

Putney Post

Summer 2007



A few years ago, an abstract oil painting of three amoebic blobs (see photo) appeared on the second floor landing of the main building. It was signed “W. Kamys 1948.” Nobody seemed to know where it came from and nobody seemed to care that I claimed it for my office wall. For years I wondered who this cool cat Kamys (rhymes with famous) was. A student? A teacher? An extraterrestrial? After all, not everyone was painting like this in 1948. The alumni directory and Google offered no answers, although there was a Kris Kamys ’65 listed as “address needed.”

In the last issue’s Class of ’46 Alumni Notes, Audrey Morris (Adrian’s widow) wrote, “I’d love to hear from Walter Kamys, who taught Adrian and whom he regarded so highly.” Back to Google and—Bingo!—out pops the website of Walter Kamys: Artist in Exile. On the bio page it says, “Teacher, The Putney School, Putney, VT. 1945-46.” And it turns out Walter’s place of exile was 40 minutes down the road in Sunderland, MA. The website? A creation of his son, Kris Kamys ’65, who was kind enough to forward me his dad’s phone number.

“I remember this series,” says Walter when I hand him the painting in his rustic living room. He leans it against the fireplace, under a more recent work. “Look how far my work has come,” he says, noticing the evolution of line, form and

color. “I don’t have any of these early works left.” When I offer to give it back he declines, saying the painting belongs to Putney. Then he invites me upstairs to the studio of the house he designed and built himself.

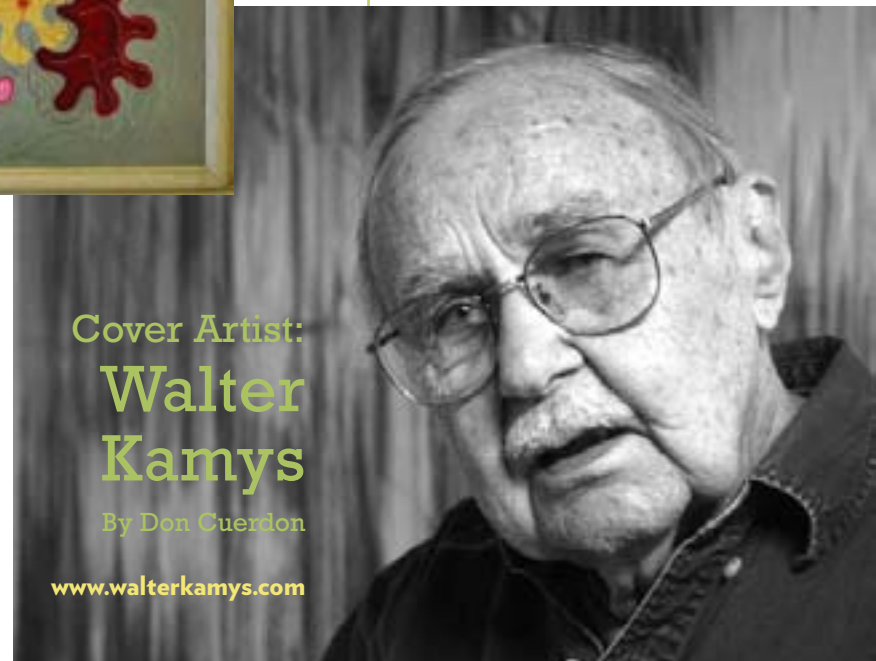
Walter will be 90 years old by the time you read this. The oldest painting in his collection dates from 1935. It’s a 10x14-inch landscape featuring a shed. His newest is sitting, unfinished, on the easel. It’s part of a series of predominantly yellow forms on a black background. “I’m never sure what I’m going to paint,” says Walter. “These new ones probably have more to do with my failing eyesight.” Walter prefers not to name his work, so as not to taint the viewer’s experience with preconceived notions. Ironically, the one we chose for the cover has a name. “It was from a series of the four seasons. I didn’t have to, but I wanted to say which one was which,” he says apologetically.

It’s hard not to be awed by this compact man and his 72-year body of work. His art is abstract, but his approach to life is pragmatic. “I taught to support my painting habit,” he says—which is about all he had to say about a teaching career that spanned instructorship at the George Walter Vincent Art Museum in Springfield, professorship at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and directorship of the Art Acquisition Program, also at UMass. Oh, and 18 months at The Putney School.

“It was like being on an island of incredibly talented and intelligent people,” says Walter of his time here, comparing it to Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. “I remember when Mrs. Hinton introduced me to the school during assembly. ‘Mr. Kamys?’ she said, ‘What will you be teaching in art class?’ ‘Painting,’ I said. There was a pause,

quest to become unencumbered by his art school training. “Meeting and working with the surrealists was an awakening and a revelation to the creative spirit.” But that period of camaraderie was short-lived, and Walter all too soon had to return to his working life in the U.S. “It seems I’ve always been in exile,” he says, without a trace of remorse.

“It’s what gets me out of bed in the morning,” says Walter of his painting. He all but gave up



Cover Artist:
**Walter
Kamys**

By Don Cuerton

www.walterkamys.com

as if she expected more. ‘And what else will you be teaching, Mr. Kamys?’ ‘Drawing,’ I said. I didn’t know what else to say.”

Before coming to Putney, Walter traveled to Mexico on the James Nelson Raymond Traveling Fellowship to study with the surrealists of the 1940s. He’ll drop names if you press him (Gordon Onslow Ford, Roberto Matta, Marcel Duchamp, et. al.). This guy has been around the block in his

showing and selling his work years ago, when he became old enough to have to choose between marshalling his energy into doing his art or to promoting his art. “I know the value of a buck, but I don’t worship money,” he says. “I can sell this painting. What would I do then? Look at my money? I’d rather have the painting to look at.”

Maybe that moniker should read, “Walter Kamys: Artist in Paradise.”