard Baker,

by Rebecca Smeyne

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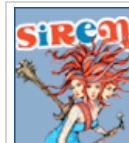


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Summer Guide
Village Voice 2007 Summer "Local Warming"

Donna Flax, Jack Pierson, and John Waters, with his funny photo collages. I return loyally to one of Helen Miranda Wilson's small oils on panel. *Boxing Day* is a flurry of clouds scurrying away from an anxious but constant moon. It's silvery, moving across the viewer's face like a quick but unforgettable vision.

Smack in the middle of the strip, but still East End, the Bang Street Gallery (432 Commercial) is showing Jennifer Ditacchio, the harbormaster's daughter, a local girl via Yale, whose bold striped canvases manage to connect the ab-ex moment to a more savvy postmodern read on landscape. There's a cocky roughness to her blue, white, and mutating gray designs. Each of these hunky minimalist canvases (stripes, stripes, stripes) feels as brutally uncontested as the weather. The water that slurps and beckons on the other side of Commercial works pretty much the same way, cheerfully or fatally striped, whatever—no amount of thought can override it.

Dianna Matherly's new work at Tristan (148 Commercial) trumpets light and dark and bravery. The show mounted here last fall, "In Honor of Survival," culled a terrific array of new and recognized talents focusing on this theme. Several of those participating artists died this past winter. Now Matherly presents a tributary show of mixed media. Four oil paintings with a similar memorializing intent are funky, allegorical takes on the disordering power of illness.

Sal Randolph is twisting thousands of yellow chenille stems (pipe cleaners) into a cloudlike sculptural form. Her studio upstairs in Schoolhouse boasts a computer named Bruce, reciting her poems and splaying a gorgeous array of cascading wallpaper on its screen. "This will go in a glass case downstairs in September," she says, pointing to the growing yellow mass, "with rope-light snaking through." "Do you think it needs sound?" she wonders.

"The place is weird," says Jack Pierson. "I was afraid to come here when I was a child. I mean," he adds softly, "that's what we like about it." Pierson is probably the best symbol of the new/old P-town art scene: an artist who makes work that's not so much "about" life as it is about how he imagines it. On September 1, Pierson will exhibit at the Provincetown Art Association (460 Commercial), the longest-standing art space in town, practically a museum, which is currently bursting with "Hans Hofmann: Four Decades in Provincetown." "No fences, nudes, beaches," promises Pierson, referring to practically everyone's proclivity to produce work that flies here. He's planning to install a group of new word sculptures—his own take on Cape Cod's dark past. "Artists almost feel trampled by the beauty here. It's the *light*," says Jack, laughing.

More by Eileen Myles

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