

Montauk Greene

In 1947, Gertrude and Balcomb Greene purchased a former military dugout atop a cliff in Montauk. The dugout was built to watch for possible invasion from the sea. With their own hands, and with the help of artist friends who visited from New York, some gradually settling in the area, they transformed it into a home.

There, Balcomb was reunited with perspective and with nature, constantly facing the horizon, before the eternal union of Gaia and Uranus, the sky and ocean, sometimes loving, sometimes fighting.

On the beach they cast their offspring, gods and humans, sharing their pain and pleasure. The surf, the sand, the fog, sometimes lightning, all fill Balcomb's scenes with his passion for another opposition, that between light and matter. Some paintings are like opening a window, others take you into a dream, lost in contradiction, like a still frame with no sound—the surf sound he missed so much when he was in town, when he was not Montauk Greene.

Works



The Women, c. 1970

Oil on canvas

66 × 54 inches



The Head Land, 1973

Oil on canvas

60 × 54 inches



Morning Fog, 1974

Oil on canvas

66 × 60 inches



Regatta, 1976
Oil on canvas
44 × 56 inches



Two Sailing Crafts, 1982
Oil on canvas
30 × 36 inches



Woman and Man by the Sea, c. 1970

Oil on canvas
50 × 40 inches



The Island, 1969

Oil on canvas
56 × 48 inches



Quiet Water, c. 1970

Oil on canvas

44 × 56 inches



Stream of Light, 1981

Oil on canvas

60 × 48 inches



The Edge of the Sea, 1969

Oil on canvas

40 × 46 inches



Biography

Balcomb Greene was born in Millville, New York, near Niagara Falls, in 1904. The son of Bertram Greene, a Methodist minister who gave him the name John Wesley Greene, he spent his childhood in small towns across Iowa, South Dakota, and Colorado, where exposure to art was minimal. Originally, Greene planned to follow in his father's footsteps and become a preacher. To pursue this goal, he enrolled at Syracuse University in 1922, with a scholarship for the sons of Methodist ministers. However, as he became more fascinated with philosophy, literature, and art, he ultimately decided to abandon the path of religion. He graduated in 1926 with a degree in philosophy. During his final year at Syracuse, Greene visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he met the sculptor and painter Gertrude Glass (1904-1956), whom he married soon after. In 1926, the couple traveled to Austria, where Greene had received a fellowship in psychology at the University of Vienna.

In 1927, the two made their way back to New York, where Balcomb focused on advanced studies in English literature. For the next three years, Greene taught English at Dartmouth College while also writing fiction. Late in 1931, the couple spent a year in Paris, where Greene started exploring painting. He studied independently at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, but apart from this short stint at art school, he mainly taught himself by immersing himself in the lively café culture of Paris and engaging with the fresh, innovative art that was flourishing in the city.

In Paris, Greene quickly developed an acute analytical sense for modernism. After he and his wife settled in New York early in 1933, Greene published articles on art in *Art Front*, the magazine of the Artists' Union, as well as in several other publications. Both him and Gertrude were active in several artistic organizations. In 1935 and 1936 he served as editor of *Art Front*, and he became the first chairman of the American Abstract Artists.

Prior to the formation of the WPA, Greene made somewhat of a living as a writer for two sensationalist newspapers, *Broadway Brevities* and *Graft*. After joining the WPA, Greene was employed by the New York mural division and completed abstract murals for the Williamsburg Houses. In 1942, Greene began teaching at Carnegie Institute of Technology,

Pittsburgh, while still pursuing his career as an artist. Despite the move to Pittsburgh, Balcomb and Gertrude would still regularly return to New York, and in 1947 the two purchased land on Montauk point, Long Island. Here, Balcomb became the pioneer of the east end art colony. Inspired by his newfound proximity to the ocean, he painted a number of marines, using dynamic brushwork to evoke the energy and spirit of the sea.

Greene participated in the invitational New York Painting and Sculpture Annuals organized by the New York School artists in 1954, 1955 and 1957. In 1972, he was elected into the National Academy of Design as an associate member. Balcomb Greene died November 12, 1990 in Montauk Point, New York.

The House



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