

Globe Magazine

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The



Issue

Spring Arts Preview: 30 Can't-Miss Events from Around New England

Plus

The Rise of the "We Owe You" Oscar BY ODIE HENDERSON

A Story of Love, Art, and Belonging in Worcester BY JACKSON DAVIDOW



ISABELLA
STEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

Escape the Ordinary

SO MUCH TO UNPACK

Betye Saar

Heart of a Wanderer

ALSO ON VIEW

Fellow Wanderer: Isabella's Travel Albums
Adam Pendleton: Untitled (Giant not to scale)

thru May 21
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Spring Arts Preview

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THE HOUSE ON GRAFTON STREET

ARTISTS JOHN O'REILLY AND JAMES TELLIN MADE AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE TOGETHER AT A TIME WHEN GAY COUPLES RARELY LIVED OPENLY.

BY JACKSON DAVIDOW



Left: James Tellin and John O'Reilly in a 2017 photograph by Seth David Rubin.

Below: Stephen DiRado captures the Grafton Street house (2017). **Facing page:** A 2016 Bill Jacobson photograph.

ONE DAY IN THE EARLY 1960S, artists and partners John O'Reilly and James Tellin were driving from New York to Bar Harbor, Maine, with the idea of settling there, when their car broke down in Worcester.

The couple and their friends have told several differing stories about what happened next: that an old acquaintance suggested that Worcester had job opportunities for prospective school-teachers; that they stumbled on a store with a "Help Wanted" sign and were hired on the spot; that they were simply too broke to repair the car. At any rate, they ended up staying for more than 60 years, creating an unlikely haven for themselves and other artists in this small postindustrial city.

"When we started out, no gay couples thought of making a life together," Tellin told me last year. A gay relationship, he explained, tended to be





viewed at the time as “only some passionate kind of thing,” not built for comfort or domesticity.

It was O’Reilly who insisted that instead of something casual or clandestine, “just going to see each other every weekend, or something, we should just make a life,” Tellin recalled. “And he was right. You only have one life.”

They built that shared life in Worcester. From 1964 to 1991, they worked as art therapists in a clinical program they founded at Worcester State Hospital. Due to strategically splitting a full-time job, each man worked two and a half days a week—and was thus able to cultivate a serious artistic practice of his own. While Tellin created evocative wooden sculptures and fascinating mixed-media works, O’Reilly produced thousands of complex, small photographic collages that put masterpieces from the Western art-history and literary canons in conversation with imagery from gay pornographic magazines as well as his own Polaroid self-portraits.

“I was his best critic, and he was my best critic,” Tellin told me. The men predominantly created work for each other’s appreciation until the late 1970s, but O’Reilly, who died at 91 in 2021, became an unexpected breakout artist in the mainstream art world when, at 65, his photomontages were included in the prestigious 1995 Whitney Biennial. He is now considered one of the greatest photomontage artists of all time.

STEPHEN DIRADO still remembers his first visit to the house on Grafton Street, where O’Reilly and Tellin lived from 1984 until 2017. It was 1987, and DiRado was an animated 29-year-old photographer at the center of Worcester’s arts community. As soon as the couple ushered him across the threshold, DiRado could not believe his eyes. “I was not in our world anymore,” he recently told me. The walls were adorned with dozens of densely hung, meticulously arranged works by the likes of Francisco Goya, August Sander, and Garry Winogrand, who was, DiRado learned, the couple’s friend.

Mixed in were rare books, spectacular bonsais, and objects such as a penguin drink stirrer and a single bowling pin. Plus, of course, their own magnificent artwork. DiRado was struck by how the couple reorganized the domestic space around their work as artists. For DiRado, the evening was a revelation about not only leading an artistic life, but also being in a loving partnership.

Selectively social over the decades, O’Reilly and Tellin were significant mentors to several Massachusetts artists such as DiRado, as well as those living outside New England who would flock to their home. Seth David Rubin, for instance, developed a friendship with the couple while pursuing a master’s of fine arts in photography at Yale University in 1991 and frequently made the pilgrim-



“THEY REPRESENTED SOMETHING OF ANOTHER GENERATION, BUT HOW THEY LOOKED AT LIFE FELT FRESH.”

Left: O’Reilly, Tellin, and their cat Kitt in a 2010 photograph by Rubin. **Below:** A DiRado photograph of O’Reilly at work in 1992. **Facing page:** A 2017 photograph by Rubin.



age to Worcester. Another regular was Bill Jacobson, who met the couple in the mid-1990s through shared art dealers and friends in New York. As Jacobson recently reminisced, “You entered into this wunderkabinett of their art and their life, and it felt old, and it felt new at the same time,” he said. “They represented something of another generation, but how they looked at life felt fresh.” For each photographer, it was a tremendous honor when their own artwork started to populate the walls of the Grafton Street house.

DiRado, Rubin, and Jacobson were each separately moved to document how O’Reilly and Tellin reimagined the possibilities of domesticity, particularly as the couple made plans to move to a retirement community in the mid-2010s.

After becoming aware of each other’s projects, the three photographers joined forces to edit and assemble a portfolio of 53 photographs — DiRado’s, Jacobson’s, then Rubin’s — collectively taken between 1992 and 2017. The trio presented O’Reilly and Tellin with the portfolio in 2017 and produced four other copies: one for each photographer as well as one for the Worcester Art Museum. The couple later donated their copy of the portfolio, along with most of O’Reilly’s archive and hundreds of other artworks and materials, to the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Andover Academy. A tribute to a remarkable couple and years of intergenerational friendship, the portfolio is a testament to their Worcester home as a worldly site of love, art, and inspiration.

FIRST LEARNED ABOUT O’REILLY AND TELLIN in a small exhibition called *LGBTQ+ Worcester — For the Record* at the Worcester Historical Museum in 2019. To represent their story, the show featured Rubin’s affectionate portrait of the couple standing on their lawn, arms casually around each other, with the splendid garden and unassuming house in the background.

As an art historian who writes about both art therapy and queer art, I was amazed their names didn’t sound familiar. But what’s more, I was born in Worcester and grew up in the town of Grafton, a mere five-minute drive, as one might guess, from Grafton Street. How could it be that a queer artistic sanctuary had been practically in my backyard?

I knew I had to meet them. I wanted to hear what it was like to be an openly gay couple in 1960s Worcester — and to be gay art therapists before the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1973. I also wanted to learn about the strength of their relationship and how it

sustained them and their visionary creative practices for more than six decades. Though COVID-19 delayed my attempt to get in touch with the couple, connecting with Tellin felt incredibly urgent once O’Reilly passed away.

When I first visited their house in the retirement community in 2021, just three months after his partner’s death, Tellin delighted in my local connection and immediately asked, “Do you know Frank O’Hara?”

“Of course,” I replied, aware, like any good homosexual, that O’Hara was raised in my hometown in the 1920s and 1930s before racing off to Harvard University and then New York, where he became an illustrious poet and queer icon. As



HAD O’REILLY AND TELLIN BEEN ON MY RADAR AS A TEENAGER, WOULD I HAVE GONE SEARCHING FOR THEIR HOUSE AS WELL?

a teenager, I tried to locate his house on North Street in Grafton, but its address seemed to correspond to a field where my brother played baseball.

“He couldn’t get away from there fast enough,” Tellin said. After seeing photos of O’Hara’s childhood home in a biography, the couple, too, was determined to find it but encountered the same issue I did two decades later. Stopping by the Grafton Public Library, Tellin explained to a librarian, “We’re looking for Frank O’Hara’s house. Can you tell us where it is?”

“Who?” responded the librarian.

“The poet. The Grafton poet.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“I was stunned,” Tellin recalled. “And I thought, *That’s what he left.*”

Had O’Reilly and Tellin been on my radar as a teenager, would I have gone searching for their house as well? It is funny to think what I might have found. O’Reilly dancing about naked taking one of his Polaroid self-portraits? Tellin painting a colossal plywood sculpture? Luminaries of the photography world reveling in a garden tea party?

Having long associated being queer with the urge to move to a big cosmopolitan city, I marveled at the couple’s contentment in Worcester. Despite its quintessential small town charm, Grafton always felt stifling to me, and I fantasized about life in a pulsating cultural hub.

At the retirement community’s cafe a few months ago, a buoyant Tellin and I were eating cheeseburgers and drinking Cokes. I thought of “Having a Coke with You,” O’Hara’s euphoric love poem written after a 1960 trip to Spain. Because of O’Hara’s premature death in 1966, I tend to situate him in a distant, wholly inaccessible era, but he was just four years older than the captivating 91-year-old sitting across from me, who, like O’Hara, never used a computer or owned a cellphone. Sixty years my senior, O’Reilly and Tellin were my age when they moved to Worcester. For some reason, I blurted out, “I still don’t understand why you two stayed in

Worcester all these years.” Surely a city like Chicago, where they first met as art students in the mid-1950s, or New York, where Tellin lived later in the decade, would have been a more stimulating place for these two brilliant, cultured men? At first, I assumed Tellin didn’t respond because he was chewing, but then I realized he either didn’t catch my comment — his hearing is limited — or chose to ignore it.

A feeling of shame suddenly filtered through me. My vacuous — dare I say *millennial* — comment overlooked something fundamental: that their relationship was their world, and their world was their Worcester home, made manifest in daily practices of domesticity and artmaking. In a more expensive or more happening city, they wouldn’t have been able to devote themselves as deeply to what they valued most. Something Tellin said to me on an earlier visit flashed through my mind: “The most important thing is to have love. Love is the most important thing.” ■

Jackson Davidow is an art historian, critic, and curator based in Somerville. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.