



# John Perreault Retrospective Launches a Long Island Gallery Celebrating Art & Community

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by Pat Rogers

Bellport Village has a new art gallery. The opening of a gallery isn't typically significant in of itself but for this Long Island village, it just might be. Bellport, located a mere 20 minutes west by car from The Hamptons, has a vibrant and below-the-radar creative community made up of artists, architects, designers, directors, New York City gallerists, actors, musicians, scientists, directors and the like, explained new gallerist [Mark Van Wagner](#) in an email.

An artist himself, Van Wagner was urged to consider taking the art dealer plunge by fellow artist, art critic and curator [John Perreault](#) (1937-2015), a resident of Bellport and New York City. Perreault grew into a mentor for Van Wagner and encouraged he and his wife, Tonja Pulfer, to relocate from Kauai, Hawaii to become part of the Bellport area community, said Van Wagner. The two men met through their mutual use of sand in their art.

After deciding to do so, it seemed fitting to launch the gallery with a tribute exhibition to the man and mentor who encouraged the possibility that being an artist and a gallery owner wasn't a conflict but a way forward. "[It's Only Art: A Tribute Survey of John Perreault](#)" opened on June 23, 2017 with an opening reception that had crowds spilling onto the sidewalk as well as congregating inside the gallery and its outdoor deck. The exhibition is curated by Van Wagner and independent curator Beverly Allan.

The outpouring of support is likely attributed equally to the welcome of an art gallery to a community that's embracing its arrival as well as celebrating the work of the artist himself. A part time resident of Bellport, John Perreault was a renowned art critic who had a knack for spotting artists who "...would ultimately become canonical..." which gained him a following from artists, art fans and people in the business, [according to Alex Greenberger](#) in a piece written for *ARTnews*.

Perreault was also an early proponent of avant-garde movements including minimalism, land art, the Pattern & Decoration movement as well as feminist art and art with gay subject matter. As a critic, he wrote as staff for *ARTnews*, *The SoHo News* and the *Village Voice*. He was Chief Art Critic for the *Village Voice* from 1966-1974 and the *The SoHo News* from 1975-1982.

As an artist, Perreault favored unusual materials including toothpaste, instant coffee grains (a nod to Bellport's connection as a home for the founder of instant coffee, [according to the NYT](#)), beach sand coated with acrylic or oil, stones and other materials in addition to paint, frequently applied from above the canvas.



“It’s Only Art,” partial view, installed at Marquee Projects. Courtesy of the gallery.  
The show is a tribute exhibition of work by John Perreault.

For the exhibition, Van Wagner and Allan visited multiple locations to see work by Perreault. Afterwards, they decided to include as much art as the gallery could artistically hold as a way of revealing the artist himself.

“We decided it would be best to really fill the space,” wrote Van Wagner in an email. “More would be more! But even still we had to edit and edit and do our best to select choice pieces from the various bodies of work. We wanted the gallery to reflect his work space, his mind space—so the viewer could really get to know him—feel his humor, see his inventiveness, feel his warmth, appreciate his irony, appreciate his wit. We wanted to give a full scope of his extensive practice. He exhausted & explored everything! We wanted to show this multifaceted artist in great detail.”



“It’s Only Art,” partial view, installed at Marquee Projects. Courtesy of the gallery.  
The show is a tribute exhibition of work by John Perreault.

At the Opening Reception, [R.C. Baker](#), a *Village Voice* critic and artist, introduced the exhibition with a talk on the work. Baker had seen Perreault’s work exhibited during his lifetime and was a fan, according to Van Wagner. The fact that both men were critics for the *Village Voice* created another type of bond.

“Baker immediately appreciated John’s serious and inventive use of alternative media as well as Perreault’s sense of formal impact,” wrote [Jeff Weinstein](#), Perreault’s widower, in an email. “He [co-wrote the appreciate of John’s work](#) after his death [for the *Village Voice*].”

[Hamptons Art Hub](#) has secured the talk R.C. Baker delivered at the exhibition opening from [Marquee Projects](#). The talk, in its entirety, is reproduced as follows. In it, Baker critically discusses the art on view as well as the man who made it.

## ***On John Perreault, at Marquee Projects—“It’s Only Art,” June 23, 2017, by R.C. Baker***

I’m going to keep this short and hopefully on point, because that’s how John wrote some of his

greatest reviews. Let me give you an example of what I mean when I say that: In 1970, Philip Guston exhibited his magisterial cartoon figures for the first time, paintings influenced by Renaissance masters from 500 years earlier. Within a decade it would become apparent that Guston's own masterpieces would join that pantheon and similarly influence serious painters for all time. Back in 1970, though, most critics—and too many artists—gave Guston terrible reviews. These first cartoon paintings were almost universally reviled. But one critic, writing in the *Village Voice*, saw something that almost no one else appreciated in those works. Let me quote a few excerpts from John Perreault's two-paragraph review:

"Guston's new paintings are cartoony, looney, moving . . . It's as if de Chirico went to bed with a hangover and had a Krazy Kat dream about America falling apart . . . It's all in the service of a tragic-comedy of errors or terrors. It really took guts to make this shift this late in the game, because a lot of people are going to hate these things, these paintings. Not me."

If that is all I said about John tonight—that in those brief sentences he got right what almost no one else did—except [Willem de Kooning](#); John and de Kooning got it right—if that was all I said, it would cement John's legacy as an extraordinarily insightful critic. But how could John have had such insight when nearly everyone else missed the beginnings of one the greatest artistic achievements of the 20th century?

One clue might come from the great underground filmmaker Jack Smith, who wrote in a groundbreaking essay in the late 1960s, "In [America] the blind go to the movies." What he was charging was that film critics didn't understand the medium because "Film critics are writers and they are hostile and uneasy in the presence of a visual phenomenon."

And so, as we look around these galleries, we begin to understand why John Perreault got Guston right, or why he saw in a young student named Ana Mendieta such astounding promise—we see why right here on these walls and on these floors. Because John was not uneasy with visual phenomenon. In fact, he reveled in it. Because John created his own visual phenomena—he was an artist.

For instance, what do we see in the painting *Don't*?



"Don't" by John Perreault. Courtesy of Marquee Projects.

At first glance, those two elongated red globules might be twins, and yet it quickly becomes apparent that they are doing very different things. One stretches exactly from the top to the bottom of the canvas; the other comes up a bit short. This is visual poetry. This is the full stop of a period on one side, the pause of a comma—or perhaps the clean break of an emdash—on the other. This is the rhythm of stanzas, the charming echo of assonance.

And then we have those two red wheelbarrows.



Artwork by John Perreault. Courtesy of Marquee Projects.

I'm not sure the children should be allowed to see them in their rough embrace. These are found volumes—we know that wheelbarrows are designed to trundle around heaps of dirt or compost or what have you. John has destroyed this utility while creating a comical narrative that in its brawniness—to my eye, at least—brings the sheer physicality of an ancient Greek statue of two wrestlers into a garden on the South Shore of Long Island.

Or how about those yellow, right-angle drips in the painting around the corner there, which is called *Three*?



"Three" by John Perreault. Courtesy of Marquee Projects.

This might be a modern dance, the troupe moving first in one direction, then all pivoting gracefully to another. Abstract, yes, but also a physical record of force and weight and velocity. And how much would John appreciate the way in which this painting is displayed in this gallery at this moment? How serendipitous is it that in a painting that is all about right angles and gravity, that in this charming—but old—building, it was necessary to put a small wedge under one corner to keep this piece level, something absolutely crucial to its concept.

But as John often said, "It's only art." That statement is a wonderful, worldly-wise view of this thing called art, one that John shared with Gulley Jimson, the main character in Joyce Cary's great 1941 novel *The Horse's Mouth* and perhaps fiction's greatest evocation of the earthy, humorous, and at times fatalistic view of life I believe all truly great artists possess. I think John and Gulley Jimson would have shared a laugh at the way one of Gulley's cardinal rules has been broken here: In the novel, Gulley says, "When I had my canvas up, it was two foot off the floor, which just suited me. I like to keep my pictures above dog level."

Which brings me to what John once wrote of [Andy Warhol's](#)—well, let's use the polite name, Andy Warhol's "Oxidation Paintings." John said, "Shower queens will rejoice and others will be simultaneously attracted and repulsed. What could be better?"

And so, with this inherently human contradiction, we arrive at a discussion of alternative mediums. I mean, are you kidding me—toothpaste? Oil-soaked beach sand? Coffee?

When I first saw John's coffee drawings I thought of an amazing show at the Drawing Center in the late 1990s, by another writer who was also an artist—Victor Hugo.

Hugo's drawings, like his novels, are Romantic, gothic, overblown, and thrilling—castles in mist, a murder of crows surrounding a hanged man, a menacing octopus, and ultimately completely abstract vistas. One of Hugo's friends said of his methods: "Any means would do for him—the dregs of a cup of coffee tossed on old laid paper. The dregs of an inkwell tossed on notepaper, spread with his fingers, sponged up, dried, then taken up with a thick brush or a fine one." There is a wonderful sense of play implied in this mucking about in the dregs of the world.

And that is what you feel here, in John's work—the world. Not just the art world, but this vast combination of things, of ideas, of culture past and present—of coffee grounds and toothpaste and polluted sand—everything was grist for John's work. Or, as Hugo once said, "Great artists have an element of chance in their talent, and there is also talent in their chance."

In a painting such as *City*, we are startled by the way chance and insightful skill and decision-making combine into a powerful, glowing composition. This is drips as architecture, a matrix of light and dark, civilization as abstraction. And to me, it is so beautiful how John, having made a life and a career for himself in the labyrinth of New York City—something that is not easy to do, as so many of us here tonight understand—John (along with Jeff, of course) then made a home out here on Long Island. And I think these two worlds are combined in this painting, both literally—grids blotted and ground down by sand—and also formally, in a way that borders on the spiritual. Because, as much as we are all denizens of civilization—of this vast network that makes art and culture possible—we are, before that, children of the edge, of that place where land and sea meet. This painting captures something so very much larger than what it represents.



"City" by John Perreault. Courtesy of Marquee Projects.

So, ultimately, this is serious business, this thing called art and culture. But it means nothing if we cannot enjoy it, and John, through his writing, his poetry, and, yes, look all around here, through his art, through all the stuff that made up this singular, wonderfully expansive life, John left the world—and I'm not talking about the art world, understand, but the real world—John left it better than he found it.

— R.C. Baker

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R.C. Baker is an artist and writer who lives and works in the Bronx, New York. He is a New York Foundation for the Arts Painting Fellow and his artwork has been exhibited at the Drawing Center, White Columns, the Center for Book Arts, and other venues in New York City, as well as

internationally. He has been a contributing writer at the *Village Voice* since 1994, publishing hundreds of reviews and numerous features and cover stories on art popular culture, and politics. His essays have also appeared in *Performing Arts Journal* and on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*. In 2016, he was awarded a Creative Capitol Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for Short-Form Writing.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "It's Only Art," a Tribute Survey of John Perreault's Work, is the debut exhibition for Marquee Projects in Bellport on Long Island. The exhibition is on view from June 23 to July 16, 2017. To see work from the show, click [here](#). Marquee Projects is located at 14 Bellport Lane, Bellport, NY 11713. [www.marqueeprojects.org](http://www.marqueeprojects.org).

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