

Arts & Entertainment

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Mulcahy puts a lifetime's devotion into each canvas

By Ann Wood

BANNER STAFF

It could be said that Wellfleet painter John Mulcahy is married to his art. He remembers drawing and painting when he was only four years old, and in the 74 years he's lived thus far, he's been too "intoxicated" by art to take a wife. As he tells his story, Mulcahy adds paint to a self-portrait on board using a palette knife. He seems unable to stop.

"I think I always had a fear that after the honeymoon was over [my wife would] turn to me and say, 'Look, buster, you have to go out and get a job,' he says. "I missed [out on a] bunch of blonds and brunettes, I was so intoxicated by art."

It seems to have paid off. Mulcahy's impressionistic-expressionistic oil paintings are held in many private and public collections, including the Provincetown Art Association and Museum and the Cape Cod Museum of Art.

Some of his small works are being featured in a group show that opens with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday at the Harmon Gallery, 95 Commercial St., Wellfleet. This show will run weekends through the holiday season. (See sidebar for other artists included in this show and other Wellfleet exhibitions opening at the same time.)

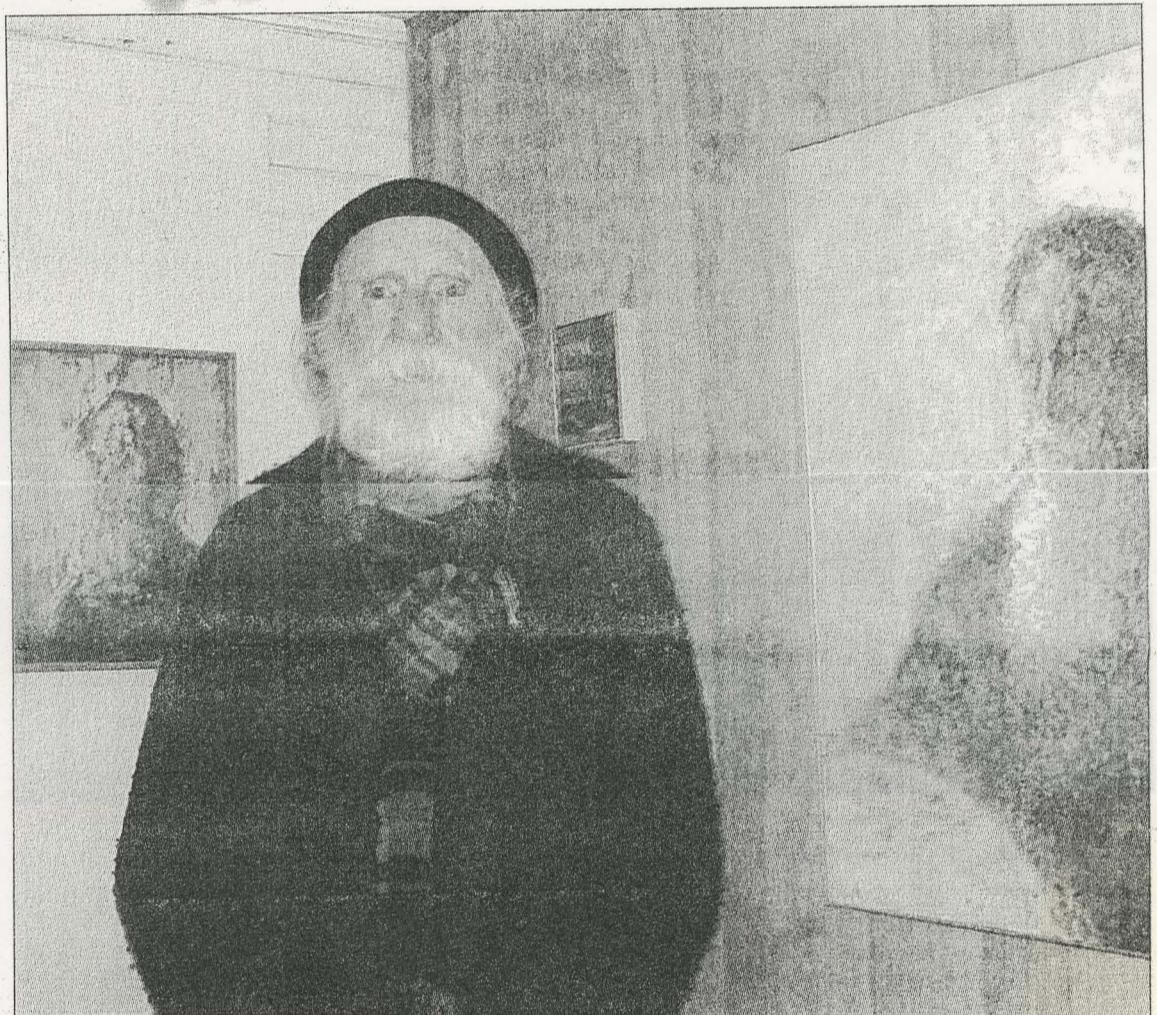
Although he typically shows at Kiley Court Gallery in Provincetown, a John Mulcahy museum is set to open next year in his Wellfleet studio-gallery on Main Street. He lives above the gallery, a two-family 28 or 30 room former inn, half of which he bought back in 1966. Then, in 1979, while Mulcahy was out of town, an accident happened that wiped out a significant amount of his art and took down some gallery walls and an alcove. He's rebuilt, sort of: a panel on which an outside mural is painted remains as one wall.

"I got a call from the police

— 'John, they've just driven a car through your studio.' And it was sad. [It was] a couple of boys under the influence, as they said," Mulcahy says, adding that thankfully no one was hurt. The Buick drove through one side of the studio to the other. "And the nose of the Buick went into the living room of the lady next door. Oh, I lost so much [art]. I had just won the Best of Show award [in Boston]. I was so proud of that painting, 'Winter in Province Lands.' That was smashed into spaghetti. I lost so much."

That was years after he first came to Cape Cod. Mulcahy drove to Provincetown in the 1950s after he got out of the army and saw an advertisement in a Boston paper — a Provincetown shop was looking for consignment art. Selling his paintings of the water on the water seemed a perfect match.

"I always loved the sea growing up in Hingham, you know," he says. "That really was the attachment ... Maine and Cape Cod have been my two painting loves."



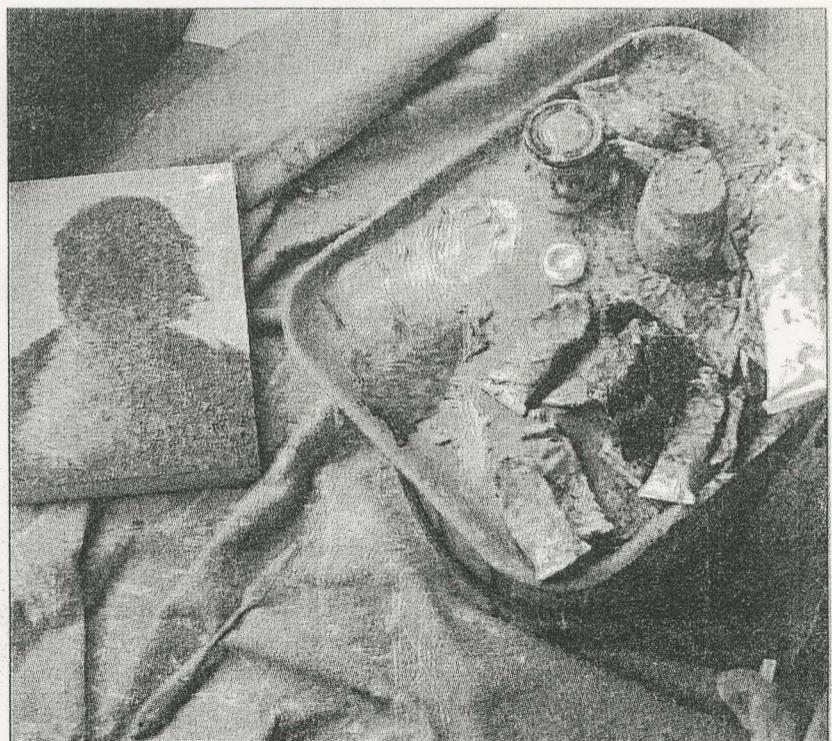
John Mulcahy with one of his self-portraits inside his Wellfleet studio gallery space.

PHOTOS ANN WOOD

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Mulcahy working on one of the paintings that will be at the Harmon Gallery Small Works show, opening this Saturday.



Mulcahy's palette is a work of art on its own.

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Mulcahy says that sometimes when he takes a palette knife to canvas to paint, he becomes a maestro.

"I just feel like I'm going right at a symphony," he says, adding that he does continue to do brush work, mostly on memory pictures. "Plein air painting is really my cup of tea. I like feeling the wind, being outdoors ... I guess it's because I'm an impressionist. I love to capture the aura nature throws at you every once in awhile."

When it's suggested that he's more than an impressionist, sometimes tinkering on the edge of expressionism, Mulcahy doesn't mind. He considers the German expressionists among his favorite painters. He also appreciates the "deep talent" of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.

"What a major person and what a happy thing [that] he was very much under the influence of toxins and things and he straightened his life out," Mulcahy says, and he lights up when asked who other favorite artists are. Although there are too many to list, he says he loves John Singer Sargent, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne and Winslow Homer.

"That portrait show of Vincent van Gogh, I just think van Gogh is just absolutely one of my favorites," he says. "I love the work of Matisse when he was a young fellow in Paris."

Mulcahy himself started creating art as a very young fellow. It seems to run in the family. His mother, a pastel painter, "had beautiful sensitivity to line work," and his father, a dentist, was supportive of his artistic son.

"I broke my arm when I was about four and I remember my dad getting crayons and paper [for me]." It was Mulcahy's right arm that was broken, and he was right-handed. So he began sketching with his left. "He got a kick out of that."

Mulcahy's father provided him with more than crayons – his first exhibition, at 17, was held in the reception area of his father's dental office. That came after studying art in high school, where he says he had a "wonderful" art teacher. He went on to study painting at an arts' college near Copley Square in Boston. He later entered a New England juried competition at the Lowell Museum.

"I think one of the proudest things was being accepted at the Lowell Museum," he says, adding that the piece that was se-

lected from among 2,000 works was called "December Shore" and painted from memory. Once it was selected, he was told that he needed to have a price placed on it, and so he asked that it be listed at \$350. He thought that was reasonable back in 1977. The curator choked and upped it to \$900. "And, can you beat it? The painting was not only accepted but sold the opening night of the party," he says, and adds that the museum only took a 20 percent commission.

Mulcahy stops painting and starts wandering through his studio, looking at the backs of several small paintings. He wants to read a statement he wrote on one of them, but he can't remember which one. Finally, he finds it.

"Art has been a wonderful journey. It became so important and meaningful to my life," he reads, adding that his sister Catherine managed the gallery. "I think my biggest school has been falling in love with nature and trying to portray the wonderful songs she throws at us."

John Mulcahy's work is also showing in an exhibition that runs through the month of December at Alpers Fine Art, 2 Main St., Andover. Call (978) 470-0013 for directions.

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