

# PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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# **P**rovincetown **A**rt **A**ssociation & **M**useum

# 100 YEARS

PAAM architects poured liquid concrete into a form made of unfinished wood boards—after the mixture hardened, the imprint of the wood grain was set forever.



# Deborah Martin

## UNCANNY LUMINOSITY

By Christopher Busa

IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, DEBORAH MARTIN HAS CONCENTRATED on painting local habitations far removed from mainstream America, yet evoking quintessential core values in our national psychology. She manages to avoid a voyeuristic curiosity while honestly exposing unselfconscious attitudes of strange places where people have made themselves comfortable. She lives in a small town tucked away in Southern California in the Mojave Desert, close by Joshua Tree National Park, where the temperature at midnight can linger at one hundred degrees. She ventures onto salt flats blurred with the heat waves of the noonday sun, her eyes shielded by the wide brim of a hat, keenly focusing her camera on what she finds abandoned in the desert—the wing of a crashed airplane, a camping cooler strewn alongside a junked car, a stack of tractor tires clustered together by some unknown soul for some inscrutable purpose.

She produced a series of oil paintings in square formats grouped under the title *Home on the Strange: In Search of the Salton Sea*. *Love*, pictured here, shows the trailer occupied for thirty years by Leonard Knight, whose truck broke down as he was passing through the area, a lucky event that proved to give great meaning to his life. Day after day, he created a “love mountain,” popularly known as “Salvation Mountain,” where he has greeted visitors with infectious joy, giving them a tour around the 50 by 100 foot structure and through its caverns, supported by adobe columns packed around pillars of car tires. The structure, covered in religious scripture and colorful paintings, appears so out of place as to be a manifestation of some kind of miracle. Although Leonard Knight passed away this February at the age of eighty-two, his work remains a monument to “Love.”

*Home on the Strange* examines the eerie atmosphere centered on the Salton Sea, a huge inland lake a few miles east of Salvation Mountain, in the middle of the desert, a bizarre body of water accidentally created by an engineering fiasco in the early twentieth century when the Colorado River was diverted, spilling the river’s water over a lowland directly on the site of the San Andreas Fault. Farms flourished, resorts populated every cove along the 140-mile shoreline, offering boating, swimming, and fishing, and attracting naturalists who observed the hundreds of species of birds that descended to refresh themselves as they migrated along the Pacific Flyway. Now the lake is shrinking, evaporating, leaving concentrations of salt that are killing millions of tilapia, a type of fish who usually thrive in water with high salt content. Their bones are embedded in the parched shoreline; algae blooms, and the lake has become toxic. John Waters narrated a movie in 2006, *Plagues & Pleasures on the Salton Sea*, documenting an ecosystem in profound distress and interviewing residents and naturalists knowledgeable about an apparent

utopian paradise in the process of becoming a graveyard, an event at once awful and apocalyptic.

From her house in the town of Sky Valley, a twenty-minute drive from Palm Springs, Martin can look into the distance and see mountains rising beyond low hills. An hour and a half outside

of Sky Valley, the next town over is an unincorporated stretch of desert named Wonder Valley; Martin’s *Back of Beyond* series is based on that area, the beautiful title taken from the name of a street. Here, many old homesteads litter the landscape, some that have been abandoned and others that



HOME ON THE STRANGE: IN SEARCH OF THE SALTON SEA, LOVE, 2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 BY 36 INCHES



BACK OF BEYOND, WONDER VALLEY, YELLOW TRAILER, 2012, OIL ON CANVAS, 48 BY 48 INCHES

have been reclaimed by “snowbirds” who vacation here in February. *Yellow Trailer* is a work that features one such abode. “We have a wide variety of people living out in this amazing place,” Martin said, “who are drawn to this intense light. I get the same feeling of vast peace looking out into the desert as I do looking out over the sea on the Cape.” There is very little shade in the desert. “When I go into Wonder Valley on a photo shoot for new material, I am practically blinded. I have to wear sunglasses.”

Deborah Martin produces her luminous paintings using an extremely small brush, only a few millimeters wide, a number zero flat brush that serves the precision and control she needs to saturate her surfaces with quavering moods of intense emotional layering. In making a single painting, she wears out more than a dozen brushes. “I basically am moving along the surface and pushing the paint, just as much as I need and no more,” she explains. “Part of it is not wanting to wait for it to dry, wanting the instant gratification that the Polaroid brought me.” An emotional complexity emanates from the aura of tonal layering, where the paint seems not so much brushed as breathed on.

Martin’s paintings are derived from imagery recorded years earlier on Polaroid snapshots taken spontaneously when the spirit moved her. She then tossed the prints into a shoe box; on the spur of much later moments, she would examine the now-faded prints for the subjects of her paintings, the images freshly revisited after significant gestation.

Born in Boston in 1961, raised outside Philadelphia, Martin possesses indelible early impressions of a few excursions to her grandfather’s seaside cottage on Cape Cod: “They remain to this day the fondest memories of my childhood.” While a student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, she returned recurrently to Provincetown, staying in a house that now is uninhabitable. That house had been owned by a sea captain named John Simmons, long deceased, but whose name served Martin to somehow identify the personality of a place that became memorable to her. The series of six paintings, titled *Captain John Simmons Interiors*, depicts a clothes hamper with its top closed, a closet empty of clothes with a dozen wire hangers suspended on a wooden rod, the descent down a steep staircase to an open outer door blocked by a bag of luggage, pillows strewn on a time-torn tattered mattress, a tangle of sheets on a bare floor (perhaps utilized by squirrels as a nest), and a kitchen drawer atop a porcelain stove, as if set there during a period of interrupted housecleaning. She returned to the house in the summer of 2009, drawn by some instinct, found the door ajar, and took some Polaroids, grainy, slightly out-of-focus impressions she sought to capture in her paintings. Only after she had completed the paintings, she said, did memories surface of the house where she had lived long ago. One painting, *The Drawer*, was selected for inclusion in the permanent collection of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, one of a series Martin produced that were shown in an exhibition last summer at the Kobalt Gallery. A new series, *Narrow Lands*, will be featured at Kobalt this July.

Martin seems motivated by the jumble of memory, wanting some confusion to activate her emotion. Following her training at the Museum School in Boston, she lived in Manhattan for several years, then relocated to Provincetown for most of the nineties, where she became, she said, “a local fixture,” working



THE DRAWER, 2011, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 BY 36 INCHES



DEBORAH MARTIN © VICTORY TISCHLER-BLUE

as a housepainter, painting many homes in the three outermost towns on the Lower Cape. She developed a keen awareness of how weathering alters the skin of the structures she painted: the August sun striking the bright white clapboard siding with the concussive battering of a bassoon; sand-borne winds of October's hurricanes smoothing the rough textures of cedar shingles; the dull, deadening chills of the endless days of December disclosing hollow pockets in smooth surfaces; the deepening despair of January days weakening lingering resistance; and then the wild rains of the cruel month of April, puckering, peeling, and bleaching the thin coating with which we sheath our habitations.

As a housepainter, Martin said, "I was meticulous. I used the right brush for the job at hand and I could paint a window sash fast—I never had to go back and scrape paint off the glass." The skills she acquired painting houses—"I like to get it right the first time"—evolved into the passion she puts into her unsettling evocations of dwellings, devoid of inhabitants, whose very absence yet is summoned by laundry left in an unopened clothes hamper or a closed camping cooler left on a driveway outside a garage door.

Early in her career, she began taking Polaroid photographs of specific houses that resonated with her, including the ship captain's house owned by the art collector Reggie Cabral, who she photographed about a year after Cabral passed away in 1996. This handsome house, a prominent edifice across from the Boatslip Resort in the West End of Provincetown, functioned as a museum for the owner's art collection, filled salon-style with many paintings and drawings acquired from artists, who, short on cash, used their work to pay the bar bills they'd run up at his legendary nightclub, the Atlantic House. His collection included work by Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Claes Oldenburg, Larry Rivers, Robert Rauschenberg, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Cabral also collected literary memorabilia of writers who were patrons of the A-House, including Tennessee Williams, Norman Mailer, and Eugene O'Neill, who rented a room upstairs in 1916, fueling his playwriting with bottles of liquor pulled up with fishing line—or so Cabral said in one of his midnight stories, improvised on the dance floor, about the outlandish characters, drawn from life, whom he turned into living legends.

Martin's painting in 2013 of the Reggie Cabral house, *Cabral*, part of the recent *Narrow Lands* series, replicates the square format of the Polaroid

image, the famous Cape light mournful and subdued. The artist captures a stately house as sullen and ghostly, with windows screened, hiding any indication of interior vitality. The filigree of a floral wrought-iron front gate filters our view, providing an aperture that screens what we see. Perched on the apex of the roof sits a glassed-in octagonal widow's walk, where the wives of sea captains would search the horizon for the distant sails of a returning ship. Martin is something of an archivist, seeking out stories lost in time; she is clearly attracted to the residue of human presence that hovers over a home that has been abandoned. The presence of people is poetically revealed by their absence.

In producing books that accompany her paintings, Martin likes to collaborate with poets, seeking verbal pictures to express what her paintings say silently. She feels gratitude when someone senses what she is after. The Korean-American poet Nicky Sa-eun Schildkraut, inspired by Martin's *Back of Beyond* paintings, wrote this short poem, "we must be rooted in the absence of a place":

we must be rooted  
in not remembering like this desert will not  
remember the scattered  
bandits and pioneers adrift  
in clapboard cabins and along stray horses

because what we need, we have  
already lost, yellowed  
in photographs, hinted by paintings

of an other-land, not quite a wild,  
wild West or vintage American dream  
but an other-field of  
the soft giving up to edge

these words, by an exile herself,  
"we must be rooted in the absence of a place"  
reminding us to stay longer,  
because we keep  
what we cannot keep.



CHRISTOPHER BUSA is editor of Provincetown Arts.

Artists, performers and writers sit down  
with Chris to talk about art.

ARTTALK is part of the WOMR spoken word program  
and airs every second, third, and fourth Monday at 12:30 pm.

