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The 'Visible Silence' of Marsden Hartley

Documentary focuses on painter's time in Gloucester

By Gail McCarthy
Staff Writer

When Marsden Hartley first came to Gloucester in 1920, he found a modest boarding house at One Eastern Point Road. Not long after, he would discover the wonder of Cape Ann's interior called Dogtown, a wild expanse that would later inspire both artwork and prose.

The life of Hartley (1877-1943), who is considered a father of American Modernism, will be featured in a new documentary, which will make its debut here next Thursday. The screening takes place at Cape Ann Community Cinema program at Gloucester Stage Company at 7:15 p.m.

Hartley, who lived a solitary life with no real fixed address, struggled to survive. But his posthumous popularity continues to grow.

At an auction last May, his 1915 oil painting titled "Lighthouse" set a record when it sold for \$6.31 million at Christie's in New York. But for Connecticut-based filmmaker Michael Maglaras, the artist's life is not about setting records.

"We are on a crusade to bring Hartley to life, and to inspire others to take pride in our collective American art experience," Maglaras said in a phone interview. "The combination of a great painter and a wonderful writer is not one you find all the time — and Hartley was both. He was not only an important painter, he was a fine poet and fine writer, an essayist, a diarist, and he left a legacy of written work."

Maglaras, who is touring with the documentary, feels this noted artist deserves a documentary all his own to illuminate his work. The piece is titled "Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet." The film features 43 paintings and sketches as well as photographs throughout his life.

Hartley traveled the world in search of remote and forbidding landscapes. But a critical period for Hartley was his stay in Gloucester, where he was struck by the boulder-strewn forests and meadows of Dogtown, which covers more than 3,000 acres of land. He returned to Gloucester in 1931.

"The two periods in Hartley's creative life, first in 1920 and then again in 1931, when he went to Gloucester and to Cape Ann to paint, left us some of the most wonderful and exciting work of Hartley's career," said Maglaras. "Hartley fell in love with the area."

Hartley described Dogtown in his writing as "... a sense of eeriness pervades all the place; the white ghosts of those huge boulders stand like sentinels guarding nothing but space."

"Dogtown became for him this magical, incredible place," said Maglaras. "He wrote to Alfred Stieglitz and others that he found this mystical place called Dogtown. In a letter he wrote to his niece, he called the place 'majestically lovely' and a cross between Easter Island and Stonehenge. He wrote a poem titled 'Soliloquy' in Dogtown. But what's important is he came out of these two trips to Gloucester with a ton of sketches that in later years he painted.

"There are at least 18-22 Dogtown canvases," Maglaras said, "some which are among his best work."

This was not the filmmaker's first work about Hartley, who was born in Lewiston, Maine.

In 2005, Maglaras released a film titled "Cleophas and His Own." Maglaras, a former opera singer, and his wife, Terri Templeton, founded a company called 217 Films in 2003 for the express purpose of making a film about Hartley's epic narrative of love and loss in the North Atlantic.

Peggy Parsons, director of film at the National Gallery of Art, said in a review that the Cleophas film "holds the viewer spellbound from start to finish."

Now Maglaras' latest film, "Visible Silence," will be screened at the National Gallery in Washington D.C. this summer.

The title of the new film takes its name from a line in a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in which he describes "visible silence."

"(Rossetti) describes a silence so profoundly still that it becomes visible and I get that feeling when I look at some of Hartley's paintings. The stillness resonates from the canvas. There's a calm, magnificent force that comes from his painting," said Maglaras.

The filmmaker said he admired Hartley for myriad reasons.

"In Hartley, you have a unique American genius, someone who is self taught, someone who is a magnificent painter. Here is someone who was very much true to himself. He was gay at a time when you couldn't let anyone know about it. It's part of his mystique," said Maglaras. "He was an outsider, a loner and a creative genius, and an example of how you stick to who you truly are in spite of the circumstances."

A section of "Visible Silence" is devoted to an important early painting of Hartley titled "Carnival of Autumn," which is in the permanent collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Art. Also featured is the painting "Summer, Sea, Window, Red Curtain" from the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover. Maine Governor John E. Baldacci proclaimed Marsden Hartley Day when the world premiere of this film was held last year in Lewiston.

Robert Newton, creative director of Cape Ann Community Cinema, said the filmmaker is both knowledgeable and passionate about the subject.

"Hartley spent a crucial time in Gloucester as evidenced by his Dogtown series," he said, "and we like to give our viewers the up-close and personal perspective to filmmaking whenever we can."

A free public lecture will take place Feb. 12 at 11:30 a.m. at Montserrat College of Art, Room 201, in Beverly. The lecture is titled "Can you really make a film about a painter?"

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'Visible Silence'

What: The Gloucester debut of the film "Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet"

When: Thursday, Feb. 12 at 7:15 p.m.

Where: Cape Ann Community Cinema at Gloucester Stage, 267 East Main St. in Gloucester. For information, call 978-309-8448 or visit www.massbayfilmproject.org.

A free public lecture will take place Feb. 12 at 11:30 a.m. at Montserrat College of Art, Room 201, in Beverly. The lecture is titled "Can you really make a film about a painter? The making of Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet."