



JOHN HELIKER

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Paintings from the Cranberry Island Years

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Essay by Martica Sawin

IN COOPERATION WITH THE HELIKER-LAHOTAN FOUNDATION

COVER *The Boat Ride* (detail), 1979, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 inches

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Three Figures at the Shore, Cranberry Island, 1987, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Still Life with White Flowers and Blue Vase, 1965, oil on canvas, 24 x 16 inches

JOHN HELIKER

Paintings from the Cranberry Island Years

by Martica Sawin

Much of my experience of Maine has gone into my paintings. It is the seaside landscape that has moved me mostly. The proximity of the sea, the light and the outlying islands have been a rich source of many ideas.

— John Heliker

John Heliker first saw Maine from a coastal steamer that ferried him at the age of sixteen on a solo trip from Boston to Bath near the mouth of the Kennebec River. Although his early years were largely spent in New York and Vermont, a return visit to Maine in 1953 made a lasting impact on his painting. At that moment his work was in a transitional stage as he attempted to reconcile his feeling for landscape with his convictions regarding underlying abstract structure. In a 1954 written explanation of his shift toward abstraction, Heliker cited the example of a painting that related to “the experience last summer of long walks by the edge of the sea on an

island off the coast of Maine; the painting started with representational cloud and rock shapes which eventually were broken down into the portrayed relationships...I feel that the painting contains a more intense feeling of the experience than any literal use I might have made of these shapes and forms.”

The statement is a useful fulcrum for a commentary on John Heliker. First, it refers to his initial experience of Cranberry Island, the place that would become central to his life and art from mid-century until his death in 2000. Second, although it describes a specific (and temporary) transition in his painting, it sets forth an artistic credo that



Clamdigger with Dog, 1985, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches



Still Life with Farmyard, 1985, oil on canvas, 20 x 30 inches

remained constant through the various phases of his long career—the aim of communicating experience through form, which for him was largely a matter of organizing the elements in unified relationships. His ultimate sense of order resulted in an underlying coherence to a body of work that runs the gamut from drawings and paintings inflected with the dominant social realism and regionalism of the 1930s, to surrealist-tinged biomorphic works in the mid-1940s, to abstractions based on landscape in the early 1950s, followed by a gradual return to representation in paintings that celebrate the visually perceived world, filtered through memory.

In 1951 when the Museum of Modern Art finally acknowledged what had been happening to art in the United States with its exhibition “Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America,” Heliker’s painting *Scava*, 1950, was included in the “Naturalist Geometric” section, one of the tidy categories curator Andrew Ritchie had felt it necessary to impose on an unruly field. *Scava* represents an extreme point in Heliker’s abstract work, based as it is, almost entirely on a rectilinear grid whose squares and rectangles are filled in with a variety of textures and linear tracery inspired by the streets and walls of Italian cities.

He had been awarded a Prix de Rome in 1948 and had spent most of 1949 in Italy. At the American Academy in Rome he shared a large studio with Phillip Guston whose work during that year underwent a major shift toward abstraction, a transition Heliker had already made but kept as an open-ended process. The two artists became good friends and one would like to have been a fly on the studio wall listening to their conversations as each struggled to come to grips with the shifting tides of art at mid-century.

A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1951 enabled Heliker to spend additional time abroad, especially in the Mediterranean town of Positano; other European sojourns followed. While in Greece during the summer of 1957, he wrote to Whitney Museum curator John Baur that he was homesick for Maine, and in the following year, 1958, he bought the nineteenth century sea captain’s house on Great Cranberry Island that became a summer refuge for him and his partner Robert Lahotan for the remainder of their lives. There the experience of place helped him enter a new luminous phase in his art, undoubtedly reflecting the intensification of light from the surrounding sea. “Returning to Maine and its great natural beauty I was

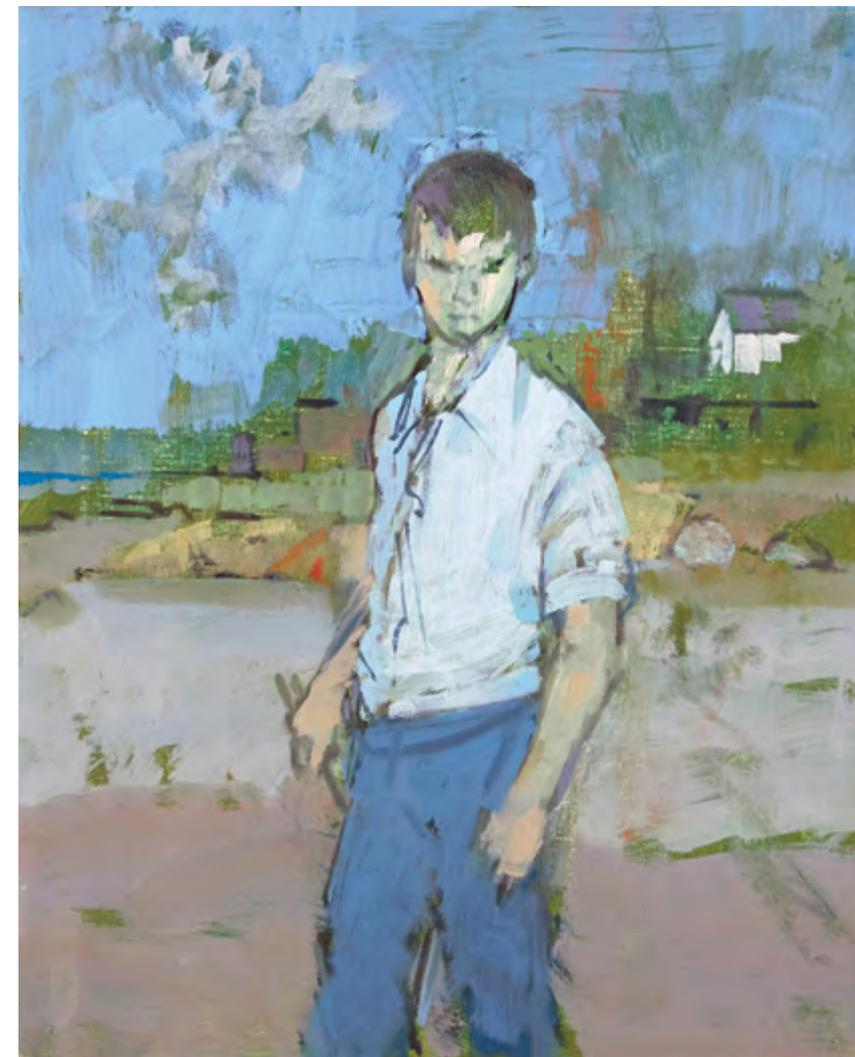
impelled to further exploration—the use of freer forms and loosening of tight patterns expressive of nature’s living moments.”

Gravitating further toward the figurative, he wrote: “Although during the first two or three years on Cranberry I have been less particularly concerned with the landscape as subject, I still feel that the time I spend there is richly rewarding. Arriving there in the early spring after the long winter with all its tensions makes me feel more alive. I feel at home and do my best work there.” It may be that the isolation of the island freed him from the pressure of changing art world fashions and furthered his independent development of a synthesis that drew on a deep knowledge of earlier art, his experience with abstraction, and a sheer sensuous pleasure in the painting process.

Although Heliker was teaching at Columbia University, Cranberry Island drew him back for long summers, during which he seemed increasingly to savor island life. Figures, engrossed in routine activities—shucking clams, picking berries, sitting in a sunlit field overlooking the sea—became integral to his compositions. Yet his paintings are less about figures in specific settings than they are recreations of the total sensation of a time and place. This

effect results from his ability to partially dissolve form in a surface play of light created through softly applied touches of paint, while giving his images a lingering presence through a few strokes of brush drawing. To avoid disruptions in the interwoven whole, details rarely stand out in sharp focus; facial features are generally submerged under a thin wash and edges are broken and softened. In this way Heliker recreates the process of seeing as an accumulation of myriad eye movements that become stimuli retained in layers of memory.

While he drew incessantly, Heliker made it clear that he did not do preliminary drawing for specific paintings, nor did he stand outdoors at an easel literally copying the view. His preference was to “spend a good deal of time contemplating a scene from all angles, then to take a blank canvas, put down a few lines, establish shapes and color relationships, while still retaining the sensation of the experience.” His fundamental concern was for a basic unity of structure in order to arrive at a sense of harmony, a goal he saw as being very much at variance with the turbulence and violence he felt was inherent to Abstract Expressionism. His emphasis on structure is readily apparent in such paintings as *Still Life with Farmyard*,



Sketch of a Young Clamdigger, 1990, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

1985, or *The Dining Room*, 1990, in which vases of field flowers are seen in front of the view from a window. Both compositions are based on the strong horizontal/vertical grids of window frames, table tops, and wall-hung paintings; the resulting rectangles are filled in with subtly variegated areas of color, that echo the delicately brushed bouquets of flowers. The grid is repeated on a diminished scale by the Cézanne-like arrays of parallel strokes of paint which, along with the interactions of color, paths of light, and repetition of related shapes, keep the eye moving over the surface. Heliker came from several generations of stonemasons and who knows what intuitive feeling for sturdy block by block construction may have underlain his taut beautifully balanced compositions, those assemblages of distinct and carefully plotted touches of paint?

Heliker stated that despite the turbulence of life in general, his hope was to achieve serenity in his art. In trying to attain a condition of harmony he was aided by his close association in the mid 1940s with the avant garde composers John Cage and Lou Harrison. “My greatest intellectual stimulation came from this involvement with music,” he recalled. “All of my friends were intensely dedicated to liberating music from the dead hand of

nineteenth century romanticism by creating a vital modern music and returning to Handel and Bach and pre-Baroque music.”

The discipline of musical structure is something he did not lose sight of, whether he was painting clam flats at low tide or a figure at work in the studio. His grasp of the cumulative effect of a painting’s total components yielded works that hold the attention over time as one gradually absorbs the diverse components interacting to preserve moments of tranquility. Beyond the comfort and security of an interior where time seems to slow down or the luxuriance of nakedness in the tall grasses of a field overlooking the sea, there are the dance of soft brushstrokes, the subtly nuanced color, and the staccato effect of the overlying drawing, to entice and hold the gaze indefinitely.

— Martica Sawin

Martica Sawin is a critic and art historian who has published widely on contemporary art since the 1950s.



The Boat Ride, 1979, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 inches



Still Life with Shell, 1987, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Shore with Figures, Maine, 1992, oil on canvas, 14 x 17 inches



Sketch of a Foggy Inlet, 1981, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches



Sailing, 1987, oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches



The Dining Room, 1990, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Three Brothers with Mt. Desert Background, 1972, oil on canvas, 26 x 34 inches



Landscape with Rocks and Beach, 1968, oil on canvas, 26 x 25 inches



Clamdiggers in the Fog, 1980, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 inches



Two Figures Picking Cranberries, 1982, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches



Study of Boy Shucking Clams, 1988, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 inches



Spring Planting, 1972, oil on canvas, 26 x 30 inches



Bouquet of Flowers in the Corner, 1963, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



Picnic with Woman and Young Boy, 1975, oil on panel, 20 x 19 inches



Still Life with White Flowers, 1988, oil on canvas, 24.25 x 21.75 inches



Man with Lobster Buoy and Dog, 1991, oil on canvas, 21 x 19 inches



House and Trees by the Bay, 1969, oil on canvas, 21 x 25 inches



Figure in the Studio with White Shirt, 1975, oil on canvas, 25 x 21 inches

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Heliker was born in Yonkers, New York in 1909. His father was a stonemason. Heliker left high school in 1923 in order to dedicate himself to art; he studied painting at the Art Students League from 1927 to 1929. He had the first of three one-man exhibitions at the Maynard Walker Gallery in New York in 1936, and in the later 1930s he was doing drawings for the *New Masses* and joined the easel division of the WPA Federal Art Project. When the Maynard Walker Gallery closed in 1941, Heliker began his long association with the Kraushaar Galleries, where he exhibited his work for more than fifty years. He had made a trip to Maine as early as 1925, and more than a quarter century later, in 1958, he purchased an old sea captain's house on Great Cranberry Island. This was where he spent summers with his life partner, the painter Robert LaHotan. It is now the home of the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation, where painter Patricia Bailey, a close friend of Heliker and LaHotan, has established a Residency Program for artists. Since 2005, the Foundation has brought one hundred ten artists to work on Great Cranberry Island.

From the 1940s until his death in 2000 at the age of 91, John Heliker played a vital role in the artistic and cultural life of New York City. Among his friends were Lou Harrison, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham. He first got to know Philip Guston when they were both awarded the Prix de Rome in 1948. And Walker Evans took memorable photographs of the Cranberry Island house in the 1960s. Beginning in 1941, Heliker's work was regularly exhibited in the annual and biannual exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art; he was the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney in 1968. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of younger artists were attracted by Heliker's independent painterly vision. Many of them had begun as his students. He taught at Columbia University for twenty-seven years, retiring in 1974. He was among the founding faculty of the New York Studio School of Painting and Sculpture, and he later joined the faculty of the MFA Painting Program at the Parsons School of Design. Heliker was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where he served several terms as Vice President for the Arts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My husband Michael and I are delighted to host the first solo exhibition in Maine of John Heliker's work since his death in 2000. *John Heliker: Paintings from the Cranberry Island Years*, which coincides with the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation's twentieth anniversary, has been a work in progress since 2010 when we first met Patricia Bailey, the Foundation's residency program director. In 2012, we held an exhibition highlighting the work of the group of prominent northeast painters who spent their summers on Great Cranberry Island between 1960 and 1985, including Marvin Bileck, Gretna Campbell, Dorothy Eisner, Louis Finkelstein, John Heliker, Jeannie Howard, William Kienbusch, Robert LaHotan, John Lorence, Emily Nelligan, Carl Nelson, and Charles Wadsworth. Since then, we have continued to work with the Heliker-LaHotan Foundation and representatives from the estates of Gretna Campbell, Carl Nelson, and Charles Wadsworth.

We wish to thank Patricia Bailey and Jed Perl from the Foundation for their help in making this exhibition possible. I am especially appreciative to Martica Sawin for writing such an insightful essay for our exhibition catalog. Both Sawin and Heliker taught at Parsons School of Design where I was a student in the early 1970s. Sawin was chair of the art history department and Heliker taught in the MFA painting program. Parsons is well known for its intensive instruction of drawing, especially the figure, and I enjoy the manner in which Heliker incorporates drawing into his paintings and his absence of figurative detail—an approach my instructor, William Klutz, also drummed into every student at Parsons. Working on the Heliker show with Martica has brought our shared fondness for Maine, my association with Parsons, and the founding of Courthouse Gallery full circle—one I never would have imagined back in the 1970s.

—Karin Wilkes
Director, Courthouse Gallery

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
Colby College, Waterville, Maine
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire
Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, Delaware
Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado
Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, New York
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska
National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut



The Clamshaker, 1989, oil on canvas, 22 x 16 inches

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