

# Arts & Entertainment

Thursday, Aug. 28, 2014

Clubs & Concerts .....34  
 Theater .....34  
 Galleries .....34

Musical theater tackles hot button issue ... 33



Early AIDS protest piece goes mainstream ... 36



## Swept away with photographer David Hilliard

By Susan Rand Brown  
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“Art rescued me,” says Boston-based photographer David Hilliard, unwinding in his attic aerie after a week of teaching at the Fine Arts Work Center, a gig he’s held for about a decade. Now Hilliard has less than 48 hours in this wood-beamed hideaway crowning the rustic structure where Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler painted a half-century ago.

Hilliard, too, is part of Provincetown’s artistic lineage. He has friends, support for his work and the ongoing Work Center connection. An important suite of his photographs, “The Tale Is True,” taken in Provincetown, was shown in 2013 in Paris, New York, Boston and The Schoolhouse, Hilliard’s Provincetown gallery.

The Schoolhouse installation of “The Tale Is True” and Hilliard’s accompanying gallery talk were eerily intimate, given the context — its subjects, George Bryant and his son, Eric Bryant, were preparing to leave their Commercial Street family home.

“It’s one thing to show this work where the Bryants are strangers,” he says, “but here the loss of a family homestead involved complex issues of family privacy.”

Hilliard continues a personal connection with both Bryant men.

Selections from “What Could Be,” Hilliard’s newest work, will be shown at The Schoolhouse beginning this Friday. Additional prints are available for viewing at the



PHOTO COURTESY SCHOOLHOUSE GALLERY  
 “Chick”

gallery, as well as access to Hilliard’s full inventory of images.

The exhibit previews Hilliard’s book by this title, to be released in October by Minor Matters. Interpretive essays by Work Center instructors who have become his friends, the writers Pam Houston and Ariel Levy, are part of the package — the written word is precious to this maker of visual images.

“As a child, I escaped into books, and I escaped into theater. I knew I didn’t fit in, and wanted something else: so art, and cinema, and amazing fiction — Raymond Carver, Russell Banks — became my alternate reality,” he says. “I like to be swept away.”

When Hilliard studied at the Massachusetts College of Art, where he is currently an assistant professor (he also holds an MFA from Yale University), photographers Barbara Bosworth and Laura McPhee, John McPhee’s

daughter, were among his favorite teachers. Both used the written word as an approach to visual imagery.

Hilliard’s passion for narrative arts opens a window to the sequenced images, in groups of two or three, diptych and triptych, defining his visual language. These are read as frames, or mini-chapters, a “balance between autobiography and fiction” to tell stories of people and places which resonate with a broad audience.

These mini-chapters then form an open-ended series, building on the themes that pull him in: fathers and sons, family and mortality, representations of masculinity, physical passion.

The three-paneled “Chick,” shot on a Provincetown deck, says much about this artist’s vision and means of approach, beginning with its ambiguous title — “chick”

### Just the facts

**What:** Multi-paneled photographs by David Hilliard

**Where:** Schoolhouse Gallery, 494 Commercial St., Provincetown

**When:** 7-10 p.m. Friday, Aug. 29 (opening) through Sept. 7

is common slang for an otherwise nameless or anonymous woman. Wood and its shadow connect throughout. A beautiful young man is seen from the back, creating attraction and anonymity; in the right panel, contours of the straw chair echo the man’s absence. Hilliard frequently uses rope as image and symbol. Here, they add frisson to the already charged setting.

“There is a long history of how photographers and artists have worked with the triptych form,” he says, seated within reach of a rustic sink and counter top, coffee cups holding the warm summer air. “In my case, it grew out of a love for theater, which is time-based. In my work, there are truths — my family, my friends, relationships I have with men, things I care about — but because I am using a big camera, with a 4 x 5 negative and a cloth over my head, there’s a slowness to it. The images don’t have to represent a literal world, but they create their own truth.”

PHOTO COURTESY SCHOOLHOUSE GALLERY  
 “Hulk”



PHOTO SUSAN RAND BROWN  
 David Hilliard

“When I started to put photographs side by side, horizontal for the most part, I would pan the camera to a space, and slowly create a scene, with shifting times and a shifting focus. Moving from left to right, I would photograph someone sitting on a chair, and then a moment later, the camera on a tripod, I would shift the focus a little bit,” he says.

Images reveal both their connection and a mysterious emotional charge, leaving much — symbolized by a visual discontinuity, an absence, a thrust of a body — left unspoken.

“So the work is really a hybrid between a still camera and a film camera,” Hilliard explains, his voice a mix of intensity and gentleness. “But in the end, it’s the quietness of a photograph that I love. I guess I’m a little bit old-fashioned, in that photography is enough.”

