

THE ARTIST WHISPERER

With the help of world-famous designer Ken Fulk, a storied Provincetown house for creatives opens its doors once more

By Larry Lindner

Four women flush with the friendship of schoolgirls come gamboling down the steep, narrow staircase, the warm intimacy of their conversation wafting through the dining room in four different accents as they make their way to the kitchen. Hailing from Austria, Germany, the UK, and the US, they have known each other since their four 28-year-old children were preschoolers. The gathering this time around is because the actress Gail Strickland (whose credits include *Norma Rae*, *Law & Order*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) has asked the group to come to Provincetown for a three-day workshop of sorts on storytelling.

They are being put up on the quiet east end of Commercial Street in the eighteenth-century house once owned by the writer Mary Heaton Vorse. Under the roof of the shingled Cape-style home, where she lived from 1907 until her death in 1966, Vorse nourished a forward-thinking exchange of ideas and hosted both budding artists and such notables as playwright Eugene O’Neill, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, novelist Sinclair Lewis, and the left-leaning couple portrayed in the movie *Reds*, Louise Bryant and John Reed. Today the role of host to both emerging and established artists and avant-garde thinkers is being fulfilled in the house by world-renowned interior designer Ken Fulk. He was asked by Vorse’s granddaughters to buy the crumbling residence, rehabilitate it, and make it a gathering place for creatives and thinkers once again.

It’s a fitting hand-me-down. Fulk is not only an internationally lauded designer but also an accomplished writer himself. He has penned articles for such publications as *Town and Country* and *Financial Times* and is just out with a new book, *The Movie in My Mind*, which gives readers a peek into the inspiration behind some of his knock-your-socks-off interiors. A true Renaissance man, he is also an unparalleled event planner who uses the home to stage fundraisers for the arts.

One could rightly add “knowledgeable eco-friendly farmer” to his resume, too. While the women chat, the large round dining table is being set for a dinner party that will feature food grown in the garden right behind the house, with nothing on the menu coming from any farther than this side of the Sagamore Bridge.

As the dinner guests eat and also walk through the home, they will see on the walls of every room, including the bathrooms, an ever-shifting array of paintings by both rising-star contemporary artists like Jesse Ceraldi and



Ken Fulk stands in Mary Heaton Vorse’s library with her books behind him. “They still need to be sorted and catalogued,” he says.

acclaimed painters past, such as Paul Cadmus. The house does double duty as a gallery, with art coming and going. In the warm weather, people gather for the showing of films on a large screen in the backyard, courtesy of a collaboration between Fulk and the Provincetown Film Society.

LUCKY BOARDERS

Writers, painters, filmmakers, and artists of every other stripe stay in the home’s eight bedrooms courtesy of Fulk and his husband, Kurt Wootton. Those who want to help in the effort to give artists a leg up, and thereby become patrons of the arts themselves, can make a donation to the initiative through their nonprofit organization, the Provincetown Arts Society.

Many of those tapped to spend some time working at the house are chosen by organizations that include the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the Provincetown Film Society, the Provincetown Theater (with which Strickland has collaborated for her storytelling series), and a music and speaker series called Twenty Summers. Fulk partners with all of them to bring to the fabled curlicue at the tip of the Cape an array of talented people. These individuals might not otherwise be able to take advantage of the energy given off by the Provincetown community.

The rooms for the ever-changing guest list of painters, musicians, writers, actors, and others are not just for proverbial starving artists, although they certainly number among the guests. It’s simply a matter of what arts organization reaches out with the name of someone who would benefit from having a place to stay while creating or exchanging ideas. There’s no limit to who can apply, including independent artists, historians, and others not affiliated with any particular Provincetown organization. “We wanted the house to be in service to the town, whatever that means,” Fulk says, “to open up our heads and our hearts and this house and say, ‘Come, inhabit it.’ Our aim isn’t to be another arts organization but to try to be connective tissue. Bringing people together is, I think, a powerful thing.”

One of those who came to stay was graduate student Lindsay Wentzel, who is studying maritime archaeology at North Carolina’s East Carolina University. She is writing her master’s thesis on the maritime history of Provincetown, with a particular focus on a local whaling company whose fortunes rose and then fell once petroleum was discovered and whale oil fell out of favor. It turned out that one of the owners of that company lived in the house for decades until his death in 1905, just two years before Mary





A portrait by Judith Shahn hangs over an easy chair in a comfy corner.



Heaton Vorse purchased it.

Wentzel reached out to Fulk on Instagram to learn a little more, and the next thing she knew he was inviting her to stay at the house while she conducted some of her research at the Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum. “It was the most surreal experience,” she says, and not just because “Ken and everyone are absolutely wonderful and made sure I was comfortable.” She explains, “I got to stay in Mary Heaton Vorse’s bedroom. That was just a really cool experience because in her book, *Time in the Town*, she talks about her bedroom and seeing the harbor. I would wake up and be sitting where she used to sit, having that experience for myself.”

During Wentzel’s stay, Fulk collected scans of whaling logs that had been kept in the house, made copies, and then sent them to her—an incredible boon because those logs do not exist in archives anywhere else. “I’ve been to 20 different archives around New England and haven’t seen anything like them,” she says.

“I didn’t expect Ken and his husband to put me up because I’m not an artist or musician,” Wentzel comments. “But for them to show me that kindness and actually *help* with my research, it meant a lot.”

And she did get to be part of the arts-engaged community during her visit. She recounts that during her week at the house, there was an exhibition of paintings by acclaimed Provincetown artist Salvatore Del Deo. “I was *living* in an art gallery,” she says. In the same week, the Provincetown Film Society had a showing of *Hello Dolly* in the backyard. Thesis research

that couldn’t have happened any other way, world-class art, and great film came together all in one place.

The house and the Provincetown Arts Society is managed largely by Gene Tartaglia, a close friend of Fulk’s who knew him before he was Ken Fulk. When Fulk was working to get his design business off the ground in San Francisco, he spent time moonlighting as a maître d’ at Tartaglia’s restaurant to help make ends meet.

It is Tartaglia who curates the home’s painting exhibitions, which he calls “a relatively easy process of picking what I love.” This fall, for instance, he will be showing works from Addison Art Gallery in Orleans, one of the Cape’s premier galleries. (See box on page 89 for details on the exhibition’s reception events and the opportunity to watch several established Cape artists paint a live model on the grounds of the home and then put their various interpretations up for sale.)

Celebrated Cape artist Paul Schulenburg will be featured as part of the Addison Art Gallery show with his sometimes Hopper-esque creations, along with other heavy hitters that include painter Sharon McGauley, sculptress Joyce Johnson (who started the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill), and painter Amy Sanders.

One of the paintings will be a Schulenburg portrait of Mary Heaton Vorse herself. Says Schulenburg, “It came up in conversations with Gene and Helen that there were no paintings of her. There are a few black-and-white photos, and even those were kind of hard to find. I found a black-and-white head shot that I used as a reference and simulated a Provincetown evening scene in the background. Provincetown is always



beautiful when the sun is going down and the sky is turning, so I created an evening light, softly glowing behind her.”

Placing the painting at twilight also allowed Schulenburg not to have to get too exact with flesh tone. “With a black-and-white photo, it can be tough to come up with the skin tones,” he says. “Nighttime, colors are more subdued—it’s a way around that. The subdued color also makes it look more vintage, more from her era.

“It’s an honor” to be exhibited in the Mary Heaton Vorse House, Schulenburg adds. “It’s amazing to me to be able to participate in something like this.”

Gallery principal Helen Addison is also excited for the exhibition and its collaborative spirit. “Gene is involved with the art to a point where he goes to studios, discusses framing choices, chooses not just the artists but the works. He knows what he’s doing, and he’s specific about how the art will be presented. It’s a bit wonderful for me, after having run shows by myself for 26 years. Working with Gene is a new and refreshing experience. I’m obviously protective of my artists, and fully trust Gene and Ken to take care of them as well.”

Of course, enjoying an exhibition at the Mary Heaton Vorse House also means enjoying Fulk’s sensitive and exquisite restoration of the property. Under his ultra-keen eye the residence has invitingly, thoughtfully, come together with very textural hand-plastered walls,



salvaged pieces of furniture from Vorse’s lifetime (including a Swedish wedding chest), repurposed wide floor boards and beadboard, a doryman’s oars transformed into part of a staircase railing, the bookcase where the whaling logs were kept before Vorse’s time, beautiful bed linens (donated to the initiative by Restoration Hardware), comfy-cozy upholstered furniture that is *so* easy to melt into....

Fulk credits local builder/artisan Nate McKean for executing the often difficult work it took to get the house back up on its feet, so to speak. One issue was that the home was sitting on rubble instead of a secure foundation and “couldn’t even be jacked up because it would have fallen apart,” Fulk says. “They had to hand-dig a foundation around it.”

McKean got it done, along with so much more that needed to happen to make the house livable and safe—and soul-restoring to anyone who enters it. Fulk cannot speak more glowingly of McKean’s work. “I’m a horrible anal-retentive nut,” he comments. “I spend my life working with my team, all I do is tell them what’s wrong. ‘It’s beautiful, it’s wonderful, but we gotta fix this.’ I walked through the house when Nate was done, and I didn’t have one comment.”

Would Vorse herself have been pleased? Her granddaughter, Gael Poltrack, says, “I’m sure she would have felt Ken was the right person for the job.” In between memories of her grandmother’s ability



The Captain Kibbe Cook House, Mary Heaton Vorse’s home in Provincetown. Courtesy of Joel O’Brien

to make what she calls “a mean clam chowder” and recounting that “she loved having kids around” and “didn’t mind the chaos of childhood coming into and out of the house,” Poltrack comments that “she would have been happy that someone was there treating the arts with such respect and treating the house with such love.” In other words, the baton was passed to the right person to take over the role of, in Poltrack’s words, “welcoming the arts and people.”

Fulk, for his part, is just happy to have had the wherewithal to take it on. “I won the lottery of life, and I’m so grateful for it,” he says. “I wake up every day, and I truly do give thanks. And I think: Be a good steward of this life you’ve been given.” 🏠



ADDISON ART GALLERY EXHIBITION AT THE Mary Heaton Vorse House

An exhibition of artists represented by the Addison Art Gallery of Orleans will run at the Mary Heaton Vorse House, 466 Commercial Street, Provincetown, from Thursday, September 15th, through Sunday, October 23rd. Paintings by Paul Schulenburg, Sharon McGauley, Amy Sanders and others, as well as sculptures by Joyce Johnson, will be on display and available for sale.

IMPORTANT DATES:

Thursday, September 15, 5 - 7 PM:

Opening reception with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres.

Sunday, September 25, 2 -5 PM:

In the courtyard, watch established artists capture live model Mozelle on canvas. (If it rains, the session will take place indoors on drop cloths.) Painters will include Paul Schulenburg, Sharon McGauley, Cassandra, Andrea Petitto, Steve Bowersock, Maryalice Eizenberg, John Clayton, Donald Beal, and Valerie Isaacs.

Sunday, October 9, 5 - 7 PM:

Greeting reception with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres.

Tickets to all three events are free courtesy of the Provincetown Arts Society. To be included, email House Manager Gene Tartaglia: gene@provincetownartsociety.com.

