

May 6, 2011

## Gravedigger, Barkeep, Wordsmith, Artist

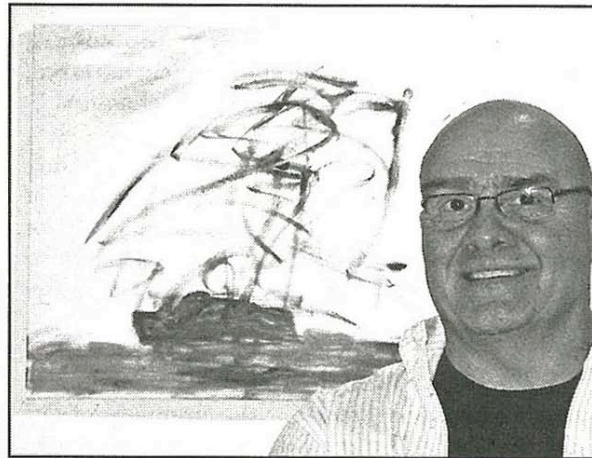
By *Elise D'Haene*

In November 2007, Steve Haweeli was at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, “one of my favorite museums on earth,” he said, when all at once he began to cry, “right there in public.” He was looking at a Dali, but said it wasn’t that particular piece of art that had him in tears, “rather the aggregate of looking at the Grises, the Miros, the Picassos, the artists whose names I forgot.” His reaction startled him, he had been to countless museums and galleries before, had traveled to 19 countries in six months after he graduated from college, and has since doubled that amount.

It was more like one of those inexplicable moments in life—a game changer, maybe soul changer is more apt—and two weeks later, back in East Hampton, “I was minding my own business in the lower level of my home and the thought came to me that I should paint.” He wrestled with the voice. “It was a voice to be honest. And I was somewhat incredulous: Me? Paint? You’re kidding, right?”

You could say that The Voice won the argument. Haweeli put paint to canvas. His first painting, “Gardiner’s Afternoon” depicts “a three-masted schooner of sorts plugging along in Gardiner’s Bay on a sunny afternoon. I have a buyer interested in it but I can’t sell and won’t sell that piece,” he said. “It’s very special to me, plus my son was there with me when I painted it.”

Scott Pitches, who owns the Outeast Gallery



in Montauk, has invited Haweeli back for a second solo exhibit, “Excavations II,” opening Saturday, May 7, with a reception from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. The show can be seen through May 19 at 65 Tuthill Road.

Haweeli is well known on the East End as the founder of WordHampton Public Relations, but in the last few years as he has exhibited his artwork regularly, his high regard as a wordsmith has almost been trumped by his incarnation as an artist.

Among his many past incarnations, he was a gravedigger: “I’ve buried seven people. I was the on-call gravedigger for my church in Manhasset, where I went to high school.” A bartender: “I made a living as a bartender and maitre d’ in my 20s and 30s.” A seminarian: “I was seriously con-

sidering a calling to become an Episcopal priest, that is until the Diocese of New York thought better of that notion. I was rejected.”

Making art has been a process of “excavation” for him, “there’s always a deeper level to take ‘the dig,’ as it were,” he said. “With my artwork, there are marks and designs that may be initially present in a piece—and I am pleased with them—but I’ve learned to add another layer to get to the ‘truth’ of the final product. This added layer parallels the added levels I’ve discovered in myself: self-deceit or that I’m capable of more love than I imagined or that I’m more lonely than first ‘diagnosed.’”

Karyn Mannix, an artist, curator and gallery owner, “is probably the person most responsible for a lot of my success because she chose me (as a complete unknown) to be one of ‘her’ artists last year for her artist’s cooperative.”

Many of his paintings include the symbol of the cross. “I believe in redemption. I need the cross as my primary weapon in fighting the demons, real or imagined, that also chase me. So I’ve got demons and crucifixes chasing me down Three Mile Harbor Road. And when I paint, the demons pause.”

Haweeli said that “every time I see great abstract art I can feel my chest open up, whether it’s Athos Zacharias out here or Joan Mitchell’s piece at the recent MoMA show. Great abstracts seem to allow me to exhale.”

His work can be seen at his [Haweeli.com](http://Haweeli.com) or at [karynmannixcontemporary.com](http://karynmannixcontemporary.com).