

# ARTISTRY IN RESIDENCE

## Barbara Siebel Thomas' Domestic Portraits on Long Island

By Alastair Gordon



HOUSES STAND OUT against the flat landscape of eastern Long Island. Great shingled cottages and sprawling wood-and-glass structures straddle dunescapes or hover over potato fields, skimming the broad sky with

cupola and chimney. The architectural heritage of the Hamptons has been celebrated since the area emerged as a resort colony in the nineteenth century, and it is there that Barbara Siebel Thomas, a painter and illustrator, has memorialized the summer houses of the prominent and powerful.

Thomas gives her clients idealized images of their country houses, images that can be hung over Park Avenue mantels or in Wall Street offices. She has specialized in residential portraiture for the past few years and works out of a small studio at the back of her house in Bridgehampton, where she lives with her husband, Michael, the author and columnist, and their son, Francis.

"I try to make the houses look as good as I can," says Thomas, who worked for ten years in advertising as a commercial artist. "I interpret a lot and try to pick elements that please the owners and please me."

This is how we would all like to imagine our own residences—without sinking foundations, leaky roofs or high

Following in a centuries-old tradition of house portraiture, Barbara Siebel Thomas creates idealized images of residences on eastern Long Island. ABOVE: An expanse of sky dominates an oil of Pete Peterson and Joan Ganz Cooney's Water Mill house, a Shingle Style structure designed by Eugene L. Futterman.

BELOW: Lee Radziwill asked the artist to paint a series of portraits as a gift for her husband, director Herbert Ross. One, a gouache on paper, depicts several views of the couple's East Hampton house. "I chose a trompe-l'oeil effect," Thomas explains, "as if the scenes were cut out and pasted together."



GARY MARBY

**This is how we would all like to imagine our own residences.**

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Barbara Siebel Thomas' Domestic Portraits on Long Island  
*continued from page 60*

mortgage rates, but as perfect dream houses. "You put in the most ideal sky," Thomas explains. "The ocean is always bright blue, the grass is always green, and every flower in the garden is in perfect bloom. It's better than a photograph. The houses never looked more beautiful."

In her paintings, Thomas tries to capture something special about the place, as if she were doing portraits of the

owners themselves. She takes photographs and makes sketches on-site, which she shows to her clients before proceeding with the final composition.

When, for example, she was painting the Water Mill residence of Pete Peterson, a former secretary of commerce, and his wife, Joan Ganz Cooney, a television executive, she concentrated on the dramatic setting. The house, a rambling Shingle Style structure designed by the late architect Eugene L. Futterman, is set on a high dune that lies between a bay and a small pond.

The artist began by making a series of sketches of the residence at various times of day and in different kinds of light. Then, after consulting with her clients, Thomas decided to make the house an element in the background and the surrounding landscape the primary focus. The final painting was done on a three-by-five-foot Masonite board.

Thomas labors over details, such as the sun-flecked dune grass in the foreground of the Peterson house portrait. "I painted blades of grass for four months," she recalls. She also doesn't hesitate to alter nature. "I'll leave things out that I don't like, or I'll compose the picture in a way that suits me."

Barbara Thomas's paintings are not simply idealized domestic icons. Several clients have had her pictures re-



GARY MANN

ABOVE: For a client who wanted the garden of her Southampton house rendered in full bloom, Thomas worked on-site and from photographs before painting a gouache that is, she says, "close to the way it really looks."

"The architecture and landscape on Long Island are a combination found nowhere else," says Thomas. BELOW: Breeze Hill Farm in Bridgehampton is the subject of an oil on Masonite painted for a fund-raising auction.



GARY BARTOLON

Barbara Siebel Thomas' Domestic Portraits on Long Island  
continued from page 64

produced for note cards. That is, in fact, how she got started: Years ago, she painted a portrait of her parents' residence in Amagansett, which they later had printed for an invitation. Soon Thomas was in business painting other houses and gardens.

For clients in East Hampton, she sketched the house from a low angle and curved the landscape a little to make the structure more imposing. And, when painting another house, rather than illustrate the main façade, she rendered the view from the back porch over a saltwater pond.

Thomas portrayed the poolhouse of another couple as a Hansel and Gretel cottage with a thatched roof, set in a sylvan landscape. It is, in fact, in the suburbs of Stamford, Connecticut. The swimming pool, meanwhile, has been made to look like a natural pond surrounded by clumps of irises and rhododendron bushes. The clients also asked her to include a nearby river, so Thomas diverted its natural flow and made it run through the background of the painting.

In a gouache on vellum for an in-

ent scenes," remembers Thomas. "Lee was very specific about what she wanted. We spent a lot of time walking around the house while she pointed out what she liked best. She definitely wanted the corner of the library, she wanted her garden, and she wanted the dog to be included."

One of the Ross paintings is a general view of the house and its twin gables. Another depicts the patio with a glass table and a view of the ocean beyond. The other two are made up of vignettes from around the property: the dog asleep on a chaise; the path down to the beach; the entrance gate; a green lawn chair; a hat rack in the hall.

Sometimes the artist chooses not to show any part of a house at all, instead highlighting some other aspect of the property. She discovered that clients with a house in East Hampton loved to sit by the swimming pool and look out over Georgica Pond and beyond to the ocean and watch the light change. So she decided to paint the vista instead of the house.

"I wanted to leave out all the ar-

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vestment banker, she kept the Southampton house in the background and placed the English-style garden in the foreground. An urn stands at the center amid lavender, pink and white flowers in perpetual bloom.

Lee Radziwill, as an anniversary present for her husband, film director Herbert Ross (*The Turning Point*, *Steel Magnolias*), asked Thomas to paint four watercolors of the East Hampton house the couple had recently purchased and renovated.

"They had a photographic collage that gave me the idea of doing a sort of trompe-l'oeil scrapbook of differ-

chitecture," she explains. The first thing that struck her about the landscape was a group of pine and shad trees that had been wildly shaped by the wind. In her painting, the trees frame the view out over the pond and cast strange shadows across a soft carpet of grass.

Painting portraits of houses presents a welcome creative challenge to Barbara Siebel Thomas. "Satisfying a fantasy is what it's about. If people ask you to paint their house, you only want to please them," she says. "I get great pleasure out of making them look beautiful." □

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