Living|Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE • WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1998

CONFESSIONS OF A SOCCER MOM

By Alison Bass
GLOBE STAFF

OK, I'll admit it: I secretly harbor the fantasy that my 9-year-old son will become a great soccer player, good enough to play on the varsity team at school, and good enough to win a scholarship to college, perhaps even an Ivy League college. Yes, it's true: I am (or was) a competitive soccer mom, one of those suburban jocks with big plans for her kid. I was one of Them.

My dream started innocently enough when my son was just a toddler and loved kicking balls around. It seemed a natural step to sign him up for kiddie soccer, at the local Y at the tender age of 5. And by the time he was 6, I had joined the soccer fray myself, as a coach on our town's reputed soccer league.

As a child, I had always wanted to play soccer myself. My brothers played on the soccer league in our community, one of the first in the country. But as a girl, I was barred from playing on an organized team. Even so, I grew up in a world permeated by soccer, its rules, its rush, the intensity of players stampeding down the field in pursuit of leather and air.

So when my firstborn showed early signs of athletic prowess, I seized the chance, if only in a vicarious sense.

SOCCER MOM, Page C7

Furniture *built for art,* not comfort

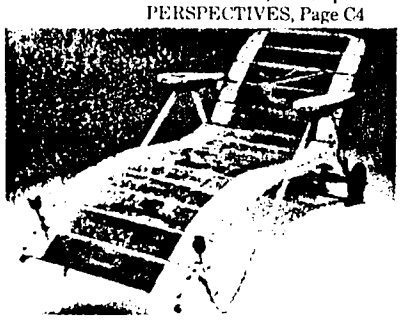
By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

Perspectives

The only form of visual art in which Boston is an indisputable national leader is studio furniture. That very name was coined here, by former Museum of Fine Arts curator Edward S. Cooke Jr., to describe the post-World War II flourishing of furniture by makers as sophisticated as they were skilled, some of whom had learned their "trade" in university programs rather than through the traditional apprenticeship route.

When a studio furniture show from California comes to Boston, it's tempt-

PERSPECTIVES, Page C4



Shawn Goodell's "Leisurematic" lounge chair.

Fuller Museum names new director

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton has named a new director, Douglas Hyland, 48, who leaves his job as head of the San Antonio Museum of Art to take his new post on Sept. 21. The Fuller has been without a director since the February death of Caroline Graboys, who is generally credited with rescuing the 29-year-old community museum from chaos in both its programs and finances, and bringing it to its current stability.

"Everybody on the search committee thought Douglas was fabulous," says Fuller acting director Liz Haff, adding that there were over 40 applicants for the job. "He's articulate, he has great museum experience and an excellent track record in fund-raising," Haff adds. While

FULLER, Page C4

GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / TOM HERDE

Bernstein, above in her Gloucester summer home, has lately enjoyed a revival of interest in her nearly century-long career.

Still painting AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

Unmellowed by age, Theresa Bernstein is as vivid as her work

"Music Lovers," 1934.

By Sally Jacobs
GLOBE STAFF

GLOUCESTER – A trim gray sedan is purring outside as painter Theresa Bernstein prepares to head into the night to give a lecture on her favorite topics – art and herself.

Never mind that she is 108 and can see out of only one eye and hear out of a single ear. That she has had four strokes and four cataract operations and broken both hips. A salt-kissed summer breeze is tickling the old white house where she has summered since 1924 and there's that newspaper photographer down there at the bottom of the wheelchair ramp, his lens trained on the front door. Bernstein tucks her tiny silver topknot under her straw bowler and waves freshly painted scarlet nails at an aide. The press is *waiting*.

"Would someone please take off my goddamned glasses!" she commands.

Not that Bernstein ever particularly repressed her emotions. This is a woman who as a teenager swept her canvases with colors so dramatic that even curmudgeonly critics took note; who plied her brush with such force and confidence in the 1920s that many mistook her work for that of a man; who, astoundingly enough, painted women as substantive people rather than accouterments to men; who devoted herself with such passion to her husband, painter and master etcher Wil-

BERNSTEIN, Page C5

Theresa Bernstein: still painting after all these years

■ BERNSTEIN
Continued from Page C1

liam Meyerowitz, that her own art fell into near obscurity; and who believed in nothing so much as "spontaneous expression," in both her art and her life.

It has been a long and largely happy life. But it has taken until now, with Bernstein well into her second century, for her to receive the kind of acclaim that many believe she has long deserved. Earlier this year, a New York gallery featured a 70-year retrospective of her work while another exhibit in which she is a principal is on a two-year tour of the country. Since she turned 100, she has been the subject of several other shows as well.

Why this flurry of attention now, as she approaches the midnight of her life? Part of the reason is that increasing numbers of women critics and dealers have drawn attention to women artists once ignored. Part of it is that her vivid realism and attention to working-class people doing unexceptional things like going to church and to work and to the beach and the theater are again in vogue. And part of it is that she is astonishingly old.

How she has achieved her stunning longevity she will not say. It is true that she neither drank nor smoked. Her only other nod to good health was "to get enough air and exercise to live." In fact, some speculate that she is even older than the generally accepted 1890 birth date would make her, including a few neighbors who remember her admitting to being older in earlier years. So how old is she really?

"I'm old enough to keep it to myself," Bernstein declares.

However old she is, Bernstein has continued to work hard. Later this year, her sixth book, a collection of drawings and stories for children called "Rabbitville," will be published. She is working on a seventh book, about Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement.

Meanwhile, she continues to paint, propped up in her hospital bed or seated in her wheelchair in the summer afternoon, an orange blanket tucked around her lap by one of the nurses or friends who are in constant attendance. The long table beside her bed is strewn with half-used tubes of oils and uncapped markers. There're a couple of portraits vaguely in progress, sheets etched raggedly in her beloved browns and oranges. There are four tiny vases of fresh-cut flowers and a pair of alabaster horses. But the better subject matter by far, of course, is the century and more of memories that drift through her mind like gossamer dust.

"Darling," she observed to a visitor on a recent afternoon, "my life has been much more exciting than you could imagine." And then she fell asleep.

• • •

Revival

Joan Whalen wished she had met Bernstein before the artist died. Owner of the Joan Whalen Fine Art gallery in Manhattan, Whalen had long been an admirer of Bernstein's paintings when last year one of her works wound up for sale in Whalen's gallery on consignment. Whalen got on the phone to get a death date for the artist, only to learn that Bernstein was not dead at all.

"I was shocked. Delighted, but shocked," exclaims Whalen. "I had always thought she was an exceptional painter, one who never fell into the isms of this century. She did her own thing, and I always respected her for that."

Earlier this year, Whalen hung a retrospective of Bernstein's work in her gallery, part of a broader resurgence of interest in the artist's paintings. Often described as an urban realist, Bernstein is also featured in a two-year traveling exhibit called "The Philadelphia Ten: A Women's Artist Group 1917-1945." Over the past decade, Bernstein has had exhibits at the Philadelphia Museum of Judaica, the Museum of the City of New York, and others.

That her work has long been shown in New York is a reflection of her deep connection to that city, where she has lived in the same studio on West 74th Street since 1932. Many of her most popular paintings are vivid portrayals of Manhattan life in the 1920s and teens, such as "Waiting Room – Employment Office" (1917), in which half a dozen women anxiously await work, or "Searchlights on the Hudson" (1915), depicting several women and children playing in the shadows of lights from gunboats patrolling the river, or "Armistice Day" (1918). The many beaches and vistas of Gloucester, where Bernstein lives from July through September, also figure prominently in her work.

• • •

Ashcan School alum

This is not the first time her work has been hailed. A Philadelphia native, Bernstein studied at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and the Art Students League in New York before she became one of the youngest of the urban realist painters known as the Ashcan School who dominated the art scene in the early part of this century.

"She really tried to push the boundaries of American traditionalism in her work," says Susan Fisher Sterling, chief curator of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. "She painted scenes we all know, like beaches and the streets of New York, but they were powerful. They had socko."

Like many of her male colleagues, Bernstein worked with bold, forceful strokes, her paint thick as frosting. People were her subject. People in line and on the subway and reading in the library and watching parades or the crashing of the waves. She used vivid browns and yellows rather than the softer pastels often thought of as feminine. Painting under the name T. Bernstein in order to escape the discrimination other women painters suffered, she drew admiring reviews for her work and in 1919 had her first solo show in New York. And then one day, three male members of the National Academy of Design showed up at her door.

"They stood at the door and they said, 'We like your father's work very much,' " recalls Bernstein.

"I said, 'Oh, he'll be pleased to hear that.'

"They said, 'We'd like him to join the Salmagundi Club.'

"I said, 'Oh, he'll be pleased to hear that.' "

They were, of course, referring to *her* work. But the acclaim did not last much beyond the 1920s. In the following decade, Bernstein's style became less monumental, her technique airier, and palette lighter at the same time that interest in American realism began to decline. Equally important was her relationship to Meyerowitz, whom she married in 1919. Bernstein, by virtually any assessment, deeply loved her husband, as he did her, and she devoted much of her energy toward promoting his work, particularly the color etchings for which he became famous.

"I think over the years she decided she would take a back seat and promote his work and that is what happened," says Girard Jackson, a friend of the couple's who has established an extensive public collection of Bernstein's work in Sugar Land, Texas. "There was only a single painting of hers in their studio until he died. She just fell by the wayside as far as the public was concerned."

But she continued to paint. Often the couple painted side by side in their small Gloucester studio or in the lush garden out back. When they finished, they would celebrate with friends over Manischewitz and a special chickpea appetizer. Whoever the guests, "it was Theresa who dominated. She was the star whether they were at your place or theirs," recalls neighbor Jackie Bell. "Bill was the perfect foil. He didn't mind at all."

• • •

Losses, recovery

Not all was sublime. Shortly after they were married, Bernstein gave birth to a girl and named her Isadora. The baby died of pneumonia two months later. In her biography of her husband called "The Artist Speaks," Bernstein wrote, "I remember the sunny morning when they carried her away and the crib was dismantled." Bernstein, who was apparently unable to have more children, will not talk about it.

The loss of her husband in 1981 was also a stunning blow, but Bernstein persevered with characteristic determination. For days she sat alone in their studio wondering what to do. "I said to the furniture, 'Who's going to write the book?' Bernstein caws in mock distress. "The furniture crackled and rattled and said, 'We don't write. We've been supporting you for years.' I said again to the furniture, 'Who's going to write the book?' The furniture crackled again and said, 'There's nobody to write the book but you.' "

Bernstein toiled over her husband's biography for nearly four years in Gloucester, dictating through the summer afternoons. The house, graced by green shutters and a leafy arbor out front, is a monument to their life together. Paintings cover virtually every inch of wall space, including the empty bedrooms upstairs in which Bernstein has not set foot for nearly a decade. In the old studio downstairs, unfinished canvases lean against the wall as though their creators had just stepped away. In the next room, Bernstein peels back a rug to show a dramatic green and black abstract she and her husband painted on the floor.

"We had no money for a rug," she says.

One day in 1984, Bernstein asked Jackson to go into her Gloucester attic and see what was there. What he found was an artistic trove worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. There were canvases on the floor, canvases on the furniture, stacks of canvases, nearly 400 in all. Many of them Bernstein had painted in her 20s and they are considered her finest work, such as "Searchlights on the Hudson," which recently sold for about $50,000. Later that same year the New York Historical Society featured an exhibit of Bernstein's and Meyerowitz's work and Bernstein embarked on a new chapter in her life.

"It was a new adventure for her," says Jackson. "She was totally devoted to William and his work when he was alive and then she turned the page and went on. After he died she just decided to live for herself, which she has done."

• • •

Relentless saleswoman

Over the next few years, scores of paintings were carried out of Bernstein's homes, restored and hung in museums and galleries along the East Coast, including several in Boston. As the price of her work soared to as much as $100,000, Bernstein's legendary sales skills grew razor sharp. Compromise is not a word she particularly likes. Whalen, the dealer who featured a retrospective of Bernstein's work this spring, remembers meeting Bernstein for the first time.

"She said, 'You're kind of young. Do you know how to sell my art?' " recalls Whalen. "I said, 'I think I do.' And she said, 'Let me tell you, when people come into your gallery I want you to lock the door and don't let anybody leave until there is a check on the table. That is how you sell my art.' I thought she was kidding. But I learned that's exactly how she did it."

Few are excused from her sales pitch. Many Gloucester residents regularly receive notices in the mail from Bernstein urging them to buy her latest book or reconsider an old one. One resident told of how after she decided not to buy a Meyerowitz etching because it was too expensive, Bernstein called her several weeks later to say that the price had increased.

On a recent afternoon, Bernstein watched intently as a reporter leafed hastily through a display of her books – including the Meyerowitz biography, two personal journals, a collection of her sketches and another of her poetry – and noted, "You have no concentration." She refuses to loan her books, saying, "No one brings them back. You have to buy them."

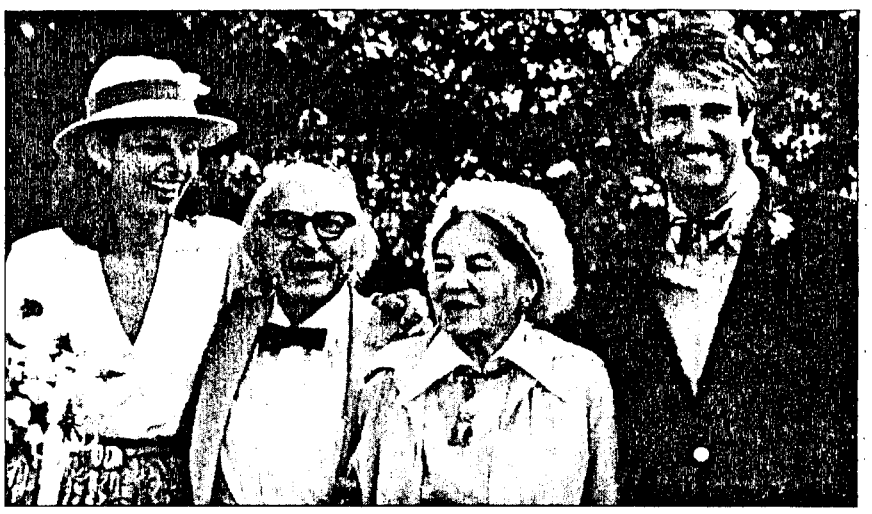
It has been a busy summer. Bernstein has attended several local dinner and events – a complex undertaking that requires several people to lift her in and out of the car. But few will forget her annual appearance at the North Shore Arts Association in Gloucester last month.

Billed to address the topic of "Art Versus Art Per Se," Bernstein had prepared for the event for weeks, mouthing the words of her speech as she lay in bed. But seated before scores of listeners in her wheelchair, a cluster of pink roses pinned to her shirt, Bernstein dealt handily with her topic, dismissed abstract art as "machinery," and deftly dodged questions about her favorite artists. She then launched into some of her favorite stories, told a riotous tale of a mouse in World War II, another about falling off the toilet and seized the opportunity to plug her books. In the end it came down to this:

"I want to say one thing," she said. "I've always enjoyed life. I always felt life had so much to offer and you just have to find the so much you can use in your own life."

And with that, she adjusted her straw hat and wheeled into the summer night air.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM HERDE



Above: Bernstein greeting fans at the North Shore Arts Association.

At right: With her husband, artist William Meyerowitz, and friends Jackie Bell (far left) and J. J. Bell (far right).

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM HERDE

Bernstein's "Carnegie Hall" (1914); the artist at work in her Gloucester home (above, right). Below, "Searchlights on the Hudson" (1915).