



The Portuguese Bend Artist Colony pictured, standing, Dan Pinkham, Rick Humphrey, Tom Redfield, Kevin Prince, and sitting, Vicki Pinkham, Steve Mirich, and Amy Sidraire

'In defense of beauty'

by Mark McDermott

Leave it to a group of painters to pick a landslide area as a place to make their stand.

A painter's gift, after all, has less to do with common sense and more to do with the possession of uncommon audacity. It is a trait that confers an ability to escape the humdrum confines of the temporal world: the artist takes transience and makes something that lasts, giving us all eyes for beauty.

So perhaps it should come as little surprise that a home in the Portuguese Bend slide area, where four decades ago dozens of houses slid towards the ocean and their destruction, is the hub around which a group of seven painters are trying to build a lasting legacy. The home belongs to painters Dan and Vicki Pinkham and the group is the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony. They are a group of plein-air painters whose common purpose, aptly described by Irvine Museum Director Jean Stern, is to do far more than "just to paint pretty pictures."

The group is making a stand on behalf of the land they are painting. They are working towards the preservation of the Portuguese Bend area not only within a body of artistic work - one that will one day be housed in a

The work of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony will be preserved for generations to come when Dan and Vicki Pinkham's house becomes a museum. The question now is how much of Portuguese Bend itself will be preserved.

museum in what is now the Pinkham's home - but also in a much more direct, immediate sense. Since 1997, the artists have held an annual art show benefiting the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, a community group whose mission is to preserve the peninsula's remaining wild beauty.

This year's art show, which opens June 25 at the Malaga Cove Library, comes at the most important point in the history of the Land Conservancy. The elements are in place for a monumental conservation deal that would create a 1500-acre Portuguese Bend Nature Preserve: two developers are in negotiations

with the PVPLC to sell parcels totaling 600 acres of land; the city of Palos Verdes has agreed to make a gift of the coastal areas encompassing Abalone and Inspiration Points; land near the landside is available at very low prices; and matching dollars are available from state and federal conservation funds that would cover 75 percent of the \$30 million in total acquisition costs.

The catch is that a significant part of the deal has to come together in less than 100 days. The Conservancy needs \$4 million by Sept. 15 in order to meet the deadline set by developer Barry Hon, who three years ago agreed to sell land on which he had originally intended to build a golf course. Thus far, only \$1.2 million has been raised towards that goal.

Hon has made no secret of his impatience. As he noted in a short documentary made by the Conservancy, he is 66 years old and wants the issue settled before he dies. "We are getting antsy, frankly," he said. "If this deal does not happen soon, we are going to move on."

A sign on Hon's desk said all that needs to be said about his disposition regarding the slow-moving deal. "Happiness," it said, "is a positive cash flow."

"We have to come up with our share now," said Barbara Dye, executive director of the Conservancy. "We've lined up all the rest. I do not think that this combination will come again. This is our chance."

"It's an opportunity that has taken 17 years to get to," said Bill Ailor, founder of the PVPLC and president of its board of directors. "We sure don't want to miss it."

So what do seven painters have to do with raising millions of dollars? They aren't out directly soliciting contributions, yet it is less likely that the community would be on the cusp of preserving Portuguese Bend were it not for the role played by the artist colony. Their annual shows have raised money for the Conservancy's day-to-day operations, thereby helping the organization to focus its own fundraising efforts on actual conservation funds.

Even more essential has been the art the painters have produced. The colony, which along with the Pinkhams includes Rick Humphrey, Steve Mirich, Kevin Prince, Tom Redfield, and Amy Sidraïne, has created an astonishingly rich and varied painterly record of Portuguese Bend in its many sublime hues and rugged details. Few places on the face of the Earth have been subject to such an outright force of artistic passion.

"We have become," said painter Amy Sidraïne, "a voice for that land."

It is no coincidence that some of the Conservancy's most ardent supporters are also collectors of the colony's paintings. To walk through one of their exhibits at the Malaga Cove library is to feel fresh amazement with a place you may have thought you already knew. In each painting - whether it shows a bean field or a sunset, a lone tree or a tumult of waves and rock - one's perception is renewed.

Elaine Adams, executive director of the California Art Club, said that the work of the Portuguese Bend colony offers a deeper look at what is in danger of being lost through development.

"Art can capture that state of being focused on the land," said Adams. "I think the artists bring out the poetry of the environment. The community there is so fortunate to have these painters doing the work they are doing - there aren't many artists so focused on their immediate environment....What fun it is to have an artist's colony in your own backyard."

Stern, a leading scholar on the history of plein-air painting in California,

said such artists are ideally suited for a conservation effort because of their fascination with the very land conservationists are trying to protect.

"An artist can demonstrate the beauty of a piece of land that is frequently overlooked," he said. "People may drive along Portuguese Bend and never notice. 'My goodness, this is a painting, right here, where I drive past every day, and I have never thought how beautiful it is'. ...That's an important part of the union between painters painting and people viewing a painting."

Adams pointed to the role painters historically played in land conservation. The creation of the very first national park, Yellowstone, occurred in 1872 partly because the paintings Thomas Moran completed the previous year were brought back to the nation's Capital - in fact, Congress bought his *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* for what was then the large sum of \$10,000 only three months after the painting was used to help persuade it to preserve the land from development. Years later, the paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Hill helped inspire the movement that resulted in the protection of Yosemite Valley as a national park.

Stern said that while the Portuguese Bend painters concerns are local, the impact of their work with the Conservancy is potentially far-reaching. He noted that as Dan Pinkham's work steadily gains wider acclaim in the art world, it also brings increasing attention to the colony and its efforts at land conservation.

"He has that kind of national presence that is very important, not only to his own career but to the entire group," Stern said. "Because the more individual attention he receives, the more the group will have exposure, and the more the message of the Conservancy will be heard - even though it is a local issue and small compared to the rest of the country, the model is repeated over and over."

The relationship between the Conservancy and the artists began one day in 1996 when Bill Ailor was hiking with a group at Portuguese Bend and ran across Rick Humphrey painting "en plein air." Ailor and Humphrey, who knew each from working together in the aerospace industry, had a short conversation about the importance of saving such a unique open space. Humphrey remarked at what a feast of color the place

Portuguese Bend Artists cont. on page 20

Tepus profile cont. from page 11

All the flags in the city are replaced right before June 14th, Flag Day, which also marks the date the SPD starts to prepare for the Fourth of July celebration.

"Some of the services we provide for the city are basic, and the people here are so appreciative of it. Little things like putting up a new flag on opening day of baseball. People will come by and say, 'thanks,'" says Tepus. "It's great. But I just want them to know that it's a crew effort. The Streets and Parks Department has always been there for the Fourth of July event. It's a busy and worthwhile working-holiday for all of us." **PEN**

Portuguese Bend Artists cont. from page 17

was for painting, and suggested that perhaps painters could do something to help the Conservancy.

Humphrey called Dan Pinkham shortly thereafter. The two had grown up together on the Peninsula and had both been painting since their childhood in the 1960s (many of their early paintings, in fact, depict places that have since been developed). Pinkham had become a full time artist and an informal group had already formed around him - one that included all the members of what would become the colony.

The Portuguese Bend Artist Colony formally came together for a group exhibit the following year. In the eight years since, Ailor said, the group helped bring many new supporters to the Conservancy.

"That is what we hoped they would do," he said. "People associate beauty with different means of expression... I think their work has brought in a whole different community appreciation of the open spaces in Palos Verdes, which has been perfect for us."

Jim Cheney is among those new supporters. He came to the Conservancy through paintings he had collected from the Portuguese Bend painters, some which he purchased long before the painters had formed a colony. Cheney became so enamored of the work he collected - "It brings open space into your house," he said - that he was drawn closer to the land itself. On several occasions, he hiked to places depicted in the works, places he'd never before considered visiting on foot.

Cheney said that his appreciation of the artists' work has also led him to a fuller realization of how vulnerable the area is to change. Some of the places in paintings he has collected have already been developed. As much as he hopes the conservation effort is successful, Cheney said he also knows that much of what the painters have captured may one day exist only on canvas.

"They are painting the Peninsula as it is now, and it is bound to continue to change and be developed, and there just won't be many free spaces left," he said. "In the future, those paintings that depict what is here now are just going to be priceless."

Anne Bauer is another art collector who supports the Land Conservancy. She said that the paintings she has collected have changed the way she looks at the land around her.

"We do have a small ocean view, and you see a different landscape every day from our house," she said. "Every day, you see something different and you look at it through different eyes. You look out the window, and it frames a certain perspective and you kind of think, 'I would like to have that painted.'"

Bauer said the community is fortunate to live in the presence of a group of painters who are helping their neighbors see - and hopefully save - the beauty of Portuguese Bend.

"That they are willing to give so much back to help preserve the natural beauty of the Peninsula is amazing," Bauer said. "I think they are preserving a legacy for all of us with their art."

Stern has also collected works from several members of the Portuguese Bend group. As an art historian, he said it is always difficult to judge which painters will be remembered generations from now. He said that the colony's output is of such high quality that he does suspect that the group is indeed creating an artistic legacy that will long be remembered.

But Stern also suggested that the time has come for the group to create an exhibit that takes the message of Portuguese Bend to a wider audience.

"The quality is there, and the dedication is certainly there," he said. "What I'd love to see them do is organize an exhibit that would get to

Portuguese Bend Artists

cont. from page 20

more people...Certainly, their art is worthwhile for a larger audience. I'd like to see them spread their message as artists and conservationists."

The Pinkhams have recently made a decision that will secure the legacy of the group in another way. Their home, the former gatehouse to the Vanderlip Estate, will become a museum that will house paintings by the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony long after the painters themselves are gone.

The Pinkhams purchased the home seven years ago only weeks before it was scheduled for demolition. The building, which was among those damaged by the landslide, had sat empty and roofless for 11 years. Pinkham said he used to glance at the dilapidation as he passed the house on the road.

"I used to say to myself, 'I feel sorry for the poor guy who owns that place! That's the truth, because it looked like such a huge undertaking."

Just as the house was about to be dismantled for its ultimate demise, the Pinkhams decided to take a look inside. The state of disrepair was so complete that they made the decision that it had passed the point of no return. But in a moment that Pinkham describes as "divine intervention" a few days afterwards - even as Vicki was already at LAX on her way out of the country in her job as a stewardess - both he and Vicki simultaneously made a decision that they would purchase the home.

Only afterwards did they discover that the home, built in 1926, is a replica of the 16th century Italian chapel that Michelangelo used as a studio. In the years since, the Pinkhams lovingly restored the house and the gardens that surround it. The home became the gathering place for the artist colony as they worked to create an even larger legacy by helping preserve Portuguese Bend itself.

"All of a sudden we started saying, 'God, this is bigger than we are,' Pinkham said. "This is turning out to be more than we dreamed of. It's kind of taken its natural direction...Now, I don't think we can get out of the way of this thing, because I think it was what we were meant to do."

Painter Tom Redfield said that the Pinkhams decision to make the home a permanent home for the colony's paintings - or as permanent

Portuguese Bend Artists

cont. on page 32

Portuguese Bend Artists cont. from page 31

as a home on a landside can be, anyway – has helped solidify the group's legacy.

"They are going to take a bit of time, a bit of place, a bit of history, and make it something lasting by what they are doing," he said. "Because people will come and go, but in this time, place, and era, we were the painters. It won't pass on. It will live on through what they are creating."

Pinkham hopes a 100 years from now, when people are shuffling through the art museum on Portuguese Bend, a legacy will have been created that is not limited to the paintings that hang on its walls. Hopefully, he said, the painters can be remembered as part of a community that had the wisdom to defend and preserve the beauty in which it had the privilege to live. Their legacy as painters, then, would also be visible to anyone as they step outside the museum doors.

"It just kind of turned out we were here at the time when our paintings and our collective vision as painters could be a vehicle for the bigger picture – for the preservation of open space and for what we feel the character of this Peninsula is," Pinkham said. "It is the quality of the open space and quality of personal experience people have when they come on this side of the Hill.

"The beauty," he added, after a pause. *PEN*