

PAINTING HER WAY OUT OF PAIN

Text by Abby Luby : Paintings by Anne Packard

One of the few women of her generation to achieve status in the largely male-dominated art world, Anne Packard turns sunlight and shadows into healing.



It's the reverberating poignancy in Anne Packard's paintings that perhaps is most striking. The 75-year-old artist has a gift for evoking emotions, an ability that she says emanates from a place of pain. The stillness of a single boat adrift in a calm ocean and the exquisite, luminous sky over the Cape Cod dunes have clearly been both solace and inspiration to the artist.

Anne's story is fraught with tragic themes: the silenced female artist, the wronged wife, the bereaved 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, presumed murdered.

"I never found my Stephen," says Anne. "He just vanished. But you don't let it become your whole identity. You move on with that persistent ache, remembering the love that you had."

At age 40, after years of depending on her husband's income, she was faced with becoming the breadwinner for her four children. "I was amazed, embarrassed, and afraid because I was brought up to be a wife and mother,"

Photo: Charles Fields; all artwork courtesy of Galerie Sono





she says. “Then everything switched. Painting was a place for me to go after my husband left.”

From her coastal home in the popular artist community in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Anne found solace in painting what she saw: expansive seascapes, silent harbors, stark beaches and dunes. Among the first paintings she sold in the late 1970s were small landscapes brushed on driftwood. Asking price: just \$5 or \$10. (Her canvases now sell for anywhere from \$7,000 to \$30,000.)

Painting had been in Anne’s family since she was a young girl. She was heavily influenced by her grandfather, Max Bohm, a famous early-20th-century Impressionist painter. Although Anne never met him, she grew up surrounded by his artwork and captivated by the stories her grandmother told about him.

“My work is the proudest thing that I am. I am in the midst of life.”

As Anne pursued her talent as a way to make her living, she befriended her neighbor, the celebrated artist Robert Motherwell, who liked her art and wanted to help her. He sometimes allowed Anne to use his house in the winter, and during the summer he regularly checked in on her progress. “He used to send people from his home down the street to see my work,” Anne recalls.

Anne began honing her unique style, weaving lustrous textures that seem to defy brushstrokes, capturing the Cape’s elusive light and shadows that reflect both turbulence and calm. Her lush landscapes are steeped in deep silences that can prompt contemplation of things unseen and unheard—the vibrant sea air and the muffled sound of the ocean. She infuses her work with her passion for solitude, where a special silence can undo the emotional and mental clatter of everyday life.

About 15 years ago, major newspapers and magazines began noticing Anne’s work. Today her paintings grace the walls of the homes of celebrities such as Ralph Lauren, Bob Vila, and Diane Sawyer. Her canvases also hang in prominent collections at many museums, as well as in corporate offices and law firms.

Recently, Anne completed a series of paintings that she calls more “brooding,” rich with tawny browns and deep goldenrods. “These are darker,” she says. “They are from the past year of stormy winters and a sense of heaviness.

In Her Words

Seaside

40 x 30, oil on canvas (page 27)

The single, solitary boats placed in many of Anne’s paintings reflect her own sense of self. “Every boat has its history and distinct personality as we do. I’m a loner—I guess that’s obvious in my work.”

Provinceland

11 x 14, oil on canvas (opposite, top)

Anne’s own deep sense of struggle and torment emerges in her paintings of dark, turbulent clouds. “I like nothing better than the approaching storm.”

Beach Point

30 x 40, oil on canvas (opposite, bottom)

“I paint what I see,” says Anne. Her work releases a connective energy, one that carries the viewer to another place. She has always been drawn to the Provincetown Harbor and its blending of sea, dunes, and weathered cottages.

But there’s always a bit of light in the end. Always.”

Not surprisingly, Anne has caught the eye of a celebrated author and a well-known filmmaker. A book and accompanying DVD about her life are due out in mid-November from Skylark Press. Writing the book’s foreword is award-winning author David Michaelis, best known for his best-selling biography of Charles M. Schulz and for *N.C. Wyeth: A Biography*. Collaborating with Michaelis is curator and gallerist Claude Villani. Art writer and curator Peter Frank will write an in-depth essay about Anne’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*, a 30-minute portrait on DVD.

Humbled and surprised by the forthcoming projects, Anne says she is “overwhelmed and delighted.”

“Most women my age are invisible,” she adds. “It’s a joy to have my say.”

Anne never expected her career as an artist to take off. “I was never working toward it; I was just going to survive,” she confides. “[My work] is the proudest thing that I am. I did it, and my kids are OK—most of them anyway. I am in the midst of life.”

eldr.com: Visit eldr.com/packard for a slide show of Anne’s paintings.

Abby Luby writes about the environment, art, books, and news. Visit her website, abbylu.com.