

Can a New Arts Center Revitalize Provincetown?

In saving the Mary Heaton Vorse home, Ken Fulk hopes to help rescue an arts colony under siege from gentrification. But artists still need cheap studio space.

By Brett Sokol

July 2, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — There was only one destination of choice for the literary set looking to leave New York City during the sweltering summer of 1916: Provincetown, at the outermost tip of Cape Cod. Once there, writers like John Reed and Louise Bryant, the playwright Eugene O'Neill, and an assorted cast of Greenwich Village radicals all converged on the sprawling 18th-century, eight-bedroom home of Mary Heaton Vorse, a celebrated labor reporter and the grande dame of the avant-garde. The goal of those heady salons? “Free love and communism!” quipped Ken Fulk, the new owner of the Vorse house.

Yet rather than flipping the home after his \$1.17 million purchase, or dividing it into condos — the fate of so many other antique buildings in this town where nearly 75 percent of the homes are now second homes or owned by investors — he has spent \$1.25 million more to meticulously restore its interiors to that 1916 moment and open it to the public on July 2 as one of New England’s newest arts centers. Mr. Fulk hopes his move will help shore up Provincetown’s fraying cultural vitality and reconnect it to younger generations of artists who have been priced out.

“I grew up loving historical homes and the patina of time, understanding that true imperfections have a place,” explained Mr. Fulk, an interior designer who divides his time between San Francisco and Provincetown. Already living with his husband, Kurt Wootton, across the street from the Vorse home, Mr. Fulk viewed restoring its dilapidated state as an irresistible challenge. He has gained a national reputation — and a devoted clientele who reportedly pay seven-figure sums for his handiwork — by fusing an over-the-top theatricality with a passion for the historical. Now he’s setting his sights on Provincetown, whose longstanding art colony sees itself under siege from many of the same gentrifying financial pressures as the Bay Area. “Quirkiness, eccentricity, is what Provincetown is all about and it’s one of the great attributes that drew me here,” he said. “This place will never be the Hamptons.”



Ken Fulk preparing to restore the Mary Heaton Vorse home. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Mr. Fulk is putting the Vorse home at the service of four local organizations — the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the Provincetown Film Society, the Provincetown Theater, and Twenty Summers, an annual concert and event series. It will include space for public lectures, fund-raisers, and most crucially, live-in artist residencies during the summer months when the population balloons to more than 60,000, from about 3,000. Artists and longtime residents have been left to scramble for affordable housing. “Arts organizations here always struggle over where to house folks,” Mr. Fulk explained, adding, “Now we have a house with eight bedrooms!”

The pandemic complicates that equation. Provincetown, like so many other places economically dependent on summer tourism, remains conflicted over the pace of reopening as a second wave of Covid-19 looms. With a townwide ban on indoor entertainment, Twenty Summers and the Provincetown Theater postponed their seasonal programs, while the Provincetown Film Society — forced to reschedule its annual film festival and shutter its year-round movie theater — recently announced the layoff of its entire full-time staff, including the C.E.O.

“We may not have a packed house, but the need this summer is going to be more profound, not less,” explained Mr. Fulk of the Vorse home’s opening. To that end he’s pressing ahead with an August fund-raising dinner for the Provincetown Theater honoring the playwright Charles Busch — though it’s now recast as a “spaced lawn party.”



Artwork in the Vorse home’s debut exhibition, “Intimate Companions,” includes Peter McGough’s painting “To a Happier Year” and Leilah Babirye’s sculpture “Abambowa” (Royal Guard Who Protects the King),” both from 2020. Tony Luong for The New York Times



Billy Sullivan's "Sharon I," from 2011, is also featured in "Intimate Companions." The exhibition is curated by Joe Sheftel and showcases 50 figurative works by 36 artists with a Provincetown connection. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Mr. Fulk said he is also going forward with the July opening of an art exhibition inside the home "at whatever capacity is allowed, even if it's just one person at a time." The show, "Intimate Companions," curated by Joe Sheftel, features 50 figurative works by 36 artists with a Provincetown connection, each exploring queer culture and the distinct sense of place embodied by the town itself — from the painter Paul Cadmus, a mainstay in the late 1940s, to more recent visitors including the painters Jen Bradley and Jenna Gribbon. A five-by-eight-foot flag created by the photographer Ryan McGinley has been mounted on a 30-foot-high pole.

Joshua Prager, a New York City-based author and co-founder of Twenty Summers, recalled that a dinner gathering at Mr. Fulk's home raised \$150,000 for his event series — three years' worth of its budget in one single evening. While Mr. Prager didn't discount the sense of dread that many artists feel as more and more prominent names move into town, sending rents soaring without any boost to the regional art market, he took the long view. "What separates Provincetown from the Hamptons is a lot more than just money," he said. "It's an informal space here. People's shirts are open, or they aren't wearing shirts at all."



Other artworks in the exhibition: from left, an untitled work from 2020 by John Dowd; “Blue Self-Portrait” by Tabboo! (1982); and Hugh Steers’s “Kneeling and Standing” (1987). Tony Luong for The New York Times

“If you look at the history of Provincetown,” Mr. Prager continued, “it has been reinventing itself for a century.”

Mr. Fulk pointed to past gatherings at the home of John Dowd, a local painter with a Hopperesque style and a kindred passion for historical architecture. Just as in 1916, “If you go to his house for a party, you’ll see half the town there: fishermen and drag queens, Pulitzer Prize winners and ex-cons.”

For his part, Mr. Dowd was more ambivalent about the future of the art colony. While he applauded Mr. Fulk’s restoration of the Vorse home, he feared that such efforts were ultimately self-defeating.

“Have I been doing the devil’s work in trying to make it look a certain way here?” mused Mr. Dowd, a member of Provincetown’s Historic District Commission, who has spent years fighting the wholesale gutting of historic buildings. “It’s a double-edged sword, trying to make things look more historically authentic,” he explained. “The more you make it like that, the more it hastens its demise as a living, working, thriving community. Because the money sweeps in from people who see the cachet in a pretty place to play, and it’s taken away from the people who created it in the first place.”

What Provincetown’s artists really needed, he stressed, was cheap rent and low-budget studios. While there have been some fledgling efforts, including the Commons, a new nonprofit co-working space, Mr. Dowd wondered if it was too little and too late. Today’s art school graduates simply bypass Provincetown altogether, he noted, leaving the art colony to essentially age



Exterior of the Vorse house on Provincetown's Commercial Street. Tony Luong for The New York Times

into extinction. "If you want to have a thriving art scene, you need youth, you need places for them to paint, and you need places for them to live," he added, noting Provincetown's dire shortage of these very elements. "There are no easy answers, but if people are going to do million-dollar fund-raisers, the focus should be a little more on that."



The artist Erika Wastrom, a 13th-generation Cape Codder, in her studio in Barnstable, Mass. Tony Luong for The New York Times



The artist John Dowd, who has spent years fighting the wholesale gutting of historic buildings in Provincetown. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Erika Wastrom, a painter of beguiling portraits who graduated from Boston University's M.F.A. program in 2012, would appear to be part of the local artistic continuum: She grew up as a 13th-generation Cape Codder, studying art with the well-known Provincetown figures Jim Peters and Vicky Tomayko, each of whom moved to Provincetown in the mid-80s as fellows at the Fine Arts Work Center and then stuck around. Ms. Wastrom's own work is now exhibited at Provincetown's GAA Gallery. "I love being part of a place that has a special relationship to painting," she said with a mournful laugh, "except that I'm not part of that place." Ms. Wastrom lives a good hour south of Provincetown in Barnstable — where homes are far more affordable, especially for someone starting a family. But raising two kids while teaching full time, and still cramming in regular studio sessions, doesn't leave much time for driving up to Provincetown to be a part of its creative community.

Many of Ms. Wastrom's fellow Boston University grads headed straight for New York City. To them, "Provincetown is a place from the past," she said. But New York and what she deemed its artistic "cookie-cutter molds" held little appeal for her. That left two options: "I could try to be an adjunct at some random university in Idaho. Or I could move back to a place that's inspiring to me and try to make work — and a living — there," she explained. "I'm not a landscape painter. But I am interested in color. And that part of the day when the light starts to disappear? There's no color like that anywhere else."

That makes perfect sense to Mr. Fulk. "There's something magical about this crazy little sliver of sand," he said, citing a passage from Mary Vorse's 1942 memoir "Time and the Town," where she speaks of the "cosmic quality" of setting down her writing and taking daily hikes through the woods to hidden ponds, or across the dunes to gaze out at the Atlantic Ocean. "I knew that I would never be quite so happy again," she wrote. "I had recaptured the happiness I had as a girl, and yet I had the freedom of a woman. I had my house and my children, and yet I had the gaiety that comes only, as a rule, with the irresponsibility of youth."

And the transformation of the Vorse house? "It's a little bit of a folly that we're doing this," Mr. Fulk said. "But it's utterly Provincetown to me." The town's offbeat essence endured, he insisted, even in the face of this summer's challenges: "There's still drag queens in the street — but now they have masks on."