

# PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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# Anna Poor

## LIKE IMMIGRANTS, MAROONED IN SINKING BOATS

By Christopher Busa

IN AN ALCOVE ALL ALONE, adjacent to the entrance to the Schoolhouse Gallery, Anna Poor's most recent work was displayed last summer in the cloistered space of a darkly painted room in faint illumination, the light seeming to flicker and flutter, as if seen under torchlight. In the center of the room, a long table displayed about a dozen salt-fired ceramic sculptures, glazed with a glassy gleam, the surfaces inflected with glints of sharp light. I was reminded of an altar in a sanctuary where each item placed on it was supremely significant, hallowed, and precious. Running along a side wall, a long, narrow table was host to smaller sculptures encased in bell jars, isolating the space around them.

Unlike earlier work by Poor—large pieces in cast bronze and carved wood totems—her ceramics are strikingly diminutive, considering Poor's gift for transforming vulnerability into a source of power.

Anna told me, when we met at the gallery for a chat, "The scale has to do with my desire to control the environment around them, the air space between the figures. I wanted them to be human-size only in the sense they were able to fit in my arms and let me embrace and nurture them."

Poor's piece titled *Pieta*—the title evoking the poignant smooth marble sculpture carved by Michelangelo—depicts a soulful loon, alert in alarm, looking searchingly down at her small chick while its broken wing flops lifelessly across her embrace. Parallel striations and linear scratches function as shading to indicate contours, bumps, and hollows, offering opportunities for her creatures to twist into turbulent contortions: embracing, quarreling, sleeping, eating. Appendages—arms, legs, toes—articulate and enact emotional dilemmas of mythic dimension, suggested by such titles as *Cain and Abel*, *Satyr*, and *Atlas*. Often her titles announce the conflict taking place when two creatures discover themselves bound in a shared trauma.

In *Birds in Boat*, two loons, listing in a too-small dory, seem on the verge of sinking into the rolling waves beneath. The waves, the dory, and the loons are integrated and distinguished by the pebbled grain of the salt-fired glaze, a texture akin to an orange peel. This is created when common salt is poured into ports on top of the kiln when the flame is hottest, causing a chemical reaction which releases a white cloud of sodium. This bonds with the silica in the clay, dispersing and swirling irregularly around the sculpture, leaving uneven directional markings, like traces that shape parabolic sand dunes. Something combusts, cools, and then arrests the history of the motion that made them. The final form functions as a physical equivalent of memory. The authenticity and individuality



*Birds in Boat*, 2017, ceramic, 8 by 9 by 6 inches COLLECTION OF TERU SIMON

of each sculpture is plainly evidenced by the highly original depiction of iconic and sacred moments.

Anna Poor's aesthetic impulse evolved out of the unique ethos she experienced while growing up as the granddaughter of Henry Varnum Poor (1887–1970), a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement in America. The movement developed out of its British origins, articulated by the writings and lectures of John Ruskin and the ennobling architectural embellishments

of William Morris. Ruskin and Morris saw up close, truly intimately, that the joy of making something beautiful was being stolen from the genuine craftsman by the numbed automaton functioning in a large factory as a mere notch in mass production.

When Henry Varnum Poor returned from soldiering in France as the Second World War concluded, he recalled the stone French farmhouses with steep gables, clumped in self-sufficient isolation, snug and at peace. Stones used in





*Pieta*, 2018, ceramic, 14 by 8 by 8 inches  
COLLECTION OF BRIAN KOLL AND DAVID ALTARAC



Installation views, Schoolhouse Gallery, 2018

the structures had been pulled from nearby fields to clear pastures for planting. In this pastoral image of utopia, the artist constructed a house on South Mountain Road in Rockland County, New York. Notable neighbors included Maxwell Anderson, whose house was designed and built by Henry. Prominent in his time, Henry gained fame as a designer, painter, and ceramist. He considered himself an artist and craftsman who had a hobby of building houses.

“Crow House,” the name of the house he built for himself and his family, was a decades-long work-in-progress, attended by a flying chorus of cawing crows. He devised a sturdy sled to slide rocks and timber down the side of a nearby mountain. Clay for his painted ceramic ceremonial plates came from a small quarry on his property. He ground his own pigments for his bold Fauvist paintings, tiles, and medallions. He diverted a creek to create a sluice to power a millhouse. In 2007, Crow House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Growing up in Crow House as the daughter of Henry’s son Peter, Anna spent much time investigating the idiosyncrasies of this wholly handmade house, with spiraling stone staircases that twisted around hidden alcoves. Dinner plates were painted with the faces of family

and friends. Handles for kitchen cabinets were all hand-carved. In one bathroom, there was a mural depicting a nude likeness of her grandmother. Domestic intimacy shared space with active studio production. When the demand for his pottery threatened to turn his house into a factory, the artist decided to continue to work at his own pace, and just charge more for the pieces he produced. He said he made pottery for the pleasure of decorating it.

Poor’s creatures represent vulnerable victims, whose helpless plight pains the artist. It is pain, however, that powers the making of the victim into a sort of talisman for the artist, protecting her by warding off dangers. Her impulse is highly original, and is as complicated as a mother’s love for her offspring. I recall how grieved Poor was when, shortly after 9/11, the Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed a pair of enormous Buddhas—towering at 188 feet tall and enduring for seventeen centuries—carved into limestone cliffs honeycombed with tunnels and dwellings, where the community could live in proximity to their spiritual source. Here Poor discovered “the surest way to debilitate a people is to attack their art and deprive them of their symbols.”

Poor experiences a sense of grief in response to the torturous dilemmas of her writhing

creatures. On the back of one piece, she has etched the words “I’m sorry.”

The double-jointed necks of her loons possess S-curves that twine and grasp or elongate and stretch in yearning and aspiration. When many of her creatures are displayed in a grouping, the turbulent writhing they depict can be compared with that of the ancient Greek Laocoön Group, which was authenticated by Michelangelo and is installed in the Vatican.

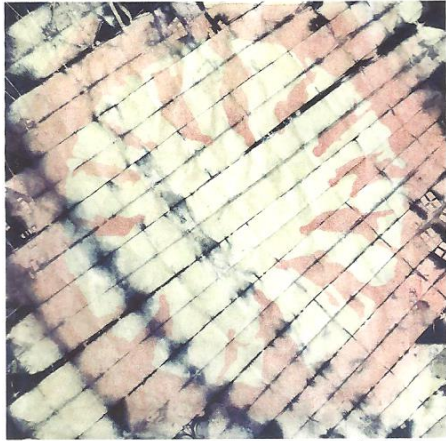
Poor’s sculpture is astonishing in its compression of extreme antagonism, just as Laocoön and his two young sons are depicted in a moment of the greatest exertion, with blood-bulging veins struggling against strangulation by serpentine snakes.

This classical evocation of the beauty and dignity of a hero’s struggle is something Poor’s long-necked loons share. But unlike most classical artists, Poor looks at the world of cultural history and contemporary life from the point of view of a woman and a mother. This is the source of the anti-heroic direction in Poor’s sculpture. There is no rage or anger, she said, only, overwhelmingly, “terror.”

We had talked about Poor’s anthropomorphic view of her creatures, mentioning Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and Spiegelman’s *Maus*. To make



the horror bearable, to distance and separate, Poor uses animals in place of people: "I try to make visible the feelings that I have in the studio, which are influenced by what is going on in the world. That's why there are those rowboats stuck like immigrants, marooned in boats without ports. Parents not being able to take care of their children. The family of a man does not have enough food. Each piece is a little narrative. There is a glimmer of hope because we don't yet know what will become of these creatures. We don't know what the future holds.



*Transition, 23" x 23", ink and indigo, 2019*

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Anna Poor, c. 1965, with her grandfather, aunt Anne Poor, and Katherine Deming; his hand-made plates are on the table and the wall, and life masks are mounted above the bookcase.



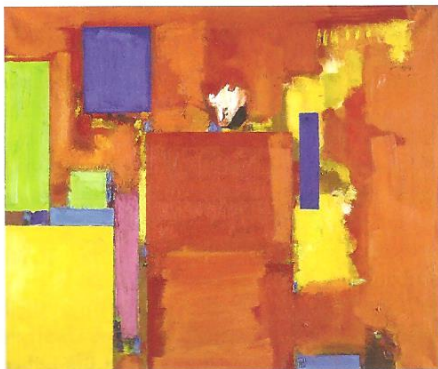
Henry Varnum Poor outside Crow House, 1942



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"That's why they don't have much facial detail. I was trying to show movement using the qualities of the medium. It's blurry. Faces are blurry, almost invisible. It's the shutter effect of trying to capture movement and fix it in sculpture. The power comes into being when the loss is tangible, and then it is revealed as valued and worth saving.

"Making them, enjoying the beauty while experiencing trauma," Poor said, "I feel so vulnerable." ❏

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is founder and editorial director of Provincetown Arts Press.