

Profile of an Artist

VF ARTISTS

A4 Coes, Peter

by Sheila Sinead McGuinness

A local gallery owner has said that all visual artists create individual visual vocabularies--languages for themselves. Critics speak of these characteristics as evolution, growth, influences, and they become the hallmarks by which artists' works are known. The language of Peter Coes' work is simple. His paintings are clean, orderly and reflect his surroundings.

One painting, *Girl Hiding*, hangs above his mantle. Painted in acrylics on brown-toned panel board, it is an allegorical scene in which three ethereal females walk through the night above a fourth who lies hiding next to a log. Are they Pleiades, fallen from the sky? Or Muses? And why is one lying next to the log? Coes doesn't say. He would only encourage viewers to imagine a story for themselves. One can assume that Coes' personal narrative motivated his painting, but the story he chooses to tell about it is a love story.

He painted it for his wife, Linda. And he gave it to her as a gift. But those were the early years of his career and, though she worked a job for pay, money was a problem. Coes' aunt had always wanted to buy the painting, so they sold it to her with the understanding that, upon her death, ownership would revert to Linda. The aunt did not die, but Coes developed a non-malignant tumor. And frightened by the thought that something might happen to Coes or his wife before they could hang the painting above their own mantle, the aunt returned it to its rightful home.

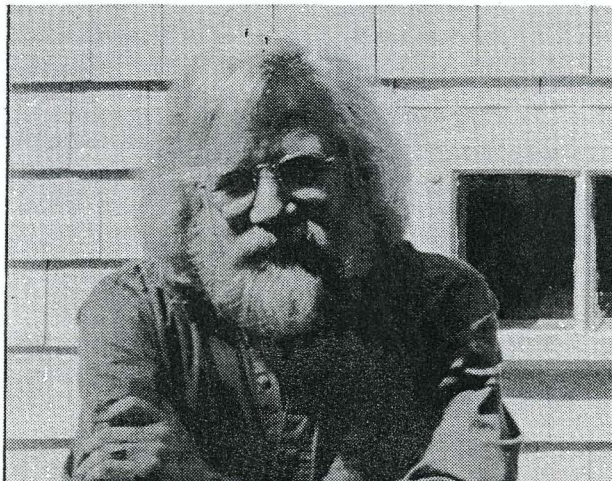
There is a history of creativity in the Coes family. Relatives were painters and stained-glass artists. Coes tells of his mother's constant drawings: women's heads encircling her crossword puzzle; of her critique of his own "girlie" drawings--not that he should stop, rather that he should draw them better! If there were a way in which Coes had experienced an apprenticeship, it might have been with his father. He was an inventor who believed he would have time for his first love, painting, after his retirement. He never realized his dream. It was this, perhaps, which gave Coes the courage to leave a paid job to paint full-time, even though he had a wife and young son. But he does not underestimate the value of a supportive partner. "I wouldn't say I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for

change channels. And I started painting the houses and the boats. It's almost as if you're learning a vocabulary for a while and then, what are you going to do? Now I'm at the point where I am making something out of the vocabulary."

Flipping through photographs of early work--prior to 1981 when he and his family moved to Provincetown--Coes shows work on brown underpaintings. Subjects are of the forests and fields: a woman in a filmy dress runs through the night woods; a young boy beneath a tree looks across a field. The field is hundreds of blades of grass, and Coes painted hundreds of individual leaves above the child's head. It is the first painting he ever sold.

His pictures are detailed, not in the way of the Dutch masters, but rather in the way of primitive painters. Yet, however similar Coes' work may be, it is not primitive. "It's tough to describe," he says, "because it's representational, but not super-realistic. I try to make it so that it's not photo-representative but much more. The way I work is to sketch from several different angles, then put the sketches away and re-draw it."

The process increases his visual vocabulary. He adds side views to buildings and brings the roofs forward. He creates a picture of a whole building, painting more of the building than one can actually see from a single vantage point. "So it is removed from reality. You can relax with it. Maybe because I grew up watching Disney cartoons, I put some of that fantasy into it!" But what should we



Linda, but things would sure be different. She never has doubted. It's mind boggling. I've doubted, frequently, but she never has."

Coes says, "Ten years ago we came out here from Western Mass. Back there I used to paint forests, 'cuz that's where we lived. Coming out here, it took a while to

Peter Coes

call the style? He says, "The way Peter Coes paints, I guess!"

The brown underpaintings disappear from his work after 1981. As do the fields and the woods. His board is cast in blue, and the patterns of leaves and grass give way to the infinite repetitions of clapboards, roof shingles and spiked picket fences of Provincetown venues. Usually, his work contains a 1950's vintage bicycle, car, or other object, and often he gives a background glimpse of the Harbor. "They evoke my childhood time, which is not a bad thing to evoke," he says.

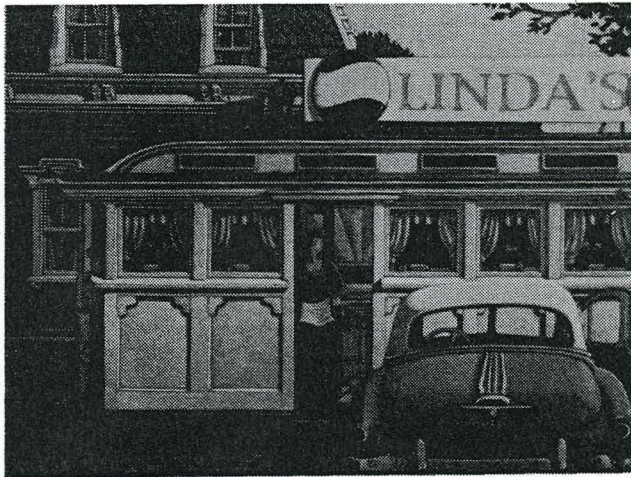
Coes paints many things into a picture to trigger the viewer's imagination, to stimulate curiosity. "I don't want to tell you the story, I want you to see a story," he says. A bicycle below an open window on the outside of a house might suggest a quick getaway from a child's bedroom; or a ball lying in front of a stairwell door might cause the viewer to want to peek around that door, up the stairs to see what the child is doing. "Some people came to me long after buying my painting and said 'You know, we can't figure out if she's coming out of the house or going into the house.' And that's great, because they can get two stories out of it that way!"

Beginning in 1966, Coes attended the sculpture program headed by Wolfgang Beal at the University of Hartford. His reason for choosing sculpture was practical. "As a sculpture major, you got your own studio a year

ahead of the painters!" He credits his teachers for maintaining an exciting program. They encouraged exploration, whereas he felt his painting teachers wanted their students to paint just like themselves.

Though Coes never apprenticed himself to an artist, he advises apprenticeship as a route for young artists. "I'm not a big believer in going to art school. It's a hard profession, and going to college or art school just doesn't teach you anything about it being a profession. The problems are not approached, like you're not going to make any money, or learn how to frame, how to market. When you are apprenticed, you see all those problems and frustrations."

His sense of exploration, first encour-



aged by Beal, led to later pieces like a wall-sculpture titled, "Reaching For The Sky." Coes painted a section of an exterior brick wall and on it, a chipped mural. The mural shows a woman with arms bent to the sky. Humorously, her arms are reaching toward a bird on the cornice of the building, which is off the surface of the mural. It blurs the viewers sense of time. Of his

building fragments, Coes says, "They're a lot of fun!"

Fun is intrinsic to a Coes nature. Coes' son, Matthew, is a clown! At age 22, he has been through Ringling Brothers Clown School and is now on the road with a travelling circus. Matthew and Obie, the cat (known by neighbors for performing acrobatic rooftop escapades), have become the willing subjects of Coes' picture books for children. But, of course! His next project is a second book--about Matthew and Obie, the Cat travelling around, trying to find a circus.

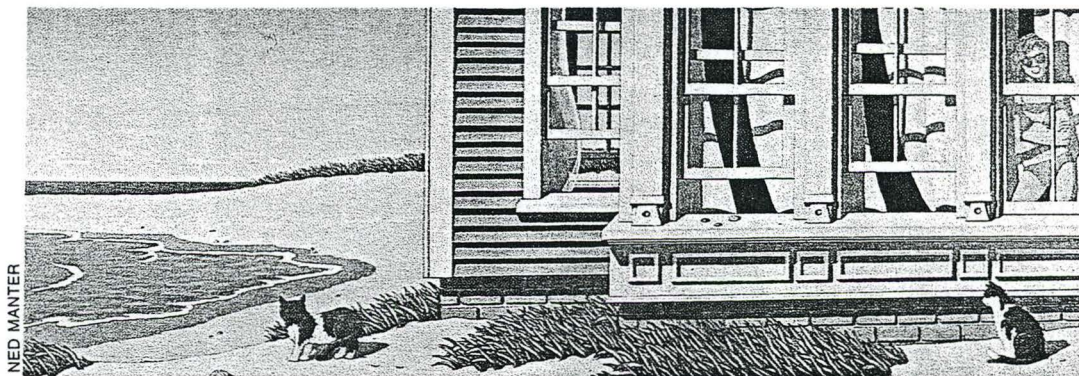
He continues to paint Provincetown scenes for his serious work. Into one Coes has painted a '50's diner named Linda's.

It is part of a series he's calling Linda's Diner Series. "I've always had Linda in my paintings. But, these are the first time I have paid real tribute to her." Another painting among those in his current show, *She Looked Down With Mixed Emotions*, is of the Lobster Pot restaurant. It features a nude female looking out an

upstairs window at a man on a vintage Harley. "I have no idea what Joy McNulty would think," Coes says, "whether she'd think it really looks like the Lobster Pot or not. I think it's pretty close, actually." One thing's sure. McNulty would wonder who is that nude woman standing in her office!

Peter Coes' work is showing through August 19th at the Rice/Polak Gallery, 430 Commercial Street.

DISTINCTIVELY PETER COES



"Summer Afternoon," 18" x 50", acrylic, 1986. A move to Provincetown a few years ago was one element that influenced the work of acrylic and egg tempera artist Peter Coes. His palette has lightened and his subject matter has become less enigmatic. "Where they remain the same," he says, "is that I still deal with the texture of things and I'm still a narrative painter." Narration, he feels, "is what appeals to people."

Peter Coes never left his childhood behind. He sees his surroundings with the intensity, the not-quite-predictable innocence, and the close-up precision of a child.

Discovering a Coes painting is like discovering the miniature jungle beneath the grass. Both focus on a finely-detailed reality, one that is often overlooked. Both have a private magic and a wafting of childhood memories, and both breathe with a life that's present whether figures are there or not.

Washed with the blues, greens and yellows of summer, Coes' acrylic and egg-tempera paintings unfold an imaginative narrative of Provincetown's Victorian angles, cramped little backyards, gnarled and ancient trees, young girls, dunes and sailboats. There's an illustrative quality about the artist's work, a style that's representative and ma-

ture, but still alive with the exuberance of youth. Coes pinpoints the source of that exuberance.

"There was never a time when I didn't feel connected to my childhood. I still have all my toys; I still play with boats. Those juices that you have when you're a child, if you don't let go of them, is what living is all about," he says.

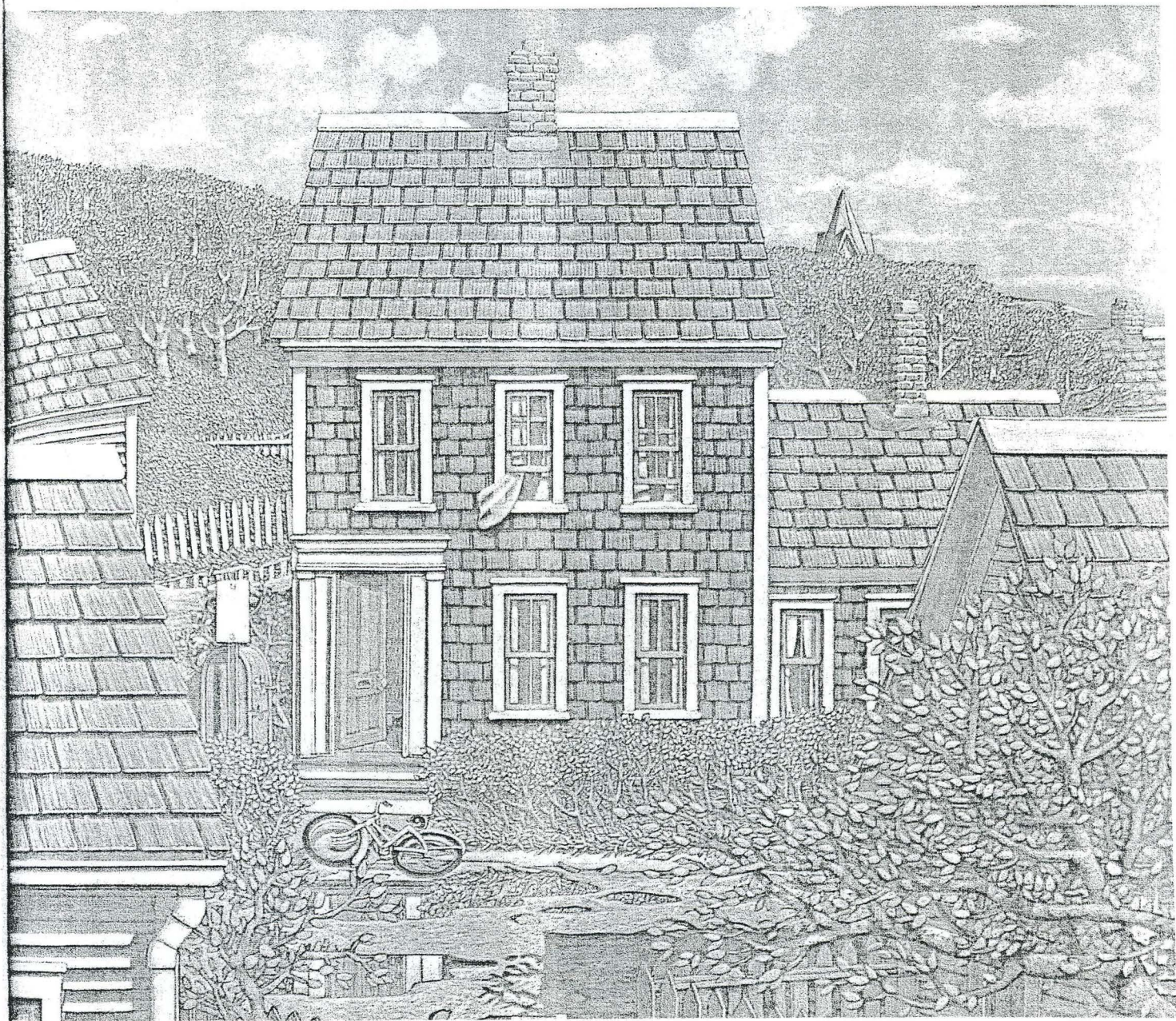
Beyond that, Coes says, "It's naive just to think it's possible to paint for a living. I constantly ignore reality that way, and ignore the fact that I'm 39 years old."

Sam Hardison, co-owner of Provincetown's Impulse Gallery, one of two Cape galleries where Coes' work can be seen, says the maturity of Coes' style led him to expect the painter to be much older. "One of the things I love about Picasso, Chagall, and Miro is that even as very mature painters, they had that child-like quality," says Hardison. "Peter

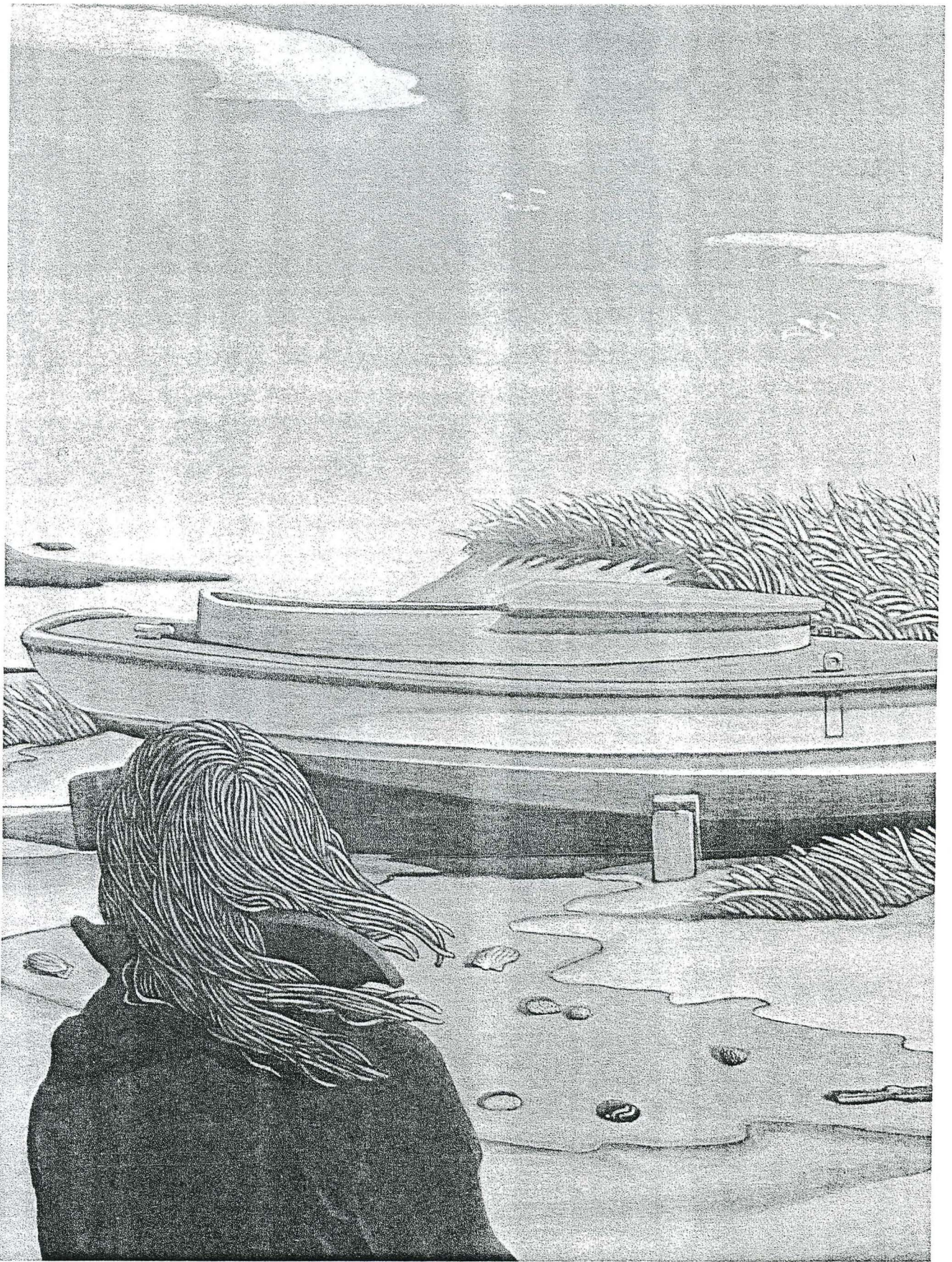
Coes is like that, very quiet, very easy, and very, very personal. His is a unique approach to painting the Cape, distinctively Peter Coes."

Coes has been painting full time for 10 years, the last five of those in Provincetown. His earlier paintings, completed in Amherst, Massachusetts, when his career and reputation were still taking form, are more tremulous in feeling. They portray sinister ritual, young females hiding or running through woods, and are painted in the somber tones of an Arthur Rackham color-plate. "People were afraid of them," Coes says.

While Amherst and its surrounding pine forests may have had an ominous effect on him, Coes really believes his change to a more pleasant tone came about "because I have a better idea of what I want to paint. There is a lot of insecurity in my earlier paintings, and that shows up in my images. So many things



"April Breeze," 28" x 22", egg tempera, 1986. Coes gathers his imagery from Cape Cod architecture, changing weather, and changing seasons, all viewed from differing angles. Sun showers and puddles trigger a fresh approach for him and bicycles are a recurring link to childhood and the past; the textural lushness is a Coes trademark.



NED MINTER

"Summer Friends," 24" x 30", acrylic, 1986. An avid sailor himself, Coes says people respond to the positive emotions behind his painting of boats, youth and summer. "I think of my paintings as mood changers, as inspiring positive thinking," he says.



NED MANTER

Keeping his recently completed studio in precise order is one way Coes creates the discipline he needs to paint every day. Having his own space is a luxury, he says. "It's nice to have a place for all the little things I've collected over the years, the things that trigger me."

happen in your life. What is triggering you is sometimes so buried you are often not even aware of it."

Coes is aware of how both the past and the present can affect his work. An avid model builder as a boy, Coes sees the Cape as an infinite source of models. He mentions the textures, subtle colors, and diminutive architecture as having a lasting effect on him. "I used to wonder what I was going to do next," he says. "Now I have notebooks filled with ideas. I don't think there's an end to it. I am *always* aware. It's a curse, actually. A sunset isn't real for me until I can paint it."

In his studio, where his collection of model cars, arrowheads, family photos, images of other art works, and a wood sculpture by fellow Provincetown artist Richard Pepitone, are all carefully and somehow congruently displayed, Coes sits in a chair smudged with blue paint. Underneath his method and practicality, he is really a procrastinator at heart. He says, "I have these little rituals that I keep applying to get more done. I get into my studio

every day. If a painting is at a standstill, I'll build a frame, gesso a board. I don't feel the day is complete until I've been here and done something.

"I think in very short steps. I have a lot of little successes. I set little goals. If you make a living painting you have to do that. Discipline is important."

His canvases start with the elemental, a wash of Provincetown's sea and sky carried in a blue-gray gesso. Even after other colors are applied, "that blue-gray always bleeds through; it unifies the painting."


Next Coes does a "careful drawing in a darker blue," one inspired by his previous sketches. Once the design is established, shadows of draftsman-like precision are applied. The shadows give Coes' work dimension, while drawing in each blade of grass or leaf gives them detail.

Such precision, Coes says, is useful, "it lends movement. You can have all the blades blowing in the same direction to lead the eye to an area of the painting. That's where it gets to be fun, almost like sculpt-

ing the painting. Highlighting decides what will pop out; it gives it real depth." Highlighting, or filling in each blade and leaf, is Coes' favorite part of the process.

Overall Coes says his paintings are still undergoing changes, subtle to his collectors, but important to him. "They are larger, with softer lines than they were a year ago. To me that's a big change, but people have just said they look more alive. If you're painting what you did last year, just because it sells, you're really in a prison," he says.

With artistic growth comes the inevitable self-testing. "It's very lonely. In the middle of every painting, I ask myself, 'Will I ever be able to pull this thing together?' I write myself notes along the way, then I go back to reassure myself that those doubts did get resolved. Your reality is the painting you're working on at the moment."

Peter Coes' paintings can be seen at Impulse Gallery, Provincetown, and Tree's Place, Orleans. He also shows at the Copley Society, Boston, and in Stockbridge, Connecticut. 

— Ann Lloyd