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Erna Partoll's Art Distills the Brilliant Colors of Her Emotions

Provincetown has been her home and inspiration for 50 years

BY SUSANNAH ELISABETH FULCHER · MAR 3, 2021

"I think of painting as capturing time," says artist Erna Partoll. In the sunny kitchen of her Provincetown home, where she has been holed up during the pandemic, Partoll points to an image of one of her best-known paintings, *The Green Wave*, on the cover of Deborah Forman's *Contemporary Cape Cod Artists: On Abstraction*. "When I went to the beach that morning, the sun was coming up," Partoll says. "There was the air and the water, the ocean. Of course, those elements are here in the painting, but I also expressed the emotions I was feeling."



Erna Partoll, at home in Provincetown. (Photo Susannah Elisabeth Fulcher)

Partoll runs her finger along deep blue and vibrant green shapes in the painting that might be waves or rolling hills. "This is where scenes from my childhood home in Switzerland were activated in my mind," she says. "I was moved by something unconscious, an association. You don't have to paint the waves exactly as you see them, but if you are able to transpose the energy of that moment onto the canvas, that will resonate within another person."

The Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown has represented Partoll for more than two decades. On visiting Partoll's studio for the first time, Walker says, "I immediately responded to Erna's 'words of communication' through her circles, portals, waves of thought, and feeling expressed in a myriad of colors."

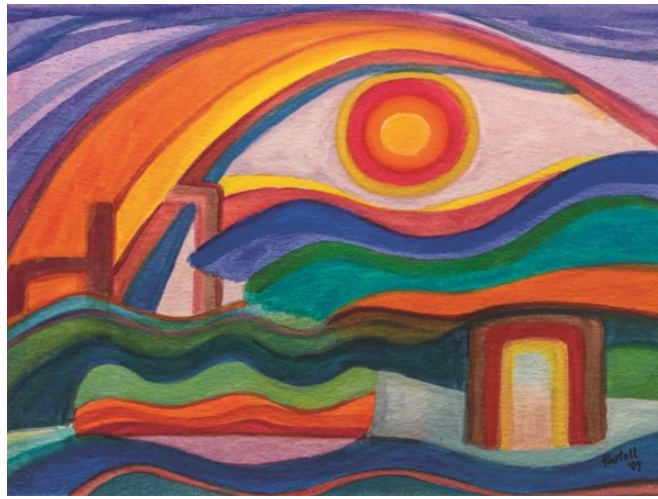
Partoll sees abstraction simply as a way of organizing what she sees and feels. "Even in a realistic rendition, you can't ever put everything you see onto the canvas," she says. "You have to choose what to emphasize."

She doesn't paint plein air — outdoors with her subject before her — and, instead, returns to her studio. "I usually start a painting with an idea, with focus on an emotion, an impression, or an intention," she says. "There has to be an essence out of which an image can develop and

Partoll was born in St. Gallen, Switzerland, near Lake Constance, in 1932. Her parents took her hiking in the mountains, nurturing a passion for nature. The family also made regular visits to the local art museum. When Partoll was six or seven, she saw a painting there of a scene near a lake. “There was a yellow in that painting that has stayed in my mind to this day,” she says. “I was so moved.”

She soon began to visit the museum on her own. Though she painted while growing up, she never considered art to be a professional possibility. “My father’s idea was that I should become a secretary,” she says, “so I found a job in an insurance company after school and hated it.”

Demonstrating remarkable independence for a young single woman in the early 1950s, Partoll left that job after a year and set off on a journey that would take her to London, Paris, Montreal, Toronto, New York City, and, in her late 30s, Provincetown. “I was interested in languages and curious how people live in different places,” she says.



The Green Wave (2009) is a gouache on paper by Erna Partoll. Her abstract landscapes blend images of Provincetown with memories of her childhood in Switzerland. (Photo courtesy Berta Walker Gallery)

Everywhere she went, Partoll found a way to support herself. “I worked hard, and, at times, it was difficult,” she says. She was a mother’s helper in London, a translator in Paris. She took courses in literature and history at the Sorbonne and spent countless hours in museums.

“I wasn’t painting yet — I was looking,” she says. When Partoll reached New York in the early ’60s, she was ready to study art. She found a night job and enrolled at the Art Students League. “I took classes from nine to three and worked from three to midnight,” she says.

“Erna studied with Theodoros Stamos, who was working on color fields like his good friend, Mark Rothko,” Berta Walker says. “She grounded her understanding of color work in this environment.” Other influential teachers were Will Barnet, Stephen Greene, and Robert Brackman.

It wasn’t until her move to Provincetown in 1970 that Partoll found her signature palette of bright colors. “I loved the 10 years I lived in New York and what the city had to offer, but all my studies and artwork were done at indoor studios,” she says. “I believe this accounted for expressing myself in more muted colors. Once I started living here, I felt almost overwhelmed by the dramatic beauty of the landscape and the ocean, the expansion of the views, and the beautiful clear colors in the brilliance of the special light on the Outer Cape. Moving into a great natural environment was the beginning of a big shift, and it has been sustaining me ever since.”

Partoll has worked at a number of Provincetown galleries, including Walker’s. “I loved working in galleries, especially where accomplished artworks are being shown,” she says. “I never tired of looking at the paintings. It gave me energy.”

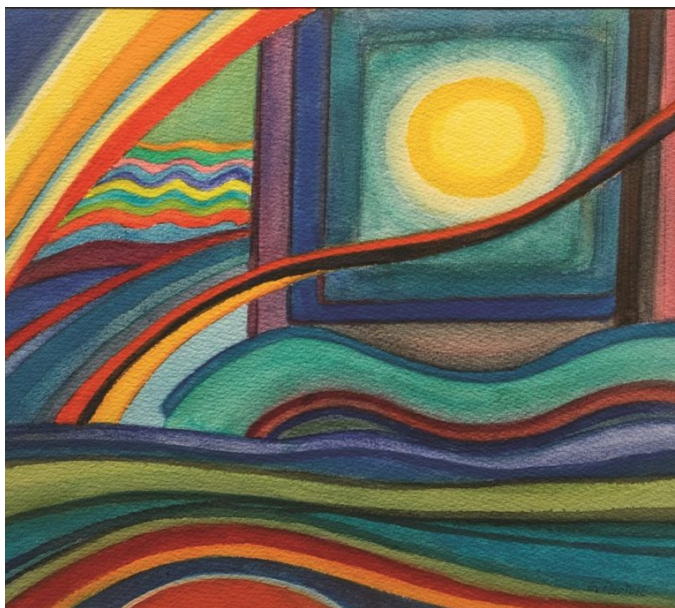


Green Portal (1999) is a gouache on paper by Partoll. (Photo courtesy Berta Walker Gallery)

In Partoll's bright and sunny studio, light floods onto the painting sitting on her easel. Nearby, a bouquet of brushes and tubes of paint in neat rows stand at attention. Though she'll turn 89 this year, Partoll still paints regularly and has no plans to slow down.

"I imagine it's just a fact that when you get into your 90s, your energy will be somewhat reduced," she says. Then she adds, with a sparkle in her eye, "But I'm not everybody. It's still exciting."

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New Day's Promise (2010) is a gouache on paper by Partoll. "Looking out over the ocean," she says, "gives you a feeling of eternity." (Photo courtesy Berta Walker Gallery)

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Susannah Fulcher was born in Austria to a Wellfleetian mother and an Austrian father. She now lives full-time in Wellfleet with her husband, Russell, and two daughters. Her time is spent writing, surviving breast cancer, and feeding her three goats, 12 chickens, and many B&B guests.



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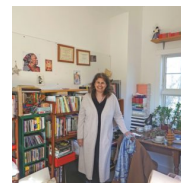
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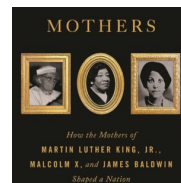
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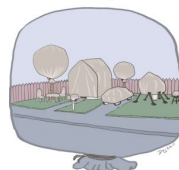
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