

# William Papaleo, Painter

## LAYERED LIFE, LAYERED WORK

By E. J. Kahn III

**A**RTIST WILLIAM PAPALEO was Bill, actually Billy, when we first met. That was decades ago, when our fathers—Joseph, known to us as Joe, and E.J. Jr., recognized as Jack, both writers, both finding success—would spend summers in Truro, a genteel mosaic of tennis in the afternoons, cocktails at sunset, lobster and swordfish on the dinner table, literary and gallery gossip in the air. We'd see each other on the local courts—my father's and his neighbor's, Lee Falk, the creator of *The Phantom* and *Mandrake the Magician*—and, before Bill had turned twenty, were drawn as partners in an end-of-season doubles tournament on the Falk court. Our final match together, perhaps for the championship, was interrupted by the news that, at the end of South Pamet Road (where we were competing), a Ballston Beach dune had collapsed. At least one young boy, who'd been playing with friends on it, was trapped under the sand and clay avalanche.

I was the editor of the *Provincetown Advocate* at the time and left as quickly as I could. We may have finished the match, but neither Bill nor I remember. The boy on the beach died. I wrote a story. The Park Service soon thereafter prohibited any climbing on the National Seashore dunes. And Bill—as he would tell me decades later—went home and, that night, dreamt. “In the dream,” he recalled last year, “I was one of the kids and at the same time I was watching myself die and become the sand dune. The last image of the dream was my awareness of being the highlight of light on the last grain of sand that I had become and at the same time a consciousness that was outside observing that reality. It was sort of like a Blake poem, seeing the world in a grain of sand.” He would say, decades later, that this epiphany of perception would inform both his decision to become an artist and the art itself.

Over the years that passed, our paths would occasionally cross, but it wasn't until 2008 that we fully reconnected. By then, Bill had established himself on two continents—as a politically and socially active painter of working-class figures set in gritty Italian cities such as Naples and Salerno, and of idyllic landscapes set on Outer Cape Cod and the Amalfi Coast. His work had been collected by museums (Castellammare, Italy, for one), institutions (Banco di Napoli, University of Salerno), nonprofits (The Mountains Restoration Trust, Santa Monica, for example), and exhibited at galleries both here and abroad (the Wohlfarth Galleries of Washington, DC, and Provincetown currently represent him in the States). Our reintroduction took place on Long Nook Road in Truro, where he had set up his easel across the street from the cottage where I was staying. On this warm, sunlit early July afternoon, Bill was carefully applying short, fine brushstrokes in layers of slightly differentiated shades of color to a vision of a stunted pine forest. Two years later, I would see the painter at work again, this time in a Tuscan valley, on a hillside looking over an olive grove toward the tiny village of Pozzo, where—over the course of five days—he produced nine oil sketches and finished paintings in a dizzying burst of creativity.

As we spent more time together, I proposed a conversation that would touch on his life's journey and his work. The interview that follows has taken place in several settings—on the Cape, in New York, by Skype from Naples, and sipping limoncello in the kitchen of a villa in Tuscany. And it begins with a question about his dream in Truro, in the early seventies.

**EJK** *Your dream seems to be focused on light, its illumination, and what that shows. How does that translate into the journey of becoming an artist?*

**WP** The memory of the dream had a very positive effect on me and my future paintings. I began to be aware of an individual essence that was my individual self but also connected to the universe in a dynamic way. This



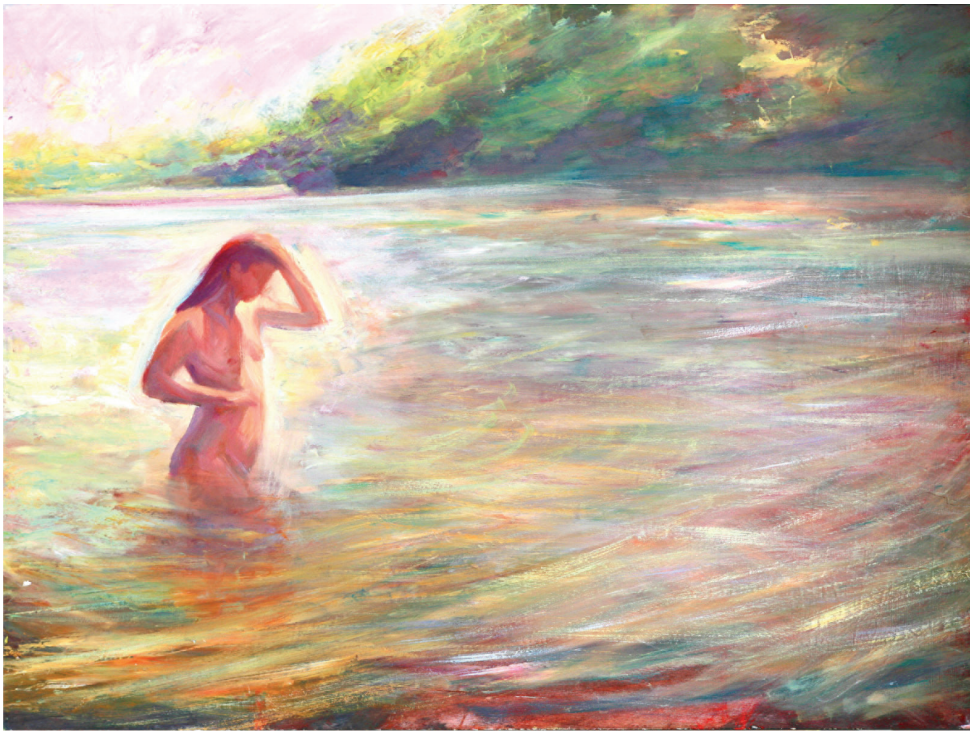
AMALFI COAST ROAD 1 (FIRST PANEL OF TRIPTYCH), 2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 32 BY 24 INCHES, COURTESY WOHLFARTH GALLERIES

resulted also in specific landscapes that related to this experience as well as a generally more mature sense of self. It became a thematic element in my painting. I tried to define it recently, in an essay I wrote for the Fulbright Conference on Italian American Culture at the University of Salerno. What I said was that—although identity is multifaceted, fluid, and expanding as it grows and interacts—there is still the desire to find a unified focus, a center fulcrum, the dot of light that is not transmutable but remains individual and universal at the same time. There remains a search for the home of the soul, that dot in the distance that gives sense to the landscape and its observer. This may play a part in why I choose the long vista, and explore the aerial perspective and the color and light of landscape in the distance, both in my American and Italian work. The big vista as mental expanse and as grounding appeals to me.

**EJK** *When did your commitment to becoming an artist begin?*

**WP** In some respects, when I had the dream it had already begun. When I was a very little kid on the Cape, I began to draw. We were surrounded by artists and writers—our fathers, the sculptor Sidney Simon, many others. I can recall a moment with my father and Carmen Cicero, together out





AFTER THE SWIM, 2007, OIL ON WOOD, 24 BY 32 INCHES, KAHN COLLECTION

on a bank of the Pamet River, where Carmen was painting an abstract landscape. “The air,” he told my father, “has color.” And I saw what he meant. I was fascinated by it. I picked art up again as an adolescent, and—on a trip to California when I was

twenty—first began doing landscapes. I don’t know if there was a “moment,” but it seemed like a natural evolution. I was already interested in light and color, and my father had wanted to be a painter before he became a writer. When I returned, I met Henry Hensche, who ran the Cape Cod School of Art, and studying with him made perfect sense.

**EJK** On your website ([www.williampapaleo.it](http://www.williampapaleo.it)) you highlight a quote from the philosopher Robert Henri, which reads, “Always we would try to tie down the great to our little nationalism, whereas every great artist is a person who has freed themselves from family, nation and race. Every individual who has shown the world that way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a ‘universal’ without patriotism, without home, who has found their people everywhere, a person whom all the world recognizes, accepts, whether they speak through music, painting, words or form.” Does this describe you?

**WP** Henri was the philosophical teacher at the Art Students League of the Ashcan School, the modern realists, so to speak. They seemed, to me, to be honest and genuine, authentic. I agree with Henri on the point he makes that any subject is good and possible as long as you can identify with it and make it yours. I like the way Americans took Impressionism and used it as a way to paint the modern scene, so that it was no longer a style but a technique through which to be in the moment.

That said, the Ashcan School artists were immigrants who came to America, and I’ve done the opposite. My upbringing was comfortable, and the Cape has been a nurturing place for artists. To be real, I decided I had to go out of that milieu. Coming to Italy, I was both fascinated and engaged. I gained both an identity and a social conscience, influenced by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. There was this part of me I had to discover, the Italian in me. As I did, I became more conscious of what was going on in society here, and that evolved into other work. I won a big commission to paint the

shipbuilders in Castellammare, and another to paint an immigrant group.

**EJK** I have read that you refer to yourself as an “American” artist, but it seems that you truly are Italian-American in your work.

**WP** Well, I think it’s fair to say I have an Italian consciousness, whereas most Italians in America have a kind of cultural amnesia. I knew virtually nothing about my roots. I had visited Italy with my family in 1968, when my father had published a well-received collection and had money for our travel, but didn’t realize anything about Italians in America. When Sacco and Vanzetti were killed in 1927, Italians didn’t want to rock the boat. They chose to blend in, forget everything, get a job, fit in.

All the things that Italians today say about the immigrants who are coming into Italy are what Americans said about Italians in the 1920s: “America is going downhill. . . . The Italians will destroy the country. . . . They’re all terrorists, anarchists.” My work touches on the same theme.

I’ve written on my website that we are living in a strange civilization. Our minds and souls are so overlaid with fear, with artificiality, that often we do not even recognize beauty. It is this fear, this lack of direct vision of truth, that brings about all the disaster the world holds—and how little opportunity we give any people for casting off fear, for living simply and naturally. When they do, first of all we fear them, then we condemn them. It is only if they are great enough to outlive our condemnation that we accept them. The series of portraits I titled *Workers* reflects this perspective and the current context in Italy.

**EJK** In *Italian Stories*, a collection of short stories that won an American Book Award in 2002, your father wrote that “there will be no deceit or trickery in this volume, just my screaming voice telling you the truth, and don’t believe that . . . even the truth is hype.” Does your work attempt to “scream the truth”?

**WP** (Laughing) Well, the thing is, *truth* is a dangerous word. I remember Henry Hensche talking about truth, and it was funny. After a year of studying with him and listening to him repeat, over and over, “You’ve got to paint visual truth, visual truth, visual truth,” he changed his message. “The best painters,” he then said, “are the best liars.” Grace Paley, a friend of my father’s, once added, “Stick to the facts, and you won’t write about the truth.” In other words, there has to be something true in what you’re doing. You have to be genuine and true. But we’re dealing with illusions, with fantasy, with imagination. There’s no perfect truth in art.

**EJK** Yet you do go for representational truth in terms of your choice of landscapes and portraits as your subject matter.

**WP** Yes, I want people to relate to my art. I want to communicate, and there has to be some kind of identification with place. García Lorca has made the point, talking about poetry, that one can write a poem about New York City without knowing New York, but to be truthful, the poet must have a lyrical reaction to the city. In other words, it has to be genuine, and that requires work that must be

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done beforehand. When you're in the moment, as an artist, you have to be genuine and create what happens. It's a spontaneous thing that you're not in control of.

Coming to Italy, I spent some time in the north studying church fresco and Renaissance techniques, but the south continued to call and inspire me, like an unconscious memory. Southern Italy has suffered eleven dominations in seven centuries and has the depth of an oppressed people and thus, as a subject, contains a universality despite its provincialism. The best an artist can do, given a new situation, is to produce a lyrical reaction to the environment that confronts him. Preferable to a rendering from the outside or a visual description of a voyage, an inward reflection, with a knowledge of the subject in mind, makes a work that, I hope, is more sincere and original.

**EJK** For me, your landscapes of the Amalfi Coast, Tuscany, and, in particular, the woods, ponds, and beaches of Truro and Wellfleet are the essence of an art that aspires to be genuine and true, but is colored by illusion and fantasy.

**WP** As Corot once said, all his paintings were memories of childhood. But to me, my memories of the Cape of my childhood are pure pleasure, a pure sensual relationship to nature. To re-create that, I have also used nude models in the sun, which is a rarity. At Castle Hill and at other locations in Truro, there's enough privacy. Not very many artists have had the chance to do something like that. In some respects, it's a development that derives from the mud heads of Hawthorne, mud heads that for me became immigrants in Italy. But nude models in the open air, even swimming in the ponds . . . that's the pure sensual freedom that the Cape provides.

**EJK** You've used both pastels and oils in your landscapes.

**WP** I work in pastel, watercolor, and oil, and I do pastels for light studies or if I'm going to a difficult-to-reach place in the mountains. I'll take my pastels if I'm climbing a goat path or the Path of the Gods, where Wagner would go to be inspired. With oils, for the most part, I paint from memory.

**EJK** Your brushstroke technique for your landscape oils, speaking from my admittedly un-expert point of view, seems unusual—textured with what seems to be more than one color in the brushstroke. . . . I'm not describing this well.

**WP** Actually you've picked up on something that isn't exactly a secret, but is a technique. It's taken some time to develop it. On the same brushstroke, to have a prismatic effect, I have more than one color on the brush. When it works, I think it's very successful. But again, those things come from influences. A lot of figurative painters sometimes forget



WORKERS 2, 1994, OIL ON WOOD PANEL, 79 BY 60 INCHES, COURTESY OF CASTELLAMMARE DI STABIA, WORKERS MUSEUM, CASTELLAMMARE DI STABIA, ITALY

the lessons of the abstract painters, which is a focus on the surface. We're at a time now when all these things are emerging.

**EJK** Speaking of emergence, your political conscience and its reflection in your art has resulted in a series of strong, challenging portraits whose subjects you variously describe as Immigrants or Asylum Seekers.

**WP** Those evolved out of my work with Amnesty International, which I'd gotten involved with through the University of Salerno. I did some work with the organization as a translator and as a contributor of artwork for their Giffoni Film Festival, where the Best Directors of a human-rights film received paintings of mine. Through Amnesty International, I was introduced to the politics around immigration in Italy and to several immigrants, whom I arranged to be interviewed. Their stories became monologues that were performed at a multimedia event also featuring my first *Immigrant-Emigrant* paintings. This past year, I created a new series based on old photos of Italian immigrants, and combined these with the old and new immigrants in Italy for a retrospective show in Salerno.

This past February, I'll have had (the interview was conducted prior to the show) a show in Naples at Maschio Angioino, a castle near the City Hall that the mayor—who's hosting and sponsoring the event—often uses for exhibitions. This will have been a mix

of cityscapes—Naples and its workers—and *Immigrant-Emigrant* paintings. There's a revival happening in Naples, a renewal that is built in part on a people's movement addressing city services like garbage removal. The event itself is designed to shine some light on these working classes, and—after twenty-five years—I'm finally seen as one of them, a working painter in Naples, and not a visiting American.

**EJK** Finally, where does 2012 take you and your art?

**WP** Well, I've mentioned the Naples show, of course. And that mixture of images that represents past and present in my Italian experience will be shown again at the Italian Embassy in Washington, DC, in October.

On the Cape I will continue to work on the development of light studies that will include the figure and landscape. I will also be teaching these elements at a Castle Hill workshop in early August, and a painting workshop on the Cilento Coast in the mountains above the sea, in one of the most pristine and natural parts of Southern Italy, in September. I'll also be doing a multidisciplinary workshop on the Amalfi Coast this fall, together with theater director and actor-trainer Sylvia Toone. Returning to the Cape always improves my painting. I can check my progress as I reflect on my lifetime visits here.

At the Calandra Institute in New York, I will be showing *New Immigrant* and *Neapolitan* images. Fred Gardaphe, a professor at Queens College and acting head of Calandra in the city, has been referencing my work in recent lectures on "the new immigrant in Italy."

At a conference sponsored by the Fulbright Foundation, he used my work as an example of the third-generation Italian who has become an immigrant by choice for cultural reasons, and how we work to combat the political, historical, and cultural amnesia many Italian-Americans suffer from today. In a lecture I gave at that conference, I described my artistic and cultural experiments in Italy as being the natural consequence of my experience of the Outer Cape as a sophisticated mixture of art and culture in a natural, sustainable environment. In the future, with my paintings I hope to show that Southern Italy has these possibilities, as well as an ancient culture to preserve. I also hope to continue to return to work and enjoy the Cape, to remember where I am from and remind me how I want to continue. ▢

*E. J. KAHN III—better known as "Terry" in the Pamet Valley—has served as an editor of the late Provincetown Advocate and Boston Magazine, and as a consultant in Washington and New York City, where he lives with his wife, Lesley Silvester.*