

Walter Plate

East End Abstractions



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center
| August – 31 October 2019

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Organized by Helen A. Harrison
Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Director
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

Catalog essay by Marc Plate

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On the front cover:

Georgica Beach – The Hamptons, 1971

Oil on canvas, 60 x 66 inches

Catalog number 9

Photograph courtesy of Levis Fine Art, New York

On the back cover:

Walter Plate in his studio, Woodstock, ca. 1960

Photograph courtesy of Marc Plate

Walter Plate

East End Abstractions

Paintings and works on paper

1961-1971

Foreword

Helen A. Harrison

More than three decades ago, when I was the curator of Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton, I was contacted by a local man named William Plate. He asked if I could advise him about some paintings he owned, so I visited his home, where he showed me some works by his late brother, Walter. They needed conservation, and I gave him a couple of recommendations. I asked if he and Walter were related to Robert Plate, whom I had met in Woodstock in the mid 1970s, and he said yes, Robert was their elder brother.

Looking back, it seems odd that I hadn't encountered Plate's work while I was the research assistant for the 1977 Vassar College exhibition celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Woodstock art colony. Considering Plate's prominence in Woodstock—his longstanding residence, his role in the Art Students League summer school, and his family still living there—how had he escaped my notice? Perhaps the fact that he had died a few years earlier accounted for his work's lack of visibility at that moment.

Now the time has come to correct that oversight.

Plate's early recognition as one of the foremost abstract painters to emerge after World War II was based on a type of lyrical abstraction that has been called Abstract Impressionism, a term coined by Elaine de Kooning. In 1958 his work was featured in an international exhibition of that title, organized by Lawrence Alloway for the Arts Council of Great Britain, which also included paintings by André Masson, Joan Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro and Jean-Paul Riopelle, among other established and emerging artists. Plate's entry was a 1955 painting, then untitled, now known as *Spring*.

In the exhibition catalog, Alloway described the abstract impressionist impulse as "useful both to artists who want to make images out of action painting and to artists who want to keep contact with nature as a fund of references. Common to both groups . . . is a sensuous use of paint to create, by the evocation of light and atmosphere, a world of space."

This seems to me a valid description of Plate's later work as well. From the 1950s until his untimely death in 1972, he was a frequent visitor to the East End, and his experiences here found their way into his imagery. Something about the maritime environment captivated him, even while he was living and working in a wooded area far from the coast.

In 1954 a reviewer of his solo exhibition at the Ganso Gallery declared that "Plate's forte in his first New York show is clearly the seascape." The examples in the current exhibition, painted fifteen or more years later, bear out that observation. They all rely on the artist's perception and absorption of experienced phenomena. Without being literal, he communicates the feeling of a day at the beach, whether sunny or overcast, in reminiscent terms, the way memories bring back sensations. Tangible things, such as a brightly striped towel, a languid sunbather, the pulse of waves breaking on the shore are interpreted freely, allowing the viewer's imagination to share in the pleasure of recollection.

I am grateful to Walter Plate's widow, Gladys Brodsky, and son, Marc, for their contributions to this exhibition and catalog, and to Jim Levis of Levis Fine Art, New York, who represents the artist's estate. It was Jim who proposed the show to me, and he has been a constant guide and supporter throughout its development.



Spring, 1955
Oil on Masonite, 48 x 78 inches
Collection of Dave Cielinski
Not in the exhibition



Walter (Bud) Plate was born in New York City on 9 June 1925. He studied at the Grand Central School of Art from 1942-43 before enlisting in the United States Marines Corps. After service in the South Pacific and Japan, from 1947-50 he attended L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and the atelier of Fernand Léger in Paris. In 1950 he studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the Art Students League summer school in Woodstock, New York. The following year he moved to Woodstock, where he married the artist Gladys Brodsky.

Plate's first solo exhibition was at the Ganso Gallery in Manhattan in 1954, followed by solo shows at the Stable Gallery in 1958 and 1960, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1969, and the Polari Gallery in Woodstock in 1970. His work was included in many group exhibitions, among them the Whitney Annuals in 1957-61; the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1955 and 1960; the 26th and 27th Carnegie International biennials; and the Tate Gallery, London, and the International Exhibition of Abstract Artists, Tokyo, both in 1959. That year he was awarded the Gold Medal at the Corcoran Biennial in Washington, DC. Memorial exhibitions of his work were held at the University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany, from 16 October – 18 November 1973, traveling to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute from 27 November – 15 December 1973, and at the Woodstock Artists Association from 3 – 25 March 1984. He is represented in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art (now in the American University Museum), and many private collections.

From 1959-68, Plate taught summer classes at the Art Students League in Woodstock. He was a distinguished visiting artist at the University of Southern Illinois in 1962, and was an associate professor of art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, from 1964 until his death on 6 August 1972.

Walter Plate in his studio, Woodstock, ca. 1960. The painting behind him is *Interior #10, 1959*.
Photograph courtesy of Marc Plate.

My Father, Walter Plate

Marc Plate

My father was born in 1925, in Woodhaven, Queens, as a triplet, a novelty at that time. The triplets—Walter (nicknamed Bud), William and Elizabeth—had three older siblings, Robert, Jeffrey and Muriel. Their mother was of Irish stock; their father German. From an early age, Bud, Bill and Betty were local attractions. Their every social event, from school functions to birthday parties and travels, was documented in the local newspapers. For their first eleven years, they were dressed in identical outfits. Bud quickly grew into a broad-shouldered, muscular man, and with his brother Bill would swim in the ocean at Jones Beach. The two of them developed a love of the sea, swimming out as far as they could, often perilously. Later, in adulthood, Bill settled into Long Island's East Hampton in a house one block from the ocean.

When he was twelve years old, Bud showed signs of artistic talent. He would go to the local park with his drawing pad and pencils to sketch the strollers and lush landscape. But the ocean was his main fascination, one that remained with him for life. There are drawings of Bud's, from the time he was a teenager, of the beach and of boats at sea and at dock. Perhaps that is why, during World War II, at the age of eighteen he enlisted in the Marine Corps. Stationed in the South Pacific, he was a bombardier, pulling the trigger that dropped bombs from a thousand feet, exploding far below. The uncertainty of knowing whether he had killed innocent people, and how many, haunted him for the rest of his life.

Bud's talent for illustrating the everyday routines of military men—playing cards, swimming, and working—caught the attention of his superiors. He was assigned to paint the sides and wings of Marine and Air Force bombers, producing portraits of smiling, long-legged beauties, like calendar girls come to life. Having wrestled with his conscience as a bombardier, it is certain that the irony of decorating the planes known as the "flying beasts" did not escape him. Now they were "flying beauties," thanks to him. It was at this time, due to the many sketches he made of actual calendar girls and models, that he became enchanted with the female form, which would become one of his everlasting subjects.

After the war, instead of going straight back to New York City, Bud went to Paris to study with Fernand Léger at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, using funds from the G.I. Bill. While studying with Léger, he also met the American artist Herman Cherry, who would have an impact on his subsequent career. In 1949, Bud returned to New York City to live with his older brother Bob on West Fourth Street in Greenwich Village. Through Cherry, who had also returned, he met many of the other artist veterans who, with the help of the G.I. Bill, were experimenting with the new American-style abstraction—Abstract Expressionism.

That summer Bob went to Woodstock, New York, to visit a friend. He liked the place and decided to come back again with Bud. The following summer, in 1950, the brothers were in Woodstock. On the first day of their visit, they found a local swimming hole, "Big Deep," to cool off. There they discovered two other people in the mountain pool by a waterfall, swimming naked—and female. Two nymphs, they later said. It was then that they decided to remain in Woodstock for the summer.

Bud enrolled in the Arts Students League summer school, in a class taught by Yasuo Kuniyoshi. In the class, Bud met Gladys Brodsky, this author's mother. Kuniyoshi, recognizing Bud's talent, told him that he should get his own studio and get out of his class; he was too good to be taught. So, my mother and he moved into a cabin in Byrdcliffe, given to artists for a nominal sum by the Byrdcliffe Guild. They stayed in this cabin, known as "Veranda," for a year or so before finding a

more permanent, weather-proofed nest. By the time I was born, in 1954, Bud and Gladys had made many new friends, most notably Philip Guston and the sculptor Raoul Hague.

Bud had the opening of his first one-man show at the Ganso Gallery in 1954, while my mother had her first one-man opening with my birth. It was a very exciting and happy time for them, filled with possibilities, but also very confusing for Bud, who was faced with the choice of staying with Gladys to see his son being born or going to New York City for the gallery reception. Of course, he went to the reception.

It was also in 1954 that Bob and Bill began dividing their summers between Woodstock and East Hampton. Bob had some writer and artist friends in the Hamptons and Springs, including Syd Solomon and Herman Cherry. Bud started visiting occasionally and often considered moving there, because of the laid-back art scene and the ocean surf. Cherry, in particular, who was friends with most of the abstract artists who had moved to the Hamptons, always encouraged my parents to make the move.

One of the arguments for moving was that Woodstock was inhabited largely by artists whose styles emphasized landscape and figuration, whereas the Hamptons were attracting downtown New York City artists with more non-objective, abstract styles like Bud's. It also had beaches and beach parties. Bud and Bob vacillated between this dual temptation for years, until it was too late to make the move, with constraining family and financial commitments in Woodstock. Bob, in particular, struggled with the decision, and came to regret staying in Woodstock.

Bud's triplet Bill, however, had no problem ensconcing himself in East Hampton in the early 1960s. I remember visiting Uncle Bill and Herman Cherry every summer with my family. We would always attend the artists vs. writers softball games. Bud played outfield with the artists in a number of games. It was at these events, and the late-night beach parties on Georgica Beach (known as the artists' beach, along with Indian Wells for the nudist artists) that Bud, sitting around the big beach fire with beer and cigarettes, listened to his fellow artists talk about the art scene in New York City. This was from 1959 to 1967, when Bud was teaching as an associate professor at Chicago, and in the summers at the Arts Students League in Woodstock, so getting to the Hamptons was considered a vacation, more than a social occasion.

Bud was having a good bit of success in New York at this time and felt a kinship to the other artists in East Hampton, who were older for the most part, like Adolph Gottlieb and Willem de Kooning. Introduced by Cherry, he met de Kooning and his wife Elaine at the summer beach parties, as well Franz Kline and the writer George Plimpton, who held an annual Fourth of July fireworks party on the beach.

I remember playing on the beaches and in the artists' homes as a ten- or eleven-year-old with Lisa de Kooning, Willem's daughter, and other artists' children, while the adults raged against Pop artists and disloyal art dealers. Ironically, Robert Rauschenberg, perhaps one of the greatest migrants to Pop Art, was at one of these parties. Unfortunately, I was too young to understand what they were talking about, and not allowed to get close enough even to hear. But I remember Rauschenberg left early, and a long discussion about it continued on the car ride back to our bungalow by the bay.

Lastly, the most vivid memory of mine, one that puts this collection of art into visual and psychological context, is of my father's response to arriving in East Hampton after a five-hour, un-air-conditioned drive from the distant mountains. Upon seeing the ocean, my father pulls us all into the nearest parking lot, takes off his clothes and runs headfirst into the crashing surf, disappearing beneath the waves, then bobbing up further in the distance. My mother, my brother and I look out the car windows perplexed; why would anyone go swimming during a nor'easter?



Walter Plate with his son Marc, September 1955.
The painting behind them is *Spring*, 1955.
Photograph courtesy of Marc Plate.

Bud could not have come at a more opportune time. His painting was moving in the direction of “Action Painting”—Harold Rosenberg had not yet coined that phrase—which would later develop into a style wholly his own. Bud called me when he returned from Paris—he was living with his brother Bob in the village—and mentioned how tough it was in New York. I suggested he go to Woodstock for a while and try to paint—get some paintings together to be able to show. It would be easier to work his way into the American scene after three years in Paris.

Although he sometimes felt isolated from the center of the agitation—the pros and cons of opinion; condemning and praising the diverse movements that had proliferated with the new found freedom offered by Abstract Expressionism—the demarcation between license and freedom had become a thin line—Bud remained true to his instincts. What he lacked in speech—he was awkward in words; his malaprops had become legend in Woodstock—he made up for in the eloquence of his painting.

He skated across a canvas as gracefully as a champion Olympic ice skater. There were no missteps with his brush. He was his severest critic. He destroyed much of his work. During the process of painting he would shift and change continuously—scraping here and there; blotting out whole areas; repainting newly discovered forms. Although he started with an image, the painting took over a life of its own. He was well aware of the dualities that were taking place in the American art scene.

He had brought back from Paris a love of Collage. It was the Collage-Cubist structure that underlay his paintings and kept them close to a classic format. Cubism had left its pose on him; Abstract Expressionism freed him.

—Excerpted from an essay by Herman Cherry for the Walter Plate memorial exhibition, Woodstock Artists Association, 3 – 25 March 1984



Interior #10, 1959
Oil on masonite, 72 x 78 ½ inches
Mair Family Collection, Los Angeles
Not in the exhibition

Checklist of the exhibition

All works are on loan from the Estate of Walter Plate, courtesy of Levis Fine Art, New York

- 1 *Surf, 1961*
Mixed media on paper, 24 x 22 inches
- 2 *The Sunbather, 1968*
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches
- 3 *X + Yellow, 1968*
Mixed media collage on paper, 24 x 20 inches
- 4 *Beach Figures, 1969*
Oil on paper, 17 ½ x 12 inches
- 5 *Masquerade, 1970*
Oil on paper, 22 x 30 inches
- 6 *Woman, 1970*
Mixed media on paper, 15 ½ x 21 ¾ inches
- 7 *Beach Night, 1970*
Oil on paper, 26 x 24 inches
- 8 *Chance Meeting, 1970*
Mixed media on paper, 13 x 24 ¼ inches
- 9 *Georgica Beach – The Hamptons, 1971*
Oil on canvas, 60 x 66 inches
- 10 *Beach Music, 1971*
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches
- 11 *Behind the Dune, 1971*
Mixed media on paper, 32 3/8 x 36 ½ inches



Surf, 1961
Mixed media on paper, 24 x 22 inches



The Sunbather, 1968
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



X + Yellow, 1968
Mixed media collage on paper, 24 x 20 inches



Beach Figures, 1969
Oil on paper, 17 ½ x 12 inches



Masquerade, 1970
Oil on paper, 22 x 30 inches



Woman, 1970
Mixed media on paper, 15 1/2 x 21 3/4 inches



Beach Night, 1970
Oil on paper, 26 x 24 inches



Chance Meeting, 1970
Mixed media on paper, 13 x 24 1/4 inches



Georgica Beach - The Hamptons, 1971
Oil on canvas, 60 x 66 inches



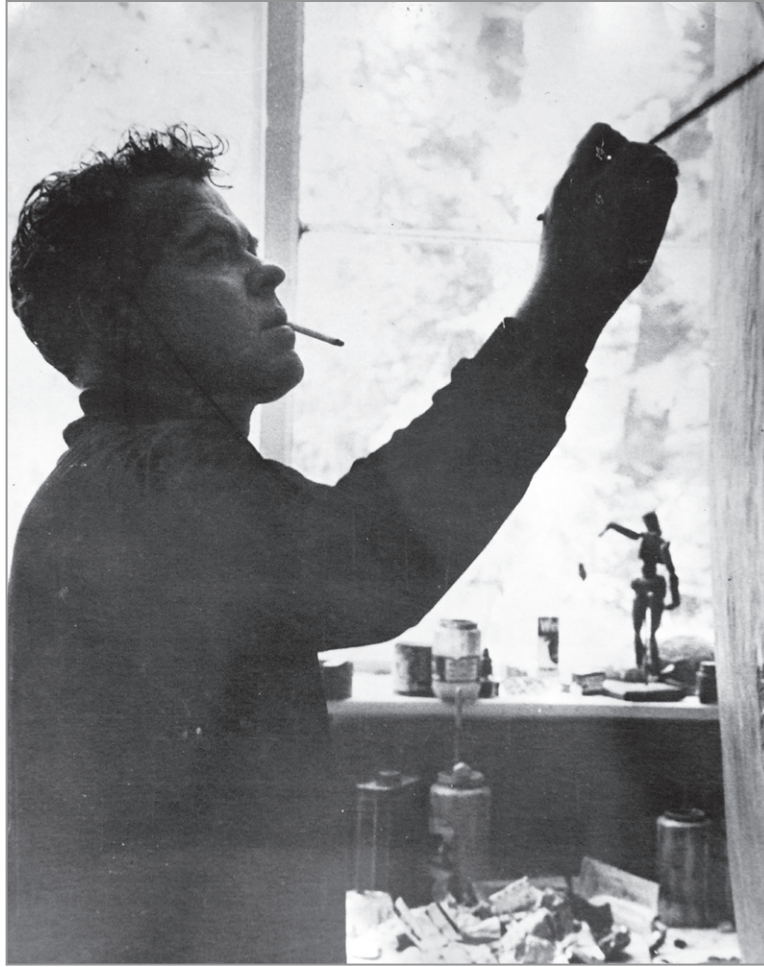
Beach Music, 1971
Oil canvas, 48 x 60 inches



Behind the Dune, 1971
Mixed media on paper, 32 3/8 x 36 1/2 inches

There has been a lot of talking done on the subject of abstraction in art, but, so far, I feel that only the paintings themselves have been eloquent.

—Walter Plater, 1960



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