

East Meets West

An artist couple finds inspiration in island living



Artist Bo Bartlett in his summer studio (top) on remote Wheaton Island surrounded by recent paintings depicting his favorite model and muse, his wife, Betsy Eby.

Located over twenty miles offshore, Wheaton Island's nearest neighbor is Matinicus. The three original buildings on the island are known as "Still Point" and now serve as Bartlett and Eby's home and studios.

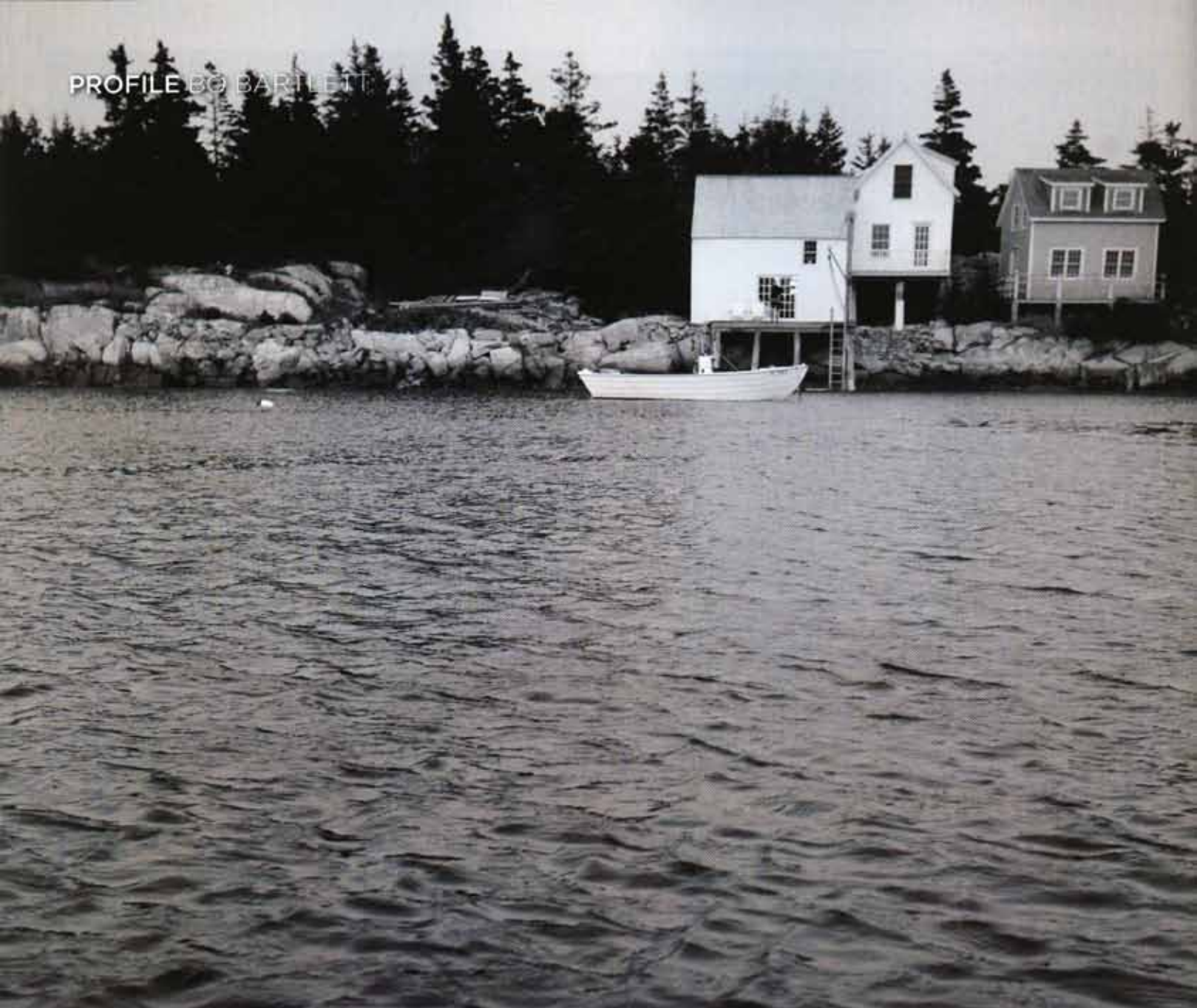
PROFILE BO BARTLETT

by Suzette McAvoy

Whether it was providence, luck, or a simple stroke of good fortune that brought them together, artists Bo Bartlett and Betsy Eby seem destined to meet. Six years ago, they were introduced at the opening reception for Bo's retrospective exhibition at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. After months of "being pen pals" and undertaking several cross-country visits—she to Maine, he to the Northwest—they started making those trips together. Today, the artists divide their time between homes and studios on both coasts.

As a couple, Bartlett and Eby complement each other perfectly. They provide inspiration and support for each other's art, and both share a passionate enthusiasm for living and working surrounded by nature. From June to October, they live on Wheaton Island, a small private island near Matinicus, some twenty miles out to sea. For the remainder of the year, they live on Vashon Island in Puget Sound.

In the summer of 2007, the couple married



on Wheaton Island, Bo commemorated the occasion in a large painting titled *The Triumph of Romance*. In the painting, Betsy resembles a graceful swan as she poses in her white, feathered wedding gown on a rock by the moonlit shore. "Living on an island is like having a giant moat around you," says Bo. "For the most part we appreciate our privacy." Betsy seconds her husband's observation. "It's a very intimate life," she says. "There is an intentional quality that you live by on an island."

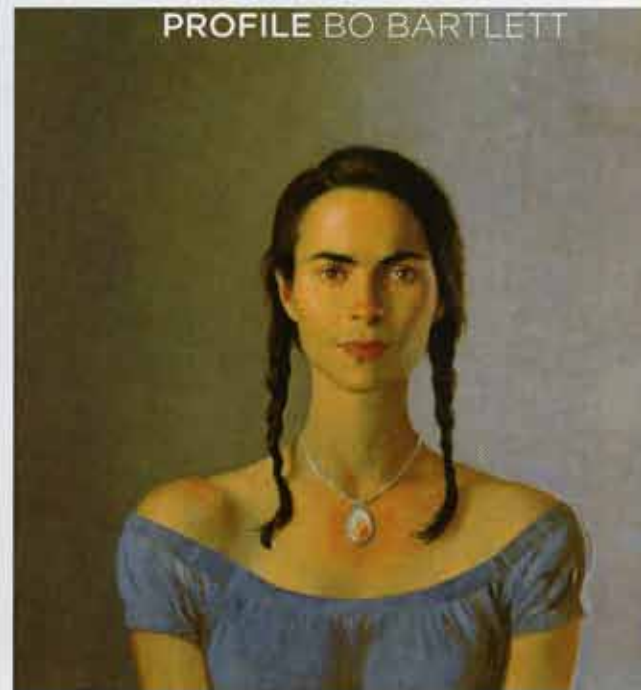
Betsy was born in the small coastal town of Seaside, Oregon, where her love for living close to nature was nurtured. During college at the University of Oregon, she studied art and antiquities, and also trained as a classical pianist. Her lyrical, abstract paintings can be viewed as musical equivalencies. Richly layered with calligraphic markings, they reflect her deep appreciation for Asian art and culture, and for the work of Northwest artists such as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves.

In contrast, Bo grew up in Georgia, and studied figure and representational painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and later in Florence, Italy. His aesthetic viewpoint looks to the European tradition and the American realist painters—Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Edward Hopper, and especially his close friend and mentor, Andrew Wyeth.

Bo met Wyeth shortly after Bo graduated from New York University's film school in 1986, when Betsy Wyeth offered him the job of making a documentary film about her husband's life and work. For the next five years, Bo spent nearly every day with the Wyeths. "Making the film, *Snow Hill*," he says, "gave me the opportunity to learn from Andrew. It allowed me the opportunity to learn why he painted, and to ask him what motivated him and how he stayed motivated. The process of making the film opened a door to my own life and my own path."

In the summer of 1995, Betsy Wyeth invited Bo to spend the summer painting at the family's home on Benner Island, off the coast of Port Clyde. "It was one of those perfectly clear days when you can see all the islands in the bay," Bo recalls. "Betsy was naming them off and when she came to Matinicus, she said, 'You don't want to go there.' Well, of course, then I did want to. So the next day I got a lobsterman to take me out, and I loved it—it was so wild and ungentrified."

The following summer, Bo bought Wheaton Island, which is "within skipping-stone distance" of Matinicus, from a woman from Boston. She had inherited it from her grandfather, who never returned to the island after his wife's death in the early 1960s. "The buildings were completely dilapidated, there were sheep in the house, no one else wanted it—but



Bartlett finds the isolation and quietude of island life conducive to the creation of his art; here he works on a portrait of Betsy, titled *The Gatherer* (top, left); Bo Bartlett, *Sweetness*, 2008, oil on panel (top, right).

A native of the Northwest, Betsy Eby makes lyrical, calligraphic artwork (bottom, right) reflective of her deep appreciation for Asian art and culture and the work of artists such as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves.

Betsy Eby, *Oh Ophelia*, 2010 (above); Eby is a trained classical pianist and her close connection with music carries over to her art: "I strive for my paintings to carry a viewer into a visual symphony, or impromptu, or bagatelle—depending on the piece."

"I've always loved that sort of thing," says Bo.

The sixteen-acre island originally had eight buildings, including an enormous barn. But by the time the property came on the market, all but three of the structures had collapsed. Bo restored those still standing, and they now serve as the couple's house and studios. The cluster of small white buildings hugs the island's rocky shore, which Bo named "Still Point" because its side of the island is calm and protected from the wind. The island's other side is known as "the Portugal side" because it faces the open sea.

"For years, there was a large rock on the beach on the Portugal side that I used as a stepping stone," says Bo. "The rock had always been loose, but I never bothered to do anything about it. But on Betsy's first trip to the island, she stepped onto the rock and, discovering that it was loose, reached around for a good-sized stone and jammed it under there. In two seconds she had completely fixed it and it's been steady ever since. That's the moment I knew she was the girl for me."

Since her first visit, Betsy has continued making improvements to the island, starting with a new roof for the house. "We had been sleeping on a mattress on the floor with a bucket next to us that we had to move strategically every time it rained," she says. "I don't think it would have ever occurred to Bo to get a new roof, he would have just kept moving the bucket."



Bartlett on Wheaton's dock; the artist says the island has "the most pure light I've ever had the opportunity to live in and work under."

Betsy added a propane-fueled refrigerator next, and two years ago "Bo got me running water for my birthday." For the past four years, she has cultivated a garden in the center of the island—"the only place that isn't rock"—in order to have a supply of fresh vegetables. "Although nothing really grows well out here," she says, "with the exception of kale, which fortunately I love."

With only an outhouse and limited electricity, life on Wheaton Island remains spartan. But for Bartlett and Eby, the island's simplicity and isolation provide an environment conducive to the creation of art. "We live with the rhythm of the day," says Bo. "We rise early with the sun, we paint, we take an evening walk. It's a pretty monastic life out there." Betsy agrees. "It's a painting retreat for both of us, a release from the business demands of our careers. It's the time we carve out of every year just to paint." **MH+D**

AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT WORK BY BO BARTLETT WILL BE ON VIEW AT DOWLING WALSH GALLERY IN ROCKLAND FROM JULY 2 TO JULY 31, WITH AN ARTIST TALK AND RECEPTION ON SATURDAY, JULY 31, FROM 4 P.M. TO 7 P.M.

For more information, see Resources on page 106.