

P|E|M connections

Peabody Essex Museum

November | December 2008



From the director



COVER: *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* (detail), 1866, William Bradford (1823–1892). Oil on canvas, 72½ x 120½ inches. Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum. On view in *To the Ends of the Earth, Painting the Polar Landscape*.

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Polar Attractions, in PEM's interactive Art & Nature Center, features games, artwork and hands-on activities to engage families and visitors of all ages. Find more ways to get involved with polar environments during our Atrium Alive weekend of special programs in November. See pages 12 through 15 for details. Louise Michaud, Photographer.

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In November, discover extreme north and south with a full weekend of special programming, art activities and musical performances inspired by *Polar Attractions* and *To the Ends of the Earth, Painting the Polar Landscape*

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Use this convenient pull-out calendar to plan your visits to PEM and register for programs in November and December

More To Do at PEM16

Winter festival with puppets, gingerbread houses and art-making, plus a members-only breakfast; Art & Nature story times; botanical drawing programs; adult batik

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FULL DISCLOSURE

Autobiographical paintings continue a storytelling tradition

On canvas, she is luminous. Her pale skin glows under a translucent dress as she stands — or does she float? — off the shore of San Francisco Bay. Nearby, a resolute Army officer wearing boxing gloves sits on a rock. An American flag, Native blanket and ceremonial headdress create an intercultural collage on his lap.

The stars of this large-scale painting by Judith Lowry are her parents. During World War II, 17-year-old June Shirley Harrison of Australia met Leonard Lowry, a Native American from California, at a USO dance in Sydney. They exchanged letters for almost four years before June sailed to America to be with her future husband. Judith Lowry was born the following year, in 1948.

Lowry's gift to PEM of *Marine Phoenix*, named after the boat that carried her mother abroad, is an autobiographical tale that brings the Native tradition of storytelling to new audiences. "Judith's painting transforms visitors not only by its aesthetic virtuosity, but also by the story line," says Karen Kramer Russell, associate curator of Native American art. "Her personal, visual narrative captures the moment her immigrant mother meets her remarkable father — a story that many people will relate to and be touched by." As well, the work is testament to PEM's commitment to bridging the artistic developments of today's emerging and established Native artists with the works of historic art already in the collection.

"I paint to communicate what I know about my family and how their experiences have shaped us as a family and a culture," Lowry says. The story is about past and future — "how my brother and I got here and what is happening in the world right now."

Lowry says that she likes that she can "walk" into the canvas when she's working on it. "The characters are as big as I am." The large paintings for which Lowry is known were a practical accommodation to her imperfect eyesight. But they are also a way to place her characters on a stage that invites artist and viewer into the artwork. Like actors in their own family drama, the subjects of *Marine Phoenix* occupy the foreground, with the San Francisco skyline serving as scenery. Their bodies are flat — illustrative of what Lowry calls her storybook style — but pop off the canvas because of the contrast in color and purposeful application of paint. She blends realism with imagination through theatrical lighting, bold colors and distinctive composition.

Lowry describes her figures as naïve, painted the way she would see them if she were still 14. "Painting in this style is like going back to my inner child. She is inspired by the work of fellow Maidu artists Frank Day and the late Harry Fonseca and draws symbolism from traditions within her Native community. Lowry feels a certain kinship, as well, with Italian Renaissance artists such as Fra Angelico, Giotto and Botticelli, who got to define their own style and painted the light wherever they wanted to."



Marine Phoenix, 1999, Judith Lowry, Mountain Maidu/Hamowi Pit River/Washo. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 94 inches. Gift of the artist. Photo by Walter Silver.

In *Marine Phoenix*, the full moon lights her mother's way across the sea. The moon is also a symbol of female fertility and the sign of Lowry's zodiac planet. The crabs — the zodiac sign of Cancer — in the foreground are the poison apple in Eve's Eden. "My mother died of lung cancer and my father died of the effects of that, too. The crabs, blue and jewel-like, are chaotic, unhappy symbols. Their sharpness is meant to disturb the harmony of the painting."

Lowry's father, named after the famous boxer Benny Leonard, was himself a Golden Gloves winner and lifelong boxer. A tradition bearer in his Maidu community, Leonard Lowry was a career military officer — one of the most decorated Native American soldiers of World War II.

June Shirley Harrison, a third-generation Australian, had worked as a nurse and in the army before sailing to America. "My mom was a real beautiful girl," Lowry says. "She sewed all of her clothes and, later, mine. She loved Hollywood movies, and especially admired designer Edith Head. When I painted my mother, I wanted to dress her in something I think she would have designed herself. I also put a reference to Hollywood in her hair, a cute little water crown like swimmer/actress Esther Williams would have worn."

Lowry's parents divorced when she was a senior in high school, but they remained good friends and good parents. "Theirs was a legendary love story in a way," says Lowry, one that had to grapple with wartime strife, racial discrimination and post-traumatic stress.

Judith Lowry decided to gift some of her work in her personal collection when she turned 60 and wanted to simplify her life. "It was like putting a child up for adoption. I wanted to make sure they all went to good homes." Lowry chose PEM because of the ongoing support she received from curators and staff, and because of the museum's origins. *Marine Phoenix*, after all, has strong connections to port cities and maritime art.

Marine Phoenix joins three other Lowry paintings in PEM's Native American art collection. *Shopping* is on view in *All of My Life: Contemporary Works by Native American Artists*. *American Tobacco Girl* and *My Aunt Viola* are on view in *Intersections, Native American Art in a New Light*. *Marine Phoenix* will be on view this spring.