

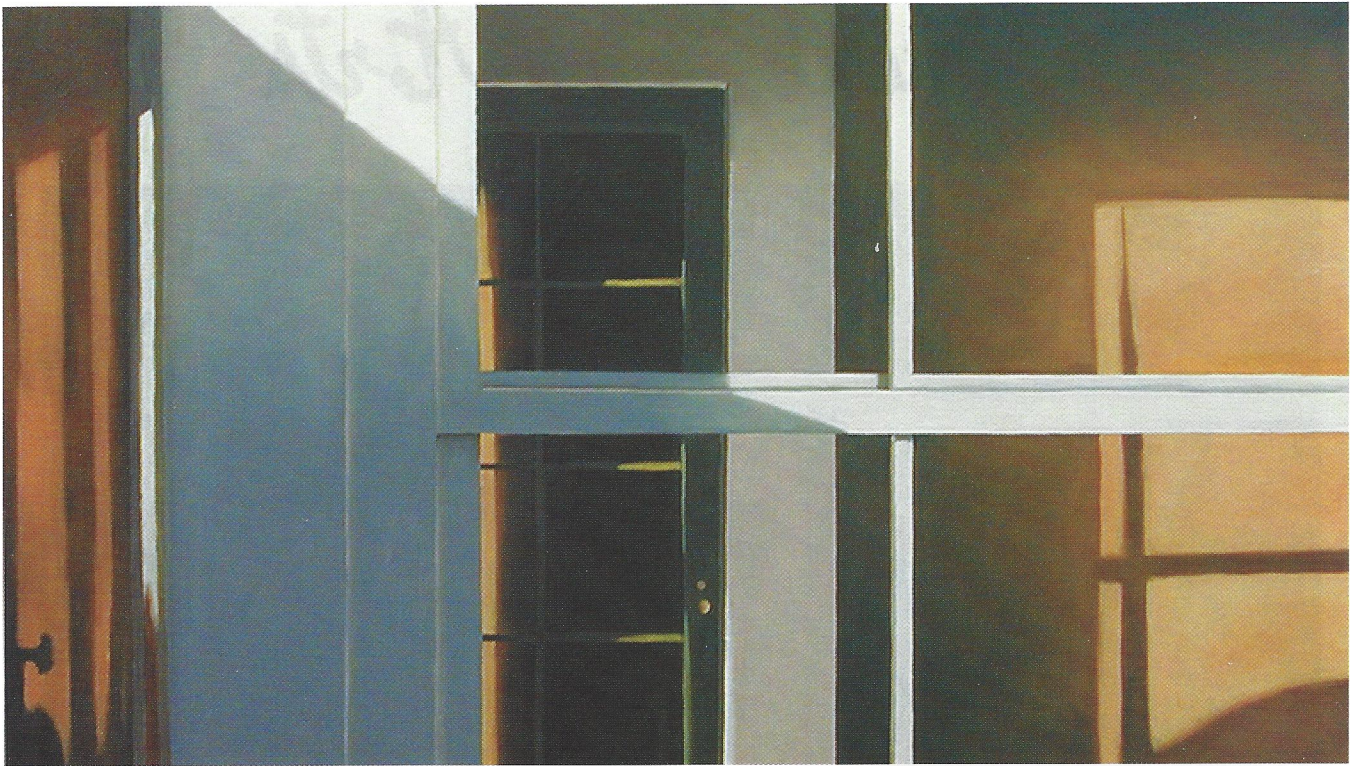


THE PAINTINGS AND PRINTS OF RHODE ISLAND ARTIST
GRETCHEN DOW SIMPSON SHED AN EXTRAORDINARY LIGHT
ON COASTAL NEW ENGLAND AND ITS ARCHITECTURE.

PICTURES OF HOME

TEXT BY LOUIS POSTEL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WEBB CHAPPELL

A good portrait of the artist Gretchen Dow Simpson would capture her appearance: serene posture, luminous skin, architectural cheekbones, a playful glint in the eyes. | One might also be impressed with how closely this portrait suggests her iconic images of houses and boats along our New England coast. Between this hypothetical portrait and Simpson's own work there would be



the same sense of refinement and structure, geometry and light, as well as an element of mystery just outside the frame.

The market for Simpson's work, however, is less than mysterious.

"The problem with Simpson is that she is not prolific" says Bertrand Delacroix, of Axelle Galleries on Newbury Street in Boston as well as in New York's SoHo and San Francisco. "We can never

get enough originals to meet the demand. In my native France they would say they are selling like 'petit pains'—hotcakes you call it here in America. Prices range from \$1,000 to \$2,000 for prints to \$15,000 for oils and up to \$30,000 for large canvasses."

Those prices make them a good investment for the home. Unlike so many of her imitators doing sunny, architec-

turally perfect New England clapboards and barn sides, Simpson has a sensibility that moves beyond mere illustration. A unique artistry is involved, a combination of clear, abstract geometry, mysterious contours and ambiguous details. Many of her paintings suggest a penumbra beyond all the bright planes and angles, something heartfelt and cello-like that could be called New England gothic; Edward Hopper comes to mind, or the novels of John Updike.

Nancy Taylor is a designer, collector and Providence neighbor of Simpson's. "I recommend her to clients," she says, "because I think she is a true artist who allows you to see something you couldn't without her interpretation. People familiar with her work say to me about how some light is touching a certain area on a building, 'That's so Gretchen!'



The play of light on the details of a house—or a bowl of fruit—are characteristic of Simpson's work. That her paintings show an aspect of a subject, only suggesting the whole, lends them an air of mystery.
TOP: *Boathouse Row II* (2003), oil on linen, 30" by 50" BOT-TOM: *Fruit VII* (2003), oil on linen, 36" by 42"



Nancy Taylor, a Providence designer, often recommends Simpson's work to clients. "There's a peacefulness and tranquility" about it, she says. TOP: *Brunswick I* (2003), oil on linen, 36" by 40" BOTTOM: *Block Island VI* (2005), oil on linen, 22" by 24"

It's wonderful when an artist can introduce something to you and share it . . . and allow you to see things you ordinarily wouldn't see: our houses, our boats, the chairs we sit in in summer, even the way we hang our laundry. There's a peacefulness and tranquility."

A Rhode Island School of Design—

trained photographer turned painter, Simpson is perhaps best known as the record-holder for *New Yorker* covers (sixty-three). But don't hold that level of commercial success against her: Simpson is a serious artist, doing serious work. Her last cover was in 1994 when Tina Brown came in as editor and insisted on timely and topical covers. Simpson insisted on the virtues of timelessness. This turned out to be a good thing for Simpson and her status as an artist as opposed to an illustrator. She dropped the magazine cover format, worked more horizontally, went from canvas to linen and started using the rich pigmentation of real oils as opposed to acrylics.

Simpson was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and grew up in Dover. "My feeling of loving architecture came

SIMPSON'S WORK INVOLVES A UNIQUE ARTISTRY, A COMBINATION OF CLEAR, ABSTRACT GEOMETRY, MYSTERIOUS CONTOURS AND AMBIGUOUS DETAILS.

from my grandparents' place on Salter's Point in Massachusetts," she says. "It was right on the water, and there was this feeling of air and space and freedom. I went to RISD but wasn't very dedicated. I left and took a typing course and had about eight different jobs as a secretary.

"I got a job as a tour guide at the New England pavilion of the 1964 World's Fair in New York, but no one wanted to be told what to look at. I got so bored I started taking pictures of the booths and sold them to the managers there."

Her photographs are the basis of her paintings. "That I take the photographs makes the painting authentically mine," she says. Simpson went on to work as a photographer for an ad agency. That was her day job. She thought *New Yorker* covers looked easy and started doing sketches with magic markers of New York windows with flowerpots.

She submitted work to the *New Yorker* for nine years before she finally got in. "It was 1974, Good Friday," she recalls.



“William Shawn was the editor and Lee Lorenz came in as the new art director. I resubmitted everything I had ever sent in. Lorenz said what he liked was the abstract quality of the paintings. I said I didn’t know what to paint, and he said ‘paint what you like’ . . . so I took my Polaroid to a friend’s apartment and shot her hallway.” That became Simpson’s first cover.

“Then I photographed a lot on the coast—Block Island, Nantucket, Cuttyhunk, Nantasket Beach. I like the abstract quality of parts of buildings that are affected by light,” she says. “Living in a tiny New York studio I fantasized a lot about New England, thinking of places I had been, and painting those scenes was a chance to be there in a way.”

Simpson may be a magazine cover champ like Norman Rockwell of *Saturday Evening Post* fame, but sentimentality is where the two New England artists part company. “I loathe any sort of sentimentality,” she says.

Simpson tends to take pictures of houses that have been forgotten. Today she lives in Providence in a 1935 mansard-roof house that may itself be forgettable, or at least not “very fancy,” says the artist. “It’s got dark green-colored walls, ruby and emerald and sapphire—all the jewels—with a yellow kitchen.”

She’s most excited about her new, renovated studio in Pawtucket, once a donut shop and then a tool store. It’s here that she plans to keep up with the increasing demand for her work, popular for being “crisp and sunny,” to paraphrase a review in *Art News*, but also because of something else, something harder to define and a little mysterious, or as designer Nancy Taylor’s clients would say, “so Gretchen!” **NEH**

EDITOR’S NOTE To see Gretchen Dow Simpson’s work and for information on upcoming exhibits, see www.gretchendowsimpson.com.

Much of Simpson’s work illustrates her fascination for the abstract quality that building details take on in different light. TOP: *Pawtucket II* (2005), oil on linen, 30" by 30" BOT-TOM: *Maine IV* (2004), oil on linen, 30" by 34"