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The Art of Survival

*He lost his wife and his eyesight, but
Tom Sgouros still has a vision*

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by Maria Miro Johnson

First he lost the sharp glints of light, the gorgeous curves, precise edges. And then he lost his wife.

Two years ago, Thomas Sgouros, a Providence watercolorist and professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, whose feeling for the medium and mastery of detail had gained him a national reputation, went nearly blind. An eye disease called macular degeneration causes him to see the world as vague shapes in a gray haze. Doctors offer no hope for recovery.

In April, Joan P. Sgouros, 64, who he says was “only the center, the core of everything,” died of cancer.

The 67-year-old artist grieves over “the whole disaster,” the loss of what he loved most in the world, and he copes the only way he knows how. He paints.

“Thank God I have this,” he says, with a wave toward his latest paintings -- abstract landscapes, painted from memory, in oil -- which hang to dry from books he’d hoped to read in retirement. “If I didn’t have this, I might have jumped into the river.”

A compact man in jeans and a woolly sweater, Sgouros is wary of telling his story, worrying it will be “poignant” or worse, that he will come off as an inspiration to others. He is, as he says, much too sad and angry to be inspiring.



Tom Sgouros critiques student work in a RISD watercolor class

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In early days, a simple goal

As a young artist in New York City, doing commercial illustration for money and abstract expressionism for love, Sgouros's goal was simple: "I wanted to be a success -- as anything."

It was while chasing that dream that he met Joan Petersen, a "presence" among his friends. She was the daughter of a Wall Street broker who'd lost a fortune in a market crash in 1938, which meant she'd had to quit Cornell University after two years. Working her way up from a typing pool, she became an advertising writer, among whose accounts were Jell-O, White Owl cigars and Coca-Cola. One of her slogans was: "Coke with chow -- Wow!"

"I can write on demand on anything," she announced one day when asked how she could promote cigars without having smoked one.

Sgouros met her at a party the night she came back from a European adventure. "Here comes Joan!" his friends exclaimed on her arrival. "And here comes this unprepossessing woman," he recalls. "It was a girl -- who had glasses on. 'This is she?' It wasn't magic from the start. It was hardly anything."



the Sgouros family at their summer home in Sorrento, Maine, in the late 1980s --standing, from left, are: Sgouros, Charissa and Thomas; seated are Peter and Joan



Still life: (oil, vinegar, glass jar) c. 1990, oil on board: 15 x 15 inches

He offered her the use of his telephone so she could find an apartment, and a three-year, on-again, off-again courtship began. Sgouros remembers the night when Joan discovered Brandy Alexanders at a night spot on Vanderbilt Avenue.

"Hey, this is great! This is like soda!" she said before proceeding to down eight of them, and heading for a nightclub on 14th street, which featured a knife-throwing act. "It was touch and go as to whether Joan was going to go stand in front of this guy or not," says Sgouros, but the couple ended up dancing instead, and falling down, and "rollicking around on the floor."

"She was a lot of fun to be with," he says, and had a great, infectious, hearty laugh. Sgouros loved her, but was reluctant to commit, which caused some strife. During one separation, Joan sent him a witty letter every day. "It took a friend of mine," he says, "to point out how sweet it was."

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He let the friend read one -- “‘This is marvelous!’ -- and I thought, ‘Well, you know, maybe he’s right...’ As I see it now, I didn’t have a chance.”

They married and had a son, Thomas, and survived on Sgouros’s irregular illustration pay. Though RISD had offered Sgouros a teaching job, he didn’t want to leave New York. It was only when a second child, Charissa (Greek for charisma), arrived that he and Joan thought, let’s try RISD for a year.

One year turned to 22.

A different picture of Joan

“We were not fond of each other,” RISD Prof. David Lord Porter says about Joan Sgouros. All they had in common, he says, was an affection for her husband, and that “didn’t help us much.”

Porter is a writer and illustrator whom Sgouros recommended be interviewed, to help provide a more complex portrait of his wife.

Joan’s problem with Porter, it seems, is that he became a RISD division chairman after Sgouros, who’d hired him, stepped down in late 1970s because of differences with Lee Hall, who was then the school’s president. “She felt Tom was not properly appreciated by RISD,” says Porter. Another problem, he grants, is “I’m as much a pain...as she was.”

That much said, he struggles to delicately word his trouble with Joan. He has heard people call her “forthright and strong, but those people, he suspects, are being delicate too.

“My lack of harmony with Joan was not unusual,” he says. “It was universal, as far as I know I know I speak for many. None of them would be so foolish as to talk to you.”

Here is what Joan was like, he says: In Porter’s own house, she forbade him to light up his pipe. This was in 1980, before smoking was as much of an issue as it is today. Porter did not perceive “it was a matter of concern for my health.”

Nor was it “‘*Would you ...*’ or ‘*Could you...*’ or ‘*Might you...*’ or ‘*Would you mind very much...*’ Joan was as blunt as a stone,” he says. “I’ve never met anyone so willing to disregard the consequences of her effect on anybody.” To her credit, “she was no fake” and “no hypocrite,” he says. “She might’ve managed a touch more hypocrisy; she could’ve borrowed some from me.”

He and others felt “hostage” to the couple’s deaf affection for one another, he says: in arguments with Joan, they would pull their punches for her husband’s sake. But what difference does it make now? he concludes. All that matters are the living, and he was crazy about her. He is a wonderful guy. The fact that I didn’t like his wife and she didn’t like me -- who cares?”

A strong personality

Sgouros is the first to say that Joan could be difficult. By now a mother of three, she’d issue orders to the city work crew which tended the playground across from her house. They’d gotten so used to it, in fact, they’d stop by her house first: “Okay, we’re here. What do you want?”

She was impossible to buy gifts for. “Oh a cashmere sweater,” she’d say. “Whatever gave you the idea I liked lavender?”

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JOAN AND [unclear] The couple married on June 14, 1959, in Joan's aunt's Brooklyn brownstone. [unclear] bride is wearing her grandmother's dress and tiara. They survived on Sgouros's [unclear] illustration pay, but finally took RISD up on its job offer.

She'd confront a neighbor over using a weed-whacker on Sunday morning, prompting him to shout, "You think you run the city, don't you?"

In 34 years of marriage, Sgouros says, there were many times he'd storm out of the house, muttering about turning his studio into an acceptable bachelor pad. But these storms passed quickly, and "there was never a night together when we didn't sleep in the same bed."

Always, they'd go to functions together, but then separate as soon as they got there, because, unlike him, "she was interested in everybody." It was all right, he says -- "I knew she was in the room."

If she irritated people, he says, it's because she was driven to improve whatever situation she considered flawed. On encountering Governor Sundlun, Senator Chafee or Mayor Cianci, she'd demand action on her latest cause. When no one at the opening of the RISD Museum's Daphne Farago wing had attended to the cutting and distribution of cake, she got to work. At a friend's wedding, she instructed wedding party members where to stand to

make the photographs look better. And with dignity, she wore the Litter Critter costume for the annual Pasta Challenge, sponsored by Keep Providence Beautiful.

She'd throw theme parties, says Sgouros, and keep the theme a secret; Once she invited the faculty members with the foulest mouths. Another time, she invited only Joans, and waited patiently for them to realize their commonality.

"She was in some ways like a child," says Sgouros, turning her attention wholly to whatever was her current objective. She was also very determined, as when she wanted to buy a house.

The modified Queen Anne of the East Side of Providence that she had her eye on cost \$30,000 in 1966 -- "way out of our ballpark," says Sgouros -- but she was undeterred. She gave real estate agent Russell Gower a check for \$500 as a binder, warning him as she left, "Don't cash that because there's nothing in the bank." Gower gulped, recalls Sgouros, but accepted it.

In a hundred such ways, Joan made good things possible for the family, says Sgouros. She ran the money because she's been scarred by her father's failure to keep his family informed about his financial crisis. "She wanted to know," says Sgouros. "She wanted no more surprises." As a result, he feels he owes everything to her, including his work. She kept everything running, he says, so "I could quote, unquote, paint."

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He taught big names

Sgouros's painting -- and teaching -- had an impact. "He really taught me how to see," says David Macaulay, who took drawing courses with Sgouros and became a star in the illustration field. "My eyes began to open and I began to understand what making a picture was all about: It's not just what you put on the paper. It's learning to see what's in front of you and interpreting it."

Sgouros hired Macaulay and another star -- children's author Chris Van Allsburg -- for the RISD illustration department. "There is something paternal," says Van Allsburg, "about the kind of care and concern he shows for the younger faculty people." Where other artists can be self-absorbed and competitive, he says, Sgouros has a natural affection for artists and is generous with honest praise.

Macaulay and Van Allsburg have dedicated children's books to Sgouros, as has David Wiesner, a former student who is a writer and illustrator in Philadelphia. All three are Caldecott Prize-winners.

Sgouros was elected in 1954 to the American Watercolor Society which was a first of many honors to come. Most recently, in 1992, he was named to the National Academy of Design, a pantheon which includes I.M. Pei, Andrew Wyeth and Willem De Kooning.

But Sgouros had more to learn.

His early paintings had been mostly landscapes and boats. Then, on a trip to Rome, he began to focus on still-lives. "I decided to teach myself how to paint." He began by setting white garlic bulbs against a white background, painting them again and again. Out from the "tyranny of nature," he could look at his subject as intensely as he wished and exert more control, not so much to render it exactly, but to organize its elements -- shape, color and mass -- to create "a poetic statement which transcends the material."

"This is what painting is," he remembers thinking. "I am now making paintings."

The still lifes were so good that in 1990, the RISD Museum of Art's director, Frank Robinson, took the risk of alienating more than 200 temperamental artists. In a highly unconventional move, he invited Sgouros, of all the RISD faculty, to show a room full of paintings. Some 700 attended the opening and the show was favorably reviewed. A one-man show followed, at the prestigious Virginia Lynch Gallery in Tiverton, and was nearly sold out.

Sgouros recalls his exhilaration -- "Geez, I'm a late bloomer."

"I was so confident in my powers, I poured water into the dirty palette and made a painting with that, and it was good," he says, "That's how fatuous you can get."

The next few years are a blur of successes: a show at the Providence Art Club, a show in Boston, a prize from the American Watercolor Society. His work was praised in a watercolor journal, a national publisher invited him to write a book, and there were constant calls to give workshops. But in the midst of these triumphs, there was a trial to endure: In 1978, Joan was diagnosed with breast cancer.

He was more broken up about it than she was. With characteristic straightforwardness, Joan told her husband after her mastectomy, "You're going to have to look at me."

"And I was very pleased to look at her," says Sgouros. "It made absolutely no difference to me or to her." She made what seemed a complete recovery from the surgery, and when she

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survived five years without a recurrence, all was believed well. “And then one day,” says Sgouros, “I noticed there was something wrong with one of my eyes.”

A terrifying sight

While eating lunch at the Art Club, “this awful thing,” a dark bloom, arose in his vision terrifying him. He rushed to an ophthalmologist, who diagnosed the problem as macular degeneration of his left eye -- odd with more than a million Americans afflicted with the disease, the doctor told him, most are older than Sgouros was, and most are of Northern European extraction. Sgouros had a hemorrhage, the doctor said. The bloom was blood, and would eventually go back to normal. But it “intruded, intruded,” says Sgouros -- “I couldn’t concentrate.”

After Joan noticed a stranger wearing an eye patch, Sgouros started wearing one, too, and “it got to be okay.” Photos from Charissa’s wedding show Sgouros in the patch. It afforded a certain romance, a certain glamour,” he said with a little swagger. “I’m ashamed that I took a little pleasure.”

Eventually the hemorrhage dried up and the patch came off. Sgouros was conscious only of a blip of distortion at the top of his field of vision. But the incident had left him aware that his painting life could end at any moment. If he was painting with speed before, now he painted at breakneck speed.

Joan, for her part, had become aware of Newbay, an electricity plant proposed for the Seekonk River, across from Blackstone Park and -- unfortunately for Newbay -- visible from her porch. As president of the Blackstone Park Improvement Association, she devoted herself to stopping it if the result wasn’t pretty.

Once, at a hearing, she had to walk a gauntlet between angry Teamsters, who wanted construction jobs and who spat and swore at her. Joan, who’d worked part-time as a Journal-Bulletin copy editor seemed unfazed, later telling a friend, “These people have never been in the Journal newspaper.”

Another time she found herself in the same elevator as the lead of the Newbay proponent who stared coldly ahead during the ride. “Well,” she said lightly to the enemy, “how are things?”

The enemy returns

In March, Joan learned that her cancer was back and had metastasized to her lungs. She waited months to tell her husband and then swore him to secrecy. The secret was easy to keep since she showed no signs of illness.

“Nothing dissuaded her,” says Sgouros, “She would go and do whatever she wanted to do.”

“We all tried to be happy,” he says, “and we succeeded -- from time to time.”

Then, in May, on a Memorial Day trip to Philadelphia, Sgouros experienced a new dark bloom, this one in his right eye. Ten days later, the sight in his left eye crumbled into shards. “It’s like watching a sinking ship,” one doctor told him. And despite efforts by numerous doctors, by August all but his peripheral vision was clouded. I felt as though it was the end of everything, the

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end of my life. It's hard for me to express to anyone what a disaster that was. There was no point in living."

Over and over, Sgouros walked through the city in despair. He hates to admit it, he says, but Joan's illness receded a bit in his consciousness. "I knew it was there, but you couldn't see it in her, and now I couldn't see at all."

She urged him to try to work. Make a drawing every day, she said. But drawing was the wrong thing, he couldn't see the pencil point. Macualay, who'd succeeded Sgouros as the illustration department head, invited his former teacher to try teaching a course. Sgouros alerted his new students to his limitations, at first warning them to work with huge contrasts of light and dark, but soon finding he could discern more than he'd expected. He changed his emphasis from "how" to "why" -- "What should be on your mind?" -- which made the teaching "deeper, more profound, and I think probably better," he says. "They are more reliant on their own investigation than on my showing them how to do it."

Taking care of Joan

Now Joan was undergoing cancer treatments and relying for help on her nearly blind husband. The drill was: Joan would drive herself and Sgouros to the hospital, he would go get the wheelchair, wheel her into the hospital and back out, and then she would drive them home. She fought and fought, but grew steadily frailer. Her heart, affected long-ago bout with pneumonia, weakened. She relied on an inhaler to breathe.

By the fall of last year, her beloved Halloween ritual, in which she dressed as a cat amid scary theatrical effects, was out of the question. At the Christmas party, a tradition in the neighborhood for 18 years, she presided from the sidelines, in a rocker.

At a certain point, on the same day her fellow Newbay opponents declared victory and drank a toast to Joan -- the doctors said they'd done all they could. One day, toward the end, she was in "real agony," says Sgouros.

"What do you want?" he asked her, when she refused his offer of Jell-O, the only food, besides Farina, she could eat. "I want to die," she said.

One by one, she called family members into the room and whispered her goodbyes. The family phoned the doctor, with whom Joan pleaded for relief from her pain, but he said he could do nothing.

"How about morphine?" she said. "No," said the doctor; it might kill her.

"I want to fly the coop," said Joan, showing the old verve. "I want to shuffle off to Buffalo."

"Why Buffalo?" he said, oblivious.

"It's a song, doctor!" said Charissa, on the extension phone.

Finally, having conferred with a colleague, the doctor agreed a little morphine might not be a bad idea. But he cautioned that it should be administered with care. With that, a seed was planted in the family's mind: Perhaps they should help her die. Though Sgouros was "horrified at the proposition," he also wanted what was best for Joan. His son, Thomas, called some friends in the medical field: How can we fix it so it can be a lethal dose? And, "we put it together," says Sgouros. "A lethal dose."

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Joan said, "I want it now," but they decided to wait until the next morning, when the doctor would be paying a house call. Sgouros pushed a bed against Joan's and held her hand through the night. While she slept, as if to spare them the trauma, she slipped into a coma, and the next morning, died peacefully, with her family all around her.

"Right up to the end she went out on her own terms," says her husband, through tears. And yet, he says, "I couldn't believe that she would lose."

The memorial service at Grace Church was packed with people, and Sgouros received 400 letters of condolence, some beginning with words to the effect of, "Although Joan and I never got along..."

Back in the classroom

It is Tuesday, 1p.m.

Twenty or so college kids are slouching on stools or at drawing tables, watching their teacher examine their homework -- self-portraits, mostly -- tacked to the walls.

Sgouros puts his nose to within an inch of each picture, and squints hard as he explores it -- up, down and across.

"Whose is this?" he says, turning around to the group.

"Mine," says a student.

"Who's 'mine'?" says Sgouros.

More than once, they'll need reminding that the teacher can't see them. When Sgouros asks if they want to take a break, they answer by shaking their heads no.

"You gotta say yes or no," he says. It is easy to understand how they could forget. Sgouros sees plenty in their work, perhaps more than they'd like. His remarks are not only specific but rather blunt: "This is a little grungy, over-worked and dull." "This gunky brown around it doesn't do a damn thing for it." "That face would be more effective if it were more like a face."

That he can't tell if one student's painting is right side up has more to do with the painting than the teacher's eyesight. But he gives each budding artist a chance to explain -- "What are you doing? How do you think you did?" after which there's a short exchange culminating with some advice from a lifetime of painting:

When an accident happens and you can control it, it no longer becomes an accident...Be willing to go too far, or you'll get stuck where you are...Don't lean on tricks...Learn to observe reality before working out of your head...Careful not to get sensational...Don't worry about failing...Do a hundred more...

"He's right to the point," Sarah Krieger, whose painting Sgouros found lacking, says later. "A little blunt, but very sensitive. He's passionate about it..."

"I think he picks up more, perhaps. To see as a whole, you want to squint your eye. He does pick up little small details. I don't know how he does it -- it's a wonder."

Heading out to the sidewalk along Canal Street, Sgouros characteristically downplays the wonder of it. "I shouldn't say this," he confides, "but student art is mainly the same every year."

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His new work called ‘amazing’

Sgouros’s own art has, necessarily, changed. The new paintings -- pared-down but sensuous views of vast sky, earth and sunlight -- seem a brave leap into unexplored territory. Even the self-deprecating artist concedes they are good -- “as strong as anything I’ve ever done.”

“But I wouldn’t recommend it,” he says of the road which led him here. “As a way of getting through to some kind of truth, forget it.”

What worries him is that people may look at his recent paintings and say: Not bad for someone who can’t see. “I’m not interested in the sympathy vote,” he says.

Fritz Drury, for one, finds Sgouros’s new work “amazing.”

Besides being full of detail, he says, “it’s certainly atmospheric in the way his work always was, and it’s gaining strength. It seems as though he’s learning something about how to work with his problem, and work through it.”

Virginia Lynch has scheduled a show of Sgouros’s landscapes for May at her gallery.

“I don’t have time for sympathy shows,” she says. “I’m a business person, and I’m showing him because he’s good.”

He’s also prolific. Besides the dozens or so oils on the walls, there are hundreds of new watercolors, each one layered into luminosity by very thin washes of color. He talks excitedly about the process -- how he knows what the colors will do, and yet how they surprise him.

With these “remembered landscapes,” he is out from under the tyranny of objects. And yet, he says, pointing to a still life, “I wish I could do those -- that trumpet -- again. Because of this experience, they would be far better than they ever were.”

He wishes, too, that he could show his work to Joan, his best friend, because that was always the fun part.

But one can die of wishing, and so he makes paintings.

“They are what they are,” he says of the results, “because they are all I can do.”