

# PEYTON WRIGHT

237 East Palace Avenue  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

800 879-8898  
505 989-9888  
505 989-9889 Fax  
fineart@peytonwright.com

## John Grillo

(1917-2014)



*John Grillo, Wellfleet, MA, 2010*  
Photo by Charles Fields

**“Abstract painting is on a level with music. It’s a physical outburst from your whole being. It’s not the idea that is created and then you start painting. It’s always a challenge to shape something from nothing, to do the impossible.”**  
*John Grillo, August, 2001.*

John Grillo (1917 - 2014) was a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, working alongside Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still from 1946 to 1947 at the California School of Fine Arts (now San Francisco Art Institute) to found the movement also known as the New York School.

Grillo’s explosive drip paintings—projectile splatterings on cast-off objects as well as other more conventional supports—chronologically parallel those of Jackson Pollock, though he reserved his most radical experimentation for the media of gouache and watercolor, creating work that exudes a sensuous delight in the manipulation of paint in radiant, almost phosphorescent color.

John Grillo was born July 4, 1917, the elder of three sons to Sicilian immigrant parents, in the small industrial town of Lawrence, Massachusetts. As a child his first influences were from within the family, since his father had painted and sculpted. The 1930s brought the family to Hartford, Connecticut, where John would frequent the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, drawing inspiration from its portrait collection.

He began taking art courses at the Hartford Art School in Connecticut, where he became acquainted with modernist masterworks by Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró at the nearby Wadsworth Atheneum. In 1937, he collaborated with Alexander Calder and Eugene Berman in the theatre production, “Paper Ball: Cirque des Chiffonniers” for the Hartford Arts Festival.

He painted the poor and the working class and in 1939 he painted a large mural depicting a family of three sitting at a dining table with no food on their plates (based possibly on a lithograph by Daumier). During this period his major interests included the “Ashcan School”, Luks, Robert Henri, Thomas Hart Benton and Reginald Marsh, together with the works of the old masters.

In 1944 Grillo enlisted in the Navy and was sent to Okinawa in the South Pacific where he continued to paint landscapes and scenes of life in the service. At that time he was inspired by a reproduction of Robert Motherwell’s collage, “Pancho Villa.” This soon led to his flowing and spontaneous abstractions, some of which were included in a post-war exhibition entitled “Soldier Art” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Grillo disembarked in San Francisco and enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts, a hotbed of experimental abstraction in America with a faculty and guest lecturers that included Elmer Bischoff, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Diebenkorn, Claire Falkenstein, Stanley William Hayter, Hassel Smith, David Park, Clyfford Still, Man Ray, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and Ad Reinhardt.

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Douglas MacAgy, the California School of Fine Arts director, remembered Grillo as that “fiery young sailor” and gave him a studio - and a lot of free reign. In Susan Landauer’s “John Grillo, the San Francisco Years: Art of California”, May 1990, she wrote: “Short on art supplies, Grillo used whatever was at hand. He threw cocoa and coffee grounds on sheets of paper to make speckled abstract patterns, tying the compositions together with washes and linear designs.”

Equally responsible for the school’s energized atmosphere were the veterans flooding the classrooms after the war, and Grillo epitomized this new breed of mature and independent-minded student on an equal footing with the instructors. Grillo’s free wheeling, unorthodox abstractions, begun while stationed on Okinawa, served as an important catalyst for many artists, notably faculty member Diebenkorn, who credited Grillo with liberating his style.

In the summer of 1947, he studied with Rothko and created a sizable amount of work. He was given his first one-man show at the Daliel Gallery in Berkeley and received the Samuel S. Bender Award for painting, the funds of which enabled him to continue painting at the school.

“Although he was only there for two short years, Grillo played a seminal role in the San Francisco branch of a movement that would revolutionize American Art. Today, Grillo is acknowledged as perhaps the first and purest ‘action painter’ on the West Coast and one of the most influential painters of San Francisco’s school of Abstract Expressionism” (Thomas Albright, “Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,” 1985.)

Toward the end of 1947, Grillo returned to the East Coast, where he was initially welcomed into New York’s avant-garde. Sam Hunter, reviewing his solo exhibition of San Francisco work at the Artist’s Gallery for the New York Times in 1948, singled Grillo out as a leading figure, writing: “His painting acknowledges no allegiance to tradition, exists in a moment of intensity of explosive abstraction.” He was also selected for the signal show *15 Unknowns* at the Kootz Gallery in 1950. From 1948 to 1951, Grillo studied with Hans Hofmann, whose love of dazzling color matched his own. Though he became a favored student of Hofmann, who purchased one of Grillo’s paintings for his own collection, the connection may have ultimately hurt his career, positioning him as a second-generation Hofmann disciple.

However, Grillo was not a slavish copier - a trait that Hofmann appreciated.

“I would do the damndest and be rebellious and go against his principles and I would just do my own thing,” Grillo said in a 1980s interview. “I was extremely shocked and quite pleased that he liked my work so much that I had buyers in some of the students that wanted to buy my painting.”

In New York, Grillo’s friends included Willem deKooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Edward Dugmore, Alfred Jensen, Nanno de Groot, Lester Johnson, to name a few.

In the 1950s he experimented with symbolism, action painting and grid-like paintings consisting of small squares based on Hofmann’s teachings. During the early 1950s the Olsen Foundation acquired some of Grillo’s watercolors and paintings for a retrospective collection that traveled to museums and colleges throughout the United States. Works were also being acquired in this period by major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Grillo’s body of work remained consistent in reveling in high-keyed color and lush surfaces. Critic April Kingsley remembered of his “Yellow Abstractions” exhibited at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1961 that they “indulged his love of pigment for its own sake to the fullest. The canvases and huge collages . . . seem hedonistic and full of joy as the best of Hofmann’s and are even more sensuous.” Grillo’s paintings—whether figurative or abstract—have elicited adjectives such as Rubenesque and he has been called “the Renoir of Abstract Expressionism.”

One critic brought up Turner, while another waxed eloquently about Venetian luminosity. Exhibitions of these works appeared at the Howard Wise Gallery, Bertha Schaefer Gallery and the Grace Borgenicht Gallery in New York City.

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*John Grillo at an exhibition, ca. 1962 or 1963. from left: Nancy Grillo, John's second wife; unknown woman; John Grillo, with cigarette. Paul Burlin is to the right.  
Courtesy The Grillo Revocable Trust*

During the mid-1960s, Grillo was artist-in-residence at the University of California, Berkeley and received a Ford Foundation Grant to produce lithographs at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1964. Returning to New York, he began working in three dimensions and produced fired clay and lost-wax pieces cast in bronze. Anthropomorphic in character, one of these works was acquired by the Guggenheim Museum for its permanent collection.

In 1965, while spending the summer in a Maine farm house, Grillo painted on found objects such as bent wood chairs, antique Victrolas, headboards, farm implements, a sauerkraut maker, and his own easel and palette. He did a series of geometric etchings, paintings and silk screens from 1967-1971. During the 1970s he explored several series, including the "Kaleidoscope" set of abstract landscapes, and colorful figurative and erotic paintings and lithographs.

In 1967, Grillo was appointed Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he taught for 25 years. He served as an inspiration to his students, initiating participatory events such as mural projects in public places, thematic performances and arts carnivals, which later led to his "Circus Theme," a series of paintings produced from 1981-83.

Having traveled to South America in the early 1980s, the mythology and religion of the Colombian Indians became the theme of paintings and charcoal drawings depicting Eldorado. He also created large-scale vibrant paintings based on the tango theme. "Grillo researched the origin of the dance from a form of social protest to a fashion of the times. He used the music of the dance to guide his art works" (Ellen Rubenstein, Cove Gallery, 1998). This theme was later revisited in 1998.

Uniquely, some of his circus and tango paintings were painted on both sides of the canvas and hung from the ceiling, to be viewed from both sides.

In 1991, Grillo moved to Wellfleet in Cape Cod, joining the close-knit art colony of the Provincetown area. He maintained a studio and continued to paint on a daily basis, reinventing and evolving his artwork.

In September, 2014 he had a retrospective exhibition, John Grillo: Six Decades, Paintings, Prints and Drawings, 1945-2005 at the Herter Art Gallery at University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

His work currently shows at galleries and museums in New York City, Cape Cod Mass., Boston, MA, Chicago, New Mexico and California.

Over the length of his career, he had over 85 one-man and 100 group shows. His paintings and sculptures are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the British Museum in London, among others.

*Biographical sources: Jamieson Grillo; Susan Landauer*