

The play of memory and desire

With Oren Sherman's work, what you see is not important, how it makes you feel is

by Stephen D'Agostino

**Oren Sherman exhibit
at Robinwood, Provincetown,
August 31-September 15.**

One could say that the paintings Oren Sherman is showing at Robinwood in Provincetown are the result of getting licked 900 million times. Actually, it was his work that took the licking, a collection of images turned into postage stamps back in the days when we had to activate the adhesive. That success was typical of his life from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. During those years, Sherman, a trained illustrator, created a print for the Kentucky Derby, a VISA card design, and illustrations for countless corporations' annual reports. Though it was lucrative, it wasn't work that excited him.

After taking a sabbatical of sorts, Sherman shopped an idea around for what he really wanted to do: illustrate a book on Greek mythology. After being turned down by 20 publishers, Random House brought his idea, and thus a new career direction sprang from the ashes of what got him to that point.

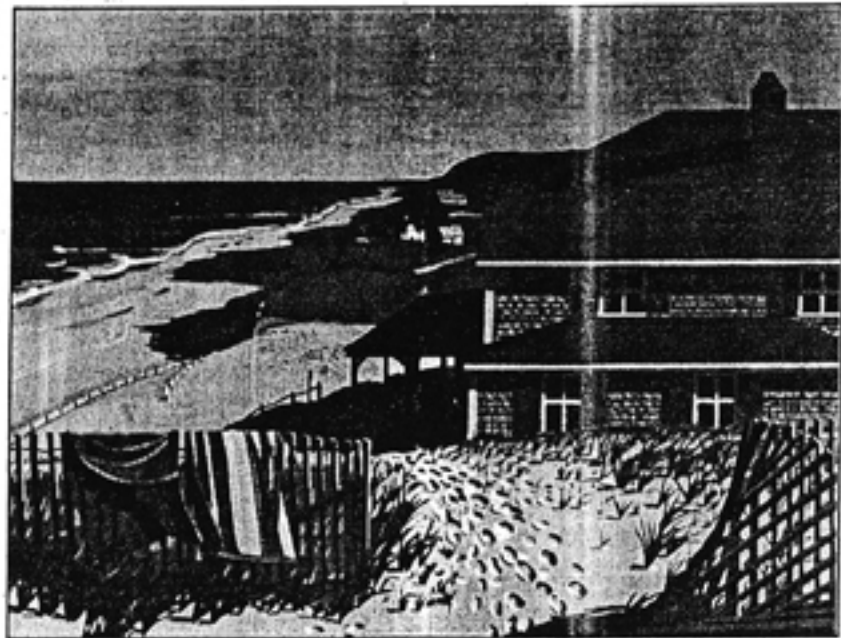
At that same time, Sherman started painting scenes in and around Provincetown.

"You can't make this stuff up. It wouldn't seem real."—Oren Sherman

The works, all done using gouache, an opaque paint that requires the artist to create the work's luminosity instead of relying on the white of the paper, sell well for him as prints, but the paintings also serve another purpose: they document what is fading fast. "You tend to think of history as something being in the past," Sherman says. "It's weird to think of history as the course of my career. In ten years, things have really changed. Stuff is going away."

The painting "Nightwatch" is a perfect example of what he means. It depicts the porch of a cottage, the umbrella on its table drawn, the chairs perfectly placed, the light casting a warm glow, the harbor behind the house peaceful. The cottage, named Achilles' House, still stands in Provincetown's East End, but it's been renovated since Sherman captured it. "It's not as nice now, like everything else," he says.

"Donnie's Rest," is another example. The subject is, or was, a small cottage on the side of the road in Wellfleet. When Sherman first saw it, it looked similar to the image. Over the years, its awnings fell off, it became increasingly dilapidated, and it was finally torn down. "All these cottages and the things I've been painting," he says, "the reasons I moved down here, are becoming finite. I'm trying to work fast and document what's here." The image, whose original is not available, recalls what Sherman saw when he first laid eyes on the cottage. It's close, but it is not exact.



Oren Sherman's 'Southeast Lookout.'

A heightened reality

In his paintings, Sherman tries to create something more real than reality. Just as people perfect recollections of, say, a trip or love affair by removing the bad memories, Sherman perfects the reality of what he sees by recalling the beauty and simplicity of how things once were. "My work is more about how things feel than what things look like," he adds.

That is not to say Sherman must perfect everything he sees. Once, he came across a house with orange and blue beach towels

hung across the fence. The wind was blowing off the water from the left, the sun was coming from the right. It arrested Sherman. "You can't prop this stuff," he says, his voice full of the excitement he must have felt when he came upon the house. "You can't make this stuff up. It wouldn't seem real." But "Southeast Lookout," perhaps the painting in this series that most mirrors reality, does seem real, as do all his other works, a testament to his skill and vision of capturing and creating reality.

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Oren Sherman

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It's obvious to Sherman that his works touch chords. "It's really exciting as an artist to have people talk to me about my work and put themselves into it," he says, "and talk about their own story. And have it be part of their experience. It's unbelievable to me. It's humbling and exciting for me to see that circle complete."

These Provincetown paintings have allowed Sherman to mix business with pleasure. In 2000, Yankee magazine selected "Coen Hill," his best selling print, for the cover of their summer reading issue. Having seen that work, L.L. Bean asked him to do the cover of their spring 2001 catalog. He modified "Marsh View," a scene on the Pamet River, for the cover. "I kind of had a fantasy list of clients and things I'd like to do," Sherman says. "The first one on the list was L.L. Bean. It seemed like such a long shot." That long shot also yielded the summer 2001 cover, for which L.L. Bean chose "Southeast Lookout," and the fall 2001 cover, a new work.

"Ninety-five percent of what I did was for everyone else," Sherman says of his life in the early 1990s. "Now, 95% of what I do is for me." For an artist who makes reality more real, this reality must seem more like fantasy. It's a present that could hardly be remade into something more perfect. ▼