

Offhand Showplace For the Avant-Garde

By ANN WILSON LLOYD

AROUND here cherrystone is a clam of a certain size, while Cherry Stone is a gallery of a certain distinction. It was started 30 years ago by two retired schoolteachers, Sally Nerber and Lizzie Upham, who "sort of stumbled into being art dealers," as Ms. Nerber, the surviving partner, puts it.

And yet, early on, the gallery merged high art with laid-back eccentricity, presenting internationally known avant-garde artists in an intimate, offbeat storefront building. The openings were pastoral salons, attended by the outer Cape's most illustrious summer and year-round residents. Artists, writers, composers and architects mingled on the lawn and wandered through the large flower and vegetable garden that Ms. Nerber planted each year on the gallery's grounds. (Ms. Nerber, now 85, still holds these bi-weekly summer affairs, which have been relocated on a smaller scale to the backyard of her home.)

Ms. Nerber says it was her partner who was the impetus behind the gallery. Upham was a ceramic sculptor who had attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, worked as a museum curator and taught art in prep school. "We rented this old shop building as a studio for Lizzie," Ms. Nerber said. "It had big storefront windows and nice north light. As we cleaned it out, it

Ann Wilson Lloyd's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about the artist Mona Hatoum.

An unpretentious, out-of-the-way gallery on Cape Cod has attracted a galaxy of Modernists.

started looking more and more like an art gallery."

At first, back-room deals generated cash flow — though not through the usual secondary art market of brokered deals among collectors or museums. "The rear of the building had been a kind of stable," Ms. Nerber said. "We turned it into an antique and junk shop called the Junk Collaborative."

With beginners' chutzpah, they aimed high to fill their gallery roster. Early headliners were Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Myron Stout and Jack Tworikov. "People kept asking us, 'How do you get these artists?'" Ms. Nerber said. "Mostly we just called them up. One day I came across Motherwell in the phone book. I said to Lizzie, 'You'll never believe who lives in Provincetown — Robert Motherwell.' She said, 'Oh, I'd love to get him for the gallery.' So we called him, and he said sure. Before that, we got Jack Tworikov the same way. He was a bit shocked, but he said yes, too."

Mr. Rauschenberg, they discovered, lived on Captiva Island in Florida, where the women had a winter getaway. "We tried seeing him there, but someone was always running interference," Ms. Nerber said.



Stephen Rose for The New York Times

Sally Nerber, an art dealer, in the Cherry Stone Gallery in Wellfleet, Mass.

Eventually they made contact at a Rauschenberg exhibition in nearby Fort Myers and were directed to his dealer, the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.

Robert Monk, then a Castelli employee, got the call. It happened that Mr. Monk visited Cape Cod most summers. He put together some of the artist's works on paper and, in 1981, delivered them himself. He later organized shows of Mr. Johns and David Hockney for the gallery. Still a friend

and collaborator, Mr. Monk, who now works for the Gagosian Gallery, planned three exhibitions for Cherry Stone this season. One, "Pop by the Sea," a group show scheduled for later this month, will once again feature works by Mr. Rauschenberg and Mr. Johns.

Upham and Ms. Nerber were not without contacts of their own. Ms. Nerber had been a longtime friend of the photographer Berenice Abbott, who gave the gallery her own

work to show as well as photographs by Eugene Atget that Abbott had printed using his original glass negatives. (Abbott had befriended Atget, who was virtually forgotten at the time, in Paris in the 1920's and famously rescued his archives just before he died.)

Gloria Nardin, a Wellfleet photographer and painter who also showed at the gallery, remembers taking Abbott's picture standing in Ms. Nerber's garden at a Cherry Stone opening. Abbott offered to exchange photographs with her, to Ms. Nardin's delight. At another opening, she recalled Upham's sitting with the painter Edwin Dickinson. "They were both wearing those visor caps, and their heads were close together, in deep discussion," she said.

The gallery's first show, in 1971, consisted of paintings by a 23-year-old local artist who had been Upham's high school student. Helen Miranda Wilson, now an established artist, still lives in Wellfleet. "It was my first show, too," Ms. Wilson said. "Lizzie remembered me and called me up. And even though they weren't experienced art dealers, everything went very well. I was very lucky. I always had this first gallery experience as a touchstone."

Timothy Woodman, another Wellfleet artist whose reputation has grown since his first shows at Cherry Stone, said: "It was always classy, but not exclusive. What they cared about was art and artists."

This included the era's experimental art. "Lizzie was intrigued with video when we started to hear about it," Ms. Nerber said. Howard Wise, the founder of Electronic Arts Intermix, one of the first video distributors, also summered in Wellfleet. In 1976, Upham asked Wise to present a night of "Video Capers," a lecture and survey of video pioneers like Nam June Paik. Barbara Wise, Wise's widow, said her husband had to rent and import electronic equipment for the event, which was well attended. "The gallery was the first on the Cape to show not just local people but important artists like Paik — and also local people who were often well known. We met the architect Marcel

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Ms. Nerber said they were "lucky to have so many local artists who also have national, even international, reputations." The partners befriended many of them, like Myron Stout, who rarely showed his work on the Cape or elsewhere. He had a small solo exhibition at the gallery in the late 1970's, a few years before his retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York. Stout's Cherry Stone show was one both Ms. Wilson and Mr. Woodman remember as "world class." Ms. Nerber recalls that Stout's New York dealer, Richard Bellamy, drove the works up in "a very rattletrap truck."

"It worried me," she continued, "considering how valuable Stout's art was, even then. I remember Stout in the gallery hanging his work, and Renate Ponsold, Robert Motherwell's wife, taking pictures of him."

Cherry Stone Gallery stayed at the original site until the early 1980's. The partners tried to buy the building but were prevented by a clouded title. Since then, the gallery has occupied a tiny building next to Ms. Nerber's home. Upham died in 1988, and Ms. Nerber decided to continue alone. "I tried to retire one summer a few years ago, but I unretired the next," she said. "I'm not the type who can hang around the house."

Now the art gatherings spill into her small but luxuriant backyard garden. At a recent one for the Provincetown sculptor Paul Bowen, Ms. Nerber sat on a lawn chair, chatting with friends. The artist Budd Hopkins, another summer resident and longtime Cherry Stone Gallery devotee, said: "That intimate, salonlike quality is still here. She's not doing the traditional dealer thing, mixing and carrying on. It's almost like she's having a little open house, where people can come in and look at well-selected and delectable small things -- often made by someone you know as a friend. There was never an attempt to want a grander operation. Sally likes to do it her way, as if she's running a restaurant that has only four tables. Those are always the most interesting restaurants."

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