

John Grillo

American Abstract Expressionist

ARTIST JOHN GRILLO, one of the founders of the American Abstract Expressionist movement, assures that it's okay that he never received full credit for his achievements. He says it doesn't matter that few know he was producing powerful, groundbreaking abstracts in San Francisco a decade before Hans Hofmann and Mark Rothko dominated New York City's art scene. He is not impressed when I point out that he played Leif Ericson to Jackson Pollock's Christopher Columbus, discovering and developing an entire new art world years before Pollock was recognized.

The only thing that matters to John Grillo is art. Being relegated to the art world's second tier in no way diminishes the power and passion of his work. Using color, shape, form, and texture in radical new ways, Grillo, as a young student on the GI Bill, gave expression on canvas to the turmoil and confusion America was experiencing and the ideological conflicts that were raging in the years following the Second World War. Today, at 86, Grillo lives and works in Wellfleet with his wife and former student, Kathy, whom he describes as the most wonderful woman he's ever met. Despite a stroke that has affected his hearing and left him a little unsteady on his feet, he's still exploring his medium, still painting with force and even with a bit of whimsy. It's what he's always done. It's what he was born to do.

BY JOHN GREINER-FERRIS



1947 **ABSTRACTION, WATERCOLOR**

I met John Grillo on a day stripped clean of winter but not yet fulfilling the promise of summer. Camera in hand, I was working Commercial Street in Wellfleet, looking for any hopeful splashes of color I could find, when I spotted a white house with blue trim standing out against a blue sky. Before I had a chance to start shooting, a man aided by a walking stick shambled down the driveway towards me. I asked permission to take some pictures.

The man invited me to photograph in his backyard, where, to my surprise and delight, every viable surface was painted in a most imaginatively colorful way—a sultry jazz-club scene was painted on the side of his garage, and found objects were cobbled together in ways both whimsical and profound. Sculptures, some to my liking and others that I couldn't begin to fathom, dotted the property.

We talked for a few hours about art—his and others—and not once did he attempt to give me the impression that he was *somebody*. He did, however, recount that he once saw Jackson Pollock urinating in a fireplace at a party.

Friendly, open, and unpretentious, Grillo was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1917, the first of three sons of Sicilian immigrants. During his teens, the family moved to Hartford, where his interest in painting was piqued during visits to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Influenced by the masterworks there, and perhaps by his father's unfulfilled dreams of becoming an artist, Grillo decided he wanted to be a classical portrait painter. Young Grillo's relationship with his father was

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1952 **ABSTRACTION, OIL ON CANVAS**

fractious at best. According to the son, his father never encouraged him to pursue art, and once even picked up his paper and pencils and threw them across the room, angry that Grillo wasn't contributing to the family's livelihood. It is ironic and also tragic that Grillo senior could not foresee that his son's work would one day be ensconced in the permanent collections of such institutions as the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Guggenheim Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art.

Despite his father's disapproval, Grillo persisted in his pursuit of art. Enrolling in night classes, he used plaster casts to bolster his study of portrait painting and figure drawing. Money for art supplies was earned during summers working in Connecticut



1989 **STILL LIFE, OIL ON CANVAS**

tobacco fields. In 1935, he was awarded a scholarship to the Hartford School of Fine Arts, but he never received his degree. After three years of feuding with his father, he moved out of the family home.

Despite this setback in his formal training, Crillo continued to grow and mature as an artist. He cites three major American artists whose styles influenced him: Thomas Benton, the American regional artist whose style and fluidity was admired by Jackson Pollock and who, later in his career, turned his back on abstract art for realism; the social realist Reginald Marsh; and John Sloan, a disciple of the Ashcan School of art.

Crillo married and had a son, and when the war came, he

joined the Navy. Although as a father he wasn't required to serve, he felt a restless yearning to see the world. While in the Navy, he spent his free time sketching scenes from military life such as a sailor getting his hair cut on a troop ship, and a tent city on Okinawa. It was while stationed on Okinawa that he met Joseph Atkinson, a furniture designer who, by encouraging him to work in a less traditional style, would change Crillo's life.

After the war, with assistance from the GI Bill and a portfolio of tattered drawings from his military stint, he was accepted at the California School of Fine Arts, known today as the San Francisco Art Institute. In the two years he attended, Crillo set the school—and the West Coast—on fire with his work. Indeed, the



1993 "CARMEN," OIL ON CANVAS

John Grillo

world had never seen anything like Grillo, who would stand back from the canvas and throw paint at it, or turn it upside down and let the paint drip. His work was unpremeditated, unrehearsed, spontaneous, and bold. Susan Landauer, an authority on the San Francisco Abstract Expressionist movement, has called Grillo "perhaps the first and purest 'Action Painter' on the West Coast, and one of the most influential painters of San Francisco's School of Abstract Expressionism."

Shortly after his first show in Berkeley, Grillo became convinced that the West Coast wasn't "as up on the modern movement [as the East Coast]." Newly divorced, he left San Francisco to study with the legendary Hans Hofmann, an association that helped tremendously to spread Grillo's reputation in New York. He impressed his mentor and regional critics with a one-man show at the Artist's Gallery, and in 1950 Hofmann select-



2004 ABSTRACTION #1, OIL ON CANVAS

ed Grillo's work to be exhibited at the influential Kootz Gallery's "Fifteen Unknowns" show. During the summertime, Grillo studied and painted at the Hofmann School in Provincetown. Eventually, the master himself bought some of Grillo's work for his own personal collection.

After New York, Grillo taught at such renowned schools as the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. However, even though he presented 40 one-man shows and almost 20 selected group exhibitions, and his work became part of the selected collections of 30 museums around the world, he didn't achieve financial security until he was 50 years old.

Art and painting are Grillo's life. Nothing else seems to matter. When I compared him to Leif Ericson, he looked at me quizzically, turning the name over in his mind as though he were

JOHN GRILLO: SELF-PORTRAIT IN WORDS

"Drawing and painting have been passions of mine for as long as I can remember. Until I went into the Navy in 1945, my work had been representational. While I was in Okinawa, an officer introduced me to abstraction and it became my primary way of working for the next 30 years or so. During the time that I was intensely exploring abstraction, though, I would often draw or paint something representational, maybe draw the figure or a still life, paint flowers or a landscape. And throughout my career, I have always done self-portraits from time to time.

"Starting with the '70s, I went back to figurative work in a big way. I have done many series of works on themes such as the circus, the Tango, the Park, Nudes

and Flowers, and still lives inspired by my collection of African and New Guinea sculpture. Now, with the turn of the century, I go with the flow. In other words, I have reached a point where I go back and forth between representation and abstraction as the spirit moves me. I find that although the thought process is similar in both modes, moving between them enriches each and refreshes the work and myself, in order to express myself more fully, I have always moved back and forth between media, which I think helps to keep my work and my mind and spirit fresh. I paint with oils, acrylics, watercolors, and pastels. I have done etchings, woodcuts, monotypes, silk screens, and lithographs. I draw with just about anything that will

make a mark. I have done sculpture in clay and bronze, and made constructions from found objects. For several summers recently, I did a great number of paintings with glazes on ceramics. I have also done several murals at my home here in Wellfleet. My famous teacher, Hans Hofmann, said that if he had to work the same way all the time, he would have given up painting, and I feel the same way.

"At this very moment, I happen to be working on a series of acrylic figure compositions that were inspired by the daughter of a friend of mine. While I was visiting with her parents in Berkeley, California, she asked me if I would paint her portrait. She sent me a photograph in one of her costumes from when she was a

professional showgirl in Las Vegas. I painted several studies and sent one off to her just today, as a matter of fact. Now, I am planning to continue on with this theme for a while.

"In fact, I had been planning to work on a Carnival theme over this winter, but now I am thinking of making this my series for next summer at Café Heaven in Provincetown. For over ten years now, I have done a series of paintings for that restaurant. They are done to the exact dimensions of the café, so it is really a series of murals on canvas. Some of the themes include beach scenes, Jazz, Tango, Nudes, the circus, and Marilyn Monroe. The series that is currently on display at Café Heaven is abstract paintings—shapes in color."

From July 3 through the end of the month, Cove Gallery will be holding a retrospective show of works by John Grillo. 15 Commercial Street, Wellfleet 508-349-2530; www.covegallery.com

running down a list of familiar painters—Rothko and Still, Pollock and Hofmann, Bischoff and Park. Nope, no Ericson.

Recently, vandals threw paint on his car. Instead of getting angry, he related the incident to Abstract Expressionism, saying how throwing paint has always been associated with strong emotions, and postulating that the potential for committing an impulsive act is ingrained in all people. He described a news photo he had seen of rioters throwing paint and eggs at an embassy as "very aesthetic."

I spent a number of afternoons with Grillo, discussing his life and his work. Talking with him is a joy. His knowledge about art is vast, his mind sharp, and his humor unexpected and frequent. During my last visit, he said he was having trouble with his painting. Sometimes, he confided, he doubts he'll ever paint again. We climbed the rickety stairs to his studio above the garage. I wasn't

sure what I was going to see. Grillo prefers to paint several themes concurrently, working on first one and then another, following where inspiration and energy lead. Perhaps, I thought, he was going to show me work incorporating circles and squares, or more pieces from his carnival series.

On a worktable lay a large piece of canvas. The central element was an abstracted female nude; surrounding her were shapes and color. Grillo once revealed that he doesn't plan his paintings. He comes into contact with the canvas—the surface—and when he paints, something is triggered that in turn causes a creative chain reaction. On that brisk afternoon tilting on the edge of summer, I saw that, even at 86, John Grillo hasn't lost his knack for making canvas come alive. **■**

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