

# THE PROVIDENCE ART CLUB

Providence Art Club  
 11 Thomas Street  
 Providence, Rhode Island

I'm on a guided tour of the Providence Art Club, and I'm lost. Guests "are always getting lost in here" quips Gallery Coordinator Kristin Grimm, as she shepherds me through the dark hallway of a period decorated, 18th century foyer leading to a small door. I step through it into a modern corridor flooded with sunshine from a soaring skylight. The back of the 1789 Seril Dodge House forms one wall of the corridor. I blink at the surreal perspective of the historic house's wooden siding, now an interior wall, feeling quite like Alice through the looking glass. Welcome to The Club.

Boasting a proximity to breathtaking waterfront views ranging from Great Gatsby-esque to post-industrial, along with a critical mass of higher education institutions including the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence has long drawn both practitioners and lovers of the arts and letters to its steep-streeted bosom. It's a fit home for the Providence Art Club, one of the oldest known art clubs in the country — second to New York's Salmagundi, but the first to boast six women and an African American among its founding members.

Founded "for art culture" in 1880 by a group of 16 professional artists, amateurs and art collectors to stimulate the appreciation of art in their growing community, the Providence Art Club today has over 600 members, including practicing artists and the art lovers that keep the scene alive.

Occupying a row of four picturesque 18th- and 19th-century homes at the foot of College Hill on Thomas Street, the Club's most recognizable feature is the Fleur-de-Lys house of artist studios. Designed by founding Club member and painter Sydney Burleigh in 1885 with architect Edmund R. Willson, it was named a National Historic Landmark in 1992. Although the youngest of the club's four buildings, the Fleur-de-Lys has an older aura drawn from a Norman yellow and green, half-timber façade studded with decorative stucco friezes and inscriptions. The magical quality of the Fleur de Lys has inspired scores of paintings and even ghost stories, including a mention in early 20th century horror writer H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu."

Dating to 1784, the Deacon Edward Taylor House next door is the oldest surviving structure on Thomas Street. Recently restored as part of a sweeping,

institution-wide renovation championed by Club president Daniel Mechnig, the Deacon Taylor houses nine artist studios including that of painter Anthony Tomaselli, whose popular Providence cityscapes often celebrate the façades of the Club's storied row across four seasons in carefree, impressionistic brush strokes.

New work by Tomaselli, which breaks out of representational Rhode Island to include New York City streetscapes, will be included in "The Elevens," a group show with fellow Club members and naturalistic landscape painters Del-Bourree Bach, Harley Bartlett and Domine Vescera Ragosta, taking place at the Club's Maxwell Mays Gallery April 9-27.

While the Club's two public galleries are programmed with a rotating exhibit roster designed to highlight its over-150 exhibiting artist members, from March 18-April 6, the Maxwell Mays Gallery opens its doors to non-member New England artists in the 14th Annual Fidelity Investments Open Juried Exhibition, exploring the open-ended theme of "Growth." As we went press, over 350 works were under review for inclusion by jurors Diana Gaston of Fidelity Investments; Judith Tannenbaum, curator at RISD Museum of Art; and Steven Zevitas, publisher of "New American Paintings" and owner of Boston's Steven Zevitas Gallery. A panel of community jurors will announce the winners of cash prizes totaling over \$1,700 at the exhibit's opening reception on March 18.

Running concurrently in the Dodge House Gallery will be "Color in Context," a two-person show featuring work by landscape artists Beverly Thomas and

Marion Wilner. In her small abstract acrylic painting "Morning," Thomas breaks away from traditional landscape in an exuberant, tactile exploration of paint and color. Wilner's series of representational monoprints titled "Tuscan Skies" celebrates the ephemeral effects of time and light through the use of shifting forms and colors over a floating picture plane.



Providence Art Club Dining Room.



Dodge House Gallery, Founders Room.



Anthony Tomaselli, *Night at Carnegie*, 2011, oil, 24" x 30".

From April 9-27, the Dodge House Gallery will show "Lost and Found," an exhibit of arboreal paintings by Mimo Gordon Riley and work by celebrated local designer Morris Nathanson.

The Dodge House Gallery glows with a wall of multi-paned windows overlooking Providence's First Baptist Church. Tall sliding pocket doors open onto the Founders Room where members and their guests enjoy tablecloth lunch service in the ambiance of a crackling fireplace and artworks on rotation from the Club's permanent collection. Over the clink of silverware, snippets of conversation form a window into the Ocean State's cultural scene — critiques of a local theatre performance, musings on color choices, reflections on a recent Members' Night program. The latter is a throwback to the founding club members' storied "Friday Knights" social nights, and are held every few weeks as a dinner program featuring distinguished guest speakers, film screenings or demonstrations.

Executive Chef Drew Yerich keeps members and their lucky guests well-fed with mouthwatering menus of locally inspired dishes like Potato Crusted Cod and Grilled Pear and Chestnut Chicken. In Rhode Island, the culinary arts are a bona fide art medium and the Club has its card on the table.

Lunchtime and cocktails continue in the dining room of the 1790 Obadiah Brown "Club House" next door, along with a beloved club tradition. The unmarked silhouette profiles of former (and some present) Club members



Del-Bourree Bach, *Homesteaders*, acrylic, 2011.

march across lamp-lit plaster walls lined with dark wooden panels and old pewter beer steins. In paying respect to the details, the Club preserves a continuity with its past as it toasts to a successful future.

Membership in the Providence Art Club is designed for persons interested in art culture and is awarded by nomination. Exhibitions at the Maxwell Mays and Dodge House Galleries are free and open to the public.

Meredith Cutler

Photograph by Lemmy Rumpier, Design by Kenneth J. Carpenter

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379 Atwells Ave. Providence, RI

www.chabotgallery.com chris@chabotgallery.com 401-432-7783