

**“The Art and Archives of Judith Shahn”  
Cove Gallery  
August 2-9, 2025**

**Remarks by Lisa Mecham**

My name is Lisa Mecham. Thank you for joining us tonight. I’m very honored to be here.

Before we get started, I want to say a few thank-you’s. First, to Liane and Larry Biron, who have run Cove Gallery for over thirty-five years. Over the course of my project, I’ve had the opportunity to get to know the “art world,” and we are lucky to have gallery owners who are ethical, devoted to their artists, and committed to making art accessible to Wellfleetians. They have been the stewards of Judy’s work all these years, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Thank you to the two Adam’s who are working here this summer. They hustled and helped us this week getting the show up.

Thank you to Edgewood Farms at Castle Hill where I was in residency in April. It allowed me to be on the ground and interview people who knew Judy first-hand.

And thank you to a few locals who helped me right at the beginning of my project: Peter Hocking, Bert Yarborough, Keith Althaus, Abe Storer, Peter Tighe and Norman Pope.

And thank you to the living Shahn family members who have trusted me to enter their lives as a stranger: Rona and Zach Shahn, who granted access to Judy’s home and art in Truro; Abby Shahn, Judy’s half-sister who lives in Maine and who welcomed me to visit and interview her; and Jeb Shahn, Judy’s half-sister-in-law, who has opened her house to me many times over.

But most of all, thank you to Judith Shahn. She and I never met in person but if it weren’t for her, I would not be standing here today.

If you're wondering what I'm doing in an art gallery, co-curating an exhibit and starting a digital archive, I have to tell you: I am not a visual artist. I am not an art historian. I am not trained as a librarian or archivist. I am a writer.

To make art, I use words.

I'm a storyteller so I'm going to tell you about *Finding Judy* by telling you a story.

I've been coming to the Outer Cape for twenty-five years. The first time I came, at the invitation of a friend, I stayed on Button Hill Road near Fisher Beach in Truro. Judy's house was just a mile up the hill, where she lived in the home her parents bought in 1924. I like to think we crossed paths. I was training for a marathon at the time, and every day I would run up and down Old County Road. Maybe Judy drove past me in her Jeep, smoking a Gauloises, rolling her eyes at this blonde-ponytailed summer visitor—neither of us knowing that our paths would cross again one day, in an unexpected way.

In 2018, I was visiting Cove Gallery—like I do every year—and I had my older daughter with me. She is an artist and graphic designer, and we had never seen Judy's ink drawings before. We started opening drawers and looking at all of Judith's work, captivated by the precision, the playfulness, how the everyday objects she drew seemed personified. Liane explained that for over thirty years, Judith Shahn contributed these to *The New Yorker* as “spots” to fill visual space throughout the magazine. And that's when she said, “Someone should really write about her.”

I bought a small drawing of two trees and took it back to Los Angeles, where I had it framed and put up on the wall. I Googled Judy's name but could find very little about her—mostly that she was the daughter of the famous artist Ben Shahn.

I didn't return to the Outer Cape during COVID: the country was in crisis, my kids' college lives were turned upside down, and I gave up on the memoir I'd written about my family's struggles with mental illness. I would look at Judy's drawing of the trees and wonder: What would happen if someone walked into my office and went through all the boxes of my writing on the shelves? What

story would they tell about me? What would I want my art to say about myself, about the world?

In 2023, I returned to Wellfleet and went directly to Cove Gallery. I told Liane that I wanted to write about Judy. So began a long adventure of following an invisible thread, not knowing where it would lead. I made many trips back over the past two years. Liane and I went into the scary basement in the Shahn house, full of boxes and trunks that hadn't been opened in decades, and rescued letters, photographs, and art before the house was sold.

Someone suggested we send everything to be part of Ben Shahn's archives at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, but I said no way. No way Judy's life was going to get buried with her father's. That's when this idea of an archive for Judy took shape. I could scan all the documents, catalog her art, and stitch her story together in real time so that she stands on her own.

I started interviewing people who knew her. "Why Judy?" they'd often ask. They'd say she wasn't a nice person. They'd tell stories about her incessant smoking and driving like a maniac in her Jeep. They'd diminish her abilities, brushing off her artistic prowess as nothing more than an inheritance from her father. But I've come to know more, and this is where the 'and' comes in—the part I love about life. Because we all have an 'and.' We're never just one thing. Judy could be mean *and* loving. She could inherit some aspect of artistry from her father *and* develop her own. We have come to know that Judy took care of her brother, Ezra, when her father abruptly left the family, leaving her mom struggling. We know that Judy loved to cook. We know that Judy loved, respected, and protected her husband, Alan Dugan, even though they had a very complex, codependent relationship. And we know that she was obsessed with the color blue. Judy always did things on her own terms, and when she got to the end of her life, she decided to have one last oyster and then she stopped eating. It took her seventeen days to die.

And we know she loved to make art. What you'll find here in the gallery are examples we tried to pull from different times in her life. Here are paintings from the early 1950s when she was painting in Mexico City. Here are different ways she captured Truro. Here's the painting she submitted to the

Metropolitan Museum of Art to be juried. These paintings capture elements of New York City, where she had an apartment for a long time.

In the other room you'll find archival material. There's a visual timeline of photographs of Judy's life and examples of her *New Yorker* spots, along with correspondence from the magazine. There's a drawing of a streetscape in New York City that she was commissioned by the Bank Street School to do in the 1960s, which is another example of the interesting detective work I've been engaged in. When I reached out to Bank Street to see if they knew about this drawing, they told me they did not—but it turns out they did have an entire folder about Judy as a seven-year-old when she was a student in their elementary school. So, I suddenly had this treasure trove of observational data about Judy around the time her father abandoned the family.

I can't wait for you to see everything Liane, Larry, and I have put together here for this show.

Before I let you go, there are two things I want to say about this moment in time, two things that *Finding Judy* makes me feel more urgently than ever.

One is about AI. We are living through a critical shift. Tech companies are building machine-learning systems that scrape the Internet, mimic what they find, and convince us they're better. Better than hands making art, better than minds struggling through process, better than hearts cracking open when they hold one of Judy's drawings in their hands.

They are not.

If you've ever wondered if they could be, I hope this gathering tonight—this moment of community—reminds you otherwise.

AI could never do what this project has done. It could never walk into someone's studio. Or hold a fragile sketchbook in its hands. Or feel the tremor of connection when a stranger sends you a poem out of the blue because they remember Judy. AI doesn't remember. It doesn't grieve. It doesn't wonder.

AI makes things easier, but that ease comes at a cost. It flattens us. Numbs us. Makes everything emptier.

So: don't go numb. Don't go quiet. Put your screens down and be in the world.

And that brings me to the second thing: create.

Especially when things feel scary. Especially when you feel small or silenced. Create anyway. Not because of what you make, but because the act of making it is what keeps us human. Whether you're painting, or gardening, or raising children, or archiving a forgotten life, it matters. Because it brings you back to yourself. It connects you to others.

That's what we're all doing here tonight.

*Finding Judy* launches in September. You can go to [www.findingjudy.com](http://www.findingjudy.com) to sign up and follow along as I create the archive of her work and tell her story in real time. My hope is that, yes, we learn about Judy—but also we learn about ourselves. I hope it inspires empathy and deepens curiosity about your life, about the lives of people you love, and about the lives of people you encounter.

*Finding Judy* is about serendipity, the magic of discovery, and the belief that what we create matters—even if we never know who it will reach.