

# REFINED TECHNIQUE: TWO GUILD OF BOSTON ARTIST MEMBERS EXHIBIT AT THE BIRTHPLACE OF JAMES MACNEILL WHISTLER

Mary Minifie & Robert Douglas  
Hunter

Whistler House Museum of Art  
243 Worthen Street  
Lowell, Massachusetts

Through July 21

Let your eyes taste the fruits of two artists' painstaking, life-long pursuit — the fixing of persona, landscape and object still-life on canvas through the teachings of classical realist painting. In an age of mass-market digital imaging and instant gratification, the Guild of Boston Artists steadfastly argue through virtue of their actions (and sheer collectibility) that their "old-school" model can still be relevant today.

Mary Minifie is best known for her award-winning portraiture, with commissions including the Boston Ballet and the National Cathedral in Washington. Robert Douglas Hunter is famed for pristine still-lifes, carefully composed in his Boston studio from a well-studied collection of objects. Affectionately known as the "Dean of The Boston School," Hunter served as president of the Guild of Boston Artists from 1973-1978. While not a brick and mortar institution, the "Boston School" label is loosely applied to regional realist painters trained by masters whose techniques were derived from R.H. Ives Gammell's (1893-1981) adaptation of French atelier instruction.

Of the Boston School artists: "We are



Mary Minifie, *Stephanie*, oil.

looking for the Big Atmospheric Effects," explained Minifie via phone. "Working from the 'big drawing'... the biggest effects and color relationships, down to the details ... almost like a sculptor would work from a block of clay."

Hunter's still-lifes will grab your eyes and keep them hostage. Depictions of stoneware, glass, copper and brass vessels from his beloved collection breathe like living beings on subtle grounds of varied color. A token object from the natural world ties together each painstakingly arranged composition — the tawny crimson of sumac, the coral blush of a pink lady apple, the dry sepia of a pinecone.

"Arrangement with a Demijohn No. 3" features a seductively shaped, turquoise demijohn casting its soft-shouldered shadow. In response, the watery warm reflection of a brass bowl, tarnished on the outside, yet finely polished within, sings a high note up the demijohn's cool, curving side. This brass bowl makes a repeat appearance in "Warm Analogous No.3," taking on a much different demeanor when paired with earthy stoneware jugs and a humble Bosc pear. Hunter's objects pose for his compositions like old family friends — donning moods and personalities according to their company.

Hunter's landscapes, featuring pastoral sites from Boston's surrounds, have a misty, atmospheric quality. Playful, bright dabs of paint break otherwise vaporous surfaces. An autumn mist silvers the air of "From the Inn at Castle Hill No. 2," depicting Ipswich's Crane Estate marshland at low tide. The air and atmosphere are glowing, quiet. I can almost smell the moist, salty air.

Two still-lifes by Mary Minifie confront Hunter's Zen-like subtlety of composition. "Peonies" play off the luxurious textures of satin and velvet, boasting energetic, directional brushstrokes of brash fuchsia and bridal ivory. Her likewise vibrant, yet smoothly rendered floral still-life, "The Chinese Cloth," reads with near-photographic perfection, with fine grains of flower pollen distinct on a teal tablecloth.

Minifie's portrait commission of four siblings, individually painted from her own source photographs taken over some years, capture flaxen-haired toddlers enjoying their pastel-hued beach toys among the rocks and shells of a Cape Cod shoreline. "Christine" has the dimpled arms of a cupie doll. Pigtailed "Stephanie" sports a rainbow halter bikini. "John" looks surprised, caught in the act. Innocence and youth, frozen in time — a Kodachrome vision



Robert Douglas Hunter, *Arrangement with a Demijohn No.3*, oil.

of infancy's fleeting moments — yet each young subject, posed just left or right of center, betrays a stiff, observed look that is slightly discomfiting.

For anyone interested in applied realist painting by contemporary artists, this show is worth a trip, differing from a visit to the Guild's own Newbury Street gallery in that here, the work is juxtaposed against a specific historical backdrop — the Whistler House Museum's permanent collection of late 19th and early 20th century American representational art.

| Meredith Cutler