



*Tribal Nocturne*, oil on canvas, 55" x 50"

## Ever young at art

by donna scaglione

### "I've got stuff under the bed!"

So says John Grillo at the beginning of a recent afternoon visit. Grillo is a prolific artist best known for his large-scale abstract expressionist paintings. The Wellfleet artist's work as a so-called "action painter" began several years before Jackson Pollack's splattering and dripping techniques blurred the boundaries of contemporary art.

At 92, Grillo spends most days painting in his home studio, experimenting with different strokes, media, and framing. As a result, he has canvases in every room of the large, rambling house overlooking Duck Creek in Wellfleet that he shares with his wife, Kathy. When he says he has paintings under his bed, he isn't lying.

His own work and that of contemporaries Alex Katz, Michael Loew, and Franz Kline crowd the walls and doors. Murals, including a brightly painted autobiographical story depicting Grillo as a sailor, color the outside rear of his house and a side of his garage. The property is a homage to a painting life that has often defied labels. Seventy-four years since he enrolled in the Hartford Art School to learn portrait and landscape painting, Grillo is still challenged by the canvas which teases him to paint something new that intrigues him. And he is still game.

"The thing is what kind of stroke you'll make," he says. "You try something different from what you've done before, or you do something you learned. The more different ways you work, the more exciting it is to me."

These days, after suffering a stroke and undergoing surgery, Grillo walks with a paint-spattered cane as he takes a visitor around his property and reflects on his art and life. Grillo's work has long been regarded by critics as innovative and alive. From his early portraits as a



*Three Sculptures*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"

*Greta*, oil on canvas, 30" x 56"

young artist to the famed abstract *Yellow Paintings* of the 1950s and 1960s; from his vivid figurative work of the 1980s to his *Marilyn Series* of 2000, this former student of Hans Hofmann has always been relentless and fearless in his art. "I've never worked for too long in the same way," he explains. "It doesn't matter which style you take. What matters is whether it gets you interested and you have something to say."

Grillo's paintings always say a lot, like those in his recent solo show *Influences* at the Cape Cod Museum of Art. A gallery full of marvelous, mammoth canvases seemed to leap off the walls, all sprawling orange and purple nudes, grinning tribal figures in neon colors, and whimsical cavorting creatures.

Since the 1950s, Grillo has had numerous prestigious shows all around the country. In 1967, he was appointed to the art faculty at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, his "first real job," he says. He remained there teaching and painting until 1991. Over the years, his paintings have adorned the walls of numerous high-profile museums including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Brooklyn Museum. He retired to Wellfleet, returning to Cape Cod 40 years after first studying in Provincetown with Hans Hofmann.

Still displaying the energy that emanates from all his works, Grillo likens his love of painting to an addiction. "I'm like an alcoholic," he says. "I'm addicted to painting."

**John Grillo is represented by The Cove Gallery, Wellfleet, MA, 508-349-2530, [www.covegallery.com](http://www.covegallery.com).**

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