



Vito Sisti, Remembered

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by Eric Ernst

Eric Ernst Remembers Vito Sisti (1961 – 2013).

It's highly unlikely that anyone who might have met Vito Sisti when he first set foot in the Springs in 1988 would have anticipated his eventual importance in an artist community as rich in heritage and history as that which exists here on the East End. He certainly didn't look the part.

If one were to mentally picture a power broker in the Hampton's art world as being tall, patrician and elegant with gently refined features, then Vito was the exact opposite. He barely topped five feet tall, possessed an arrestingly aquiline profile, constantly seemed in need of a shave, and, as befits someone who makes a living as an auto mechanic, was (sometimes even at openings) more often than not redolent of grease and gasoline rather than cologne.

Seemingly more at home at Wolfie's Tavern in Springs than perhaps any other setting, he could, on occasion, be cantankerous and curmudgeonly yet this did little to mask a generosity of spirit and an open admiration for this storied artist community as well as a profound and energetic sense of civic pride as evidenced by his work with the Springs Food Pantry and, in recent years, the Annual Fisherman's Fair.

However, Ashawagh Hall, the noted exhibition space in the Springs, is where Vito made his impact most profoundly felt and where his presence will be most deeply missed. Among his more notable achievements, during his tenure serving on the board of the Springs Improvement Society, he spearheaded a desperately needed renovation that dramatically upgraded an exhibition space that is, without question, one of the most important landmarks in the evolution of post-war American art.

It was, however, his role as curator for many of the exhibitions at Ashawagh Hall over the past twenty years that will cement his legacy as a singularly important member of the East End's creative community.

Beginning in 1989 with an exhibition titled "Fine Arts and Auto Parts," Vito's annual display of local artistic talent became a highlight of the summer season. In more recent years it was called "Vito Sisti Presents" and featured evenings of music, poetry, dance, and movies (mostly bad ones), and it became a post-Labor Day celebration of the end of the seasonal onslaught of tourists as well as a gauge for the continued vibrancy and vitality of the fabled local artist population.

Vito also illustrated a measure of social consciousness in another of his curatorial efforts which was the annual exhibition of women artists of the region (although more than one observer has noted that, aside from offering opportunities to women artists who may otherwise have been overlooked by the galleries, Vito also liked being photographed for the poster for these events surrounded as

the only man among twenty to thirty females).

As to his academic background that may have led him to his endeavors at Ashawagh Hall, there was none. Instead, he leaned on his own sense of common sense aesthetics and he approached each artist and their work with an open mind unencumbered by prejudice or personal agenda. As he once stated, "There's a lot of bad-school art around. If I can't use a piece, I just tell an artist it's not for me."

Among the artists themselves, Vito's sincerity and dedication was both widely recognized and genuinely admired. He related to them on levels that transcended the normal curator/artist paradigm and he was completely absent the artifice often found in the art world. He not only liked art but also sincerely liked and admired the artists themselves, a sensibility that was returned in their appreciation of all he did for them and for the community at large.

On at least two occasions, he was immortalized in artwork as in Billy Strong's "Vito-Lope" (a gold life mask with antlers) and Trish Franey's life size replica which one art critic described as "an homage to Mr. Sisti whose efforts over the years on behalf of the local artist community is widely admired as well as a supposition as to what Mr. Sisti might have looked like when he had a fuller head of hair."

As sculptor Elaine Grove noted, Vito was "The little engine that could. He reinvented himself from a car mechanic to an art impresario, journalist and unofficial mayor of Springs by sheer will power, instinct and enthusiasm."

We will all miss him very much.

-Eric Ernst

EDITOR'S NOTE: Vito Sisti died unexpectedly on Monday at his home in The Springs. He was 51 years old.

Eric Ernst is an artist and art critic based in the Hamptons, NY.

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