

ART REVIEW By **Cate McQuaid** Boston Globe

‘Visionary Boston’ celebrates undersung trio

At Danforth Art Museum in Framingham, Boston Expressionists John Brook, Steven Trefonides, and Kahlil Gibran get their due

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent
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Photographer John Brook was a central node in the network of Boston culture in the decades following World War II. He had a storefront studio on Newbury Street. He was the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s staff photographer. He regularly photographed visual artists, and he had his own practice, making art about his interior life.

More than a decade ago, Jessica Roscio, now director and curator of the Danforth Art Museum, was organizing “[The Expressive Voice](#),” a 2011 exhibition there celebrating Boston’s mid-20th-century retort to Abstract Expressionism. [Hyman Bloom](#), one of Boston’s leading lights, called abstract painting “emotional catharsis, with no intellectual basis.” Boston Expressionists made figurative, deeply psychological art.



Steven Trefonides, "Triple Threat (1)," 1990. Oil on canvas, 48" x 48". On loan from Phyllis Trefonides .GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM

She happened upon a group photograph of artists shot at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1947. The photographer was Brook.

“There was very little information about him,” Roscio said in an interview with the Globe. “Nobody knew if he was still alive.”

He was, at the time, living in a nursing home in Brighton, she said. He died in 2016, at 91. “He’d been there since the ‘90s,” she said. “He was charming and cracking jokes.”



John Brook

That year, Roscio helped collector Thomas Adams form the [John Brook Archive](#) in an effort, according to the nonprofit's [website](#), "to reintroduce a once prominent photographer to the world." In 2021, Roscio curated the first major Brook exhibition since 1970, at the Griffin Museum of Photography, "[Return to Riverrun.](#)"

Now, the photographer is the linchpin of the Danforth's "Visionary Boston," an exhibition exploring an undersung trio of Boston Expressionists — Brook, painter and photographer [Steven Trefonides](#) (1926-2021), and sculptor [Kahlil Gibran](#) (1922-2008; cousin to the [poet](#) of the same name). "Visionary Boston" puts Brook, Trefonides, and Gibran in context, supplementing their art with works by other Boston Expressionists, including movement icons [Bloom](#) and [Karl Zerbe](#).



John Brook's "Ten Artists and Karl Zerbe." 1947, from the exhibit "Thirty Massachusetts Painters in 1947," Institute of Modern Art, Newbury St., Boston. Karl Zerbe is in the far rear center before his painting "The Blue Clown." From left: Carl Pickhardt, Reed Champion, Kahlil Gibran, Jan Northey, Esther Geller, Thomas Fransioli, Ture Bengtz, Giglio Dante, Maud Morgan, Lawrence Kupferman. Gelatin silver print. On loan from Jean Gibran. GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM, JOHN BROOK ARCHIVE

The Boston group, like their abstractionist cousins in the [New York School](#), grew out of a mid-20th-century reckoning with the horrors of World War II and an interiority prompted by the burgeoning practice of psychoanalysis. New York artists such as [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Robert Motherwell](#) funneled emotions through breakthrough abstractions, turning picture planes into pictures of the psyche. Boston artists depicted their demons in narrative, character, and figuration.

Brook, Trefonides, and Gibran mined the bleeding edges of reality. They also shared a fascination with photography, a medium not commonly thought of as unrealistic. Roscio builds this show around the notion that what we see is always bent, shifted, or reconfigured by what we look through or into — camera lens, mirror, retina, or our own perspective.

The passion for photography started with Brook, who introduced Trefonides to the medium in the 1950s; Trefonides went on to develop parallel careers in painting and photography. The restlessly inventive Gibran built his own high-powered lens and designed a mass-produced tripod.

For Brook, all the magic happened inside the camera, and the darkroom was merely a place to print. He deployed the lens's optical potentials the way a painter uses a paintbrush, an aesthetic rooted in turn-of-the-century [Pictorialism](#). Pictorialists such as [Julia Margaret Cameron](#) often used foggy diffusion; it appears in Brook's untitled gelatin silver print, shot through his own handmade lens, depicting a couple kissing, the negative space between them glowing like an angel. In a later color print, wildflowers spin woozily, as light and color strum viewers' feelings and senses like harp strings.

Trefonides was a documentary photographer, who only turned to the mystical and uncanny in his painting studio. His photos employ disjuncture and perspective in ways that revealed social isolation. One of his best known images, on view here, is "Dying Woman," from a series shot in Brookline at the Hebrew Home for the Aged. He photographed his subject from above, in a brilliant composition of swirling lines of sheets and hair.



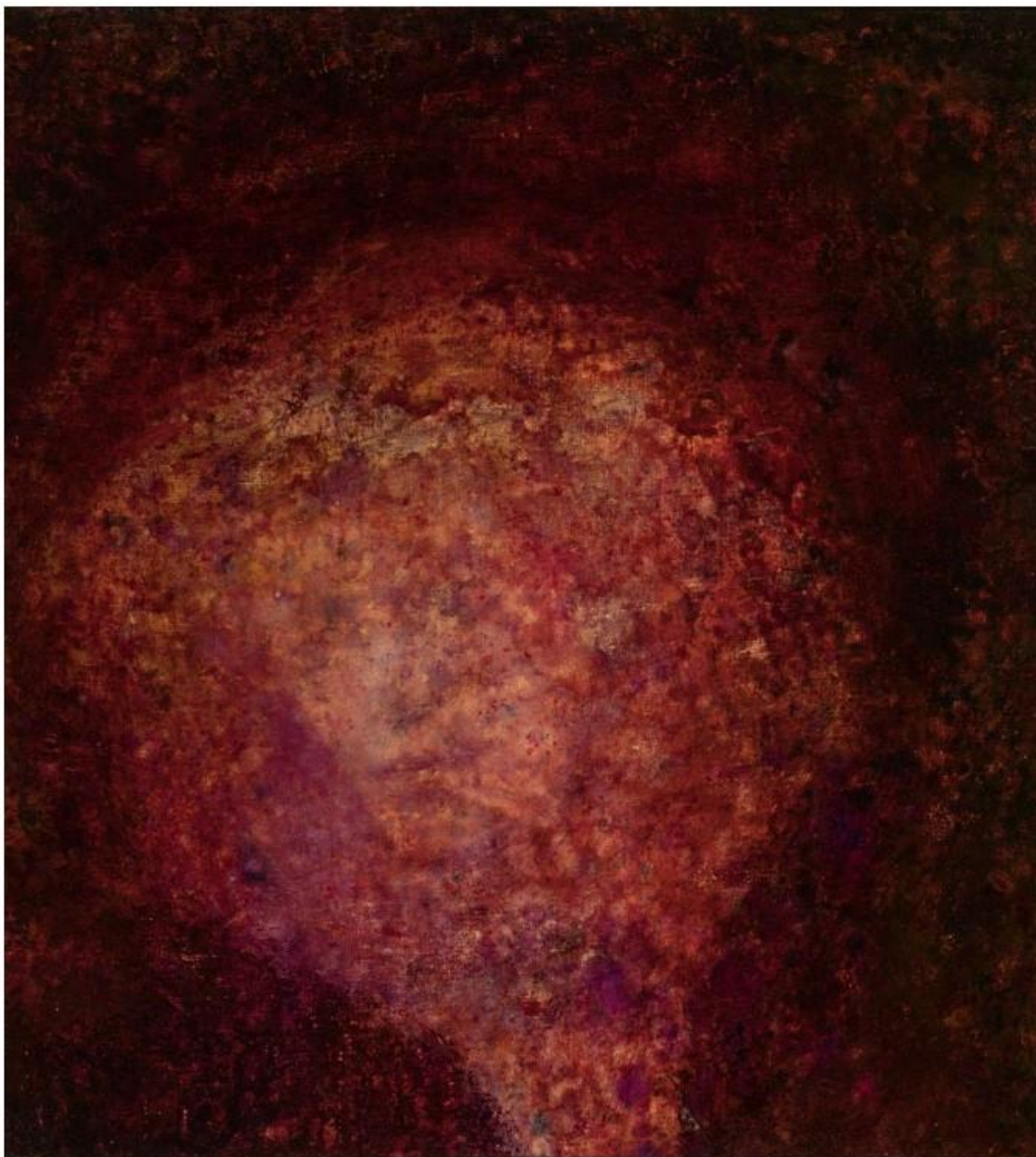
Steven Trefonides's "Dying Woman," circa 1950s. Gelatin silver photographic print. On loan from Phyllis Trefonides. GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM

His paintings swirl, too — with hallucinatory light and color, like Brook’s wildflowers. They often tell intimately revealing stories against social backdrops. In “Triple Threat (1),” two top-hatted fellows butt heads at an outdoor event. Colors spark and shimmer. In “Triple Threat (2),” two ladies in elegant gowns primly take centerstage while the men topple into a brawl. Installed side by side, these paintings make a farce about rage and class. Or perhaps the artist dreamed the scene, and they tell us as much about his own unconscious as about the performance of social norms.



Steven Trefonides, "Triple Threat (2)," 1990. Oil on canvas. On loan from Phyllis Trefonides. GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM

Dreams — irrational and often freighted with emotion — are the stuff of visionary art. Gibran’s welded steel “Bouquet 2,” a deadly cluster of blooms, is at once mournful and nightmarish. He also painted, and his canvas “Night Image” depicts a face hovering like an embryo in a womb, veiled in mottled red paint.



Kahlil Gibran, "Night Image," 1946. Oil on canvas laid on a panel. On loan from Jean Gibran. GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM

Kahlil Gibran, "Night Image," 1946. Oil on canvas laid on a panel. On loan from Jean Gibran. GARY SAMSON/DANFORTH ART MUSEUM

There's something viscerally potent but beyond the grasp of reason in much of "Visionary Boston." But all three artists also tether us to the ground — Gibran with his devices and the materiality of his sculptures, Trefonides with his documentary photographs, and Brook with his artist portraits. These last testify to the vitality of the artistic community here and knit the show together. They depict the bedrock from which a movement flourished.

VISIONARY BOSTON At Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University, 100 State St., Framingham, through June 4. 508-215-5110, danforth.framingham.edu

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