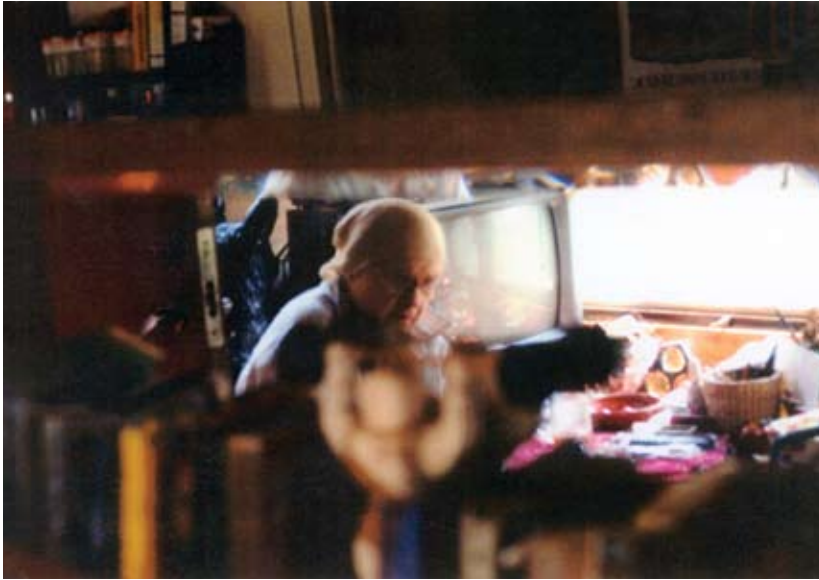


Coming into her own

The posthumous success of artist Stella Waitzkin



Stella was a reclusive personality at her West Tisbury house and studio.

BY LAURA D. ROOSEVELT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN CHRISTOFFERS

What comes to mind when you hear “Vineyard art”? Is it one of Rez Williams’s huge, dramatic views of fishing boats, or an Alison Shaw farmer’s market photograph? Perhaps it’s a dancing Tom Maley sculpture outside the Field Gallery, or a tapestry of irises by Julia Mitchell. It could be almost anything, given the diversity of art Islanders create, but one thing it probably wouldn’t be is a work of abstract expressionism. Yet one of the Island’s most noteworthy artists was Stella Waitzkin, a painter and sculptor whose style was grounded in the abstract expressionist movement.

What? Never heard of Stella Waitzkin? Not surprising. A complex character to say the least, Stella was something of a recluse whose welcome mat at her Music Street house read “Go Away.” More focused on making art than on showing it, she disliked having her work written about and was known for turning down invitations to exhibit her art and even for canceling shows at the last minute – which earned her few friends in the museum and gallery world.



JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER ARTS CENTER ARTIST ARCHIVES



In her Chelsea Hotel apartment, Stella created this massive installation, *The Wreck of the UPS*, between 1993 and 2003.



The fumes from melting resin didn't disturb neighbors at Stella's Music Street studio.

But now her son, Fred Waitzkin, a journalist, novelist, and the author of several books of nonfiction, including the memoir about his chess-prodigy son *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, is working to bring her art into the public eye. Although his relationship with his mother was not uncomplicated, Fred believes that Stella's work is important and should be preserved and exhibited. "She was an artist's artist," says Fred, explaining that while the public did not know her work, other artists – including many of the big names of abstract expres-

sionism – did. Shortly before Stella's death in 2003, Fred founded the Waitzkin Memorial Library Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to placing Stella's work into the permanent collections of museums and corporations throughout the world.

Many artists whose work does not become well known during their lifetimes harbor the dream that they'll become famous after they die. "Stella always said she wanted us, upon her death, to truck all her sculptures and paintings down to Florida, take them out on our boat, and dump them into the ocean," says Fred. "But she allowed me to prevail and create the Trust, which is how you know that posthumous success was on her mind."

Stella began painting in the 1950s. Unhappy in her marriage to a salesman who was working for her father's company when they had met, she felt stifled by her life in suburban Long Island. She began traveling to New York City to study art. Soon she fell in with the young, maverick painters, musicians, and poets of the abstract expressionist movement. She studied painting with Hans Hofmann and life drawing with Willem de Kooning. She spent long evenings at the Cedar Bar (a Greenwich Village bar known for attracting abstract expressionists in the 1950s), discussing art with Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. In 1968, after her marriage had ended and her children were grown, she moved to the Chelsea Hotel, where her one-bedroom apartment



Untitled (Fred), c. 1950, acrylic on paper, 22.5 x 30.25 inches, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Icon Series, Dark Icon, 1983, resin, 6 x 6.5 x 4.5 inches. The translucent cast face on the mummified books resembles a cameo.

became a sort of salon. “There were always artists and jazz musicians there,” recalls Fred, “and poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso.”

While her early works were largely abstract expressionist paintings, in the 1960s and ’70s, Stella expanded into sculpture, performance art, and film. She made her first sculptures from glass, melting bottles over mattress springs in enormous kilns at her father’s lighting fixtures company, Globe Lighting. In 1973, she discovered polyester resin, which became her primary material and may have been responsible for her eventual move to the Vineyard: When Stella melted down this highly flammable and toxic substance in her living room and on the balcony of her Chelsea Hotel apartment, her neighbors objected to the fumes.

“She was driven here by her New York neighbors,” says Mary Etherington, whose Vineyard Haven gallery, Etherington Fine Art, now represents Stella’s work.

Stella’s first visit to Martha’s Vineyard was in 1958 when, in the throes of divorcing her husband, she took Fred, then fifteen, on a road trip. Twenty-two years later, in 1980, Fred and his wife Bonnie inherited a cottage in Chilmark, and Stella came to visit. “She fell in love with it,” says Fred. For the next eight years, she would stay in the cottage for three to four months a year.

“She found working here intoxicating and inspiring,” says Fred. “The sun and the sea worked their way into her art; the color and imagery of her work was

informed by this place.” She liked, for example, to take a folding chair to Lucy Vincent Beach on late fall evenings, particularly when storms were brewing, and sit and look at the sky. Then she would go back home and work.

Toward the end of her life, Stella made a series of sculptural paintings of fish, inspired in part by living on the Vineyard, and in part by her loathing of fishing, a favorite pastime of her ex-husband – and son.

“My mother found it difficult that I fished,” says



WAITZKIN MEMORIAL LIBRARY TRUST

Stella, in 1977. Her original wish was for her artwork to be dumped into the ocean after her death.



Untitled (Cherub), in the old barn on Stella's property.

Fred, “that I went out to sea; but at the same time, the danger of the sea worked its way into her work. The things you think you hate, you internalize, and they become fuel for creative expression.”

But the predominant theme in Stella’s sculpture was books – as objects. Stella made molds of books and then re-created them in various colors of resin. Often translucent, the books would sometimes contain almost indiscernible objects within them – invitations, photographs, found objects. Her focus on books reflects a love-hate relationship with them: On the one hand, she revered books as physical vessels of knowledge, but on the other, she was known for having told the poet Allen Ginsberg that “words are lies.” In an essay entitled “Discovering Stella Waitzkin,” art critic Arthur C. Danto wrote of Stella’s work that “the books were almost literally the ghosts of books....Even if one attempted to break into them, there was nothing to read....It was as if these books, emptied of their words, could no longer impart the toxin of their falsehood.”

One of Stella’s works, a wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling installation entitled *The Wreck of the UPS* incorporates a number of Stella’s paintings, several mounted fish, bookshelves stacked with both real books and books cast in resin, and on the floor, nestled in an overturned stepladder, a copy of her son Fred’s memoir about fishing and his relationship with his parents. Stella disliked *The Last Marlin* because she felt that it revealed too much about her personal life.

“She liked to live behind veils,” says Fred. “The mystery was very important to her. She felt that if the mystery were revealed, the art would be diminished in some way.”

Mary Etherington met Stella in 1977, when Mary was working at the Center for Book Arts in New York City. “One day, Stella walks in and drops a book on the table. It had a stake driven through it and was made of resin. I was new to New York, straight out of Kansas. This was the beginning of my art education, of a real broadening of my horizons.”

In 1990, Stella bought a house on Music Street and began spending as much as three-quarters of the year here. “She worked here, breathed the air, and became an Island institution,” Fred says. Her life on the Island was oddly self-contradictory, consisting of equal parts seclusion and sociability.

As her “Go Away” doormat suggests, Stella didn’t encourage visitors – even her son. (“I had to make an appointment to see my own mother,” quips Fred.) She was intensely private about the process she used to make her art and wouldn’t allow anyone near her when she was working.

On the other hand, she liked to eat lunch at the now-closed Biga Bakery in West Tisbury, swim in the pool at the Mansion House (then the Tisbury Inn), and frequent the Up-Island Council on Aging. She had a stall at the Chilmark Flea Market where she sold secondhand items that she collected in New York City and elsewhere. The epitome of an eccentric “character,” she dressed like a gypsy, was interested in astrology and numerology, and liked to tell people’s fortunes.

“She was marvelously intuitive,” says Fred. “She could scare the heck out of you. You’d spend a couple of minutes with her, and she could tell you all about yourself.”



Untitled (Cigar Box Series), c. 1975, mixed media, resin, plaster, 6.5 x 8.75 x 8 inches.

She made few very close friends on the Island, among them Joyce Bowker, director of the Council on Aging. “Stella chose her friends very carefully,” says Joyce. “She didn’t seek out friendship, but if she liked you, it was for life. She loved her privacy, but she never applied the ‘Go Away’ mat to me. She always had some interesting meal to present to you – exotic tea or vegetables you’d never heard of. You didn’t go to Stella’s house expecting a sandwich.” Stella also regularly brought food over to Joyce at the Council on Aging, and she often presented her with some of her second-hand “finds” – an old scarf, a sweater, a hat, or a purse. “She was always giving away little treasures – or things she thought were treasures,” she says.

“She was a bit of a renegade,” notes Mary Etherington. “She just did it her own way. I think it’s admirable; it’s hard to be that honest about who you are.”

When Stella died in 2003, most of the rooms in her Music Street house were stacked floor-to-ceiling with her artwork and “treasures” for the flea market. Fred says it took two years to sort through it all. Now, however, much of her art is displayed in an old barn on the property. Representatives from museums as well as serious collectors have seen the work there and at her Chelsea Hotel apartment, which now functions both as a showcase and as the office of the Waitzkin Memorial Library Trust. The public can also see pieces at Etherington Fine Art and online at www.stellawaitzkin.com.

Thanks to the work of the Trust, a steadily growing number of museums and corporations are purchasing pieces of Stella’s work for their collections, among them New York’s Museum of Modern Art; the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian Institution, both in Washington, D.C.; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the Detroit Institute of Arts; and the Yale University Library. This fall, the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, will open a large-scale installation, including furniture and artwork that will effectively recreate Stella’s Chelsea Hotel living room. Fred reports that income from sales of Stella’s pieces has reached “the significant six figures,” allowing the Trust to be self-sustaining and continue its work. Stella may not have been a household name in her lifetime, but she’s on her way to becoming one posthumously.

“She was of a time and a group of artists who were at the forefront of changing and bringing the rest of us along,” says Mary Etherington. “That comes across in her work. It’s a very personal vision, and there’s mystery to it. The imagery is unexpected, the juxtapositions striking. It’s not necessarily pretty.”

According to her daughter-in-law Bonnie Waitzkin, Stella “hated pretty.” What mattered was originality.

“When I first met Stella,” says Mary, “I didn’t understand the work or the person. I had to grow up first. But if you like a little difference and challenge, it’s worth it. If you put in a little effort, there’s a big payoff.” ♦



Learning from Stella

What an artist and mother passes on to her son

Fred and Stella Waitzkin in Chilmark, circa 1965.

Cities and islands have a powerful metaphoric aura for artists, although the mood and allegory of any given one can be strikingly different depending on the artist. For example, New York City has been depicted by authors as chilly and cruel, but for me it’s a warm town where I am least likely to feel lonely even when there is no one around I know. I think for most writers the pull of favorite places relates to finding energy, which is another way of referring to inspiration; where to discover it, how to employ it? Artists are tireless searchers for creative energy, and if they unearth it, they can be ruthless about digging for more and keeping it at all costs. At least my mother was this way, and I learned about art from her.

I first traveled with her to Martha’s Vineyard when I was fifteen. I was already a fervent fisherman, and while we walked on Squibnocket Beach or on the Menemsha jetty, I was looking for breaking blues and bass. She didn’t care at all about fish. She was smelling something ineffable in the fruity sea air with that familiar far-off notion in her eyes; and then she would frame a section of sky between her two fingers and nod; you never knew about Stella, maybe she was recalling a passage in *Moby Dick* or she was listening to a refrain of John Coltrane in her head, or maybe storm clouds ahead informed a furious dark canvas she was working on in her studio. Mom’s roiling, deeply textured oil paintings seemed like pure madness to me. I was so impatient with her then. I didn’t like the discordant jazz she listened to or her avant-garde taste in all the visual arts. I beseeched her to look at the bloody cod and bass heaped in wooden boxes behind Poole’s

fish market, and she cast me this ironic look: Are you crazy, are you so mundane and crass?

I think it was on this first trip to the Vineyard that I showed her a short story I was composing. She scribbled up my pages with her near indecipherable expressionist handwriting, put in ideas that I had never dreamed of. Where did she find such distant and sensuous phrases and metaphors? I was so young. I couldn't write like that and I didn't want to. I just wanted to pull a big bluefish onto the beach. Mom, please, get real!

Stella taught me about pacing and juxtaposition. When I was sixteen, she sent me off to Afro-Cuban drumming school. She was always choosing unlikely careers for her friends and family. (It was never entirely clear if her offbeat career counseling was self-entertainment or wise counsel.) I loved drumming, but perhaps Mom had a secondary motivation for my study of congas, bongos, and cowbells. Perhaps she believed that rhythm would be a primary color in my writing (another career she had chosen for me) as it was in her painting and sculpture. Surely because of those drumming lessons, I have always written to a distant beat. I have little patience for writing that doesn't swing.

When I was a kid, I was dumbstruck by the way anything might find its way into mother's art – shark teeth, chicken bones, birds, religious icons, anything. And yet, even while I was resisting her strange work, I found it disturbing or impassioned, as if it lived. Stella was an emotional woman, but she also searched for feeling, might tap into it from a friend's tragedy or a hilarious conversation over lunch. It is the alchemy of a creative person to redirect emotion; for example, to turn grief to humor. But an artist must feel. Stella came to the Vineyard because the Island greatly inspired her.

In 1990 she bought her house on Music Street in West Tisbury, with a raised deck looking onto a broad meadow. Throughout the day a flock of turkeys crisscrossed her fields routing enormous crows, and a fat orange cat stalked the turkeys, and sometimes a deer walked out of the heavy brush. She thought this view was Eden. The warm yellows and deepening oranges of late afternoon spilled into her polyester-resin sculptures of books. At dusk, the tall trees that bordered her property to the south were angry and portended disaster. The trees threatened Stella and she put that fear into her work.

She became a recluse on Music Street. Mother fell ever more deeply into her art. In her last years, art was everything to her. She told me this one afternoon, when I arrived unannounced and unwelcome. I put my hand to my face because if art is everything, or should be, how could I ever hope to measure up as a writer? What about my wife and kids, and what about fun, what about fishing? What about hanging out with my mom? Again she shot me this scathing stare. Stella was beautiful and she could be ruthless.

Mother drew inspiration from her landscape. Jackson

Pollock once told her that his great canvasses were about the sky, and that made a deep impression; but if her newest work was too relentlessly black or frightening, she might drive her old Volvo to Louis's to hear jazz pianist John Alaimo play his lyrical and swinging renditions of Bobby Timmons and Horace Silver classics; or she might take a day off from art, recharging her batteries in bed watching TV soap operas, or Saturdays she'd drive to the flea market where she had her own table with the most unlikely assortment of old hats, scarves, and knickknacks. Dressed like a bag lady, Stella gossiped with celebrity acquaintances but really she favored lonely, tortured souls. Particularly as she got older, she recognized that contrast and change of pace are critical in great work. Darkness unalloyed can be trivial.

She and I are so different and very much the same. If I don't have a writing project, life seems flat or worse; the fun in my life, and there has been much of it, always works in counterpoint to the article or book I am struggling with. I shamelessly rob from my entertainment, from the ocean, you name it. I don't go anywhere without a notebook in my pocket. It took me years to learn that the most important work takes place when you are miles away from the laptop. An oddly familiar scent in the air or the smell of your own sweat while working out can invoke the critical idea or the stitching between two ideas. Sometimes directly searching for the answer is the wrong way to look. At least for me, solutions are often glimpsed out of a corner of the eye, where reality and illusion are very close. It is like this in fishing as well, trusting an inner sense that a big school of tuna is close by; gut feeling is usually the right way to go. Inspiration opens the key doors.

I have done some of my best work in the house on Music Street, spurred ahead by late afternoon walks along the dock in Menemsha or by listening to Stan Hart narrate the incredible, absolutely incredible stories of his heart. Of course there are many differences between Stella and me. I have a greater appetite for people. Family and friendship is right up there at the top of the list for me, alongside great writing, pro-football, and fishing.

My mother was a wonderful teacher, and she could be unyielding about her ideas; but maybe I had some influence on her as well. In the last years of her life, she had mostly turned away from abstract paintings and polyester representations of books. Instead, on her Music Street deck overlooking the broad meadow of her dreams, my mother had become devoted to making ancient and oddly emotional sculptures of fish. They were the strangest fish one could imagine. One of the last things she said to me was that someday she hoped to go out fishing on my boat with my son and me. This was a great surprise after so many years of Mom spurning such offers. No question Stella would have put that unlikely trip right into a wholly unique vision of sport fishing. It's such a shame that we never had a chance to see it. ♦

— FRED WAITZKIN



Stella Waitzkin, detail of
The Wreck of the UPS.