

→ BEN & HELEN



Dolly/Molly Phone, 25 x 14 inches



Blue Bird, 73 x 40 inches



This is the Siberian Husky, 73 x 40 inches



I am not a Robot, 73 x 40 inches

An unlikely
collaboration between
a young artist and the
painter he never met

→ By Zohar Gitlis ←



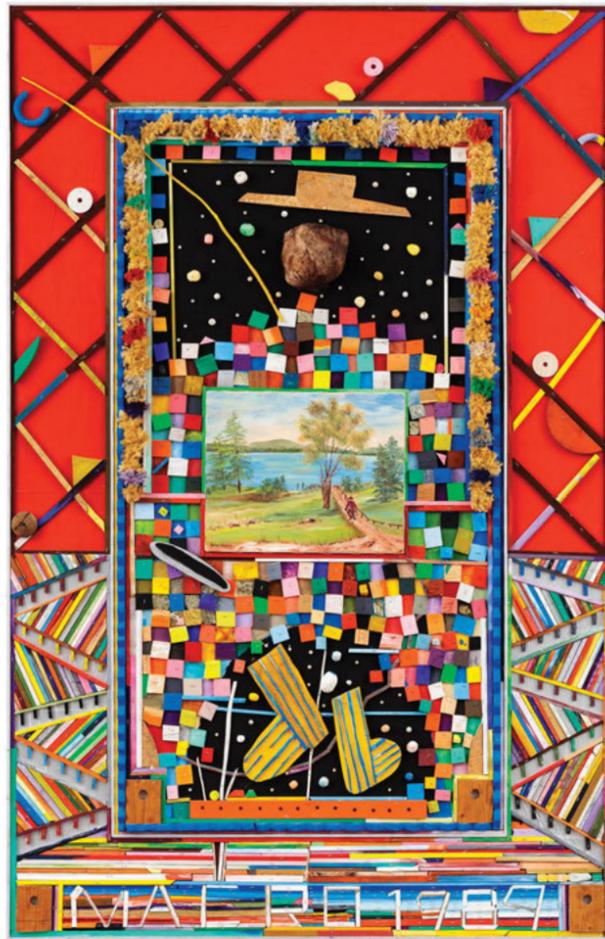
Permanent Guest, 21 x 17 inches

ry from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. On mornings off from his afternoon gig at the Goff-Nelson Memorial Library, in downtown Tupper Lake, he is preparing for an upcoming show at PPOW Gallery, in New York City.

Ben Gocker's studio was built by the original owner of his Tupper Lake residence, the late Helen Macro, a dressmaker and painter. Ben and his wife, Ivy, the library director at Adirondack Experience, in Blue Mountain Lake, moved into Helen's house and studio two years ago. They wanted to leave New York City and buy a home in a quiet upstate town where they could start a family and Ben could find the space he needed for his art. They were initially dismayed at the lack of affordable options that fit their vision. And then came Helen's house. Despite being a fixer-upper, it was exactly the space they had dreamed of—a small family home with room for Ben to work, thanks to renovations Macro had made for her fabric business and dress shop.

Helen Macro, born Helen Wood, grew up outside of Malone. She married George Macro, an Italian immigrant who first came to Tupper Lake with a road-building crew in 1940. Helen operated Macro's Design Studio from the basement of their home for over 25 years. After

From the Library Window, 94 x 61 inches



→ The ←

whitewashed walls in Ben Gocker's Tupper Lake studio are hung with large wooden boards, each almost entirely covered in small sticks and scrap wood pieces. The sticks, painted with bright pastels and bold matte primaries, have been assembled into intricate and dreamy word-search-game mosaics. There are subtly formed rivers and movements of color dancing behind jumbled letters, somehow calming despite the immediate chaos of the puzzle itself. The words "Flamingo" and "Dianthus" pop from a work in progress. The piece borrows the terms from a puzzle titled "Think Pink" that Gocker found in a children's book.

Outside, falling snow blankets the residential street of modest homes tucked just behind the village center. This is the first time in Gocker's life he has had a studio of his own. It is allowing him the space and flexibility to experiment with scale, to make bigger and more complex work.

The snow and the whitewash of the studio walls heighten the feeling of brightness and warmth that come through Gocker's attention to detail and play. Gocker explains that this new series of work is inspired by word-search games found in those "ephemeral [drugstore] puzzle books that seem like nothing, easy to overlook." His love of words predates his MFA in poet-

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There is a reverence in Ben's work that draws the viewer's attention first to Helen's intimate observations of Tupper Lake.

her retirement, Helen became a prolific painter, and her sewing studio became a painting studio. "I just lose myself when I'm in my studio," she told the *Tupper Lake Free Press* in 1988. "The hours just fly by and it's so nice because I can leave my work and supplies out when it's time to call it a day and it's all there waiting for me the next day." She put hundreds of scenes of Tupper Lake on canvas in her home studio: the waterways, municipal fields and surrounding forests.

When Ben and Ivy moved into Helen's house, shortly after her 2016 death, Ben transported the majority of her paintings to the Goff-Nelson Memorial Library. Stipulated as a gift from Helen, they were put on display and sold to support facility improvements and a new air-conditioning system. Ben bought a few paintings for himself, which would later become the subject matter of his recent exhibition at Denver's David B. Smith Gallery, *A Bright Big Picture in Some Future Machine*.

Although Ben never knew Helen while she was alive, it is apparent that he has developed genuine affection for her. Walking through his and Ivy's home, he points out the bits and pieces of Helen's life that are left behind. Some, like a small red felt heart hanging in his studio, remain untouched; others have been renovated or rearranged since he and Ivy moved in. "Everything about this house just seemed perfect," he says, pointing to a nook in his daughter's room, built in by Helen and George, now a diaper-changing station. At the kitchen table he pauses. "There's a picture I've seen somewhere of Helen, she had a table here, too."

A Bright Big Picture in Some Future Machine features

large-scale assemblages built around Helen's original paintings and found objects from the house. There is a reverence in Ben's work that draws the viewer's attention first to Helen's intimate observations of Tupper Lake, with his work flowing from her core. The resultant pieces are a weaving together of Ben's colorful wooden mosaics and Helen's quiet portraits of the home and town that the two artists share—a transcendental collaboration and an effort to find meaning in one's place.

"Like working collaboratively," says Ben, "there would be elements in her pieces—whether it's the way a bird's beak was pointed or a color that she would use that I would [pick up] in my piece, and it was nice to feel like there was someone else working with me."

In Ben's *From the Library Window*, Helen's painting of the same title sits at the center. Her gaze wanders across the lawn of the Goff-Nelson Library. There is a large tree with yellowing leaves swaying in the wind, a small figure walking towards Raquette Pond, and just a hint of waning afternoon light. Ben surrounds Helen's image with the suggestion of a celestial figure, a comet perhaps, in a hat and boots dancing among stars and colorful wooden blocks. There is a halo of frayed rope that mirrors the yellow leaves on Helen's tree. At the bottom of the piece, "Macro 1989" is spelled out in painted wooden sticks.

Ben and Helen are both untrained artists in the tradition of American folk arts. It is unsurprising that Ben is most inspired by artists with a dedication to creating on their own terms; individuals who, like Helen and himself, have day jobs but choose to interpret the world around them through art-making. Ben met iconic photographer Jamel Shabazz while Shabazz was still working as a corrections officer in Brooklyn and taking photographs in his spare time. As Ben remembers, Shabazz "would walk around with a jug of orange juice, and a chessboard, and his camera, and he would just drink orange juice and play chess with guys, and take photos." Ben's work is driven by a similar urge to archive and understand the world he lives in.

Ben began working part-time at the Goff-Nelson Memorial Library in 2016. He loves public libraries for their "free open space" and sense of possibility. Although he doesn't know precisely why Helen donated her life's work to the library, he has learned from shelving books that she was a frequent patron—her name is still listed on many of the books' check-out cards. One day, going through a pile of de-accessioned books, Ben stumbled on a guidebook about raising Siberian huskies. He noticed that the cover was a striking match to one of Helen's paintings. "She must have checked out this book and made a painting of the cover because it's the exact same thing, and I just came across it, truly by accident." He took the book home and added it to *A Bright Big Picture in Some Future Machine*. In the collection, Ben's piece *This is the Siberian Husky* features Helen's painting, while his *Sibe-* | Continued on page 55

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BEN & HELEN

Continued from page 41

rian Husky incorporates the cover of the de-accessioned library book.

Asked if he believes in ghosts, Ben says he believes in “spirit.” It is not coincidence, he says, that he stumbled across the Siberian husky book at the library. Nor is it a coincidence that he found Helen’s house when he did. To Ben, art is about uncovering and paying attention to the way these moments come together. He likens this to Helen’s practice. “I think that when Helen would sit down and make a painting of Bog River Falls, she was really looking at it. [Looking at] what her attention was telling her about that water, those rocks, the trees, and the place where she lived.” Ben’s attention is following the path between Helen’s practice and his. “This space she built for herself” is giving him the opportunity to try things in his art that he hasn’t been able to do previously—that opportunity is a gift.

“Helen died and left this art behind and no one knew what would become of it. What became of it was more art. And [she] also didn’t know what would become of her gift of her art to the library. What became of that was money to buy a new air-conditioning system.... So I was thinking a lot about what becomes of your life’s work after you die, and you don’t really have control over it and it has a funny and sort of odd life of its own. Who knows?—Helen would probably be happy that the library could get air conditioning.... I’m happy about it.”

Ben is shy about the possibility of showing the work in Tupper Lake. He is worried his respect for Helen’s work might not be as apparent to her friends and neighbors. When Ben and Ivy bought Helen’s house, Macro’s accountant told them Helen would have been thrilled to know that a young family had moved in, and an artist was using her space. Upon purchase, the accountant gave them a painting of Helen’s as a gift. *Our Old Hound Jipper* hangs on the wall of the dining room, unadorned in a simple wooden frame. ▲

Ben Gocker’s upcoming show at PPOW Gallery in New York City is slated for September. See more of his work at www.bengocker.com.

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