

by Jeannie Motherwell
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Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler and Cape Cod Influence the Works of **Jeannie Motherwell**



Jeannie Motherwell, "Perfect Storm," 2007, Acrylic and Collage on Canvas

In early childhood, my father and stepmother encouraged me to make drawings and paintings about what I dreamed the night before. Like many, they often pinned my work to the refrigerator, but they also framed many of these mementos. It was a marvelous form of validation for me and influenced my love for painting today. I have a childhood of memories from summers spent in Provincetown, MA, a tiny fishing village and artist colony on the tip of Cape Cod. Surrounded by artists, writers and an internationally renowned artist family (my father is Robert Motherwell and stepmother Helen Frankenthaler), it was there where much of my creative influences were derived.

In 2009, I had a solo show in Provincetown at Lyman-Eyer Gallery, where I dedicated a series of close to 20 paintings and collages as both a personal response and as a public memorial to the sinking, in October 1976, of the "Patricia-Marie" fishing vessel. It was headed for home to the Provincetown harbor -- its hold too heavy with scallops. The captain and all six crew members perished.

The sinking of the Patricia-Marie happened early during my first winter in Provincetown, and for 30 years the loss haunted me. I was 20-something, fresh out of college and the Art Students League, meeting local people, getting around by bike, painting in my studio but mired in a deep slump at the time— I was on my own, and feeling part of a community--something new to me since New York City, my home town, was so global.

I had befriended a dark haired fisherman named Bobby, one of the younger crew members of the Patricia-Marie. One morning, headed to the bike trails, I passed the local bar --there he was in the door, asking if I'd join him for a beer. After a moment's hesitation, I joined him for a soda instead. What I remember was his smile that lit up the room and the thick wad of \$100 bills in his wallet—it must have been thousands of dollars, and he said, 'Here I have all this money and I can't even give it away.' When the boat went down, Bobby's wallet was the first thing that emerged before recovering his remains weeks later.

I was only at the bar for a few minutes, when I mentioned that we should get together again soon. He said he'd be going out very early the next morning and would be gone for several days. It gave me a glimpse into his world--the constant coming and going--from sea to land, and the dedication that it commanded.

The tragedy was a pivotal moment for me creatively. I mourned along with the community, and as I continued to paint, an abstract subject matter began to emerge. Triangular shapes decoded were not the sailboats of my sunny childhood, or the picturesque druggers lining the wharf, but the ghost of the Patricia-Marie.

These works began with streaks of loosely applied washes on the canvas often mimicking a raging sea; collaged imagery of torn bits of paper, drawing and painting. Perfect Storm hints at the expressive boldness of Chinese calligraphy. Splashes of blue surround the center of the picture; a torn piece of paper from one of my earlier boat paintings suggests a red boat tossed by a raging sea. All elements are deliberately balanced holding the boat aloft as it appears to be ravaged by the sea. Even if I complete the Patricia-Marie series, its sudden cataclysm will remain in my work as memory and feeling. I liken this series to my father's "Elegy to the Spanish Republic," which consists of hundreds of pieces done in memory of those who fought and died in the Spanish Civil War--a shattering event for his generation. The boat is in my skin. After three decades of trying to name my subject, I have pulled from deep within my core to find my own elegy conveying the unspeakable horror of that day.

www.jeanniemotherwell.com
Jeannie Motherwell jmoth@aol.com