

AND THE SWEETEST SMALLEST OF ALL

Cherrystone clams are famously sweet and small, and the description applies equally well to Wellfleet's Cherry Stone Gallery, a small space with a big heart—not unlike its late co-founder, Sally Nerber, celebrated this summer in a new exhibition called *Sally's Party*.

"She didn't want a memorial," says Brenda Correia, gallery executive director and Nerber's long-time friend and business partner. "We went to a memorial once and she said, 'don't you ever do that to me!' She made me promise it would be a party."

And what a party it is! Works by world-famous artists—most of whom Nerber knew personally—are side-by-side with local and newer artists. Berenice Abbott, Eugene Atget, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, and James Lechay are joined in by guest artist Pasquale Natale, who repurposes old hat blocks... something Nerber would have approved. "Sally would have been happy to have him join our party," says Correia with a smile.

The blend of globally recognized and local artists is typical of the fare offered by the gallery, established by Nerber and her life-partner Lizzie Upham in 1971. Neither woman had a background in exhibiting art, though Upham was a clay artist. "Sally was an accidental gallerist," laughs Correia.

Nerber and Upham met at a party in Connecticut and moved to Weston, Massachusetts, where wild child Upham taught at The Cambridge School. Nerber's beloved older brother Jimmy counseled moving to the Cape, and the women bought a house in 1964. When Nerber decided that Upham needed an art studio, she found a location on Railroad Avenue in Wellfleet, and—in typical Nerber style—spent a year buying jam from the building's owner to gently convince her to rent. When Upham finally saw the place, she said, "This isn't a studio; it's a gallery." And so it became.

Possibly because they weren't part of the establishment, Nerber and Upham did things that no one else would ever think of doing. When Upham learned that Robert Motherwell lived nearby, she secured him for the gallery—by the simple expedient

by Jeannette de Beauvoir

of calling him on the telephone. All these years later, his widow Renate became a major sponsor of the *Sally's Party* exhibition. The Cherry Stone Gallery was Motherwell's only commercial venue (he was part of an artists' cooperative in Provincetown) and he said that he couldn't leave. "They run their gallery," he said, "the way galleries used to be."

"As a gallerist," says Correia, "Sally was a gifted individual who provided a necessary narrative to viewers." Along with Motherwell, Nerber and Upham filled the gallery with names that represented the most avant-garde artists of the time, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Myron Stout, and Jack Tworkov.

They didn't just find artists in the white pages of the telephone book, either. Nerber was a longtime friend of photographer Berenice Abbott, whose work is part of the current exhibition and who gave the gallery her own work to show. "Berry" also gave them Eugene Atget photographs that she'd printed using his original glass negatives; you can see them in the current exhibition.

Nerber had experience



Brenda Correia with Sally Nerber



Some of the works Cherry Stone has represented since 1971 include (l to r): *Flatiron Building, Madison Square* (1938, gelatin silver print, 13" x 10") by Berenice Abbott; *Avenue des Gobelins* (1901, gelatin silver print, 9" x 6.5") by Eugene Atget; *Savarin 2 (Wash and Line)* (1978, lithograph, 26" x 20") by Jasper Johns; and *Bouquet #5 Still Life Blue and Grey* (circa 1990s, oil, 16" x 19") by James Lechay.



gathering creative people around her; she'd had a short-lived marriage to a poet (her friendship with Abbott dated from that time), and in Wellfleet she put on art gatherings, salons for friends and artists alike. "She was a phenomenal cook," remembers Correia. "She was a farm girl, she knew where to find the wild asparagus, she knew what trees grew where. She loved her oysters and clams, and she was great at shucking them."

And she noticed those around her, too. There was a man in Wellfleet then, a man called Flicker ("the town drunk," says Correia) who lived in a house with his horse; Nerber kept him stocked with hot soup to make sure that he ate. Her eye was not just for art, but for the whole of life.

The gallery moved from Railroad Avenue to its current Commercial Street location in the 1980s, and in 1988 Lizzie Upham died. Nerber kept the gallery going on her own for a decade but knew that she needed help.

And then one day Correia, herself a painter, printmaker, and art dealer, simply walked into the gallery. "I just looked around quietly, the way that I usually do," she remembers. "She asked me, 'Have you been here before?' and we started a conversation that lasted three hours." The two women learned that they had something significant in common, having both lost their birth mothers when they were 12. "It was a critical time for a big loss," Correia says. "We saw things alike in many ways. We never really analyzed the history, but it was there. It became clear that we'd be very close." That closeness became official in 2011 when Nerber legally adopted Correia.

In addition, "we shared a philosophy about the gallery," says Correia. "Being excellent at promoting others is a 24/7 job. She was my greatest teacher; I look at our 14 years of collaboration as helping form my outlook on the mission of the gallery." While Nerber was initially interested in exhibiting Correia's work, they only did it once, at the very beginning of the friendship. "We stopped because we had become business partners, and a vanity gallery wasn't the model we wanted. We never even exhibited Lizzie's work."

In 2006 Nerber "suspended" the gallery to retire and travel. Her retirement was in its turn also suspended—so she could put on an exhibit of the fine bookbinding work of Mary Kendall Valentine, whose work she had collected... and who was her mother.

"She left such a large legacy," says Correia. "She served her community as an eternal enthusiast. She had an innate ability to bolster the embodiment of possibilities in people. She made art available to everyday people. She launched careers, supported careers that were already heralded; she recognized artists and brought them together."

She takes a deep breath. "She walked through life," she says, "and embraced whatever she encountered."

Sally's Party continues on exhibit at the Cherry Stone Gallery, 70 East Commercial St., Wellfleet. For more information call 508.246.5486 or visit cherrystonegallery.com.

