

# CAPE ANN Museum

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### SIXTY YEARS OF PAINTING ON CAPE ANN LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

<b>Speakers:</b>	Oliver Balf, Sinikka Nogelo
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#### Video Description

Listen to Cape Ann artist Oliver Balf (1927-2010) speak about his life and work in this video recording of a program offered in conjunction with an exhibition of his paintings at the Cape Ann Museum. Moderated by then director of Cape Ann TV, Sinikka Nogelo, who was a student of Balf's at the Montserrat College of Art, the discussion covers the artist's early years at Temple University and his first summer

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in Rockport at the age of 19. A founding instructor of the Montserrat College of Art in 1970, Balf encouraged individual expression in his students and credits early experiences with Hans Hoffman and Matisse as influencing his artistic development. He also explains how the unique setting of Cape Ann, the artists and people that he met there, and the students that he taught helped to nurture and shape his perspective on the intersection between life and painting.

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### Subject list

Oliver Balf	Tyler School of Art and Architecture
Paul Scott	Rockport Art Association
Joseph Jeswald	Cape Ann Society of Modern Artists
Roger Martin	Gallery 7
Sinikka Nogelo	Montserrat College of Art, Expressionism
Norman Rockwell	Alwin Nikolais
Matisse	Expressionism
Hans Hofmann	Rockport, MA
Poole's Farm	Ray Pisano

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### Transcript

00:14

Linda Marshall

Welcome, everyone, thank you so much for coming out on this sweltering afternoon. My name is Linda Marshall, and I'm the Director of Programs here at the museum. Today's a very special program. We're very pleased to present "Sixty Years of Painting on Cape Ann", which is an artist talk with Oliver Balf. Ollie has been working on Cape Ann as an artist since the 1940s and is known to many not only through his paintings but through his work as a founding faculty member at the Montserrat School of Fine Art. The museum is currently featuring an exhibition of many of his recent works upstairs on the third floor in our atrium gallery. And those works will be on view through September 14. And also, as you can see on the stage today, it gives us the opportunity to also exhibit many of Ollie's earlier works. And I'm sure he'll be speaking about those as well.

01:11

It is a great pleasure to have Sinikka Nogelo, the Executive Director of Cape Ann TV, here today to act as moderator for the talk. Sinikka first met Ollie when she was a student at Montserrat, and hopefully they will speak about that as well. And just thank you, Sinikka, so much for being here today. I also want to mention that immediately following the talk, we will be offering refreshments and a reception right outside of these doors. And it gives you a chance to also go up to the third floor if you arrived a bit late and wanted to take a look at the exhibition. So, I do hope you enjoy the program. And won't you please join me in welcoming Oliver Balf and Sinikka Nogelo.

02:03

Sinikka Nogelo

Thank you and welcome. I just wanted to start by saying how excited I am to have been invited to this special occasion because I so admire Balf, the painter. And as Linda said, I was one of the lucky number who got to actually study with him. I went to Montserrat after having gone to college. So, this is an opportunity I absolutely would not have wanted to miss. So, thanks to Cape Ann Historical. And thanks to Bob Quinn for videotaping this for the museum's archives and for a Cape Ann TV audience and most of all to Oliver Balf. So, it's just absolutely wonderful to be here. It's such an honor for me.

02:46

Oliver Balf

It's an honor for me, too. This is my favorite museum because they present such interesting work in such nice ways, and I love this place. And thank you everybody for coming out on such a hot day, hopefully to hear my story which might be many of your stories, too -- how artists get started.

03:14

Sinikka Nogelo

I'm going to do a few honors and read a little bit as far as a biographical introduction. Oliver Balf was born in Rye, New York, the son of Russian immigrants who fled the Czarist oppression in the early 1900s. After World War II (He is, unbelievably enough, a GI vet, and I can't believe it. I mean a World War II vet! He seems far too young to me.) he entered Tyler School of Fine Art at Temple University in Philadelphia and earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and later studied in New York at the Art Students League, at the New School, and with Hans Hofmann. He began exhibiting in 1946 while in Philadelphia, and moved to Cape Ann during the 1950s, where he has been painting ever since. During that time, he's received numerous awards for his paintings, a commission for a mural at the Mass General Hospital in Boston, and he was a founding member of Gallery 7, which some of you may remember. He's a recent nominee for the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters. Also, an educator, Ollie taught at the New England School of Art and is a founding faculty member of Montserrat College Art in Beverly, where he received an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts and is a Professor Emeritus. During the 1950s he worked for the Boston Globe as an artist, was a consulting designer for Parker Brothers and a

designer-illustrator in the book publishing industry. He was also Artist Director at Tadco for a time. Though retired from all the painting, as a sports fan and father he did recently illustrate his first children's book, "Manny Being Manny", written by his son Todd. He is currently represented by the Mercury Gallery in Rockport and Boston. So, with that, I'm very pleased to start this conversation about sixty years of painting on Cape Ann with well-known Rockport artist Oliver Balf. (Yeah, what a life!)

05:37

Well, we get to hear the details. So why don't we start, Ollie, in the beginning with such a momentous decision for a young person – why'd you go to art school?

05:49

Oliver Balf

Well, actually, when I was in high school, I was much more interested in music than I was in art. And I seriously thought I might be a jazz trumpet player. But my art teacher, who thought I had lots of ability -- her name was Mabel Burkin -- she thought, since I was going to go into the service, that I should apply to art school before I went in the service, so that when I came out, I'd have a place to go. And I took her advice, and I applied to Tyler School of Fine Arts at Temple University. And because they were dying for students, I was accepted. Anybody would have been accepted. And when I got out of the service -- I got out in late July or August of '46 and in September I had a place to go to school. So, it was absolutely wonderful. It worked out perfectly for me.

06:59

And I guess while I'm talking about this early art in my career -- growing up my favorite artist, maybe everybody's favorite artist, was Norman Rockwell. I don't think as a kid, coming from a working-class family, I don't think I'd ever been to a museum. So, the Saturday Evening Post was my art education. And Norman Rockwell was top drawer. And I still can remember riding into New York City on the New Haven Hartford Railroad, and they had these posters near the men's room. And I can remember seeing a Picasso up there of a young girl holding a bird with a colored ball near her feet and thinking to myself "Why is that up there? It's not like a Norman Rockwell." So, it took a long time before I really found out what art was all about.

08:15

Sinikka Nogelo

And what was it like going to the school?

08:20

Oliver Balf

At the time it was interesting, because it had an integrated arts program. And as a freshman it was kind of a wonderful freshman class because they were all ex-GIs and teenage girls. All the ex-

GIs were between 19 and 40 years old with different life experiences and all kinds of different expectations for themselves. In the integrated arts program, we had to take music and dance and creative writing, theater, chorus, all kinds of things that applied to the arts. But the crowning glory was the dance class. To have a group of ex-GIs in Gianni boots doing pliés and leaping around was really a sight to see.

09:27

And the dance teacher was a Broadway professional named Alwin Nikolais, who had a group called the Nikolais Dancers on Broadway. And he was just wonderful in making this class like a fun gym class. Everybody loved it. And still to this day, I think about how he used space in dance and how it applies to painting, because some of what you're trying to do in dance is exactly the same thing that you're going to do in painting.

10:08

Sinikka Nogelo

That is one of the most fascinating things about all kinds of disciplines. People who are good at something and when they're really passionate about saying how it goes, are talking in the same language, whether you're a rock climber or a dancer or a painter.

11:22

Oliver Balf

Absolutely.

10:25

Sinikka Nogelo

Hey, let's get you to Rockport. You're having this winter time at Tyler school, dancing away out of your boots before Stomp ever was dreamed of. How did you get to Rockport? How did that happen?

10:37

Oliver Balf

Well, my roommate in college was an ex-Marine who had three years in the Pacific but looked like a kid. He wanted to study watercolor with John Chetcuti. He read about him in a magazine. And he came up to Rockport, and he found the cheapest place he could live was behind Poole's Farm on South Street. I don't know if people know where that is any more, but it's on the top end of South Street. And across the street, he had a big potato farm. And Frank [Schade] rented a tent from him for the summer. It had two beds in it, and it was \$75 for the entire summer. And he invited me to come up and join him, and I did so that was like \$37 a piece.

**11:34**

And what we did was go out and do watercolors in the morning, a couple of watercolors. He was studying and I wasn't, but I saw what he did and would go out on my own. And then we'd go swimming at Old Garden Beach, and after that I'd do another watercolor before supper. Then

we'd hang out. But behind Poole's not only did he rent tents but he rented chicken coops, which I'll get into in a minute. But he had a group of 30 or 40 people living back there, including in the chicken coop next to us was Tom O'Hara, who was a terrific painter and taught at Mass Art and had a wife and young baby living in a chicken coop. Let's get started. The Allenbrook family was there. Betty Wiberg is here today, but she and her family were part of that group. There was a Mr. Brooks, a motorman from Boston and his whole family. And several others back there enjoying a whole summer for not much money. And there was a path directly from Poole's house to Old Garden Beach. It was very easy to walk there, and we walked all summer long.

13:20

I don't know if I should go into the GI Bill part of this thing now.

13:25

Sinikka Nogelo.

Oh, why not? Go right ahead. If you had to support yourself and were sharing a tent with somebody, obviously finances are very interesting.

13:39

Oliver Balf

There was after the war something called the 5220 for GIs. The 5220 was 52 weeks of unemployment and \$20 a week. And Frank found out that if you were self-employed, you didn't have to go down to get your check except once a month. And so, you could be self-employed. And we were both self-employed landscape painters. Very different.

14:15

And actually, that ended up being four summers worth of painting for both of us. It wasn't quite enough money and I worked several odd jobs. There was a restaurant in Rockport called The Seaside that I was a dishwasher at and other little things to keep income and the household going, but we had wonderful summers. Wonderful time.

14:40

Sinikka Nogelo

Now you moved up the second summer to the chicken coop. I guess maybe you moved in a little earlier to the chicken coop. But then you're also starting to become involved with the Rockport art scene in many other ways. You want to talk first about what it was like at the community around Bearskin Neck or how you got into the Rockport Art Association and came to apply at age 19?

15:07

Oliver Balf

Well, two different things. Rockport was a much smaller community, maybe 4000 people then, and almost everybody who came Rockport came for the entire summer, and it was easier to get to know people, at least it seems to me now that I don't know anybody. It seems it was quite

easy to know everybody back then. I'd go downtown to paint sometimes. And people would always come up and see what you're doing. And it just occurred to me now, but I can remember a little kid 10 or 12 years old, coming up and watching me paint and saying, "Boy is that good. Boy is that terrific! Wonderful! Is that the first one you ever did?" But anyway, Jane W. S. Cox, who was a painter in Rockport, saw me painting downtown and suggested I apply to the Rockport Art Association, which I did. And I was accepted at 19, which was a pretty big deal for me. And I put in an outrageous painting that they accepted. It was a party with nudes sitting on chairs. I think I have a picture of it. Unfortunately, you won't be able to see it. But anyway, it was accepted. And it was put up. And of course, my expectations, being way out of line, is that if a painting didn't sell then it was no good. So, when it didn't sell and I got it back, I painted over it. With many other paintings, too, but for probably for better reasons.

17:14

Sinikka Nogelo

Well, at least you did photograph it and I have a Xerox of it. So afterwards if you really want to see this first Rockport Art Association painting, a black and white Xerox is available up here. Now, what was the other association that you joined? CASMA?

17:33

Oliver Balf

The Cape Ann Society of Modern Artists. Are there any other people here who were members of that? No? It was down as you turn the corner to go to Front Beach, which is now a motel, but that was where CASMA was located. And CASMA was kind of an alternative to the Rockport Art Association. And a lot of people fall into both associations. And when CASMA folded, we tried to get Rockport to split so that they had a modern section and a conservative section, but they wouldn't buy into it and it never happened. So that was the end of the Cape Ann moderns.

18:36

Sinikka Nogelo

Or so they thought. You discovered expressionism in college. And actually, we might talk a little bit about some of these paintings later. There's a progression behind us here.

18:46

Oliver Balf

Yeah.

18:47

Sinikka Nogelo

So, tell us about expressionism.

18:54

Oliver Balf

Well, since we talked about having this talk, which is a long time ago, one of the things that occurred to me was that I grew up in Rye with immigrant parents. My father was a watchmaker/clockmaker who'd come from Russia. And Russian Jews had been... you couldn't move from the town you lived in and there were pogroms. Both me and my mother had bad memories, thought this was the most wonderful country in the world, the land of opportunity. And the advice to me as a kid was don't make any waves. We don't want anything to happen. Be quiet, keep your emotions intact. And I think I grew up quite repressed in terms of expressing emotion about anything. And when I got to college, somebody started talking about expressionism, which meant that, unlike Norman Rockwell, you didn't have to paint exactly what you saw. But you could paint what you feel about what you see. That sort of began to appeal to me. And then in that first year, there was a huge Matisse show, and I went to that Matisse show. My first impression was, this is terrible. He can't draw and the color is bizarre. But I couldn't get the images out of my mind, and I went back maybe 20 times to see that show. And by the time it left, I had begun to think I would like to be an expressionist, too. And I believe now, thinking back, that is the hook that made me want to paint all the time, because it was a way of getting my emotions out where I wasn't doing in regular life. And my wife can testify to that, because she's so wonderful about expressing her emotions.

**21:15**

Sinikka Nogelo

So now the pictures behind us -- are any of these from the early era?

21:19

Oliver Balf

Well, the first one, the lobster shack. This was after we were married. We first moved to Pigeon Cove, right near the Tool Company, and the Pigeon Cove wharf had lots of lobster shacks that were just like that. And as you can see or I think you can see, I was fairly realistic in terms of painting lobster shacks, which I thought was the way to go. I think the work upstairs is probably more expressive and less real.

21:58

Sinikka Nogelo

And the work upstairs -- is that in the last 10-15-year or so time period-wise?

22:01

Oliver Balf

Yeah.

22:02

Sinikka Nogelo

Now this boat is already expressionistic. Quite early?

22:10



Oliver Balf

Yeah. In the 60s, and I might mention that about that particular boat painting that I wanted to some time [unintelligible] But at one point Joe Jeswald, who was the real founder of Montserrat, the real source behind it -- he started by forming a school for children in Gloucester. And we would go down -- it was on Center Street in Gloucester -- and we would get the kids just -- you know, it was almost like babysitting -- young kids. And we would take them down to the docks and compose and that was one of those probably done at that time. And I remember one little girl, and we were painting a boat called the Cigar Joe and she said that was her father's boat, which was kind of deep, so I remember that.

23:16

Sinikka Nogelo

And here you are -- Live-baited Lobsters Sold Here. Quite representational. Beautiful work.

23:23

Oliver Balf

Actually, it's one of the few paintings that I did that I had a photograph and used it as reference. I don't usually do that.

23:33

Sinikka Nogelo

And then we have Eastern Point Light.

23:36

Oliver Balf

Yeah.

23:37

Sinikka Nogelo

Total expressionism. Absolutely amazing.

23:40

Oliver Balf

Yeah. That was about the sun.

23:46

Sinikka Nogelo

And this looks like a gesture almost. What year did you do this painting? Also, a fishing boat.

23:50

Oliver Balf

Probably the 70s. That's reflections. I did a whole series of boats with reflections like that.

24:02

Sinikka Nogelo

You can see a Matisse influence in the next painting.

24:05

Oliver Balf

That basically is...that's my wife. And she hates all the portraits I've ever done of her – completely faceless.

24:17

Sinikka Nogelo

The jazz singer upstairs is really nice. And then I know everything else up there -- the lush tomatoes, fruits, and table still life kinds of things. That jazz singer, which is really reminiscent of this stuff.

24:30

Oliver Balf

Yeah. A little bit.

01:11

Sinikka Nogelo

Yeah, I love the jazz singer. And here's the Tool Company that you mentioned.

24:34

Oliver Balf

Yes, I was asked to do some paintings of the Tool Company for a person who may or may not be here tonight. He's here! And he bought some paintings of the Tool Company and this is the only one I didn't sell to him and had left over.

24:58

Sinikka Nogelo

Well, I know we've got to get to Gallery 7 and Montserrat and all that, but you've got quite a life history before all of that happened and friendships that were so important for you to actually develop before that had come about. You told me that life happened and friendship happened and then the goal rather than the other way around.

25:24

Oliver Balf

And while I'm reminiscing, I want to mention that we had a little frame shop, Frank and I, on Tuna Wharf. We were probably the first shop on Tuna Wharf, and this would have been 1951. And the same year they had a wonderful jazz program at the Hawthorne Inn in Gloucester, and it

was run by George Wein, who was internationally known as a great promoter of jazz. He started the Newport Jazz Festival. Anyway, he had a jazz club in Gloucester and Frank and I were both great jazz fans. And we spent all the money we made that summer going over and listening to jazz every night at the Hawthorne Inn. But we occasionally, when someone would come to visit us back then, occasionally we would play out in front of the frame shop. Frank would play the uke and I would play cornet. And we wrote lyrics to a jazz song called “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home”. I don’t know if anybody knows that, but our lyrics were:

Lady, won’t you buy a frame?  
Lady, won’t you buy a frame?  
We have tried in vain  
To send you a hand-carved frame.  
A picture without a frame  
Is like a guy without a dame.  
Every hour of the day  
You can hear a frame to say,  
Lady, won’t you buy a frame?

27:07

Sinikka Nogelo

Well, it’s not too late to put out the CD. Who were the people who were hanging out with you over at the frame shop? What about that part of your real life in Rockport?

27:26

Oliver Balf

Now I’m going to go back to after Nancy and I were married and we moved up here in 1955. And we moved up because we had a small child and New York was too expensive to live in. And I said, “Gee, I know a place where you can get a tent for \$75.” So, we moved up without a job and spent the first month really worried because I didn’t have a job. And somehow, I met Leonard Derwinski, who a wonderful commercial artist in Rockport, and he said, “Why don’t you try the Boston Globe? They have 120 artists working three shifts a day there.” So, I went to the Boston Globe, showed them my portfolio, and I was hired as a sub. And of 120 artists that worked there, almost all of them were called “subs”. If you were a staff person, you got benefits, but subs got no benefits, but we did get a little extra pay for being a sub. And some guys had been subs for 20 years. And at some point, after about a year of working at the Globe... (And by the way, once I started working there, I met Don Stone and Roger Martin and then Joe Jeswald -- Joe Jeswald I had known in New York, but I can come back to that. But anyway, we all worked on the newspapers in Boston. They worked at the Post, I worked at the Globe, and we commuted in together. So that was our initial way that we all got to know each other.) After about a year at the Globe, I was offered a staff job. And because I wanted to be a painter, (and I didn’t consult my wife) I turned it down. I don’t think Nance will ever forgive me. But anyway, that’s how at least four of us met. And Don Stone, who probably lots of you know his work and know his name, was originally a cartoonist on the Boston Post.

29:55

Sinikka Nogelo

And then of course your career that you had to support your painting, obviously a career you also enjoyed or you wouldn't have picked that as your paying job, ended because artists were fired from the newspapers. Why was that?

30:11

Oliver Balf

In 1957 there was a mailers strike of the trucks which carted the newspapers around. And they wanted a lot more money and more benefits and whatnot. And the paper in order to negotiate with them had to figure a way of cutting expenses. And so, these 120 artists working for the Globe were doing all the ads for all the stores in Boston. So, by getting rid of all the artists, the stores had to form their own art departments, and it was just a reshifting of the artists. But the Globe was a wonderful place to work. Even as a job, you know, I worked the eight to four in the morning shift, and if by one o'clock all the work had been done, they let you go home, and you were still paid for a full night, which was pretty nice.

31:14

Sinikka Nogelo

Sure. And creative work all the way. So, then that brought you to Tadco first or teaching first or both at the same time?

31:23

Oliver Balf

No, because when we were all fired, I had to find a job. And a company had just moved to Gloucester called Tadco from Oklahoma. They were a silkscreen company, and they needed an art director and artist. I filled their needs and worked for them for 10 years, meanwhile painting and showing, you know, continuing to work. Even there I would do a painting either before or after work. I kept working.

32:07

Sinikka Nogelo

Working and showing but also starting a gallery.

32:12

Oliver Balf

Yeah. The same group, all of us scratching to eke out a living, and all of us were in touch, because we were still showing either at the Rockport Art Association or someplace else. We decided to form a gallery in Magnolia. And it was called Gallery 7. And the seven people -- I'm going to miss some people here, but I think it was Jim Sweeney. And there was Roger Martin, Joe Jeswald, myself. Somehow I've lost track...

33:00

Audience Members

George Gabin, Paul Scott, and George Aarons.

33:13

Oliver Balf

And George Aarons. Right. That was Gallery 7. Thank you!

33:22

Sinikka Nogelo

I wish I'd been there. That's all I can say.

33:24

Oliver Balf

Well, that was Gallery 7, and we were right next to the Patio Restaurant in Magnolia. And we would be open in the evenings and people would come out of the restaurant feeling really good. Wonderful place to have a gallery.

33:39

And I wanted to mention that Roger reminded me that Charles Olson gave his first public reading at Gallery 7 in Magnolia.

33:54

Somewhere in all of this, by the way... Well, I'll get to them later when we get to Montserrat. I don't know where I'm going. I've lost it. Oh, and then, later on Gallery 7 moved to Boston. And when we moved to Boston, I don't know where Joe met Randy Dupps, but Randy Dupps became the director of our gallery in Boston, and we lasted there for maybe, I don't know, four or five years I think.

34:32

Sinikka Nogelo

Now before that had you been a cooperative?

34:34

Oliver Balf

Yes, we were always a cooperative. We also had a place, another gallery, in Rockport called Phoenix Gallery. All the same people. And so, all of us tried to make it with galleries and cooperative galleries and knowing each other and becoming friends.

34:56

Sinikka Nogelo

And quite an all-around art scene the whole time with playing music outside your frame shop, Charles Olson reading in your Gallery 7. Sounds idyllic. No housekeeping over there in the tent. But in all seriousness, the things that came out of that are just unbelievable.

35:20

Oliver Balf

While you're talking about that, when we had the frame shop – this is '51 -- Frank and I lived behind the actual frame shop. Just a little, tiny place and it had no running water and no bathroom and that's a *real* problem. But it had a restaurant across the street and they let us use their outside facilities. That's how we managed to pull that off.

35:52

Sinikka Nogelo

As a young husband, young father...

35:53

Oliver Balf

Oh, that's later.

35:59

Sinikka Nogelo

Then you were at the Globe and doing these other things and actually supporting a family. And still painting.

36:00

Oliver Balf

And still painting.

36:07

Sinikka Nogelo

Kind of the common artist's life and artist's struggle.

36:09

Oliver Balf

Yes, it is. It's probably the story of everybody. I mentioned the children school that Joe started. And then all of us somehow -- I had quit Tadco by then and somehow we all got involved in teaching at the New England School of Art in Boston, which was a commercial art school, not a fine arts school. And Roger taught there. Joe taught there. I taught there. Jim Sweeney taught at another school across the street somewhere. Paul Scott taught there. And we would all commute together. And George Gabin taught there. So that was that whole group, so we had teaching experience together. And none of us wanted to be a commercial art school. We wanted to form a fine arts school. And Joe approached, the North Shore Community College to see if they would finance a fine arts school. And they wouldn't, but somehow, they put him in touch

with Steve Slane at the music theater, who was trying to form a school to help them with their nonprofit situation. And it was just the right time. They said, “Yes”. And then we had a whole bunch of fundraising things in Boston. I’m trying to remember some of the people who were involved in that...

38:15

Sinikka Nogelo

You had some remarkable early students, I see. I know that Barbara Moody actually taught there when I went.

38:21

Oliver Balf

Oh, yeah. The early students with Barbara Moody, Giles LaRoche, Gary Greenberg, [unintelligible], Sigrid Olsen, and Sinikka Nogelo. A great group of students.

38:37

Sinikka Nogelo

Thank you for putting me on that list. I’m gonna get a tape of this!

38:44

Oliver Balf

The early students were important, because they were courageous enough to take a chance on a school that was not a degree-granting school but a certificate school.

39:00

Sinikka Nogelo

Now of course, it is a degree-granting school and has been for a number of years.

39:03

Oliver Balf

And that was after Jim Davies became president, and he was able to institute a degree-granting program.

39:13

Sinikka Nogelo

Well, tell us some of the early stories of Montserrat.

39:16

Oliver Balf

When it first started, we started at the Crane Estate, because the school behind the music theater hadn’t been finished. And we painted – we had two -- we had a sculpture studio and a painting studio in those stone barns down at the Crane Estate. And Ray Pisano, who was the sculpture teacher, was teaching a sculpture course in one of the stone barns when an inebriated

guy in a dress-suit came in and was making kind of a ruckus. And Ray, who was full of plaster and dressed in dungarees, called the police, and the police came over very quickly to arrest the person who was doing all this and they immediately grabbed Ray Pisano. [unintelligible]

40:37

Sinikka Nogelo

Wonderful [unintelligible] This is how we get treated.

40:39

Oliver Balf

I ought to mention too that in the founding how important a part Paul Scott played in setting up the curriculum for Montserrat. Paul had been a monitor for Hans Hofmann in Provincetown. And, he was very well educated in what an art school should be like. And he is responsible for setting up the first curriculum, which was very basic principles of design.

41:22

Sinikka Nogelo

And I think there's all your experience no matter where you had it in the commercial world, being a painter all those years, absolutely came in handy in the classroom and then the perspective you got, as far as sharing where your students were hoping to go or coming from.

41:40

Oliver Balf

Yes. And part of that was that we really, I mean, it was a school founded by working artists, not teachers really. And I think that we felt when we started it that all of you people who came in were just working hardest with us. And it wasn't "Hey, I'm going to teach you how to do it." It was "Come and join in and we'll all experiment together and figure it out."

42:09

Sinikka Nogelo

I was certainly taught that way. The only story I'll tell is the very first day of introduction to painting, Ollie had us paint some trees or a tree or whatever tree. And we came back with the trees, and he didn't talk about the paintings. He talked about the feelings that the paintings gave. So, he never mentioned expressionism. But you kind of got the idea, and taskmasters they were since we painted night and day.

42:40

So how about, you know, looking back at 60 years of painting in *Rockport*? I'm really curious, just about time really to have the audience get a chance to ask you questions, but I'm really curious. Two things, you know, besides satisfaction as an artist and as a teacher, you know, kind of contrast those a little bit, but also painting some place in 60 years. What is that like? What kind of gift did you get from that which you weren't expecting? Or what are the good parts of that? Are there any down sides?



43:18

Oliver Balf

Ah. [sigh] That's a tough question.

43:20

Sinikka Nogelo

About seven questions.

**43:24**

Oliver Balf

I think that every artist needs some sense of place. And although in later years my paintings weren't of boats or Gloucester or anything. Part of that was... (I love painting outdoors, by the way.) But as you get older and feebler and you can't get up from, you know, sitting on the ground and doing your painting, you end up having to do something else, but you still bring with you the excitement and the joy of being in a place as beautiful as the Cape is. And I still remember going out and painting at Bass Rocks late late afternoon and the light changing and having to paint very fast to get down the feel of the water and the strength of the rocks. That stays with you and you bring it to when you can't go out anymore. You bring it to whatever subject matter makes you want to paint. And of course, in recent years there have been a lot of jazz singers and a lot of still lifes. And the still lifes -- I don't set up a still life. I just put things in the painting. And so, it evolves that way, and there's always a surprise for me when a painting is finished. I never know how it's going to come out. And I always loved the idea of it that when it's finished, that something happened -- that painting. But I never know in the beginning.

45:25

Sinikka Nogelo

I presume you love watercolor the most.

45:28

Oliver Balf

I do, because it's the most direct, and it's the quickest. You can't go over it. You just sort of have to do it, and whatever happens, happens. I like that part of it.

45:45

Sinikka Nogelo

And when you were working with students as a painter to painter, what would you really do? The basic thing that is the most important for a teacher to give or perhaps the teacher gave you that you remember influenced you?

46:03

Oliver Balf

Well, I always thought that each person is an individual, and that what *they* want to paint is the most important thing and *how* they want to paint is the most important thing. And the thing that I can give is the motivation for them to do it in their own way and to encourage them to see things in a unique and individual way. The problem with teaching somebody to paint the way you paint, is, if they really learn it, they'll never be as good as you are. So, it's much better if they learn to paint the way *they* want. I tried to do that.

46:58

Sinikka Nogelo

Well, when you say you studied with Hans Hofmann. I say I studied with Balf.

47:08

Oliver Balf

I might tell a Hans Hofmann story. I don't know how many people know who Hans Hofmann is, but he is internationally known. Hans Hofmann spoke the worst English of anybody I have ever heard. He would say, "Thisisafuss. Thisisafuss. Thisisafuss." And so, you had no idea what he was really talking about. But he would tear your painting up and reposition it and draw lines on it to show you where he wanted the tension and where he wanted it to go. And as a teaching method, it was wonderful because everybody could get what *they* wanted out of, because he just was *not* verbal. He didn't speak English. He was a great teacher, and a lot of people got exactly what they wanted.

48:04

Sinikka Nogelo

This has really been absolutely wonderful. Do you have anything you want to get in here before we go to the audience?

48:11

Oliver Balf

No.

48:13

Sinikka Nogelo

So, I'll repeat the questions in case anybody didn't hear. What would you like to ask Ollie? Ah, hand in the back.

48:26

Diane Ayott

Hi, Ollie. I'm Diane Ayott. I had the honor of taking a painting class with you many, many years ago. And I did so after a good friend of mine -- I saw the work he was doing. I met him at a drawing group and we became very close and shared each other's work. His name was Jim Sawyer. Do you remember him?

48:44

Oliver Balf

Yeah. Sure. He did well.

48:45

Diane Ayott

I was a student at Mass Art, and he was going to this little place in Montserrat, and I thought, "Damn! I want to do some of that." So, one semester, I took a course with you and a course with Joe Jeswald, and it was wonderful. And the authenticity that you brought into the classroom, that's what I remember most. Your gentle spirit, your, I don't know, it was kind of a kindness but a rigor at the same time. It was just great. And now I'm on the faculty at Montserrat after all these years and a lifetime of painting, and you were part of that. It was great. My question though is, since you guys were all inspired by Hans Hofmann and other people from the New York School at the time, you got a lot of influence from Europe, obviously, through those guys. And so, they were learning about the Bauhaus when they left. Many of them left Germany, and came and worked in New York at Yale. And somehow all that influence also got woven into the work that you did and the work that you passed on to your students. And I want to know what you think about that. Were you aware of that? Was it foregrounded in your own mind as you were teaching, planning your courses?

50:04

Sinikka Nogelo and Oliver Balf

[clarify the question between themselves]

50:15

Sinikka Nogelo

The Bauhaus School. If you were aware of that when you were studying with him [Hofmann].

50:17

Oliver Balf

I was not as aware of it as I was after working with Paul Scott in terms of figuring out a curriculum for Montserrat. Paul was completely Bauhaus influence. And I would say that the way he wanted to structure the curriculum was really a Bauhaus curriculum. So that was where that influence came from much more than from Hans Hofmann himself. I think that if you had studied with Hofmann -- the people in New York who studied with Hofmann varied from absolutely academic painters, real academic, academicians (I'm not saying that right), to people who were off the wall in complete non-objective painting, and the reason was because he, in terms of English, he really couldn't get it across.

51:49

And I'll say one other thing about studying with Hofmann in New York. His studio was on 8<sup>th</sup> Street above a place called the Village Barn, and the Village Barn was a nightclub/strip club. And

those girls who were stripping were modeling for Hans Hofmann upstairs in the day or whatever the school hours were, and they were really beautiful girls. But if you walked through that classroom, there were out of 20 people, there would be two people where you would recognize that there was a girl in the picture. It was an odd place to study.

52:43

Audience Member #2

[unintelligible] the big black and white illustrations? Was that shortly after Hofmann used the black and white illustrations?

52:56

Oliver Balf

Well, all his classes were drawing classes. So, everything you did or I did would have been in black and white. And all his drawing or crossing would have been in black and white.

53:14

Audience Member #3

Would you talk a little bit about the influence of dance and movement from your early schooling in your painting?

53:18

Oliver Balf

Yes, you know, going to Tyler, I would never have thought that dance had any relationship to painting at all. But once you're taught by a professional about how you move your arms and how you move to expand a space, how you jump to make movement in space, and how you interact with someone else to either push or pull, all of these are terms that every painter knows about and that really works well with a painting. So that they're so closely related that I was really surprised that, you know, they get that much out of it.

54:16

Sinikka Nogelo

Yes, way in the back?

54:17

Audience Member #4

It seems that when you were young and you had family and children, most of you had a job, and you were doing your work at the same time. When I wanted to go to art school, my mother said, "You better go and study something that would support you, and then you don't die poor," which I did. But at the same time, I never gave up painting or creating which is, you know, something you like to do and you do it. What is your advice for young artists who come out of college now, and they just want to go out to the world painting? Do you suggest they have another job, too, or they just keep painting?

55:00

Sinikka Nogelo

What is your advice to young artists now if they want to be painters? She's talking about how she had her mother's advice not to go to art school but do something she could [unintelligible] but she still stayed painting nonetheless. What is your advice to young students today. When they come out of art school do they get another job?

55:10

Oliver Balf

My feeling is – by the way, you don't have to go to art school to be an artist. A lot of really good artists come out of a straight academic institution and have found their own way of expressing themselves. And it's usually interesting and original and pretty good. So, I guess my advice is that, you know, jobs only enhance your experience with life and with problems of living and meeting other people and whatnot. And if you want to paint enough or do something in art enough, all of that experience is what you draw on to express what you think about the life you're living. And if you're as emotionally tied up as I am, and therefore you have to get it out, you'll find a way to get it out whether you're working full time or not. You just keep painting.

56:46

Audience Member #5

Hi, Ollie. This is a question for Balf, the teacher. When I was in your graphic design class, you began every class by reading to us the Ellen Goodman column from the Globe. And I have my own idea of why you did that, but I wondered if you could tell us what you were accomplishing with that.

57:16

Oliver Balf

I wish I could remember. Ellen Goodman is a very clever, original writer, and I guess I liked her stuff a lot. And anything to get people thinking, in original ways, seemed to me to be important. And probably that's why I did that.

57:35

Sinikka Nogelo

And let's not forget, you were a newspaperman and maybe these young kids don't read newspapers and you were going to read it to them. I think there were questions in the back we didn't address, when we first had people raise their hand. Do we still have a question back there? Yes? So, anyone else have a question? Yes.

**58:01**

Audience Member #6

Hi, Ollie. I'm honored to have been your student. And I'm curious to know... Alwin Nikolais was one of my favorite choreographers. I didn't know you studied with him. But he also started doing, in later years, the influence of slideshows and everything else influencing the human

body, almost making it a moving painting. And I just find it fascinating that he also kind of brought his dance movement into almost a field of canvas on the stage.

58:30

Oliver Balf

His group was almost like a painting.

58:32

Audience Member #6

Oh, absolutely.

58:35

Oliver Balf

You know, something that -- how various people are, he was a terrific piano player. And when we'd do these exercises, he was playing piano and it was just a happy experience. It was great.

58:56

Sinikka Nogelo

Time for maybe one or two. Anybody else? Well, most the audience knows the time, just as well as we do.

59:10

Audience Member #7

I have one more question! I have one more! Could you just tell us, Ollie, at this time in your life, what's a typical Ollie Balf day? Like in the morning when you wake up?

59:27

Oliver Balf

Well, I'm telling you this, I don't paint as much as I used to, but if I get an idea or a theme or something that excites me, I can still get up and paint every day for a good long period of time. But I have to have something that I want to get out. And somehow between aches and pains and getting older and all the rest of it, I don't do as much of that today as I used to. But a typical day would be getting up, having breakfast, reading the paper. Now I do crossword puzzles for some reason. And then I would probably go up and paint for an hour, not much more than that, then I would come downstairs, do something else, then go back up and look at what I've done, and then rework it a little bit. And if it was okay, I'd let it stay. And then I'd look at it again the next day, and then maybe do some more to it, and that should finish it. That would be about it for the painting.

1:00:51

Sinikka Nogelo

Just a fast painter.

1:00:54

Audience Member #7

And is that the way you've always done it? Would start and then rework it and then wait and come back...

1:00:59

Oliver Balf

Yeah. Actually, it's been in recent years that I've allowed a painting to go a couple of days, because I do find that, you know, [pointing to a painting] that was all one shot, and I just want one 40-minute painting. But now I find that the first shot through it's not rich enough, but it's too wet to do anything else with. So, I have to leave it alone for a while then I come back and do a little more to it. And then I've also found that if I wait another day, I might find I can do something else to help it more.

1:01:50

Sinikka Nogelo

Thank you so incredibly much. This is wonderful and I wish we had two more hours.

1:01:57

Oliver Balf

I thank everybody for coming and It's been a pleasure to talk to all of you.