

Painting's Next Wave Hits Cape Cod

The Henry and Sharon Martin Collection

By ELIZABETH IVES HUNTER



Many readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* will recall an article in the July/August 2006 issue that highlighted the collection of important 19th-century American paintings formed by Henry and Sharon Martin. In that piece, the Martins summed up their philosophy in one sentence: "When we've looked at the same picture a hundred times, we want to look at it for the 101st time and still experience something new." In this same spirit, the couple has more recently assembled an outstanding group of contemporary representational paintings made in New England.

CONNECTING WITH THE PRESENT

The Martins began collecting 18th-century British portraits for their Connecticut home. Soon they shifted to 19th-century American Luminism and the Hudson River School, especially smaller paintings executed on the spot which, more often than the larger versions finished back in the studio, successfully convey that region's majestic vistas and skies. While building this collection, the Martins enjoyed investigating both its technical aspects and intellectual underpinnings.

At the same time, these two busy professionals were using their second home on Cape Cod as a getaway. This house affords views of a marsh and Nantucket Sound beyond — a magnificent landscape with light and moods quite different from the Hudson Valley's. On the Cape, the Martins found themselves going to galleries and meeting artists regularly. This situation provided them with opportunities to ask living artists about their actual methods and intentions, questions at which scholars of historical art can only guess. Over time, the Martins forged friendships with these men and women, who have contributed enormously to the couple's enjoyment of art.

In 1996, the Martins purchased their first contemporary painting from Cape Cod, *Single Sail* by Provincetown's Anne Packard (b. 1933). They were attracted by its minimalist composition and the soft focus that enhances its sense of serenity. Two years later, at the Cape Cod Museum of Art's benefit auction, the Martins acquired *Oranges and Mexican Bowl* by Pamela Pindell (b. 1950). In both cases, they found these images so compelling that there was literally no choice but to buy them.

The Martin Collection has grown further to include still lifes, landscapes, and seascapes by Jacob Collins (b. 1964), William R. Davis



ANNE PACKARD (b. 1933)

SINGLE SAIL

1998, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 24 IN.

(b. 1952), Donald Demers (b. 1956), Robert Douglas Hunter (b. 1928), Joseph McGurl (b. 1958), Peter Quidley (b. 1945), and Matthew Schulz (b. 1979) — all represented by top examples. These painters came to art in diverse ways: Quidley and Davis were largely self-taught, while Collins, Hunter, McGurl, and Pindell are inheritors of the Boston School tradition through the teaching, writings, or pupils of its greatest exponent, R.H. Ives Gammell (1893-1981). Packard and McGurl



PAMELA PINDELL (b. 1950)
ORANGES AND MEXICAN BOWL
 1998, OIL ON CANVAS, 8 x 12 IN.

form and can draw viewers into their highly personal visions through emphasis and subordination. Jacob Collins has painted with this trio on at least one occasion and shares their interests.

The works representing these four artists in the Martin Collection illustrate the full range of possibilities available to landscapists who have mastered their craft. Though all four men paint the sea, it is Demers who most often paints it close up as it rages against the shore. Like Frederick Judd Waugh (1861-1940), who set a high standard for wave paintings, Demers begins with small studies, in color or black and white. The latter allows him to establish the proper relationship between full light and half tones, which are pivotal in creating the illusion of breaking surf. We see this relationship clearly by comparing the charcoal concept sketch for *Oncoming Sea* with its finished oil version. Demers observes, "Through quantum physics we know that all matter is essentially made of moving energy and not much else. I found myself focused on the kinetic energy in the subject and not the fact

came from artistic families, while Demers attended art schools that marginalized drawing and design, much to his frustration.

EARTH, SEA, AND SKY

Just as the Hudson River School saw nature as a visual expression of the sublime, so the painters of land and sea in the Martin Collection hint at layers of meaning beyond what can be observed with the eye alone. Given their similar ages and objectives, it is not surprising that Davis, Demers, and McGurl have taken painting trips together, nor that galleries have exhibited them together as "The New American Luminists." All appreciate the infinite variations of light as it falls across



DONALD DEMERS (b. 1956)
THE ONCOMING SEA
 2003, OIL ON CANVAS,
 34 x 48 IN.



DONALD DEMERS (b. 1956)
CONCEPT SKETCH FOR *THE ONCOMING SEA*
2003, CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 4 x 5 ³/₄ IN.

WILLIAM R. DAVIS (b. 1952)
FISHERMEN AT SUNSET OFF WHITE ISLAND LIGHT (NEW HAMPSHIRE)
2002, OIL ON CANVAS, 19 x 44 IN.





JOSEPH MCGURL (B. 1958)
OFFSHORE
 2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 48 IN.

that it was water and/or sky and/or rocks; but a coexistence of various energy masses interacting with one another.” Particularly noteworthy is Demers’s masterful handling of the soft edges of the waves breaking at this composition’s center.

The small paintings that Davis makes on site provide a fertile archive for his more imaginative work in the studio. *Fishermen at Sunset off White Island Light (New Hampshire)* epitomizes Davis’s deft marrying of contemporary scenery with elements from the past, such

as the tall ships once common in New England; here he uses the shadow and light on their sails, and also the shadows of their hulls as crucial elements in the overall design. McGurl is represented in the Martin Collection by large oils and small *plein air* studies. Like Demers’s *Oncoming Sea*, McGurl’s *Offshore* was too large and compositionally complex to be painted outdoors. Here he provides cues that guide our eye across the canvas, capturing the essence of late afternoon sunlight on water without a hint of mechanical repetition. Not surprisingly, the Martins relish the Luminist effects in this sea and sky, as well as the serenity they convey.

McGurl says he enjoys making “series of works which have a similar composition, topography, philosophy, light quality, etc. Working in this way allows me to more fully develop an idea and exploit the possibilities more thoroughly. *Offshore* was part of a series originating in my imagination, though it is based on my knowledge of nature. For this

JACOB COLLINS (B. 1964)
DUNE WITH STORM
 2008, OIL ON PANEL, 13 1/2 X 20 IN.



PETER QUIDLEY (B. 1945)
As TIME GOES BY
2006, OIL ON PANEL, 24 X 36 IN.

series, I envisioned a viewpoint suspended above the sea, and originally it contained nothing but sea and sky. My goal was to make these paintings as bare as possible. Gradually, various manmade objects crept into the scene, but these were minimal intrusions; the emphasis was still on the sea and sky. Suspending the viewer in space, leaving him uncertain about just where he is witnessing the scene from, reinforces the ethereal quality I was seeking. *Offshore* is a representative of the ultimate goal for all of my paintings — the exploration of light, form, space, and color interpreted through paint.”

Collins’s *Dune with Storm* originated as he stood on the beach watching a storm approach. He has succeeded in evoking the essence of this charged atmosphere through deft design and a color conven-



tion that intensifies the moody look of the clouds and beach. Packard has spent much of her life in Provincetown and knows it well enough to capture the place’s essence entirely from memory. In both *Single*

Sail and *Beetle Cat*, we see a single boat on a calm sea; these pictures, Packard underscores, are not about the boat, but about solitude and the isolation of the creative process. Her joining of sea and sky is a soft, atmospheric blending of elements and not, as so often happens, mechanical or abrupt.

Like other artists represented in the Martin Collection, Matthew Schulz bases his paintings on both visual memory and on-site studies. The landscape seen in *Towers Aglow* started as a line drawing made *en plein air*, but the dominant cloud tower came entirely from memory. Training the memory has come naturally for this young artist, who spent hours with his late grandfather hunting in the woods of Maine and marshes of Cape Cod. In addition, he cites McGurl as a major influence, along with his former teachers Robert Bateman and the late Paco Young.

STILL LIFE

Unlike their colleagues in landscape, still life painters have complete control over the arrangement of their forms. Peter Quidley silhouettes his objects against a dark background, using positive and negative shapes to create a sense of calm and unity in the design. *As Time Goes By* is a superb example of Quidley’s highly personal style: Our eye moves from left to right across a series of containers and flowers that form a triangle with its highest point at right. A less skilled artist would have over-elaborated the cut-glass surface here, but Quidley avoids this temptation by attending to the details without compromising overall harmony.

Robert Douglas Hunter’s *Arrangement with a Pear and Kumquats* reveals how he chooses objects for their



MATTHEW SCHULZ (B. 1979)
TOWERS AGLOW
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 X 24 IN.



ROBERT DOUGLAS HUNTER (b. 1928)
ARRANGEMENT WITH A PEAR AND KUMQUATS
 2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 16 X 24 IN.

varied shapes, colors, and values — not their functions — then composes a harmonious whole. If there is any underlying message here, it is the tranquility achieved through the conscious arrangement of apparently random objects. As our eye moves along the top edge of Hunter's objects, then down along their bottom edge, we become aware of the spaces between these elements. Sharp as his edges may be, Hunter rightly considers himself an impressionist; like the Boston School a generation earlier, he can capture the look of light falling across form through subtle mastery of emphasis and subordination.

Represented in the Martin Collection by a trio of canvases (*Oranges and Mexican Bowl*, *Deep Blue*, and *Peonies*), Pamela Pindell also sustains the Boston School tradition, having studied with Hunter's first pupil, Sidney Willis. Though her choice of objects and arrangement strategy are entirely personal, she and Hunter both think in terms of foreground, middleground, and background, and are fascinated by the lost edges of curvilinear forms as they turn into deep shadow. Pindell's exceptional powers of observation and chiaroscuro surely move her into the highest tier of contemporary impressionism.

THE NEXT WAVE

Painters almost always seek to pursue at least one of the following goals: to set down an image or impression of the world around us; to give visible shape to an ideal world of their own imagining; or to decorate the surfaces of a larger environment (such as a ceiling or wall). Once focused on an objective, artists summon their skills and knowledge to address the job at hand. (The word "job" is pertinent, because that is exactly what a painting is to a painter.) They also know that, whether or not the picture is well received now, a more significant evaluation will be made by future viewers uninterested in contemporary fads and styles.

Since the late 19th century, many painters have rejected representations of the "real" world as mere copying. Instead, they have attempted to show the essence of things without painting the things

themselves. This trajectory has opened up the possibilities of picture-making, of course, yet artists so inclined risk the specter of theory outstripping practice. Fortunately, the fascination with conceptualism, abstraction, and expressionism seems to be diminishing, and one can detect renewed interest in the blending of 19th-century academic tradition (what the mind knows about form) and Impressionistic observation (what the eye actually sees). This potent combination is moving representational painting into a new phase analogous to the extraordinary step forward taken by the Hudson River School 160 years ago. Henry and Sharon Martin's growing collection epitomizes this exciting groundswell, and its public display this year and next will surely inspire everyone to take a closer look. ■

Editor's Note: *The Subject Is Light: The Henry and Sharon Martin Collection of Contemporary Realist Paintings* is now on view at the Cape Cod Museum of Art through November 7. It will then open at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut, next March.

ELIZABETH IVES HUNTER has been director of the Cape Cod Museum of Art since 2003, when she curated its retrospective of the painter Frederick Judd Waugh. Having grown up among artists, she shifted to banking after earning a BS at McGill University (Montreal). Hunter returned to art in 1981 upon the passing of her godfather, the Boston School master R.H. Ives Gammell, and has subsequently edited his influential books and co-organized exhibitions of his art.

Information: Cape Cod Museum of Art, 60 Hope Lane, Route 6A, Dennis, MA 02638, 508.385.4477, ccmoa.org

All photos courtesy of Henry and Sharon Martin.