

Painter Anne Packard Exhaling after 35 years

By Abby Luby
Special Correspondent
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Few women artists achieve matriarchal status without years of struggle in the largely male-dominated art world. Anne Packard is one of those women, who now, after 35 years of painting through and in spite of a turbulent life, has caught the eye of a celebrated author and a well-known filmmaker.

Heralding her next step into notoriety, Packard's newest work is on view at Galerie Sono in South Norwalk through April 4. The show will kick off a multimedia project documenting her life and work resulting in a book packaged with a DVD. Writing the book's forward is award-winning author David Michaelis, best known for his New York Times bestseller biography of Charles M. Schulz, and for "N.C. Wyeth: A Biography." Collaborating with Michaelis is curator/gallerist Claude Villani. Art writer and curator Peter Frank will write an in-depth essay about Packard's work, and film producer Emily Lau, known for her work with the History Channel and the Discovery Network, will write, produce and direct "A Day in the Life of Anne Packard" expected to be a 30-minute portrait exploring the artist's life and work.

Packard, 75, says she is thrilled to have her voice heard.

"I'm overwhelmed and I'm also delighted because most women my age are invisible. It's a joy not to be invisible and have my say."



Packard's story is the quintessential drama, laden with tragic themes of the silenced woman artist, the wronged wife and the distraught parent. After 17 years of marriage, her writer husband left her for a much younger woman, and in 1974 her 18-year-old son, Stephen, disappeared forever in the California mountains with his girlfriend, presumed murdered.

"I never found my Stephen. He just vanished," says Packard. "But you don't let it become your whole identity. You move on with that persistent ache but remembering the love you had. At the time I couldn't imagine that it was happening. I look back now and still can't imagine it, but I'm OK." Packard says she persevered, painting her way out of pain.

"People didn't want to know about my grief, which made me furious and so hurt. Instead of getting weaker, I got stronger."

At 40, she had to be the breadwinner for her four children.

"I was amazed, embarrassed and afraid because I was brought up to be a wife and mother. Then everything switched. Painting was a place for me to go after my husband left."

Now, 35 years later, her works are in the homes of Ralph Lauren, Bob Vila, Diane Sawyer, in prominent



collections at the Oglethorpe University Museum of Art, Cape Cod Museum of Art, Kemper Museum of Art, Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, New Jersey State Museum and Provincetown (Mass.) Art Association and Museum. Packard canvases have graced the walls of a plethora of investment and law firms nationwide.

Painting wasn't new for Packard; it had been in her life since she was a young girl. She was heavily influenced by her artist grandfather, Max Bohm, an early 20th-century romantic impressionist painter based in Provincetown. Although Packard never met him, she grew up surrounded by his artwork, imbued with her grandmother's stories about Bohm.

Packard, also based in the popular artist community of Provincetown, started painting what she saw: expansive seascapes, silent harbors, stark beaches and dunes - visual content that's expected from a coastal-based artist.

But Packard takes her landscapes to a different place. Her work evokes deep silences prompting mesmerizing contemplation. Her lush canvases are nuanced with the subtleties of light, sea air and the quiet, muffled sound

of the ocean. She infuses her work with her passion for solitude, where a special silence could undo the emotional, mental clatter for both her and the viewer.

"It was a vehicle for me to just get out of myself and to get into myself. It worked both ways," Packard says.

Among the first paintings Packard sold in the late 1970s were small landscapes brushed on driftwood, asking price: just \$5 or \$10 (her canvases now sell from \$7,000-\$30,000).

Recognizing her talent and liking her art was Packard's late neighbor, the celebrated artist Robert Motherwell. Says Packard of Motherwell.: "He used to send people from his home down the street to see my work."

Motherwell befriended Packard, sometimes lending her his house in the winter and regularly checking in on her progress. But to Packard's disappointment, Motherwell's mentoring stopped short of promoting her.

"We would spend an evening talking. But he always looked at the floor and just talked in a stream of consciousness - just like James Joyce."

Packard notes that he never included her in his soirees and dinner parties and she sums up their relationship with a hint of bitterness.

"The friendship was not a sharing one. I was this barefoot women with

all these kids and no money who lived down the street who painted all these paintings that he liked."

At one point, Packard urged Motherwell to help her with some public mention, but to her dismay he turned her down.

"I had gone over the line and that was the end of that. He was that kind of man. He told me, 'I could send you to New York and put you in touch with all sorts of people, but you wouldn't be any happier driving a Mercedes than you are now.' It was clear that he wasn't going to publicly come to my aid."

Packard was already honing in on her unique style, weaving lustrous textures that defied brush strokes, catching elusive light and shadows that reflected both turbulence and calm. The paintings in the SoNo show are some of her most emotive and brooding work, painted with tawny browns, dark goldenrods.

In "Autumn Sky," a selvage of frothy



white waves spark a dark teal ocean sandwiched between a deep Sienna clouded sky and a smooth washed-over beach. The work instantly

evokes a distant, coastal soundscape of the outgoing tide.

In "Empty Chair," Packard's deft hand offers a gravity-less



phenomenon in a room with a chair beside a window seemingly suspended by the window's light.



"Reflection" is one of Packard's signature themes of the solitary boat adrift - here the boat and its

reflection are cast in a still, slate-blue sea that melts seamlessly into a midnight-blue sky.

"These are darker," says Packard of the show's work. "This past year, it's stormy winters, fall, heaviness. But there's always a bit of light in the end. Always."

Many see the spiritual side of Packard's work. "I don't know that it's spiritual, it's just something that happens when I get into the zone," she says. "If I hold my breath, I lose it. It's a very visceral kind of thing not a learned, or conscious. I know where I want to go and I let it happen."

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The show of Anne Packard's work runs through April 4 at Galerie Sono, 135 Washington St., South Norwalk. There will be an opening reception on Saturday, 5 p.m. Admission is free. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sunday, noon-5 p.m. Call 831-8332 or visit www.sonogalerie.com

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