

# Weekend

## Arts&Performance

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/BILL GREENE

# Matched pair

Robert Henry and Selina Trieff have been married for half a century but are opposites in their work



A collage by Robert Henry.

By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**WELLFLEET** — Painting is a way of life for Selina Trieff and Robert Henry, but they haven't yet really gotten it down. "After 50 years, you ought to know how to do it," Henry reflects over a cup of coffee in the couple's kitchen, which looks out over Wellfleet Harbor.

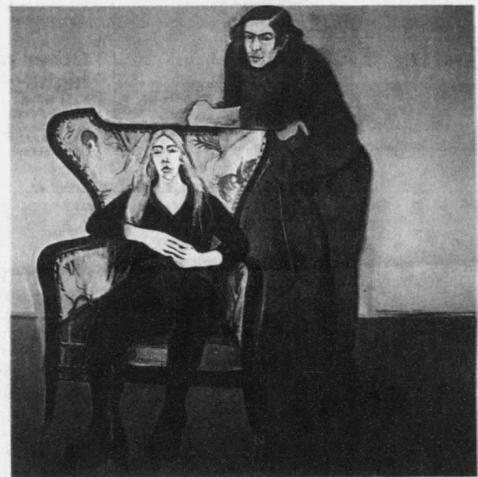
"We have a group that meets once a week, and we always complain about 'pencil management,'" says Trieff. "You have to handle the tool and get as much as you can out of it. Most of us are relatively old, and most of the complaints are from the older ones. How do you learn to do this?"

Henry and Trieff are both 70, and come November they will have been married for 49 years; they have two daughters and four grandchildren. A dual exhibition of their works opens at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown today, and a film about them, "Their Lives in Art," premieres at the center on Sunday evening. Although they have hair that's graying to white and Trieff has the stoop of an old woman, the two make a sharp, vivacious couple.

Although they share a medium — paint, or charcoal and graphite, as most of the works in the show demonstrate — their work reflects their individual sensibilities.

Henry's art constantly changes, shifting from representational to abstract, driven by both deep reflection and a sense of urgency. When he puts pencil to paper, he never knows what might show up. "I hate to repeat myself," Henry says. "I have thousands of drawings. Occasionally one of them finds a subject matter."

His largest piece in the exhibition is a collage of chopped-up, salvaged sketches, underscored with bits of paintings. Drawings from a live model — an arm, a leg — stutter across the surface like a percussion riff.



Robert Henry and Selina Trieff (top), who have a show in Provincetown, share a medium but not styles. Trieff evokes stillness, such as in her self-portrait of the couple (above) and a piece from her "Heads" series (left). Henry emphasizes movement.

COUPLE, Page C18

# Together, they survive a trying ordeal

► **COUPLE**  
Continued from Page C17

"I love motion," Henry confesses. He's dressed in a turpentine-stained T-shirt and shorts; green paint peeks from inside his right ear. His thick eyebrows rise devilishly. "My work is all about motion."

"It's funny you should say that," Trieff puts in. She's dressed in sneakers, loose pants, and a striped shirt and peers out from behind large glasses that magnify her eyes into great, liquid pools. "Because mine is about stillness. I never thought about that. It's exactly the opposite."

Trieff paints figures — often Pierrot-like, white-faced — solemnly staring directly out at the viewer.

"It's a little terrifying," a visitor observes, confronting one.

"Imagine making them," Trieff answers tartly.

"I had a show in Oslo," she continues. "A man came in and said, 'I could not live with any of these.' After half an hour, grumbling, looking at the work — who stays in a gallery that long? — he ended up buying one of the more difficult paintings."

Trieff relieves some of the tension of her portraits by painting farm animals. "I have a bunch of sheep that look a hell of a lot like my family," she observes.

"Your family is more goatlike than sheeplike," notes Henry.

She's all about sitting still and looking more deeply at the same thing — which at one point she sums up as "loneliness." He's all about movement and change and what's next. So don't they drive each other crazy?

They answer at the same time.

"Yeah," says Trieff.

"No," says Henry. Then he corrects himself: "Well, not excessively."

Born in Brooklyn and residents of West York's West Village, Henry and Trieff are longtime summer denizens of the Cape and Islands. Both studied with legendary teacher Hans Hofmann at his Provincetown school back in the 1950s; they've been coming ever since.

"Bob and Selina are leaders in the artists community in Provincetown," says Hunter O'Hanian, executive director of the Fine Arts Work Center.

"Both are extremely well-respected artists and have a wide following among younger artists as well as more established artists. They seem to be universally loved."

Henry is the current president of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, leading the efforts to renovate the old building. Both Trieff and Henry teach at FAWC. Henry taught for 30 years at Brooklyn College. Teaching is almost as vital to him as painting: Both force him to think on his feet.

Five years ago, he used his improvisational ability with a pencil to get through the most difficult period the couple had ever faced. Trieff was experiencing problems with walking and balance, so she consulted a neurosurgeon who identified a congenital defect: Knobs on her top two vertebrae were too small, and as a result her skull had actually sunk onto her spine, compressing a nerve. Trieff went into a hospital in New York for two surgeries. In effect, doctors disconnected her skull from her spine, removed a vertebra, and, in Henry's words, "tied the the whole thing up with titanium."

The procedures went well, but Trieff developed pneumonia. Doctors told Henry that she had a 50/50 chance of surviving. They sedated her and put her on a respirator to regulate her breathing. She was out for weeks.

Henry came in every day. And every day, he sketched what he saw. It was his way of coping.

By the time Trieff was well enough to be brought back to consciousness, her muscles had atrophied. She couldn't walk and



Robert Henry made the drawings for "Selina in Hospital" while at his wife's side as she recovered from spinal surgery and pneumonia.

could barely use her hands. Nonetheless, she demanded that Henry bring in paint and gold leaf.

"I thought I had to get back to work to make me feel better," Trieff recalls. "I tried to paint. Burnt sienna, smeared on hospital sheets, looks like blood."

Henry recounts the ordeal in "Selina in Hospital," a booklet he self-published, illustrated with prints from his sketches. He also created a harrowing portfolio of prints, which stand alone without text to show the sense of helplessness and vulnerability the family felt in the face not only of injury and disease but of the machinery of the hospital.

Trieff doesn't remember much of what turned into a three-month hospital stay. "I know about my hospitalization from his book," she says.

In addition to their exhibition, the two are represented by the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, and they display their work in the bay windows of their studio looking out

onto Commercial Street in Wellfleet. And although Trieff was briefly slowed during her health crisis (even now, she continues her rehab in regular visits to the gym), the two keep making art.

"People ask me, 'Are you still painting?'" Trieff says. "That's a very sad question. If I weren't doing it, I'd be out of my head. What would I do?"

She looks up through her glasses, staring like a figure from one of her paintings. "Maybe the threat of death," she says, could stop her. "Even then, I'd go down with a pad."

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