

The provenance of *Man and Shop Window*

William O'Rourke

All the good art I own has been given to me, most often by the artists themselves. How Judith Shahn came to give me her 1954 painting, which I have titled "Man and Shop Window" (titling it in the manner of the rest of her titled paintings), happened like this: It was the early 1970s and I was living at 4 Milligan Place down in the Village. Milligan Place was/is a small, gated courtyard on Sixth Avenue (The Avenue of the Americas, it was/is also called) between 10th and 11th streets, nearer 10th. The more famous Patchin Place, on 10th street, abutted the back of Milligan Place. I lived in a one room apartment in the front looking out onto the courtyard and a corner of the playground of an elementary school on 11th street. I moved there because my friend in the building, Craig Nova, told me an apartment had just come open when I returned to the City after finishing my first book, *The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left*, in 1972. The building, before it was cut up into small apartments, had, supposedly, once been the home of Theodore Dreiser.

I was living, as I described it back then, an economically immature existence. In other words, I was poor, cash poor, but, I realized it was a special kind of poverty, the bohemian existence I always pined for as a kid growing up in the Midwest. I had no money, but my book was on the *New York Times Book Review's* New and Recommended list. Craig had just published his first novel, *Turkey Hash*, and we pooled our funds and purchased a foot-long lettuce sandwich to share at the Blimpie's (now long gone) at the corner of 11th and Sixth, all we could afford, and after that thin meal Craig vowed *this would never happen again*.

Well, I got a job, more or less, at Feller's Scenery Studio in the South Bronx building Broadway scenery, making use of the theatrical skills I had picked up in my youth. And I recall Craig trying his hand at ghostwriting. We both forged ahead.

It was around this time I was contacted by Judith Shahn. Judy, after some sort of legal battle, was being evicted from her studio, which happened to be around the corner from where I lived. I had known her and her husband, the poet Alan Dugan, since 1970, when Stanley Kunitz had shanghaied me and Louise Gluck, both of us fresh graduates from Columbia University's new MFA creative writing program, to become fellows at the also new Fine Arts Work Center, located in Provincetown, Massachusetts. I had some youthful experience with Cape Cod, but not much with Provincetown, but, having few other prospects in 1970, I went merrily along. My first year was mainly spent working in the fish factory there (gone now) and then guarding the Chrysler Glass Museum (also long gone), but the following summer in P-town managed to change my life, when I met a young lawyer who led me to Harrisburg, PA, and the Catholic Left.

Judy and Alan were big supporters of the FAWC, from its beginnings to the end of both their lives, Alan helping to anchor the poetry side of the operation and Judy the art side. I never had known or knew at the time that Judy had a studio down in the Village, as well as a separate small apartment that she and Dugan had kept for years. But she asked if I could help move her out of the studio. Dugan had been hitting the Heaven Hill a little hard and had gotten into fisticuffs, or some altercation, with the landlord and was banned from the building.

Sure, I said. I had actually done a similar job before, when I was a graduate student at

Columbia. I had moved an artist from one studio to another, employment that turned up for me after I observed a notice on a bulletin board at Columbia. Fay Lansner, primarily a print maker, had a studio on the east side, above a tony restaurant (Sign of the Dove), which was expanding and she too was being forced out. That was 1969. Fay was moving to a new studio on lower Broadway. It turned out that Fay's husband was Kermit Lansner, then the editor of *Newsweek*, which resulted, after my Harrisburg book came out, in me being invited to a number of fancy parties.

But Judy wasn't moving to another City studio, but taking most everything back to Truro, where a studio was to be built, enlarging the house they owned there, a house which I presume had been in her family, once owned by her father, Ben Shahn.

So some things went to the apartment, but most went into storage, or was prepared to be shipped to the Cape. I did the work during the night in the main, having a day job at the time, and it took a couple of weeks. The loft space was to be taken over by a baker, a baker whose specialty was "erotic" bread. This, obviously, was a sign of things to come, and at the time I presumed erotic bread was sculptural, though I thought there might be only so much that could be sculpted in dough. The wealthy, oddly, were somewhat subdued in the 1970s. But, the nascent one percent was preparing to invade and occupy Manhattan. Doubtless all this was a forerunner of the artisan food movement. Isn't "toast" hot now?

In any case, Judy and I labored away and when we got to nearly the end, after taking down two by four partitions, etc., packing canvases, etc., we reached the back of one wall not seen for a number of years and she spotted something, reached down, and extracted a small framed canvas. She said to me, "Well, this will take us through old age."

What it was was a painting of her brother done by her father. It was a portrait, dark with the accumulated dirt of decades. I saw it a year or so later hanging on their dining room wall in Truro, all bright and clean. She had sent it to Yale and its experts had restored it.

And, it was when we got down to the last two or three things left to pack in the studio, she said, "You can have one of these. Pick." I may have protested, since I was doing this for a friend, not for any kind of pay. But, nonetheless, I chose the largest one, the canvas that is on the cover of the *NDR*, #39. It was framed, which was maybe why I picked it, whereas the two smaller ones were not.

Nearby, in another corner of the loft, were three sculptures by Marisol, who once shared the studio with Judy. And I pointed to the group, squarish wood constructions, pillars of a sort, with faces painted at the top, about three or four feet tall. "Can I have one of those, too?"

I meant it as some kind of joke, but Judy said, nonplused, "No, she's going to come by to get those."

I didn't have to pack Judy's painting, since I only needed to carry it around the corner.

So, I have had it for over forty years, somehow managing to take it, unharmed, with me in numerous relocations, and I'm not sure if it has ever been reproduced, or cataloged, anywhere. I certainly would have lent it for any sort of show, but Judy – no one – ever asked me. Judy died when she was eighty in 2009, predeceased, as they say, by Alan, some six years earlier. An obituary can be found here: http://www.provincetownartistregistry.com/S/shahn_judith.html

Until the last years of her life she mainly did illustrations found in *The New Yorker*, small sketches that filled white space breaking up and at the end of articles. And she continued to produce a number of prints, in a far different style than her early oils, which may well be her ongoing artistic legacy. *The New Yorker* has changed, New York has changed, everything has

changed, and I am flummoxed to look back at those years, my poverty years, that were so rich.