

TODAY'S  
MASTERS

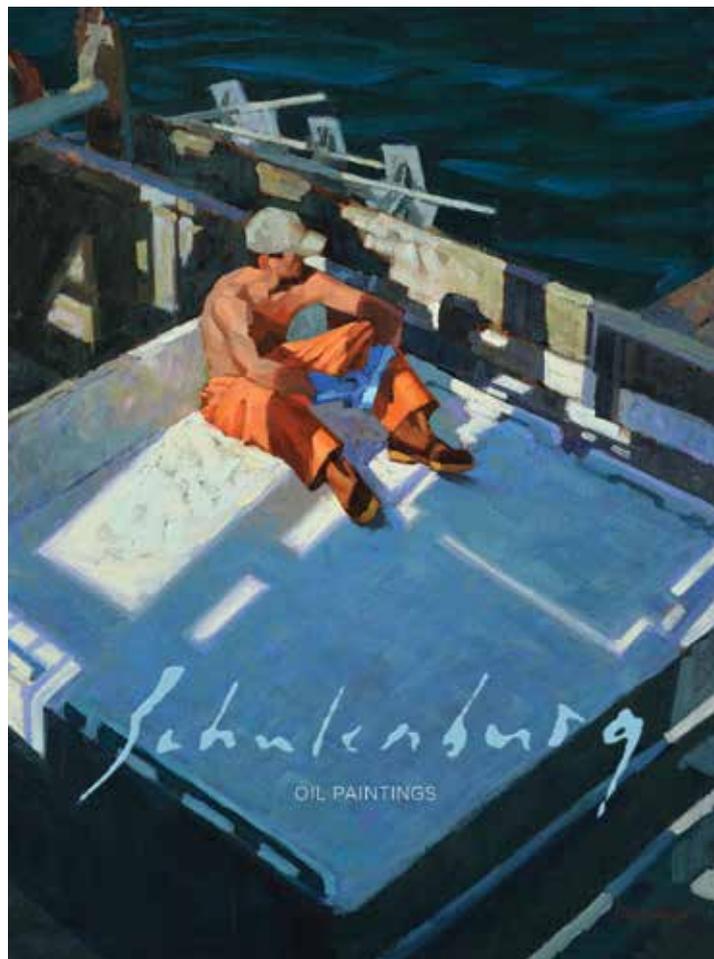
# PAUL SCHULENBURG: MAKING THE COMMONPLACE EXTRAORDINARY

A quiet yet steady player in the renaissance of American realist art has marked 20 years of full-time painting with the first book published about him. Launched last June by his primary representative, Addison Art Gallery (Orleans, Massachusetts), *Paul Schulenburg: Oil Paintings* is a handsome hardback volume running 200 pages and featuring more than 100 color reproductions, most of them full-page. Its appearance presents an ideal opportunity to assess Schulenburg's artistic achievements thus far.

Born in 1957 in Schenectady, New York, he grew up in a home filled with paintings created by his maternal grandfather, the talented hobbyist Frank Hazard Dygert. Schulenburg recalls, "My mother would tell me, 'You have a talent like your grandfather. Don't waste that gift.' So rather than steering me toward a more 'practical' profession, my parents always supported me in my artistic pursuit. I think that has made all the difference."

Schulenburg's ability was certainly noticed in 1975, when he won the top national Scholastic Art Award, then found himself at Boston University, on a scholarship, studying toward a B.F.A. in painting. Unusually for the late 1970s, BU faculty members such as Joseph Ablow, David Aronson, Sidney Hurwitz, Reed Kay, Morton Sacks, and John Wilson still offered a classical curriculum (rather than a modernist one), imbuing Schulenburg with the practical skills and appreciation for both beauty and history he has relied upon ever since.

After graduation, weighing his career options, he was just 24 when his first wife died of leukemia, leaving him with their infant daughter. With continuing support from his in-laws, Schulenburg decided to set his paintings aside in order to work at home as a commercial illustrator until his little girl grew up. Like Winslow Homer,



The cover of the book *Paul Schulenburg: Oil Paintings* features *By the Pier* (2006, oil on panel, 30 x 24 in., collection of Jeff Bonasia).



Edward Hopper, N.C. Wyeth, Rockwell Kent, and other talents, Schulenburg thrived in the busy, deadline-oriented world of illustration, and among his inheritances from those 19 years was the graphic clarity that defines his paintings today. Schulenburg knows how to promptly capture viewers' interest through the deft arrangement of shapes, even before we slow down to see exactly what those shapes are.

As to why his first monograph emerged last year — generally a year we hope to forget — Schulenburg explains, “2020 was my 20th anniversary of making the transition from illustration back to fine art, and also of exhibiting my work at Addison Art Gallery. Until then, there had been no looking back.” (Not coincidentally, the earliest work pictured in the book dates to 2000.) And as to why the transition occurred at all, he explains, “I remarried in 1993, and within a few years my wife, Pharr, said to me, ‘You went to school for fine art. Do you think maybe you should get back to painting?’ She has always believed in me and continues to encourage me.”

Today the couple share their home and painting studio in Eastham on Cape Cod.

#### AN ARRAY OF SUBJECTS

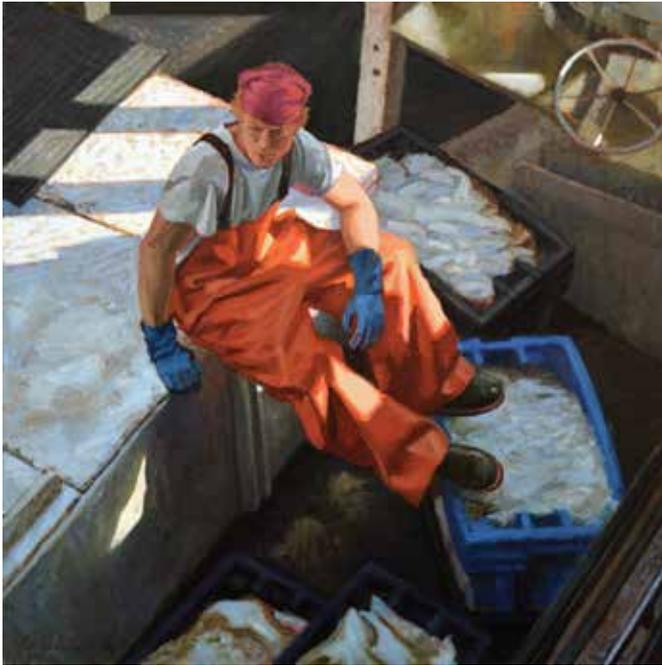
“Painting for me is like a personal journal,” Schulenburg notes, “interpretations of the people, places, and things I experience day to day.” Most straightforward are his Cape Cod landscapes, which, like the land itself, are usually horizontal, presenting us with a vision of shore, water, and sky, occasionally intersected with a vertical element such as a

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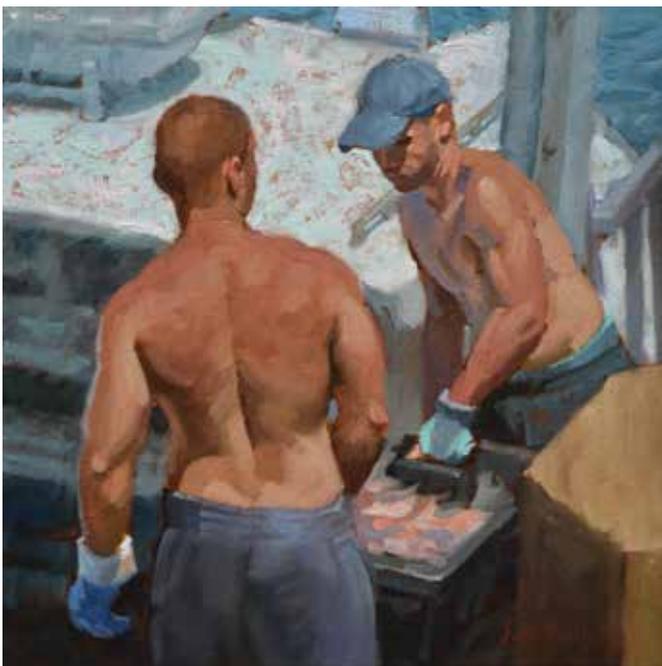
(ABOVE) *First Encounter*, 2020, oil on canvas, 30 x 48 in., private collection ■ (BELOW) *Sun Streaks at Low Tide*, 2020, oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in., Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Massachusetts

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(TOP) *In the Shade of the Pier*, 2018, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in., collection of Jim Stott and Jonathan King ■ (MIDDLE) *Pulling Nets*, 2019, oil on canvas, 28 x 37 in., private collection ■ (BOTTOM) *Two Fishermen*, 2020, oil on canvas, 16 x 16 in., Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Massachusetts



sailboat's mast or a building. In fact, the shoreline along Cape Cod Bay has a completely different character than that facing the Atlantic Ocean, a distinction that locals recognize instantly in his paintings.

Schulenburg is best known for scenes of people working on the waterfront in strong summer sunlight. "I started painting commercial fishermen about 20 years ago," he recalls. "On a gray Cape Cod day, I spotted them in their orange overalls, so colorful against the blue water. I was drawn to the drama and activity at the piers, as well as the opportunity to pursue figurative painting. I usually spend my time at the piers observing, trying not to get in the way. Occasionally I talk with someone who turns out to be a retired fisherman, or just off a boat. I've made several paintings of a young woman named Stephanie Sykes, whom I first saw working a few years ago. [She appears in *Pulling Nets*, illustrated here, and she also works for the Cape Cod Commercial Fisherman's Alliance.] Another fisherman allowed me to board his boat and use it for a photo shoot."

Although these people work in crews as large as six, Schulenburg isolates them one or two at a time, not only to better appreciate their unique poses and gestures, but also to evoke the monumentality we have admired in earlier scenes of brave fisherfolk by Homer, Kent, and others. Usually glimpsed from the pier above, with no horizon to distract us, Schulenburg's heroic forms are surrounded by abstracted shapes that drive our eye back to them. By expertly managing light and shadow, he contrasts the hardness of vessels and equipment with nature's suppleness. "I am drawn to painting the fishermen in part because their work is so foreign to me," Schulenburg adds. "They risk their lives on the open ocean harvesting fish. I paint on dry land, in less volatile conditions."

The artist is also intrigued by these men and women because he knows their way of life is threatened due to environmental factors, overfishing, and foreign competition. Equally under threat are the charming towns and settlements that dot the Cape — the cafes, storefronts, and cottages that Schulenburg paints with affection, yet never sentimentality. Thanks to rigorous zoning ordinances, the region's historic villages are in better shape than many elsewhere, but the battle continues for preservationists and others seeking to retain their authenticity.

Schulenburg is equally well regarded for limpid interior scenes that emphasize the way light falls on floors, walls, and furnishings more than any specific feature. "I like to think of what has happened in these spaces through the years," he admits, and indeed comparatively few artists have so successfully evoked the personalities of empty rooms since the 19th-century Danish master Vilhelm Hammershøi. At other times, Schulenburg populates these rooms with a figure, usually a woman and often his wife. As in all his work, he offers — in his own words — "a narrative quality, but it's a partial narrative. I often find that what is most interesting is what is left unsaid." In the figurative scenes, "a small change in the angle of a head or a tilt of the hips can completely change the emotional quality of a gesture."

Last but not least, Schulenburg paints the streets of New York City without the usual hubbub and away from the usually depicted landmarks: "I look for the overlooked," he says, "for things that are a little unusual." Like Hopper before him, Schulenburg investigates the hard-edged architecture with deft juxtapositions of raking light and planes of color, and with the occasional passerby inserted for scale and interest. Given his love of Cape Cod, some may be surprised to learn Schulenburg depicts the city at all. He explains, "Just as a trip to the beach can be refreshing, going from a rural area to the city can jolt the system and make you see the world through fresh eyes." In a similar spirit, Schulenburg has traveled to — and painted — sites that intrigue him in the American Southwest, Mexico, Spain, Italy, and France.

Schulenburg keeps on his artistic toes by mixing up his projects: he might spend one day outdoors painting, sketching, or taking reference photos, and the



(LEFT) *Sanctuary*, 2019, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in., Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Massachusetts ■ (BOTTOM) *Time Off*, 2020, oil on canvas, 26 x 40 in., Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Massachusetts

next day undertaking an interior scene. His genres may be wide-ranging, yet they always reflect his fascination with capturing light. Inevitably it is the scene's key component, complemented by a sophisticated usage of negative shapes, management of warm and cool color, and lively brushwork often involving the impasto brush and palette knife.

Even with explicitly New England-based scenes depicting lobstermen or Provincetown, Schulenburg somehow never produces

work that feels parochial, instead transcending the here-and-now to become universal. Much of this has to do with the mood he endows — more contemplative than lonely, a bit mysterious without being self-consciously cryptic — and with what Salmagundi Club of New York chairman Nicholas Dawes calls his “ability to make the commonplace extraordinary.”

#### A SENSE OF PLACE

Cape Cod features prominently in Schulenburg's art, and it has featured powerfully in his life. “When I was about 6,” he remembers, “my family started vacationing on Cape Cod for two weeks every summer. Those weeks were like heaven to me, and I fell in love with the seashore and the ‘Cape light.’ Every summer we would visit Provincetown, where I would see artists drawing and

painting, and galleries up and down Commercial Street. I saw Cape Cod as a place where living as an artist wouldn't be just a fantasy, but a lifestyle.”

In 1899 Charles Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, and artists have been flocking there ever since. Hawthorne himself painted local fishermen and residents of Provincetown, so “I suppose I am carrying on that tradition,” Schulenburg





*Sunrise in Brooklyn*, 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in., Addison Art Gallery, Orleans, Massachusetts

Stephanie Sykes has posed there, wearing her orange overalls and surrounded by fishing gear.) Schulenburg revels in the camaraderie, and notes that during the pandemic, he has been welcoming only a few colleagues to his studio but dozens more via Zoom from as far away as California and Britain. As a proud Cape Codder, Schulenburg helped to bring 18 leading artists from across the U.S. to paint together in Provincetown in 2010, and he has helped organize additional group trips to places such as Port Clyde (Maine) and San Miguel de Allende (Mexico).

Many of Schulenburg's collectors reside in Cape Cod or New York City, though plenty more have no direct connection with either place, living as far afield as Asia. He confides, "I find that when I really connect with my subject, people viewing my work will sense that and connect as well. It's always an honor when people appreciate my work and want to have it in their homes." Among his admirers are Jim Stott and Jonathan King of Kittery Point, Maine, who founded Stonewall

muses. "I find inspiration in Hawthorne's gritty portrayal of local working people. I also admire the figurative work of Edwin Dickinson (1891–1978), who was more of a tonalist. I love the subtlety of color as well as the compressed space and flattened perspective he often used, which is similar to the overhead views in some of my fisherman paintings. In the mid-20th century, Henry Hensche (1899–1992) taught in Provincetown and introduced a more colorist approach to painting. I love his vibrant use of colors. My work probably falls somewhere between Hawthorne and Hensche — sometimes more colorful and sometimes more tonalist. It depends on the painting."

Not surprisingly, Schulenburg's art — especially his cityscapes and townscapes — is often compared to that of Edward Hopper, who summered in Truro near Provincetown. "He's so inspiring because there's a real simplicity to his compositions," Schulenburg enthuses. "And even though you associate his work with realism, he didn't get caught up in detail; so much of his power was implied rather than rendered." The same can be said of Schulenburg's work, which is far more about big shapes than about exacting precision.

As director of art at the Cape Cod Museum of Art, Benton Jones is in prime position to observe, "Through Paul Schulenburg's complete devotion to his work and his caring, personal relationships with the expansive community of artists here, his studio has become a lightning rod for creativity." Indeed, he has painted portraits of leading Provincetown artists (partly inspired by Hawthorne's simplified "mud head" portraits), and since 2008 he has hosted a weekly model-pose at which colleagues can draw and paint together. (Even

Kitchen, a leading national producer of specialty foods. They own not only *In the Shade of the Pier* (illustrated here), but also a larger version of *By the Pier*, which appears on the cover of Schulenburg's monograph. Dear friends of theirs purchased *By the Pier* from a gallery and arranged for it to be delivered to Stott and King's home because their own house was being renovated. It was agreed that one couple or the other would acquire it, and once they saw it hanging on their own wall, Stott and King decided it must stay.

In view of Schulenburg's talent, such enthusiasm is understandable. In fact, it's likely that Stott and King experienced a form of the awakening the artist has written about: "There's a line you can cross into another realm, where the painting seems to take on a life of its own. I don't mean like photorealism, but rather having an indefinable spark of something that takes it one step beyond the ordinary. Like one of Cézanne's still life paintings, it becomes almost a living being. That's when the artist falls in love and hopefully the collector does as well. That's what I strive for." ●

**Information:** Schulenburg is represented by Addison Art Gallery (Orleans, Massachusetts); George Billis Gallery (New York and Los Angeles), and Art Essex Gallery (Essex, Connecticut).

**PETER TRIPPI** is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.