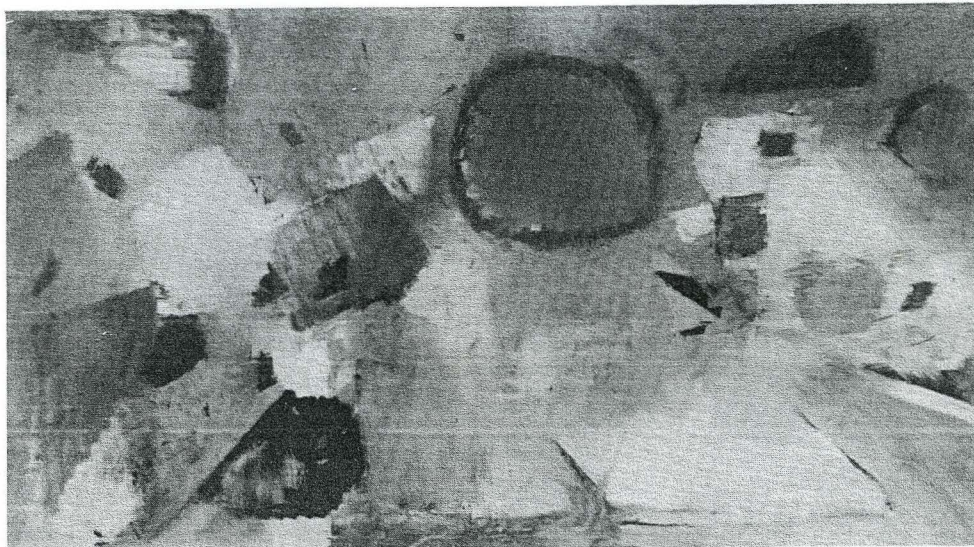


JOHN GRILLO



Khufu, 1963

John Grillo

John Grillo inherited a talent for art from his father, who yet painted and sculpted, though not professionally, and who passed on a basic impulse to make do with circumstance. Grillo is also a *bricoleur*, able to make do with what is at hand, as those of us who have watched him construct a lasagna can testify. Following a suggestion whispered at an opening, a spontaneous party would erupt and there would be Grillo, grating the cheese. Two hours later, the lasagne would emerge. In his work, he uses different surfaces (oil on canvas, three-dimensional furniture), and different styles (abstraction and figures), and he has published several books of poetry. His work seems to anticipate the varied styles of today's pluralism.

At first Grillo's main artistic influence was the Social Realism of the 1930's, which left him with an abiding sense of the injustice and suffering in the world. During his wartime service with the Navy in the South Pacific he came across a reproduction of a collage by Robert Motherwell. This chance encounter made him realize the possibility of modernism in art, of "letting myself go."

After the war, Grillo attended the San

By Tony Vevers



Centripetal Song, 1962

John Grillo

Francisco Art Institute studying with Clay Spohn, David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Clyfford Still. Mark Rothko was also an influential presence at that time. In 1948 Grillo came East to study with Hans Hofmann in New York and Provincetown. Grillo has spoken of the change — coming from San Francisco, with its tilt to the Orient, to New York and the discovery of an European culture that was perhaps closer to his Italian heritage.

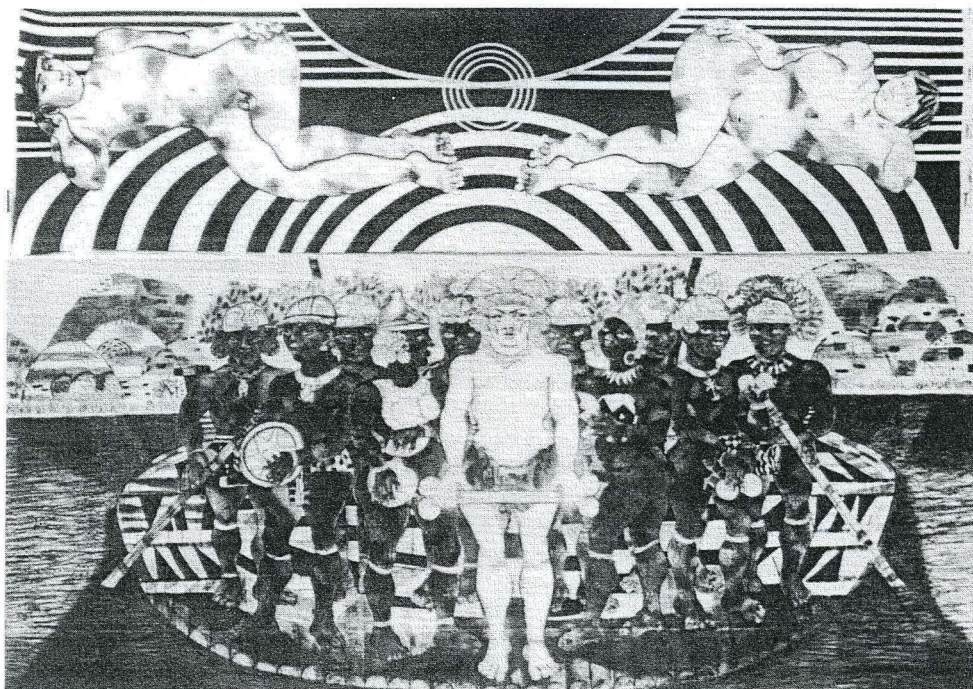
Grillo has written of his feeling for Sicily "where carts and objects were transformed into pure color and therefore transcended into pure love."

The first time I saw John Grillo's paintings was at the Tanager Gallery in

New York, at that time (the winter of 1952-53) on 4th Street off the Bowery. It was a dark, overcast day and I remember stepping past a sleeping derelict to get in the gallery. I was instantly struck by Grillo's paintings. They were small canvases packed with bright, clear rectangles of color: yellow, red, blue, white, green and more yellow (by count; 21 yellows, 13 reds and 11 blues out of a total of 76 set against a counterpoint of 17 blacks and reddish browns — in one painting of that period).

The contrast between art and squalor was vivid certainly, but one must also remember that at this time most of the work of the New York School was carrying a heavy freight of black, both in mood and in paint. The color and light in Grillo's little paintings were a joyful epiphany indeed.

These works were followed by exuberant collages — some of which seem to foretell the merger of painting and sculpture in Rauschenberg's combines a few



El Dorado, 1983-84

John Grillo

years later. This tendency recurred in the '60s when Grillo worked on surfaces as varied as a Victrola, a vise and a drop-leaved table which were covered with vivid abstract designs. Here, also, Grillo anticipated the trend to treat furniture as sculpture which is evident in the work of Richard Artschwager, Scott Burton and Margaret Wharton.

At the same time Grillo was producing the large, yellow-drenched canvases that became his signature in the early 1960s. His work had begun to sell, but not without setbacks. I remember in 1960, I was working at the Studio Shop in Provincetown when Grillo came down and charged \$200 worth of paint. At the time this was a staggering amount to put out (all that cadmium yellow) on the chance that a sale might come through. Later that summer I ran into a well-known, and wealthy, collector who told me he'd heard of John's plunge into great expectations. "I'm going to make that guy sweat," he announced with sadistic glee, typical of the savage guerrilla warfare between artist and buyer so characteristic of that time. But he did come through with the purchase of a large work by the end of the summer, and Grillo went on to a major one-man show at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1961. Of this show Budd Hopkins recalled that, "I . . . was almost bowled over by the sunlight Grillo had provided . . . I wanted to lie down and bask"; this feeling was echoed by the other artists and critics who loved the show.

When Grillo came to teach at the

University of Massachusetts in 1967, he experienced the city person's horror of the countryside. "All those trees — like bars in a jail!" But as many artists do he painted himself into a rapport with his new-found ambiance — he's been there



John Grillo with recent paintings

ever since. At the same time, after 20 years of abstraction, Grillo found himself obliged to teach life drawing, which in turn led to his working figuratively — the teacher, taught.

His students have attested to Grillo's enthusiasm as a teacher — he has put on performances with them at U Mass — and as one student said recently, "he inspired our vitality."

Probably the least known of Grillo's

activities is an on-going series of poetic journals that are a further comment on the human condition. He has also established a relationship with the city of Medellin, Colombia, where he has worked and exhibited to great acclaim for the last seven years. The annual Tango festival at Medellin has inspired his most recent figurative paintings of dancing couples which, with "Grillo's Circus Series" and the "El Dorado" paintings and drawings, show the evidences of embodying Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, man at play, which was been a key element throughout Grillo's career.

Grillo has spoken of the need to calm down, not to be anxious, to work for oneself and not to be in a hurry. He has also gone his own way, but his way has become ours, too: the celebration of life that is instinctive in all of his work. "It took me so long to acquire taste, and to reciprocate; to learn to give back to life what you got out of it."

Grillo's name is apt, for it is the Italian name for the cricket, that cheerful creature that signals the height of the summer's season. So, keep on, John, singing that lemon yellow, orange yellow, saffron and jasmine yellow, sandy and golden yellow song of yours. □□

Tony Vevers is an artist who has made a substantial contribution to the Provincetown art colony. He has exhibited in many galleries, including: HCE Gallery, Sun Gallery, and Long Point.

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tion," Grillo feels. "You end up with a shape that doesn't have anything to do with nature [hence freeing you from any idea]." His abstractions have been critically described as "painted pure energy" and "as...full of joy as the best Hofmanns...and...even more sensual."

In talking about younger artists, Grillo comments, "Too many artists think that by just showing paintings they're going to make it somehow. They're more involved in the idea of trying to sell, rather than getting into the work itself as an artist."

"My work is mostly about color and love and sometimes art."

In America, it's all about money. It's very different for young people with talent: it's a product—you sell it. It's not the same as being a professional doctor or whatever. It's something else. I constantly say, 'Work for yourself.' " As guileless as when he was just starting out, Grillo says, " I never think I'm going to make any money."

Grillo explained his early beginnings, "In 1947 I went to New York from San Francisco, where I had been at the Art Institute [as a G.I.] with Mark Rothko, and looked up Clyfford Still. His advice: 'Go to all the openings and museum group shows.' I studied with Hofmann in 1948 in New York and 1949 in Provincetown. He was a big help...he was in tune...praised me highly and had a relationship with the work I was doing. I began to get three or four collectors and [that] helped me along for a few years. Hans Hofmann promoted me." Actually, Hofmann selected Grillo's work for the acclaimed "Fifteen Unknowns" exhibition at the Kootz Gallery in 1949 and even bought one of his large paintings.

"The first painting I sold in Provincetown was 1949. In the late forties and fifties there were a lot of struggling artists here...painters like Red Grooms, Jan Muller... We were very poor and worked part time and we all helped each other." In a statement that puts Provincetown's affordable housing crisis in historical perspective, Grillo remembers, "it was 1956, I think, and I rented a house on the dunes for the summer for \$400. At the end of the summer, I asked how much more would you want for it—I wanted to buy it. 'Another \$600,' the owner said."

Grillo's energy imbues not only his paintings, but his whole being. Looking around the cafe, Grillo, now 83, leaned across the table and speaking like a true Italian, shared, "I'd like to make a book with all the work I've shown here over ten years—with recipes."

John Grillo's Work: A Retrospective from 1946 to the Present can be viewed at the Cove Gallery, 15 Commercial Street, in Wellfleet through August 3rd. An Opening Reception will be held Saturday, July 22nd from 6 - 8 PM. Call (508) 349-2530 for details.

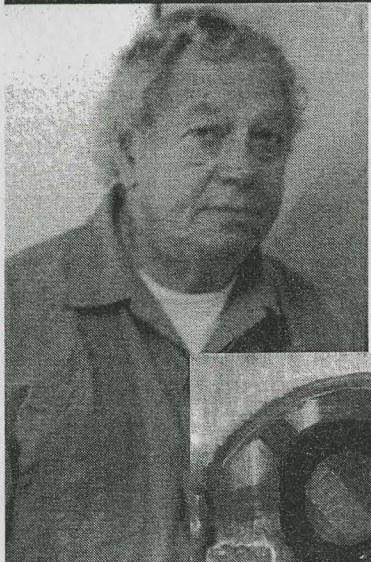
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POA ^{Ay} Portrait of an Artist

by Eileen Kennedy

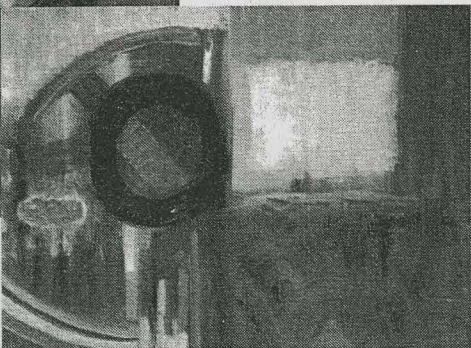
John

Grillo



"My work is mostly about color and love and sometimes about art."

John Grillo, an important early Abstract Expressionist whose work



is in the collections of the British Museum and New York's

Metropolitan, Guggenheim and Whitney, sat around Café Heaven over lunch and talked about art and his retrospective show opening at the Cove Gallery this weekend.

"I don't really know what art is." Surprising, perhaps for an artist about whom art critic April Kingsley has said, "the sun comes out in many minds' eyes at the mere mention" of his name. "I don't really know in a way. It's kind of part of [an] energy that you have, you give out in a certain way. It requires that life energy."

"I work many different ways. I experiment a lot. Sometimes by just making the gesture and seeing what happens. Although Grillo's work has danced between abstraction and figurative—particularly in his self-portraits—and back again over the years, this current retrospective of approximately twenty works—watercolor, gouache, collage, acrylic—from 1946 to the present are all abstract. "The freest way [to paint] is pure abstrac-