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WORKING ALONE TOGETHER: GERSHON BENJAMIN AND THE CIRCLE OF ARTISTS AROUND MILTON AVERY IN GLOUCESTER IN THE EARLY 1930s LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

This lecture and slideshow by Lisa Peters, director of research and publications at the Spanierman Gallery in New York from 1985 to 2012, was offered at the Cape Ann Museum to coincide with its exhibition *Gershon Benjamin and his*

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Contemporaries, which ran from November 8, 2008, until January 31, 2009. Many artists were attracted to the unpretentious setting and diverse nature of the arts culture in Gloucester in the early 1900s, and for Gershon Benjamin (1899-1985) and Milton Avery (1885-1965), Cape Ann in the 1930s offered the opportunity for both individual exploration and convivial gathering. Lisa Peters discusses their early careers, artistic development, and contrasting personalities in light of their friendship, and presents the duo as the nucleus of a larger group of whom many went on to play prominent roles in 20th century American art.

Subject list

Benjamin Gershon	T. S. Eliot
Milton Avery	Edward Hopper
John Twachtman	Lisa Peters
Wallace Putnam	Spanierman Gallery
Thomas Nagai	Gloucester Society of Artists
Stuart Davis	European modernism
Mark Rothko	Abstract expressionism
Otto Neumann	Color field painting
Adolph Gottlieb	The Ten
Marsden Hartley	Regionalism

Transcript

John Cunningham 0:05

[Recording started late]...Gershon Benjamin estate and Dick Hayward, the CFO of the Gershon Benjamin Foundation, who are here today with us for this presentation and to see the exhibit upstairs. Also I'd like to recognize Ira Spanierman, Gina Greer and Lisa Peters of the Spanierman Gallery for making this exhibition possible. And I'm also thrilled to announce that the Gershon Benjamin Foundation has made a gift of Gershon Benjamin's works to the museum, which will be added to our collection and be here for a long time for all of our enjoyment. I'd like to introduce the museum's program director, Linda Marshall, who will introduce our speaker. Linda, Thank you.

Linda Marshall 0:54

Hi, everyone, welcome. We're really pleased today to be able to present a lecture by Lisa Peters which is in conjunction with our current exhibition of Gershon Benjamin and his contemporaries. This exhibition will be on view. It's up on our third floor gallery, if you haven't had a chance to visit it yet, through the end of January of 2009. Please also check out quite a beautiful full-color catalog that was produced and published by Spanierman Gallery with a quite comprehensive essay by Lisa Peters. Today's lecture is titled "Working Alone Together: Gershon Benjamin and the Circle of Artists Around Milton Avery in Gloucester in the 1930s." Lisa Peters is Director of Research and Publications for the Spanierman Gallery in New York, and she's currently co-author along with Ira Spanierman of the catalog raisonné on John Twachtman. She's written many exhibition catalogs for museums such as the National Gallery of Art, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Wichita Art Museum. She's also authored articles for the American Art Journal, the American Art Review, and Plein Air Magazine.

2:08

Lisa has lectured and participated in many symposia at museums including the Phoenix Art Museum, Weir Farm Historic Site, Cincinnati Art Museum, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the High Museum of Art, the Florence Griswold Museum, and also New York University, Seattle Art Museum, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She received her PhD in art history from the City University of New York. I do hope you enjoy today's lecture and won't you please join me in welcoming Lisa Peters.

Lisa Peters 2:51

Thank you, Linda. I would like to thank Ronda Faloon, Martha Oakes, John Cunningham and the board of the Cape Ann Museum, and Kermit Birchfield for this opportunity to speak today on the exhibition here at museum. I'm especially glad to speak in Gloucester on the subject of Gloucester; as for almost any period in American art history Gloucester is special. It's impossible not to notice just how many images there are of Gloucester when walking through museums and auction houses throughout the country, and listening to almost any lecture, Gloucester seems to come up. In my own work at Spanierman Gallery Gloucester has figured prominently. In fact, the very first exhibition that I worked on and that I curated for the gallery was a show as far back as 1987 of the work John Twachtman produced during his last summers from 1900 to 1902, which he spent in Gloucester, and at the time I came up here to the museum and worked with Martha Oakes. Thank you. Thank you. (Martha's hiding back there.) Twachtman's death occurred suddenly in his last Gloucester summer when he was 49, and he is buried with a simple grave marker in Gloucester's Oak Grove cemetery. In 1996, we held the exhibition "Painters of Cape Ann: 100 Years in Gloucester and Rockport", for which Karen Quinn, now curator at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and I split up the essays on the different time periods covered. In 2007, the focus of an exhibition the gallery produced in partnership with the Cape Ann Museum was on the art created by Gloucester native Fitz Henry Lane in the mid-19th century in relation to that of his student and copyist Mary Mellon. Many of you had the opportunity to see the show here in the fall of last year. In between a myriad of works by scores of American artists who were lured by Gloucester and had to paint it have come through or

been shown in the gallery, as it seems that almost every American artist worth his salt worked in Gloucester, whether they painted a saltbox or not, such as these are. Gershon Benjamin was no exception.

5:13

Among the papers in the Benjamin Foundation archives is this photograph of Benjamin and his wife Zelda and Milton Avery and his wife Sally, along with the Japanese born artists Thomas Nagai and his wife Paula Rosen, on Gloucester's Good Harbor Beach. Dating possibly from the summer of 1932, the photograph is an exciting find, as it seems to be the earliest known image of Milton and Sally Avery together. And it is especially meaningful as it was in Gloucester that the two met in the summer of 1924. It is thanks to Joan Facey, who is in the audience today, that the Benjamin archives remains intact. Joan met the Benjamins in her childhood when she lived near them in New Jersey. She became a close friend of the couple, perhaps filling the role of the child they never had. As executor of the Benjamins' estate and the chair of the Gershon Benjamin Foundation, she has maintained the works in the archives with a rare stewardship and remarkable care. She has many stories to tell about knowing the Benjamins and spending time with them.

6:14

Having nine full boxes of untouched archival materials arrive at the gallery was like finding King Tut's tomb being opened on one's doorstep. The boxes were like a sealed time capsule. They contain never-studied-before letters, exhibition catalogs, photographs, and other documentation, not only pertaining to Benjamin but also to the context in which he worked. While going through them, we quickly became aware that Benjamin, an unknown to the art world in the past, knew many of the important artists of his time. This list handwritten by Zelda includes both artists with whom he was intimately acquainted and others with whom he exhibited, but it is not complete by any means. And it suggests the many connections that artists of his day had, who in retrospective seem to belong to different worlds. I'd like to point out just a few of the names on the list, including well-known artists such as John Sloan, Arshile Gorky, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and of course, Avery, along with lesser known such as Karl Knaths and Maurice Sievan.

7:21

Nonetheless, it was clearly with Avery that Benjamin formed the strongest artist-to-artist bond. Benjamin was part of Avery's inner circle and the two artists were close throughout their lives together. This is reflected in the many times that they depicted each other as may be seen in these images, on the left a portrait of Avery by Benjamin and on the right a portrait of Benjamin by Avery, and they even looked alike. Here's another pair in which Avery depicted Benjamin with a caricaturish exaggeration that only a friend could get away with, showing Benjamin with an askew tie, slicked hair, and red pursed lips, and Benjamin created a Matisse-like pastel of Avery, sitting with obvious self satisfaction in his favorite chair.

7:59

We were lucky to use the material from the Benjamin archives for our catalog “Over Seven Decades of the Art of Gershon Benjamin”, which accompanied the show at the gallery last March and April. It is the discovery of many images by Benjamin of Gloucester along with the awareness of his place in the art of his time that prompted the idea of bringing the show to Cape Ann, which has come to fruition along with a side exhibition of a group of works by Benjamin's and Avery's contemporaries.

8:30

I have two objectives to this talk. One is to explore the art Avery and Benjamin created in Gloucester and the other is to relate the work they and their circle produced in Gloucester in the early 1930s to the context of Gloucester art and the American art scene at that time. But first, I will look at the careers of Avery and Benjamin, leading up to their time together in Gloucester, which provide some background for their approach to Gloucester.

8:56

Born in upstate New York and raised in East Hartford, Connecticut, Avery came from an old New England family that had once been wealthy but that had decline to their fortunes over the years. Even before the death of his father in 1905, Avery began to work for a living, taking on various construction jobs in local factories. Avery's training in Hartford from 1905 until about 1922, detailed on the screen, followed traditional academic methods that focused on figural rendering. But in about 1919, he began to paint landscapes, working in a style combining Tonalist and Impressionist approaches as may be seen in *Hartford Woods*, where the blue and pink shadows are typically Impressionist, but the way he blended landscape forms into the atmosphere seems more the result of artful construction than plein air observation. In Hartford, Avery drew inspiration from the work of Ernest Lawson, adopting a method like Lawson's of using a palette knife to create shimmering surface effects.

9:53

However, the main influence on Avery during his formative years was very luckily for me the art of Twachtman, which Avery's friends later recalled that he admired greatly and which, due to its modern and abstract qualities, was held in esteem at the time when that of many other American Impressionists was seen as passé. Avery may have learned of Twachtman due to several articles on Twachtman that were published in the years 1919 to 1924. Could Avery have seen the three works by Twachtman that were exhibited from April to November of 1920 at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, as part of a show of the holdings of the New Haven lawyer Burton Mansfield. If he had, perhaps he would have taken notice of Twachtman's *Beach at Squam*, a Gloucester scene in which an Annisquam dune is treated with an aesthetic significance beyond its humble nature, which may have contributed to Avery's desire to see Gloucester for himself, which he did for the first time in the summer of 1920.

10:57

Clearly, at the time, there were many artists' colonies that Avery could have chosen, and Old Lyme, Connecticut, just south of Hartford, had an active colony of American Impressionists that

included Avery's teacher at the Art Society of Hartford. What might have drawn Avery to Gloucester is that it not only had a long-standing reputation as an artists' town, but at the time seemed to be entering a new boom in its art life. Alexander Tucker wrote in the *North Shore Breeze* in 1922 that in the past few years there have been rapid strides in the growth of Gloucester and Cape Ann as an art center, with East Gloucester as the cradle or nest for the majority of painters. In an article in 1923 Frederick Coburn, art critic for the *Boston Herald*, observed that while Gloucester had fallen for awhile off the nation's art map as other colonies were discovered, it was now entering a new era that saw the revival of its fortunes, especially due to new two new art societies that opened that year.

11:47

At the time, he began going to Gloucester, Avery was working in a conservative style, as he seems to have been unaffected by the rise of interest in European Modernist art that occurred after the Armory Show of 1913. This was a show that introduced Cubist, Futurist, and Dada work to American audiences and led to the spread of these influences among American artists. In Gloucester, Avery stayed firmly within the aesthetic of Twachtman, as this painting of 1921 reveals in its closeness to a Gloucester scene by Twachtman. Another work of about 1921 is also close to Twachtman but shows Avery's adoption of a more vibrant palette than was typical for Twachtman in his Gloucester scenes such as this one.

12:37

By 1923, Avery had clearly found a place within the Gloucester art world, as he participated in the first exhibition of the Gloucester Society of Artists, whose art committee was chaired by Stuart Davis. Of the three works Avery showed *Rocks and Surf* (Sorry, I'm a little out of order.) might have been similar to this painting, which is again extremely close to a work by Twachtman and shows his continued method of building up dense layered surfaces. Avery was probably glad of the chance to show his art, which the non-juried organization afforded, and he may have become aware of some of the modern art on view by artists such as the chairman of the organization's art committee, Stuart Davis. The degree to which Avery was working conservatively is clear when the works he was creating are compared with those Davis exhibited in his Gloucester studio in September of 1922 that included these paintings, although it is not at all clear if Avery could have seen this exhibition.

13:42

As mentioned earlier, it was in the summer of 1924 that Avery made the acquaintance of fellow artist Sally Michael. She remembered that they met while they were both sketching on the beach, and he discovered at some point that conveniently she had the room across the hall from his in his rooming house. The two were smitten with each other and he was so much so that he decided to lie about his age. He subtracted from it 14 years, not just a few years, so it seemed that he was only three years older than she was. This subterfuge worked and was not discovered until 1982, when the Whitney Museum was organizing its Avery retrospective. Milton and Sally were married in May of 1926 over the objections of Sally's Orthodox Jewish parents. But contrary to what they might have expected, the two had an extraordinarily

harmonious marriage throughout their lives, as she supported and encouraged him in his art, telling him whenever he had doubts that she refused to be married to a bad artist.

14:50

A year before he married Sally, Avery had moved from Hartford to New York City along with fellow artist Wallace Putnam, with whom Avery had become close in Hartford, where both had worked in construction and exhibited their art in local libraries. In fact, it was Putnam who was clearly the reason for the meeting of Avery and Benjamin.

15:08

The beginning of Benjamin's story, which I'll now turn to, makes it seem unlikely that he and Avery would meet, but their artistic development had several striking similarities. Benjamin was born in a Jewish family in 1899 in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains of Romania. When pogroms swept through Eastern Europe, his family immigrated to Montreal, arriving in 1901 when Benjamin was two. He began the study of art when he was 11 and still in elementary school. At age 14, he pleaded with his father to allow him to quit school and study art full time. His father, after arguing with him, relented, finally agreeing on the condition that Benjamin get a job. He promptly did so, entering an apprenticeship with a photoengraving firm. This was a good choice, as he would work in this trade for most of the rest of his life, making sufficient income from it that he didn't have to support himself from his art. And this is the reason that his works have remained in his estate all these years.

16:07

The degree to which Benjamin's and Avery's early artistic tracks were parallel is reflected in the similarities in figural works each created in 1919. Also like Avery, Benjamin began about the same time to create landscapes in a style influenced by Impressionism and Tonalism, as seen in his *Trees and Twilight*, which he exhibited in Montreal in 1921 and a snow scene at the same time.

16:30

In the summer of 1923, Benjamin made an impulsive decision to move from Montreal to New York. He was joined there by a young actress he had been courting in Montreal named Zelda Cohen, whom he had drawn in 1919 in a work that's in the show. The two were married by the end of the year. Zelda shared Benjamin's desire for him to make good in New York and, like Sally for Milton, she would support and encourage Gershon and his work throughout his life, despite the fact that he made no effort to make a living from it or to achieve prominence. This was clearly true devotion.

17:07

Benjamin's and Avery's stories link up in 1925. It was that year that Benjamin got a job working nights in the art department of the New York Sun. Exactly at the time that Benjamin started at the Sun, Wallace Putnam also began working there in the same position on the same graveyard shift. And for the next 25 years, the two remained at the Sun, where this photograph shows

Benjamin working diligently. Gershon's and Zelda's friendship with Putnam is reflected in this photograph of them vacationing together in the 1920s. And this was the early part of a friendship that would last for them throughout their lives. Putnam was no doubt the liaison between Avery and Benjamin, but the two may have furthered their acquaintance at the Art Students League, where artists could draw from the figure for free. During these times, the artists created typical academic drawings such as these, but they also began to work in freer modes suggestive of the influence of the art of Matisse, which they had many chances to see in New York in the late 1920s. And both began to incorporate European influences into their art, the influences that had eluded them earlier, Benjamin looking at Cezanne and Picasso, and Avery mostly at Matisse, although he kept to a dark un-Matisse-like palette. Avery articulated the aesthetic perspective of the time that he would maintain throughout his art, explaining that he omitted any details that would disorganize aspects of his compositions that were already filled by some form of color.

18:40

The friendship between Avery and Benjamin was cemented in 1927 when Gershon and Zelda moved into the Lincoln Arcade, where Milton and Sally had settled following their marriage the year before. The Lincoln was an office building that had been converted to artists' studios located at 1931, the building seen here thanks to the New York Times website, in a picture of it from when it caught fire in 1931. However, even before this fire, which led to its tearing down and eventual replacement by Lincoln Center, the building had seen better days. Sally called it a ramshackle affair, but she went on to note that its discomforts were more than made up for by its spirit of artistic camaraderie. Avery may, in fact, have learned about the Lincoln through a Gloucester connection. When he and Sally moved in their neighbor in the building was Stuart Davis, who created this image in 1917 of his studio and living space at the Lincoln, which he modeled on Matisse's red studio. Davis seems to have moved out shortly after Avery arrived. But in turn, Avery brought several other artists to the building, who were also drawn to the prospect of merging life and art. Among them were some of his artist friends from Hartford, including Vincent Spagna seen in a drypoint by Avery and an oil by Benjamin; Aaron Berkman, seen in 1935 photograph and one of 1936 in which he instructs students from the top of New York's Flatiron Building. Wallace Putnam stayed with the Averys in 1927. Thomas Nagai seems to have been a resident of the Lincoln in roughly the same timeframe.

20:18

By the late 1920s, the Avery home had been turned into an artistic salon centered around him and his art. On a daily and nightly basis, a circle of artists gathered in the Averys' apartment, where they spent evenings reading literature aloud, critiquing each other's work, and looking especially at Milton's, perhaps considering his images of Sally, who was his muse even when she was resting. In fact, the creation of the atmosphere of the Lincoln was due to Sally, as she realized that the best working environment for Milton was one in which he was surrounded by a hive of vigorous creative activity. To produce this ambience she cut short her own artistic ambitions and became an illustrator, a job that enabled her to pay the bills, work at home, and watch over Milton and his cohorts at all hours.

21:03

At times, the artists also gathered in the Benjamins' apartment which was larger due to the fact that his salary from his job at the Sun allowed him to pay just a little bit more. The supportiveness that Sally gave Milton and her closeness to him is summed up in this gouache by Benjamin of about 1928, in which the curve of Sally's pose serves to secure Milton, while he, holding her hand, gazes steadily forward.

21:38

Other artists soon joined in the circle around Avery at the Lincoln. In the late 1920s the young artists all from Eastern European backgrounds, Mark Rothko, known then with the name of Rothkowitz, and Adolf Gottlieb became regulars in the Avery household. In the 1930s Barnett Newman became part of the gatherings. These artists are usually associated with another generation altogether, as they were leading figures in the Abstract Expressionist movement of which they led the way in the development of color field paintings such as these by Rothko, by Gottlieb, and by Newman. But at the start of their careers they followed admiringly in the footsteps of Avery, looking at him as a role model and an anchor. Avery was distinctly not a talker. He is famous for saying, "Why talk when you could paint". But he communicated by listening and through his art, and his few comments were valued by fellow artists. Whereas Rothko viewed Max Weber, with whom he studied at the Art Students League, as embittered, grandiose, directive and pompous, he described Avery as having an approach that was that of an artisan and an attitude without pretension or agony. Rothko recalled Avery as having that inner power in which gentleness and silence proved audible and poignant. Benjamin, described by some as a dreamer, was more of a talker than Avery, and his gentle encouragement of his artist friends endeared them to him, and they stayed close to him even after their art went in very different directions.

22:56

Although the artists began to gather in the late 1920s in the Lincoln and Avery appears to have been in Gloucester again in 1929, it was not until the early 1930s that his friends accompanied him. Why did they choose to go to Gloucester at this time? The most obvious answer is that for Avery, who was a father figure for so many of them, Gloucester was familiar and had positive associations in terms of his relationship with Sally. But another reason was that there were more accommodations and less expensive ones than usual in the town, due to the impact on Gloucester of the depression. As Martha Oakes chronicled in the 1989 catalog for this museum on Avery and Gloucester, the fisheries in the town, which had been prosperous during the 1920s as in these photographs from a flush time, fell into decline in the 1930s like most businesses across the country, while in addition, imports of foreign codfish further eroded prices in Gloucester for salted fish, which was the mainstay of the town's economy. The departure of the fishermen left more vacancies in houses such as these along the shores of East Gloucester, making it possible for the artists to continue the pattern of daily communication they had established in New York. As Sally recalled, the artists got places nearby each other,

and noted that at the same time, they all had places to work by themselves, and thus they had a perfect opportunity to be both alone and together at the same time.

24:30

Rothko, who had sought ways to escape his Russian immigrant family while with them in Portland, Oregon, did not feel the same way about Gloucester, and he called his times in Gloucester working vacations, times when he enjoyed working alongside his friends. This was a practice he may have followed in 1934 when he and Avery created these watercolors that are similar in palette and subject matter. This medium afforded spontaneity and both artists included casual figures down by the water. Rothko showed Milton and his daughter March, born in 1932, in his image, reflecting the way that work and pleasure were easily combined in Gloucester. Yet the artists didn't mimic each other stylistically. Rothko used a fluid watercolor application as a means of direct expressiveness. Avery, who had left the realism of Twachtman behind, explored the potential of his medium for producing different energies of line and effects of color.

25:26

That the artists were together in Gloucester provided opportunities for them to paint each other, perhaps resulting in some of their portraits of each other which are humorous and suggest a familiarity with each other's quirks, as in Avery's depiction of Nagai wrapped up in a dotted blue scarf and a funny felt hat and his image of Rothko with foggy glasses and turning his hand on a slant as if not sure about something. The subject of an unidentified drawing of a figure looking so serious as to seem worried by Benjamin is probably Gottlieb.

26:00

The artists express the spirit of vacation time in images of their wives, engaging in evenings of game playing, from which the men, as aspects of these compositions suggest, perhaps felt left out. Avery's card players seemed to be on the beach, which suggests a Gloucester locale. He widened the dark figure with her back to us for compositional reasons, creating continuity among the figures. Benjamin painted several images of card playing women huddled together. Rothko suggested the connection between the three women through his abstract arrangement. Gottlieb called this painting "Conference", perhaps to suggest that these women in kimono bathrobes may be taking themselves a little too seriously.

26:46

In the 1930s, the Gloucester Society was no longer a place for modernists, and much of the art on view in its shows reflected a throwback to the Impressionist art of the 1890s. In an article in 1929 AJ Philpott remarked that, "Either the eccentrics in painting have died out or they stayed out. As they were not easily killed, it is probable that they went into retirement." For example, among the exhibitors in 1931 the president of the society, Oscar Anderson, showed a boat scene perhaps similar to this. Emile Gruppe contributed a view of Bass Rocks, perhaps the very undated work that we have at the gallery at present. Anthony Thieme showed a view of Rockport harbor, which may have been similar to this painting also at the gallery. Avery had

moved beyond Twachtman at this time to a Modernist influenced style, and it was probably for this reason that he didn't participate in the society shows and his circle of artists were of a similar mind.

27:41

But Philpott may have exaggerated the degree to which the modernists had gone into retirement, as it seems that at least some Modernist art was present and welcomed in Gloucester. This was suggested in an article in the American Magazine of Art in 1930 that described all of the various art schools in session in the town that season. Among them was that of Hugh Breckenridge, whose school was recognizable by the smocks and umbrellas on Rocky Neck. Breckenridge painted in a vivid Post-Impressionist style, as well as in an abstract one, inspired by Cubism and Synchronism. On the other side of the cove was Earnest Thurn's school, held in the Reed Studios, where the magazine reported the newcomers and modernists were welcome. Among those who taught at his school in 1931, the date of this photograph, was the German-born artist Hans Hofmann, who had had direct contact with European Modernism in the 1910s and spread techniques of non-objective painting in America, eventually teaching and working alongside Jackson Pollock and many other leading figures in the Abstract Expressionist movement. And one wonders if the figure in the white shirt, perhaps without the top... One of the figures in here is Hofmann. Perhaps somebody has determined that. The married couple William Meyerowitz and Theresa Bernstein also gave classes in painting and etching at their home on Mount Pleasant Avenue, where artists of many stripes often gathered. She recollected later that their house was a haven for artists including Stuart Davis, Edward Hopper, Marsden Hartley, David Burly, Leon Kroll, Raphael Soyer and Peter Blum. The magazine noted that another artist, Frederick Lincoln Stoddard, took students on favorable days to the ocean rocks where the surf dashes up. The article noted that he had given up his New York studio to spend winters in Gloucester as had other artists, but I was unfortunately unable to find examples of his work summer or winter.

29:40

This kind of diversity and the general buzz of artistic activity created the kind of background that spurred Avery and his friends. While they may have enjoyed the intimacy of their close friendships, they probably were not isolated from the art scene in general. And this is suggested by a letter that Zelda sent to Gershon when he was staying in Gloucester in the summer of 1933. The letter is care of Nagai, and Zelda sent this letter from Los Angeles despite the New York City return address, but you can see that Nagai's address at least was 128 East Main Street. This was a location between the town and Rocky Neck and near the inner harbor where so many of the other artists were also living and gathering. And for example, Stuart Davis resided at the time at 252 East Main Street, which was further down the shore. Avery and his friends don't seem to have isolated themselves, as did Marsden Hartley, who, while in Gloucester in the summers of 1931 and 1934, focused obsessively on painting the boulders of Dogtown. Later Sally Avery would describe Hartley as a little above a vagrant and an outcast. Perhaps the solitary activities were known to Avery and his friends then. Unlike Hartley the artists didn't shy away from typical Gloucester subjects. Avery and Benjamin painted the view

from Banner Hill that was so popular with Gloucester artists that they often had to elbow each other out to paint it. The closeness of their composition suggests that the artists might have been working together, but they used styles of their own, Avery treating shapes as solid colors and Benjamin exploring subtleties of tone. He incorporated the bare canvas into his design and used dabs of thick pigment to create a sense of light and air, which he also brought out by the lime green color of the warehouse in the foreground.

31:31

That the artists derived inspiration from one another is reflected in these similar compositions by Benjamin and Nagai in which Benjamin followed Nagai's use of compositional strategies from Japanese art, with which Nagai was familiar from his years in his home country. Nagai's baroque treatment of forms comes directly from his earlier training under Thomas Hart Benton, but he gave the Gloucester scene his own spin, showing the picturesque site as if the boats and buildings were windup toys. Benjamin appears to have worked spontaneously, as is suggested in his fluid use of watercolor washes in his image of the boats, but he didn't hesitate to combine elements from different works, as he seems to have taken the boats from one of his oils and set them into his watercolor to balance his composition. In another view of the harbor, his forms are recognizable but reduced and flat to produce an image with the structured scheme of a Japanese print in which diagonals create movement across the surface rather than into space. He used a dry brush and broad strokes that follow the rhythm of his composition. His approach was modern by comparison with the Impressionist views from Banner Hill by other artists of the time, such as Alice Judson.

Avery enjoyed playing around with the forms of Gloucester as in this image, where he painted pink buildings as if they were blocks and used a strong balance of pink and green, reflecting his growing identity as a colorist. Nagai may have influenced the way that Avery often gave Gloucester structures sloping pagoda-like roofs, and he showed a certain humor himself in turning fish houses into Japanese temples.

33:14

One reason for Gloucester's popularity in the 1930s had to do with the rise of Regionalism. This movement, which arose from the growing disillusionment with American involvement in European affairs in World War I, was based on the idea that American artists needed to sever ties with European art and that only by doing so could America develop a distinctive art of its own. This movement was so powerful that artists were essentially sanctioned by its proponents for any traces of European influence in their work and any deviation from a focus on subjects that didn't show or express something distinctive about America. They were urged, for example, by a critic for the New York Times to sing in their own voices or not to sing at all. Gloucester was an excellent subject for Regionalism, because it provided an ideal vehicle for the painting of a uniquely American place and American themes that evoke nostalgia and affection. Its community of fishermen was still active and vital by contrast with comparable towns in Europe, where the fisherman left when the tourists came, keeping its link with the past. Its angular wooden clapboard houses and colonial churches painted white evoked Puritan severity. Its jumble of fish houses and factories were deemed American because of the way

they were distinctly unpretentious and authentic. Its variable light heightened the aesthetic qualities of its lively harbors and curving coastlines.

34:40

Edward Hopper had already found a uniquely American quality in the town's domestic architecture in the 1920s, painting what he described as a solid looking town and delighting in the fact that, while he was painting houses everyone else was painting ships and the waterfront. In the 1930s, in addition to cheap housing, it was probably in search of this heartland of New England that Gloucester was so filled with artists. How did Avery and his circle fit into this trajectory? Many of their subjects have resonances with the American Scene and American Regionalism, but Avery and Benjamin in particular seem to have had more interest in aspects of modern life in Gloucester than in the colonial past. Avery created drawings of coal derricks, gas pumps, and telephone lines that paralleled some of Stuart Davis's of roughly the same time. Avery clearly had a sense of humor about the sentimental attitude of the period toward things colonial by showing a gas pump labeled "colonial gas". In a watercolor he conveyed the vitality of Gloucester industry, showing warehouses seemingly clamoring over each other, while the words "Gort can", part of the signage of the Gordon cannery adds to the Americanness of the scene. Benjamin, by contrast, created images of industrial subjects that parallel some of the sense of quiet inactivity in Hopper's art. In one a detached red freight car stands idle on the tracks, while a figure, possibly a signalman, stares into space. In another, empty coal barrels are turned on their side in front of a fisherman's shack set on a tilt. In a watercolor road mending seems lugubrious with workers who seem clueless standing at a distance. Some of his works have a similar feeling of stillness that is present in the Gloucester work of Edward Hopper as in this one of 1928.

36:40

A work by Benjamin has less of a sense of ominousness of Hopper, but has a Hopper-like perspective, showing a house passed by a road and telephone wires, and the scene is devoid of movement and human presence. In a pastel Benjamin portrayed the houses that fascinated Hopper but used a warmer palette, enjoying the coloristic possibilities of the scene. In another work he showed a boat beached awkwardly on its side, while the car parked against the wall of the fishing shack suggests the changes that have come to the lives of Gloucester fishermen, who perhaps spent more time in their cars than on the sea. In this watercolor, industry seems awkward as rowboats slowly approach Harbor Cove where a 35-foot-wall enclosure held boat coal brought in by boat. In a watercolor by Gottlieb there is a similar sense of an industrial scene that is cluttered and sluggish, while the presence of a boat with the name "Enterprise" that juts into the scene seems ironic.

37:48

While Avery and his circle captured some qualities of their surroundings, they seem to have been more interested just in expressing what they saw and felt than in presenting explicit messages and focusing on content. They took a stance against the nationalist fervor of American Regionalism. As early as 1930, Avery told an interviewer for the Hartford Courier that

he felt art should express an abstract idea rather than having literary content. Benjamin expressed his belief that a work of art should convey feeling rather than doctrine. Gottlieb recalled in a 1967 interview that in the 1930s he felt Regionalism to be nonsense, in the belief that art had to be international. Yet clearly issues of American Regionalism were at the forefront in Gloucester in the early 1930s. This is reflected in the fact that both Hartley and Stuart Davis responded to Regionalism in different ways with Gloucester subjects. Hartley showed his Dogtown works in the 1932 exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in New York, along with a poem entitled *The Return of the Native*, in which he declared himself a great regional painter of New England. He expressed his view that the druidic rocks of Dogtown, unmarked by any triviality, were a cross between Easter Island and Stonehenge, providing evidence of an ancient race.

39:10

Stuart Davis also had a show at the Downtown Gallery in 1932 that he purposefully called “American Scene: Recent Paintings New York and Gloucester.” In showing works including his *Garage Lights: The Gloucester Scene*, what Davis intended was to prove to diehard Regionalists, like Benton and John Steuart Curry, that American Scene paintings could be done in a Modernist idiom, using what he called his color space logic instead of an illustrator approach. If Davis was in strong disagreement with a nationalist perspective, he proclaimed that excellence not nationality was the issue and said, “If Picasso were a practicing artist in Akron, Ohio, I would have admired his work just the same.” Davis reacted against the limited definition of the American identity or what it was to be an American, stating, “I am as American as any other American painter, an American whether I want to be or not. While I admit the foreign influence, I strongly deny speaking their language. Over here we are racially English-American, Irish-American, German-American, French, Italian, Russian, or Jewish-American, and artistically we are Rembrandt-American, Renoir-American and Picasso-American. But since we live here and paint here, we are first of all American.” This attitude clearly would have resonated with Avery's group of painters from foreign backgrounds. But unlike Davis they had no interest in being confrontational, and they spent their time in Gloucester seeking aesthetic inspiration and the ways in which Gloucester subject matter could express and resonate with their own attitudes and moods. They were among few artists of their time to stand against Regionalism, but it was their belief in individual expressiveness that it would eventually win out over Regionalism and lead to the innovative art in the future.

40:56

Instead of looking for evidence of the American past in Gloucester, they used their time to explore new techniques, and one they were particularly drawn to was the use of gouache on black construction paper. This method afforded the study of new tonal relationships, as colors on black surfaces absorb light rather than deflecting it as on white ones. This resulted in a bringing out of surface patterns rather than atmospheric softening. Both Avery and Benjamin used this method for nocturnal scenes for which it was well suited. In a view of the harbor, Avery explored all sorts of ways of using light on dark, light on light, and dark on dark patterns. Benjamin used the technique for an image of the lighthouse on Gloucester's Eastern Point, in

which he elongated the form of the lighthouse to fit into the vertical format of his composition, as this comparison with a photograph of the site reveals, and he tied it to the picture plane through the tiered horizontals of the keepers' cottages, laundry lines, and the bell tower. The beacon's light doesn't infiltrate the darkness but just stands quietly against it. Benjamin's carefully composed image is vastly different from Lane's Luminist views of Gloucester lighthouses at sunset, but perhaps for both artists the lonely subject resonated with the introspective aspects of their natures.

42:16

Both Benjamin and Avery used gouache and paper for figurative works as in an image of a lobsterman's daughter by Benjamin and a reader by Avery. His form was given the same pattern treatment as other elements in the scene. Benjamin also showed a reader intently focused on his book where the light falls. In fact, reading seems to have been a common occupation for the artists and their wives during their Gloucester summers, and in an oil in which the tree and sky suggest a Gloucester rather than a New York locale, Avery portrayed Sally also curved in total concentration around a book. Rothko similarly portrayed readers at this time, while he too explored gouache but used it for more colorful arrangements.

42:56

Among the authors the group favored was TS Eliot, whose poetry Sally remembers they often read aloud. The writings of Eliot may, in fact, have been the starting point for a number of images they created in Gloucester, in which fishing shacks and warehouses are set into bleak, surreal landscapes. Gottlieb is known, in fact, to have been strongly influenced by TS Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland*, which was first published in the *Dial Magazine* in 1929. He expressed the spirit of this poem in his work of 1933 that he exhibited with the title *Gloucester Harbor Fisheries*. Here he captured the feeling of the spent spirituality of Eliot's poem as is suggested in this image of isolated shacks and other strangely shaped forms that seemed to wilt and lie fallow, while dark shadows spread from unknown sources and the light in the sky seems a polluted shade of blue. Benjamin and Gottlieb may well have been working alongside each other for these two similar nocturnal images that express a similar mood. A sense of surreal eeriness is also present in another Gloucester waterfront scene at night by Benjamin, while the green boat on its side against the navy water suggests focused color. Avery and Nagai also created similar gouaches on dark paper in which there seems to be a sense of cluttered disarray and confusion. Perhaps in creating these images the artists were aware of Eliot's long association with Gloucester. He spent his youth on Eastern Point and wrote at least three poems set in Gloucester, *Cape Ann*, *The Dry Salvages*, and the third section of the *Four Quartets*, which expresses the mystique of Cape Ann, while references to aspects of Gloucester experience surface in many other poems.

44:42

Based on this work Gottlieb entitled *Rockport Inner Harbor*, which is in the exhibition and is another gouache on dark paper, it seems probable that the location from which Gottlieb and Benjamin were deriving their subject matter for these works was the harbor of Rockport, as the

pink chimney in this painting is similar to that in the two works by Gottlieb and Benjamin that I just showed. This image of squat buildings huddling under a strangely threatening sky diverges from the typical views of Rockport Harbor from the time in which in almost all Motif #1 is prominently featured. This granite pier with its red stained fishermen's shack was the ubiquitous stamp of the Rockport artist, who painted the subject often with the expectation that images including it would be more likely to result in sales than images without it. Such commercial interest was as far from the minds of Avery and his friends as possible, who sought whatever means, other than their art, they could use to get by.

45:43

The way in which they simply used the iconography of Gloucester to explore their own feelings is summed up in this image of Gloucester harbor at night by Benjamin, in which he captured a mood that might be described as unmet yearning. He stretched and tilted forms in the harbor and rendered them in disorienting contrasting colors, rather than softening them into the atmosphere. Avery used the same approach in works also looking over the harbor at night, but he clearly found some humor in the way the Gloucester scenes couldn't be complete without the obligatory white sailboat and the church spire, two of which he dabbed in here seemingly as an afterthought.

46:24

The details of Avery's visits to Gloucester after the summer of 1934 are unclear. He is known to have gone to Vermont every summer from 1935 to 1942. But he may have made some brief trips to Gloucester or just returned to Gloucester subjects, as there is a gouache in the Cape Ann Museum's collection of Gloucester that is dated 1937. There are also a group of images of Avery and his artist friends swimming in quarries from 1937 and 1938 that could be Gloucester, although more research would have to be done to determine if this is the case.

46:57

Benjamin's chronology is also unclear. An image of a beacon by Benjamin has a circa date of 1939. Martha thought this might be the beacon at the end of the Dogbar Breakwater. But could it be the Dry Salvages? Regardless of the subject, it seems unlikely that Benjamin went out and about to paint this. Perhaps he combined sketches and his imagination to convey a sense of the fragility of this tiny spiky structure, propped on an outcropping that seems to be falling into the sea.

47:30

From their time together in Gloucester, clearly each artist in the circle around Avery developed a personal point of view from which they proceeded further in the years to come. While they may have gone to the town for the cheapness of the housing, what they found was a place where they could be free to work as they chose, inspired by the energy of the art scene and a diversity that encouraged their own independence. They were perhaps more free in Gloucester to use a wide range of influences than in New York, where Regionalist pressures were stronger.

Sharing ideas while supporting each other's independent routes of expression, they found in Gloucester a perfect opportunity for working alone together.

48:10

Whereas they were unified as a group in Gloucester, within the context of the New York art world by the mid-1930s, they had gone in different directions. In 1935, Rothko and Gottlieb became part of The Ten, a group of artists who exhibited together and whose largely abstract works provided a basis from which Abstract Expressionism sprang. By the mid-1940s, they had moved away from Avery's influence, producing psychologically complex abstract images such as these that often reflected the mythical archetypes written about by Carl Jung.

48:43

In 1935 Avery began to receive the recognition and acceptance that had eluded him earlier, when he became represented by Valentine Gallery, the American dealer for Matisse, with whose art he became positively associated. The return to favor of Modernist art in the American arts scene and in general occurred in the years before and during World War II, when many European artists immigrated to New York. Avery's place in this trajectory was furthered when he left Valentine Gallery in 1943 for that of Paul Rosenberg, who had fled Paris just before the Nazi occupation in 1940 and had become the prominent dealer in New York for the European artists who came to America and for modern European art in general. Avery's success did not translate into sales. It was possibly for economic reasons that he returned to Gloucester in the warrior summers of 1943, 1944, and 1945. But the reason to go back to Gloucester was just as likely that he hadn't gotten either Gloucester subject matter or the freedom of expression Gloucester represented out of his system. Since there are Gloucester works by Benjamin from the same time, it is presumed that he joined Avery during some of these years, and Benjamin may have gone back in 1946, as well, or simply created Gloucester subjects then based on earlier times, due to some works by Benjamin that are dated 1946.

50:05

Instead of staying on East Main Street, Milton and Sally resided in the 1940s at the Mother Ann Cottage near the unique rock formation at Eastern Point Light. But he got right back into his routine of spending his day sketching outdoors with Sally at his side, as this photograph from 1945 reveals. However, Avery now departed further from descriptive imagery as he reduced his motifs even more to bold simplified patterns and broad color areas. Instead of going in the direction of abstraction taken by Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman, Avery continued to derive his inspiration from the physical world, as he wanted to capture his direct responses to what he observed, although he was not bound to realistic representations. He put into his works the curves of boat holds or the convergence of sloping warehouse roofs just as he wanted and organized them within the surface of the picture plane, while treating the space around them as form rather than background. Benjamin too chose to keep his work based in a rather representational mode. His forms got flatter and more linear, but his style stayed rooted in more of a traditional perspective than Avery. Starting with physical sources as well, Benjamin's process was to winnow them down, so that they reached the point of no return between art

and the true shape of the form. In this way, he used the artistic process as a way of gaining control and order, eliminating what he felt to be inessential. His method is apparent in the difference between these more spontaneously rendered watercolors of Bass Rocks and his painting of 1946 in which he defined planes with crisply outlined form so that even the water is contained. Avery may have been deriving inspiration from the same site for this more flamboyant image.

51:51

Whatever points of convergence or differences Avery and Benjamin had, they clearly felt a comfort and pleasure in being together, whether painting or gathering on the beach, and they maintained their connection until Avery's death in 1965. Even in the 20 years that Benjamin lived afterwards, he drew images of Avery keeping the connection with him alive. There was never any competition between the two artists, or sense of the disparity between Avery's success and Benjamin's lack thereof. They had an ideal sort of friendship of mutual support, sharing, and acceptance of difference. Avery ended up with fame whereas Benjamin fell into obscurity, due to his absolute disinclination to market his work or compete for fame. Luckily, his estate is intact and his papers preserved so that he can be rediscovered and repositioned where he belongs, including the Gloucester phase in his art. Thank you.

52:58

I'd be happy to take questions. Do we have any questions? Any comments? Yes?

Unknown Speaker 53:08

I have a question about, if I can formulate this. The pressure they... What were they trying to get away from in New York? You were saying something about nationalism and they came here and they felt freer?

Lisa Peters 53:19

Well, I think there was a lot of pressure on artists to paint American subjects and to not use European-inspired styles. And they, I think they would have felt this pressure more in New York than in Gloucester, although certainly these issues were present in Gloucester at the time as well. For example, the Whitney held a symposium that they debated nationalism and whether it was a good thing for artists to reflect nationalism in their work, and the affirmative won. Nationalism won out, so I think they were looking for a way to get away from that, and they didn't really want to fight it either. They just wanted to be themselves. They didn't think that art had to belong to a certain, you know, place, to a certain country. They wanted to... They were... They actually called themselves (I didn't go into this in the lecture.) They exhibited... They were called Expressionists in the early 1930s and showed together in a number of exhibitions where that was sort of the label that they got. So they were trying to break away from this whole American Scene. You know, prevalence.

Unknown Speaker 54:29

When these artists were painting, they were painting things that they were looking at. And as many of them were foreign born, the 1930s were not a time when you would want to be going back to the homeland.

Lisa Peters 54:50

Right.

Unknown Speaker 54:51ss

Therefore, if you had an opportunity to have some time during the summertime, where were you going to go? Rothko said, "Let's just go to Gloucester and paint."

Lisa Peters 54:55

Right. I think that was the attitude they had. This was the town where artists went, and it was a town for making art. And they knew that. Whereas I think some of the other colonies were more about that particular place and about a particular style, there was more freedom. There was so much more diversity in Gloucester and they felt comfortable with that. Maybe even with the fact that Gloucester itself was diverse in its population.

Any more questions? Thank you.