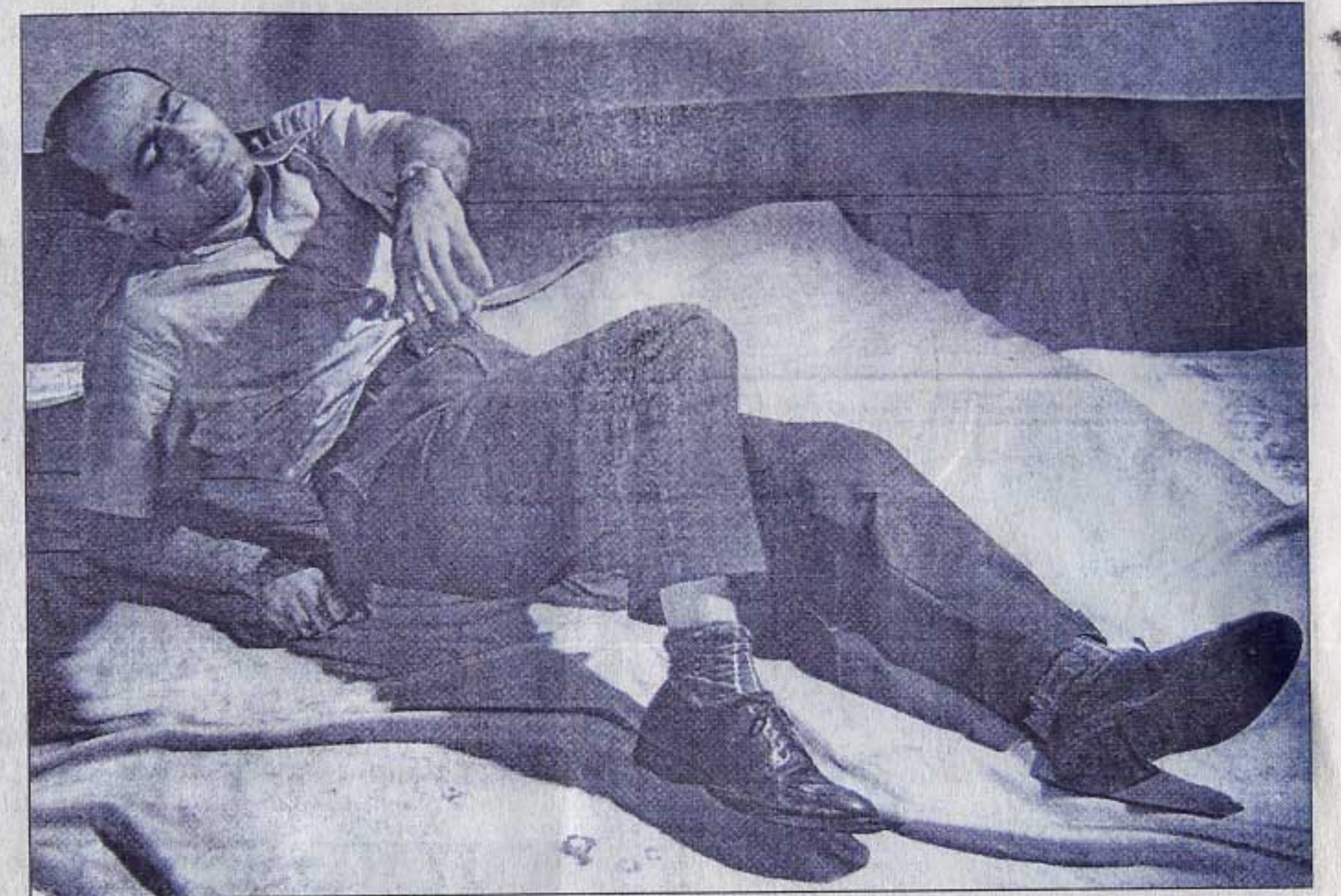


Out of a Garage, Into the Limelight



It was in an unassuming cottage in Bellport, center, that real estate investors found a trove of paintings, at left, by Arthur Pinajian. In photographs, he modeled for poses of the figures in comic books he illustrated, right, before leaving commercial art to paint full time.

BY JENNIFER LANDES

Arthur Pinajian's life and legacy combine to form one of those stories that should be made into a book or movie, and it was. Yet, it wasn't about him specifically. Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Bluebeard: The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian" is about an eccentric Armenian-American painter who knew all the big boys of Abstract Expressionism but chose to paint his own art in obscurity and died unknown. This is also Pinajian's story in brief, and the similarities in "Bluebeard" continue, but you get the idea.

A sampling of the Bellport artist's midcentury-style abstractions and later landscapes are now on view at Lawrence Fine Arts in East Hampton. His work has been likened to that of other East End artists such as Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Adolph Gottlieb.

Pinajian worked six months of the year in his sister's cottage in Bellport, and Vonnegut spent much of his time in Sagaponack, but there is no record of the artist and writer having known each other, or of Vonnegut having been aware of the artist by reputation or through other connections. Like "Bluebeard," Pinajian's art was finally "discov-

ered," found by two house flippers hoping to make the most of the real estate boom in 2006.

Thomas V. Schultz and Lawrence E. Joseph were struck by the artist's work, some 7,000 pieces, that remained piled up in the garage he had used as a studio. They bought the house and through various connections they brought in art historians to take a look over a period of months. The experts liked what they saw.

Pinajian, who died in 1999, and whose sister is also dead, left instructions that his entire oeuvre be destroyed. On at least two occasions, it almost was. Howard Shapiro, the owner of Lawrence Fine Arts, said in his gallery on May 12 that each time, those in charge of the estate thought better of it and returned the paintings, drawings, sketchbooks, and journals to the garage.

Mr. Schultz was the first potential buyer to see the cottage and studio, one of the smallest houses in the area at a scant 625 square feet. "The house also had works that were stored in the attics and in various rooms," he said. Mr. Schultz had taken art history classes in college and found himself responding to the pieces.

By that point he had decided to buy the house, "and I concluded that I was not going to be the one who put someone's life's work into a Dumpster. I called my business partner and told him I wanted to save it and he supported me, but we did not know where it was going to take us," Mr. Schultz said by phone on May 14.

After they brought in the experts, including the late William Innes Homer, who was professor emeritus at the University of Delaware, where he had previously been chairman of the art department, and Peter Hastings Falk, an arts reference book publisher and appraiser, they began conserving the work and separating it into periods: midcentury-style abstractions, landscapes, and a series of erotic nudes. They set about putting together a catalog and showing pieces in various venues around the country, including two shows in New York City — one in SoHo and another this spring at the Fuller Building in Midtown.

Mr. Shapiro was approached to have a show because of his gallery's location on the East End. "I was hesitant, because who needs to show another unknown artist? Every gallery has the underrated unknown artist with untold stories," he said.

"It's a little trite, but I said yes with some trepidation."

What sold him was the quality of the works and their freshness to the marketplace. "Everyone wants a masterpiece from that period, but all of the good things are already in museums. If all you can get is a C-plus Gorky, why not buy an A-plus Pinajian?"

While most of his best art is still available, not everything in the large collection is of the highest quality. At Pinajian's best, his abstract works show a dynamic line and a Cubist shard-like style that was rejected by many in the period who were trying to shake off European traditions from earlier decades. Judging from the works in the catalog, it appears that Pinajian tried on painting styles like cardigans, but his use of color and line is unique, even when echoing others of his period.

Mr. Shapiro said the Fuller Building show "was going nowhere until The New York Times got a hold of the story." The article, by James Barron and published in March of this year, caused the story of the artist and his work to take off "like a rocket ship, and now it has a momentum of its own." Collectors have since flown in and major museums are said

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to be interested, although none have finalized purchases yet. Mr. Shapiro said he took three works to an art fair in Chicago and all of them sold, and fast.

According to Mr. Schultz, who is managing the collection, they plan to sell a small portion of the works to help defray costs but would like to find a collector who is interested in the whole archive, which includes the artwork as well as the journals and Pinajian's early work as a commercial illustrator for comic books and other projects. Estimates of the value of the group in its entirety range anywhere from \$30 million to \$150 million, depending on who is doing the estimating.

The team that put together the Pinajian shows and catalog have also formed a group called Rediscovered Masters to help other artists' estates and late-career artists gain recognition,

showings, and sales. Three East Hampton artists are currently listed on the group's Web site: Dan Christensen, who died in 2007, and Connie Fox and William King, a married couple who show regularly on the South Fork and in New York City.

With so many artists of the midcentury years having passed away in obscurity on the national and international scenes after having been linked with the best and the brightest during their early careers, it would seem some lessons could be drawn from Pinajian's experience. Perhaps collectors will consider buying some of the A-plus work that might still be moldering in garages out here if it is presented in the right way.

Mr. Shapiro wasn't sure, but said he hoped so. "There is a certain romance in this particular story, the artist who never showed and wanted his work destroyed. People respond to it, and then they respond to the work."



Arthur Pinajian sketched fellow Army soldiers after he was drafted in World War II. He was awarded a Bronze Star for his actions at the Battle of the Bulge.