



The Portuguese Bend Artist Colony, whose annual art show benefiting the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy opens July 1 at the Malaga Cove Library and runs through July 20. From left to right, Kevin Prince (on the floor), Richard Humphrey (standing), Amy Sidraire (seated), Tom Redfield, Vicki Pinkham, Dan Pinkham, and Stephen Mirich. Photos by David Fairchild

The building of an art colony

by Mark McDermott

Dan and Vicki Pinkham had decided they didn't need the challenge.

It was in the Spring of 1998 and the couple had a good thing going. They lived in a San Pedro condominium, Dan had an art studio on the Peninsula, and they had a specially equipped mobile art studio - a pickup camper with a kitchen, a full shower, and even a small art library - that allowed them to spend six months each year traveling and painting. Vicki still worked part time as a flight attendant, while Dan's reputation as a painter, as well as the price each of his paintings, was steadily rising.

But when the couple learned that the former gatehouse to the Vanderlip estate was about to be demolished, it caught their attention. Even in its state of dilapidation, there was something intriguing about the gatehouse.

Foremost was its location. The gatehouse is on Portuguese Bend, one of the last truly unspoiled stretches of coast anywhere in proximity. The area had become a primary subject for Dan and Vicki, so much so that they had joined with five other painters - Rick

How the Vanderlip estate's gatehouse became the home of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony

Humphrey, Amy Sidraire, Tom Redfield, Kevin Prince, and Stephen Mirich - and formed the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony. Beginning in 1997, the group held an annual show benefiting the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy and its efforts to preserve the very landscapes they were painting.

Mirich, who lived on Kumquat Lane in the Portuguese Bend area, had actually worked on the dismantling of the gatehouse. His landlord, Chuck Himmelwright, had owned the home years ago.

After learning of the gatehouse's imminent demise, Pinkham mentioned to Mirich he'd be curious to see what it looked like inside.

"I've driven by that house for years," he said. "I've always wondered about it."

"Hey," Mirich said. "Why don't we go over

there right now?"

Mirich thought the place might be perfect for the Pinkhams, so together they went and visited the home. Any notions Dan Pinkham had about possibly purchasing the building were immediately dispelled. The high-ceilinged main room - the most distinctive part of the 2,000 square foot home nestled into the hillside along Narcissa Drive, and all that is readily visible from Palos Verdes Drive - was barely held together. It had no roof, plaster, windows, or doors. The ceiling was held up by scaffolding.

Dan, who'd spent some of his younger years working in construction, recognized a nightmare project when he saw one. He couldn't imagine undertaking something of this magnitude and still managing to get any painting done. The home was just too far gone. "It didn't seem I was capable of it," he recalled.

After only a few minutes inside the house, he turned to his wife. "You know what, Vick? I don't think so," he said. "It's a no."

As Mirich remembers, there didn't even seem to be a glimmer of possibility. "Their first comment was, 'What were you thinking?' It was anything but positive."

A funny thing happened after they left the house. That same day, Vicki left for a flight to Tokyo - the route she worked for many years - and Dan was alone working in his studio. He couldn't stop thinking about the house.

"I just didn't feel at peace with the answer no," he said. "So I was wrestling with it. I went over to my desk and pulled out my Bible and decided to sit and read some scripture for some guidance on the direction we should take."

Pinkham, a quietly faithful man, let the Bible fall open and placed his finger on the page. It fell upon Matthew 21, verse 42:

*The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone
This was the Lord's doing
And it was marvelous in our eyes.*

"I decided that's a good enough sign for me," Pinkham said.

At the very same moment, Vicki was on a jet bridge at LAX on her way to her plane. She ran into two other flight attendants she had frequently worked with. They stopped to chat, and said something to Vicki that startled her.

"We heard," one of the women said, "that you are getting a new house." It was particularly odd because Vicki had had no notion of buying a new home, so it was never something she'd ever mentioned to anyone.

"They had no idea," Vicki recalled. "They had just misheard some information."

It struck her as so bizarre she thought she'd better call Dan. He had just finished reading the Bible. They decided, on the spot, to make a bid on the home.

A few weeks later, they received a phone call and learned that their bid had been successful. They'd saved the house from demolition, in fact, by 24 hours. They immediately drove up to Portuguese Bend and were standing in front of the house when an older man on a bicycle stopped to talk with them.

"Oh, you must be the new owners of this place," the man said.

The Pinkhams looked at each other. How did he know?

"Wait a minute," the man continued. "You are that artist guy, aren't you?"

Dan responded that yes, in fact both he and Vicki were artists.

"Well, that was meant to be," the man said.

"What do you mean?"

"You just bought the old chapel."

"What?" Dan said. "This was the gatehouse to the Vanderlip estate."

"Yes, but I'm an historian," he replied. "This was also a copy of a 16th century chapel that Michelangelo used as a studio when he was painting the Sistine Chapel."

With that bit of information imparted, the old man pedaled away.

A while later, Rick Humphrey came and took a look at the property his friends had just acquired. He was astonished.

"Literally, I think, if we had pushed hard enough we could have pushed the walls over," he said.

What, he wondered aloud, had they gotten themselves into?

On a recent evening, all seven members of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony gathered at the Pinkham's house. Although various of the artists often paint together, it is relatively infrequent that all seven are in one place.

They do all regularly pass through the gatehouse, often coming from or going to the surrounding countryside. The term artist colony applies to the group in a somewhat more loosely defined sense than the term might connote: they are a collective mainly in the sense that they have a common goal. A mission statement on their website describes their purpose:

"Our passion for the natural open spaces, along with our childhood memories of the Pales Verdes Peninsula, have motivated us to formally organize and capture the beauty of the remaining undeveloped land through our art as a record for future generations. We want to stimulate community involvement in land conservation as well as address the value of beauty in our lives, while maintaining the classical traditions and heritage that have made the Peninsula unique."

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The Pinkham residence when they purchased it in May, 1998.

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This past year has been particularly significant in that the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy was able to put together essential aspects of a \$30 million deal to formally create the 1,200 acre Portuguese Bend Regional Open Space Park. It was a stunning accomplishment, one that had seemed nearly impossible when the effort began.

In fact, when the colony first came together, part of their imperative was to preserve in paintings what seemed likely to soon be lost.

"It was hard for us at that point to see how [preservation] was going to come about," Humphrey said. "The pressure to develop here in the latter part of the 1990s was really strong...We kind of felt like it was going to be a matter of time, so the urgency we all felt to get out and paint it was pretty strong."



The Pinkham residence today.

In canvas after canvas, the painters documented the area in all its astonishingly varied glory and in so doing raised the awareness of a precious and vulnerable beauty. Several of the painters work won national acclaim, bringing attention both to the group and its subject matter.

Jean Stern, the director of the Irvine Museum and an authoritative voice on the history of landscape painting in California, became one of the colony's more ardent admirers. "They are a unique group," he said, "because they are very much focused on a purpose in their art, and it isn't just to paint pretty pictures and sell them to the masses. It is to record this beautiful land and present a statement that will reach people today as well as three or four generations from now. I think what they are doing as a group, and certainly as individuals, is truly significant."

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Every member of the group has increasingly gained a following among art collectors. At the group's forefront is Dan Pinkham. He has fulfilled the promise his former teacher, the great Russian impressionist Sergei Bongart, foresaw when, in one of the last paintings of his life, he painted a youthful Pinkham and called the portrait *An American Poet*. His landscapes have a poetic, even mystical quality that is able to convey the spiritual quality of the land as few painters have. He is at the stage of his career where his work is coveted not just by renowned art galleries but also museums. One of his paintings, *Lifting the Veil*, was recently purchased by the Carnegie Museum, one of the great collectors of landscape art in the world.

On this night, the colony was preparing for its upcoming exhibition, the annual art show at the Malaga Cove Library benefiting the Conservancy. It has become a central part of their yearly cycle as a group; in the fall, they travel together to Maine and spend a few weeks together at a farmhouse belonging to Redfield's family (both Pinkham and Redfield have family roots that reach back to the East Coast and to early American art history - revered spiritualist painter Thomas Pinkham Ryder is an ancestor of Pinkham's and impressionist Edward Willis Redfield is Redfield's great grandfather).

Just what the colony is and how the gatehouse functions for them is

apparent as soon as the artists arrive. Humphrey finds a book and a chair in a small sitting room dominated by a piano and four walls of well-lit paintings, crosses his legs, and immerses himself. Soon, he and Prince are discussing, among other things, an idea for a painting, a book called *The Music of Silence* and how dusk makes a transition into night in a way that is noteworthy for monks as well as painters.

In the main room, Solraive sits alone at a table and works on a draft of the art program for their show that Prince has prepared. A recording of Gregorian chants fills the room, drifting and reverberating through its 30-foot height. Outside the high-arched entryway of the main room - only recently completed - is a deck with a fireplace around which the Pinkhams, Redfield, and Mirich discuss the hanging of the show, the importance of frames, and who is going to make the walls.

The last year has been significant for the house, as well. Although Pinkham says they are only in the second of what he has envisioned as a four phase project - one that won't be completed until a reflecting pool is restored to the gardens behind the house and a Sistine Chapel-inspired mural adorns the walls of the main room - important aspects have been completed: a front door has been installed and a wall blocking the formerly red-tagged main room from the rest of the house was knocked down.

"We gave Vicki a hammer and let her wail away at it," Dan said. "We couldn't believe it. That took us, what, six-and-a-half years?"

In fact, the main room, which the Pinkhams call the chapel room (friends traveling in Italy have visited the so-called Roadside Chapel where Michelangelo worked and confirmed its likeness to the gatehouse), sat for several years without windows or doors. It was vastly improved early in their habitation when they fortified the foundation, added a roof, built outside walls, redid all the woodwork (much damage had occurred through exposure) and, more recently, plastered the interior. Last year, they had to wait four extra months until every last one of the fifteen sparrows who had nested in the rafters finally grew strong enough to fly away.

"There were four of us waiting for that last sparrow to leave the nest and he fluttered and flew to a little piece of wire, and we thought, oh, maybe he is going to flit out the door," Pinkham recalled. "He flitted out and we jumped up and put the glass in...We had been covering the flooring with plastic so [bird] stuff didn't etch the hardwood. We had to close the barn door when the last one left."

They had been using the room in its various states of completion, celebrating Christmas with a 15-foot tree and hosting neighborhood decorating parties that have been a holiday fixture at Portuguese Bend since long before their arrival. Even without such niceties as electricity and windows, Vicki said they had grown to love the room.

"We had a big long table and chairs and it was functional for us because it was just like a big farmhouse," she said. "Everybody loved it because it was so unusual and unique, like the candles blowing in the wind...I would say to Dan, you know, we don't need windows."

The windows have helped. The rest of the house is cozy - particularly its kitchen, which feels like it belongs to a French farmhouse, a still life painting brought to life - but the main room is the home's focal point. The high ceiling and generous light make the room expansive and warm. It feels like a place built to house big thoughts. Not surprisingly, Pinkham often uses it as a studio.

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"It's wonderful," he said. "It's just great light. The window on the north side lets light in all during the day, and the high ceiling really expands your vision and your expectation for what you want from your work. It's all about light and it's all about a sense of what you want, the inspiration holding the end of the brush."

The house functions like a painter's factory, an artistic production line of sorts. Pinkham and Sidraize both use a half-basement underneath the main room to chop moldings for framing, an upstairs attic provides ample storage for canvasses, and every wall in every room save the kitchen displays the beautiful finished product (the bathroom is called "the Maine room" because all its landscapes are from Maine).

But the real means of production is the home's location. Just outside the front door is Portuguese Point, and due south is its dramatic counterpart, Inspiration Point. Vicki said they often rise early and paint outside before returning to their home for breakfast. Dan paints small canvasses outside which he expands onto larger canvasses in the studio.

"There is so much here," Vicki said. "All you have to do is step out your front door and you have a painting right in front of you."

Although both miss the more mobile lifestyle they had become accustomed to with their mobile art studio, they have gained something by staying somewhat more tethered to one place. They know the land they live in with an intimacy rarely achieved.

"It is very intimate, yet I feel every time I go out, I discover something new," Vicki said. "A new kind of light, a new tree, a new color from the sky. It's never like, 'Oh, I've seen that before.' It's never the same."

Their home has become a place that artists visit from around the world as well as focal point of their colony. Sidraize said that she feels a warm sensation every time she drives around the bend and the home comes into view. It's not just arriving at the house, or to Portuguese Bend, she said, so much as it is like returning to a way of seeing.

"I don't know how to describe it," she said. "I was telling Tom [Redfield] the other day, I can go from here to there, to the store or wherever, driving around town functioning okay mixing with people who are not painters...then I could pick up a book and see a brush stroke or I stop at the house, or even seeing the house as you come around the bend...It's more like coming home, like a language I understand."

"It is a place where you are renewed artistically," Humphrey said. "If going to a church is a place for spiritual renewal, this is the equivalent artistically. This is the place you go for artistic renewal. It's not just the house, it's the gathering. And I think the layering of experience over time that creates that."

"It feels like a sanctuary," Dan Pinkham said. "It just has a presence about it."

Prince said he first saw the house when he and Redfield, shortly after learning the Pinkhams had purchased it, broke in and gave themselves a tour. "I coveted it immediately," he said.

The house, like the colony itself, Prince said, felt immediately familiar.

akin to when you meet a person who it feels like you will know forever.

"It's that same feeling," he said. "Like, okay, this works. I am going to be okay here."

It is the Pinkham's intention that their house will one day be left to the community as an art museum. Nothing formal has occurred yet to make this so, but if the group continues its current trajectory, it will likely not be difficult to find the financial wherewithal so that the house preserves their work for generations to come.

"This is not something we are going to sell and turn around and make a profit on," Pinkham said. "At the end of our lives, the direction this house will take is for the community."

The colony came together almost a decade ago with almost no forethought - the time, place, and people somehow just meshed - and the evolution of both the group and the gatehouse likewise seem to have naturally converged. "We love our neighbors here and they have been extremely helpful and supportive," Pinkham said. "We really found our life very full, trying to juggle building this home, or this chapel, and balancing the needs of friends, the politics, and the vision of preserving open space. So we just kind of all fell into place. It just all kind of did - it wasn't anything we tried to do. It was more we were compelled to do it."

A museum would be the logical conclusion of the story of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony. "If things happen the way they anticipate it," Redfield said. "It is almost a guaranteed legacy for our group - as the painters of a specific time and place."

Humphrey said his oldest daughter, Jessica, can already see that future. His children have grown up coming to the home, sitting on the floor listening to talk about art, politics, and even God. They have watched their father and his friends become part of the preservation of Portuguese Bend. Now, Humphrey said, Jessica has this picture in her head: one day, she will be an old woman, shuffling around this house and explaining to visitors who the painter who left that painting behind was. And what it was that mattered so much both to the painter and the group he or she was a part of: this place, located on a landslide, where they made their stand.

"Well," Humphrey kindly tells his daughter, "Don't rush us out of this house too soon." PEN