

Quiet drama runs deep

by john grenier-ferris

"There's a quiet drama on the Cape, which is why I like painting here," says Robert Roark, a life-long painter and co-owner of the Winstanley-Roark Fine Arts Gallery in Dennis. "I love going out after a snowstorm, when there's serenity on the Cape. Or when the sun is low in the sky, when you have the beautiful colors and shadow patterns—it is such a wonderful time to paint."

Though now a permanent resident, like so many other artists, Roark has been coming to the Cape over the course of his life for different reasons. He is drawn by the natural world, but he also comes for the community of artists that encourage an artist of Roark's caliber to live here, surrounded by people who share a common passion.

While studying at the prestigious Art Students League in New York and working on the Cape during the summers in the 1960s, Roark found the same vibrant artist life in Provincetown that he experienced in New York. "There wasn't a separation," he explains. "Everyone mingled, and you were exposed to all points of view, surrounded by artists. It was really very energizing."

Roark would go to a party at Andy's, as he refers to Andy Warhol's place, surrounded by a variety of people, each with a different point of view. "It was a stimulating atmosphere," he remembers. Such artistic interaction also motivated the painter to join the many artists who lined Provincetown's Commercial Street during the summer months, painting portraits of tourists. "You could exchange ideas about art with people who were different from you, who had different ideas," he recalls.

These influences are a straight line connecting Roark's childhood in rural Mississippi to the style he has today. He started out as a young artist in Laurel, Mississippi, a place so small that you could walk wherever you needed



Antique Memories, oil on canvas, 12" x 16"



The Unfinished Journal, oil on panel, 20" x 15"



The Cove At Sunset, oil on canvas, 12" x 16"

to go. Nevertheless, it had a top-notch art museum that Roark frequented. A year at the University of Mississippi during a turbulent time of racial unrest left Roark cold; he was interested in art, not politics, and dropped out to join the Army. Eventually, he moved to New York where he studied art, and then worked primarily as a commercial artist.

Today, Roark is a well-established artist in control of his style, materials, and techniques. He paints with intricate detail and has a clear mastery of Cape Cod's light and color palette, yet avoids sometimes stultifying ultra-realism. There is an element of abstraction to his work that evokes a strong visceral response.

He paints what he enjoys like so many artists. From elegant portraits of bright-eyed children to fantasy paintings that take Disney-like imaginative themes and render them with Georgia O'Keefe-like clarity, to his landscapes that are finely rendered Cape Cod treasures, Roark has a varied, deep repertoire.

Surprisingly, when he is asked, this museum-caliber artist can't define what he does. "I create what people would loosely define as artwork," he says after some thought. "I want what I do to be accurate and well-drawn. It's all pretty simple and straightforward." But then he adds, "Once, Andy told me that art is anything you can get away with. To which I replied, 'Nobody should know that better than you.'"



Portrait of Devon, oil on panel, 7" x 5"

Robert Roark's work can be seen at the Winstanley-Roark Fine Arts Gallery, 744 Route 6A, Dennis, MA, 508-385-4713, www.masterfulart.com,

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