

Arts & Entertainment

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John Dowd DRAWS on the past

By Sue Harrison
 BANNER STAFF

Drive down Commercial Street until it curves at the Coast Guard Station and you are confronted with a solid Cape Cod house that would be in the middle of the street unless the street had shifted around it like a stream around a large rock. In the upstairs window, framed by the darkened room behind is a white bust of Shakespeare endlessly gazing out on the busy street. It's a bit of mystery, a dash of enigma and a glimpse into the sensibilities of John Dowd, the artist that lives in the house.

Dowd, who designed this year's AIDS Support Group auction poster and t-shirt, has been in town for 20 years painting the austere Provincetown houses that have survived nor'easters, changes in the economy, shifting demographics and an often raucous popu-

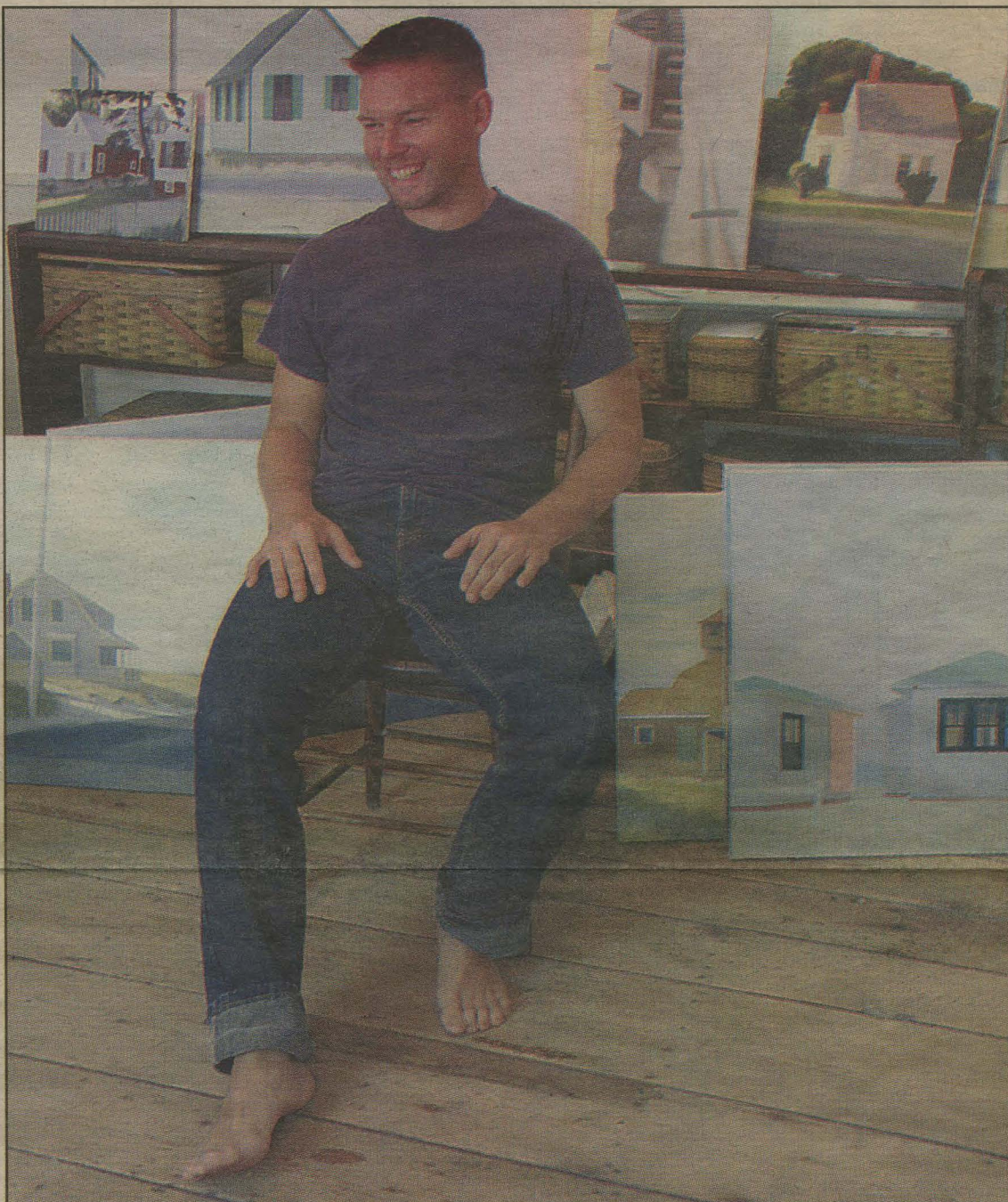
lace. It is these houses that speak to Dowd and tell him about the town, its history and its ability to survive. Dowd's latest work will go on display at William-Scott Gallery, 439 Commercial St., Provincetown, beginning with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 30 and hanging through Labor Day weekend.

Originally from Northampton, Mass., the son of two schoolteachers, Dowd credits his grandparents with his early interest in architecture. They had an old Victorian house, which he says was "much more interesting and mysterious in a child's imagination than the ranch I grew up in."

After earning his degree in architecture, Dowd came to Provincetown where something caught his attention, and he stayed and painted.

"When I first came here I was depicting what actually ex-

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PHOTOS SUE HARRISON

John Dowd surrounded by the paintings that will hang in his upcoming show at William-Scott Gallery.



One of Dowd's spare paintings that captures the strength of place.

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isted," he says of his simple, clean landscapes that are always sans people. The buildings are the complete statement and within their lines and the mood they evoke, the people who built them and lived in them are revealed more clearly than if they had posed for a portrait. "There was a kind of spare, lonely landscape of these older houses in a slight state of shabbiness," he continues. "Increasingly, it's harder and harder to find locations that have some kind of emotional resonance. For a great part it has to do with the landscaping around the buildings. There were the little burnt lawns where you used to be able to see around the tops of the foundations without all those plantings. The simplicity has been supplanted by suburban aesthetic which may be prettier but is not as strong.

"Provincetown embodies this classic traditional Cape Cod look, which has been an icon for America. They use it as a template for houses everywhere, but here, it seems, people have lost the sense of what was unique and true to the place. They have brought in this suburban mentality, they have to have the cast iron urn, the fieldstone wall, they have to have the cobblestone driveway. All these things that are fine in horse country in Delaware or Connecticut or something. To bring in these things that are alien elements, is different from what I found appealing and inspiring."

The changes he sees around town are not for the good in terms of the historic integrity of

the place or the aesthetic the houses were born from.

"There was a hard, beautiful dignity to them," he says. "They weathered all those years and they were still there. They were very uncompromising. They had been there for 150 years. They had made it through all these storms and they were pure to themselves. A lot of houses now seem like they are putting on fancy clothes. They've got some money and they have to show off. Make up with all the colors. They are all tarted up and the fancy jewelry is the lawn ornaments."

There is none of that going on in Dowd's house. The old wood floors are less than perfect, an antique stove handles the cooking duties, the windows are all period and the walls have been re-plastered like they were more than a century ago. A narrow staircase leads upstairs and through more rooms to Dowd's studio, his only nod to the present. It's full of light, and old metal boxes filled with thousands of photos, from which he paints, line a wall-length bookcase. Many of his windows,

doors and trim bits were on the way to the dump before he rescued and reused them.

In years past, people came to town and left their shoes and cares by the door.

"They came to escape their world. Now, they want to bring that world here. They want all the conveniences and have no appreciation of the rustic. It's all about slick and about status."

Dowd pauses several times during the conversation and says that although he stands by all he said, he doesn't want people to think he is ungrateful. It's just that he loves the town he first saw, and he wants to keep that spirit alive. He does that with his paintings, with his hours of volunteer time on the local historical commission and through the way he lives.

"When I think what this town was about, it was the sand and the water," he says. "The beauty was more elemental. It was not about showing off the trappings of wealth. That gets in the way of seeing what's here. Now, there's all this flash and glitter, and it's not the flash and glitter of the moon on the bay. □

ASG auction full of goodies

The 16th annual live and silent auction to benefit the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod will take place in Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St. on Friday and Saturday, Aug. 30-31 and promises an even bigger selection of treasure than ever before.

This year's poster is based on a woodcut designed and executed by John Dowd, and Dowd did the t-shirt design as well. John Waters has signed on as celeb co-host and is donating some of his personal memorabilia (four signed movie posters and other goodies) for the auction. In a Waters-related donation, photographer Henry Garfunkel has given a photo of Ricki Lake taken when "Hairspray" was being filmed. Alice Brock has donated a first-edition copy of her famous 1968 cookbook "Alice's Restaurant" valued at around \$2,000.

Vacation packages include New Year's in South Beach or a getaway to Palm Springs. There is merchandise, clothing, services and artwork along with a sprinkling of the truly unexpected. Artists donating work include



PHOTO HENNY GARFUNKEL

Ricki Lake on the set of John Waters' movie "Hairspray."

Marian Roth, Bob Henry, Selina Trieff, Barbara Cohen, Anne, Leslie and Cynthia Packard, TJ Walton, John Dowd, Robert Kernaghan, Richard Segalman and many more.

Susan Baker has given the original drawing done for the carnival page of her book "The History of Provincetown."

The silent auction will take place from noon to 10 p.m. on that Friday. The live auction is on Saturday starting at 7 p.m. For more information, call (508) 487-9445, ext. 48.

Flying high on art in the bins

By Melora B. North

BANNER STAFF

Provincetown artist John Dowd has curated an exhibition of work at the Fine Arts Work Center, 24 Pearl St. in Provincetown, that is a trip back to the '80s when emerging artists were honing their skills in the old bins that were offered up for rent by FAWC as studio space. The exhibit opens Friday from 6 to 8 p.m. when many of the artists will be on hand to discuss their work and their bin memories.

The bins go back to the early 1900s when FAWC was the site of Days Lumberyard and the bins were originally used for coal storage. When FAWC purchased the property in 1972 they followed in the tradition of Days' and offered the studios for rent to artists, at very inexpensive prices — in 1914 an artist could rent a bin for a mere \$50 a year.

Taking advantage of the affordable studio space, Dowd jumped on board and it was there that his career took off. Now an accomplished artist who works from 9 p.m. to dawn, he has been awarded the National Academy's highest prize for landscapes. For this exhibition Dowd has assembled work from such noted artists as Paul Bowen, Marty Davis, James Hansen, Norris Church Mailer and Bert Yarborough, among others, all of whom occupied bin space in the '80s before the space was converted to what is now the Stanley Kunitz Common Room.

"When I was there it was very inexpensive," says Dowd. "Some of the spaces were divided with blankets hanging from clothespins. There were waist-high walls like horse stalls. You could see over to the other artist's areas. You could have a small space or an entire stall, they weren't always full. There was a lot of energy, a lot of younger people. There was music, it spilled over. It was great to be young and have the freedom to paint in an accept-

ing and nurturing community."

Originally from Northampton, Dowd has a degree in architecture from Notre Dame. After college he traveled to Rome, then decided to spend a summer in Provincetown and found it to his liking. Today he lives and works in town.

"When FAWC stopped offering the studios I knew it was time to look for another," says the artist. "I decided it was time to buy something, a place I could live and paint in. It was 1994, I got a house, it was cheap. What I paid then is the price of a garage now," he says, laughing.

He easily recalls the small sacrifices he made when working in the bins.

"There were lots of swallows," he says. "There were large barn doors on tracks. You had to be careful of the swallows. At night I had to turn my paintings around or they would s*** on them. They wouldn't necessarily fly at you if you were there; they kind of did their thing after you left. The droppings were everywhere. You had to put a cover over the chairs. You could scrape the stuff off but it is acidic and the paint wouldn't be the same. I learned the hard way." He laughs at the memory.

So it is with authority that Dowd can curate this exhibition that he hopes will take viewers back to the days when art was being created in a raw environment fueled by freedom, peppered with a bit of subtle hardship.

"The overview is to try and capture the energy and vitality we had," says Dowd. "Expressionistic works, sculpture, portraits ... there will be a wide range of work exemplifying the breadth of expression from the '80s in Provincetown. Basically they were people doing whatever they wanted and needed to do. There is no unifying thread to this show, just that we were all alive at the same time and in the same place. We're even going to be playing the music."

But will they bring in the swallows? That is the question.

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Canvas by James Hansen, one of the artists who painted in "the bins" back in the 1980s.



JOHN DOWD

Summer Work

September 4 - 7, 2009

Opening Reception: Friday, September 4th, 7 - 9pm

View the exhibition online September 4

The William • Scott Gallery 439 Commercial Street, Provincetown • 508.487.4040 • williamscottgallery.com

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