

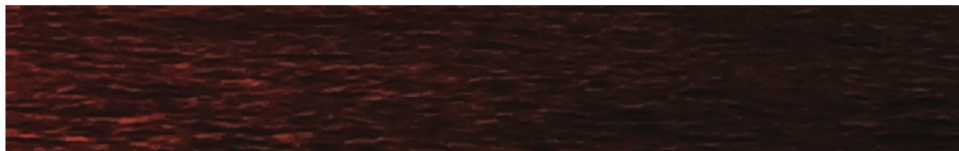
# people & places

BUSINESS | ENVIRONMENT | FINANCE | PEOPLE | NEW & NOTABLE

Outer Light, Old Saybrook. PHOTO BY MARK CASSIDY



Judy Cotton HONORS THE CONCEPT OF HOME



# The undertow of home

ARTIST JUDY COTTON'S NEW MEMOIR EXAMINES THE COMPLICATED ALLURE OF OUR BIRTHPLACES

BY JANET REYNOLDS

**A**t 81, Judy Cotton would be forgiven if she decided to rest on her laurels. An internationally acclaimed artist with works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Britain Museum of American Art, the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and the National Gallery of Australia—to name just a very few—the Lyme resident is doing anything but hanging up her brushes.

Not only is she actively creating art—more on that later—but she just published her first memoir. The book, *Swimming Home*, is a recollection of home in its many complicated phases. Born and raised in Australia, Cotton was sent to boarding school at age 4. After a conflicted childhood, she moved to Korea and Japan in the late 1960s, and ultimately landed in New York, where she discovered and joined the thriving art scene. The book is an ode to the land she left but has never left her. (See excerpt on page 19.)

Cotton says she had been writing bits about her life for a while. “Then I would put them away in a drawer and hide them,” she says. “Then I thought, ‘You’re 80. Stand up and own it. Stop hiding stuff.’”

Although familiar with writing and editing—she was the contributing New York editor for *Vogue Australia* for many years—Cotton had never written anything book-length prior to her memoir. “It was lovely to



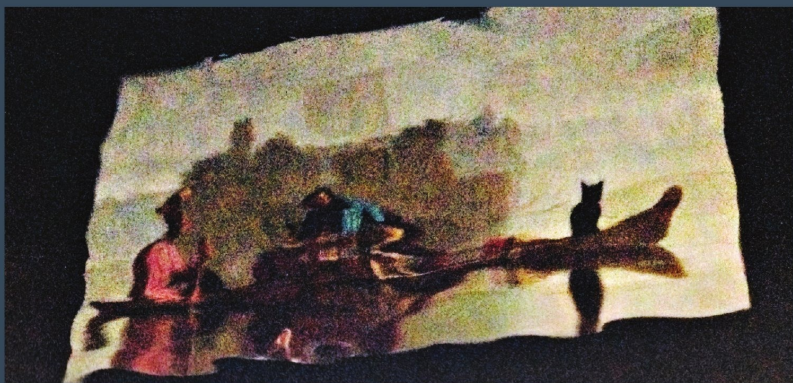
Artist and memoirist Judy Cotton, 81, with her beloved dog Pip, a 15-year-old Jack Russell. The painting is one of Cotton's works from the 1970s.

PHOTO BY DENISE MINEAU



# Judy Cotton's Reflections

The images on these pages are part of Judy Cotton's Reflections series, which was shown at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in fall 2022.



**ABOVE** *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, George Caleb Bingham, 1845.



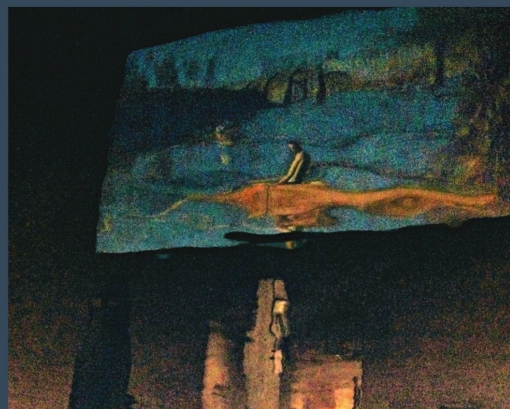
**LEFT** *Young Mother Sewing*, Mary Cassatt, 1900.

**BELOW** *Prisoners from the Front*, Winslow Homer, 1866.

**OPPOSITE TOP** *The American School*, Matthew Pratt, 1765.

**OPPOSITE MIDDLE** *The Champion Single Sculls*, Thomas Eakins, 1871.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** *Mrs. John Wood Dodge*, watercolor on ivory by John Wood Dodge, 1836. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUDY COTTON



be lodged in a longer piece," she says, adding she rewrote the book four times. "It was like being in the middle of a series."

Delving into her life also brought some surprises. "I was surprised at what an obstinate little beast I was," she says. "I didn't realize how hard-headed I was. I would resist authority no matter what."

Her time at boarding school challenged that stubborn streak, Cotton says. "In those days they thought you should know how to hold a spoon correctly, hem a tablecloth. That's not my preferred choice," she says, noting during the holidays at home she was allowed to run and explore the vast outdoors with abandon with her brother and cousin. "We could go anywhere. We ran free in a way I don't think you can now."

And still Cotton realized she needed to leave Australia. Her parents were going into politics and she says she needed to leave in order to become her own person. "I left because I wanted to see the world," she says. "I wanted to see what art was, where you couldn't hit the ceiling too fast."

Over the years, Cotton, whose work was recently shown at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, has explored different mediums. Before she left Australia, she primarily used acrylics. Then she moved into oils. Lately, she has been working with encaustic, a form of hot wax painting.

"I was laid low with Lyme disease and in a wheelchair for six months," she says. "I could only stand for 10 minutes at a time. For some reason I said, 'Encaustic, that's what I'm going to do.' When the surface is honey soft, you draw rapidly. It's a lot of fun. If you fail, you melt it."

"At 81, you can paint a leg of a chair three times. That's not the question you're asking yourself," she says of her interest in exploring various mediums. "In the studio, you ask yourself a question and the painting is the way you try to answer it. Different mediums come up [to answer the question.]

"Ideas—they rise. You can't trust it unless they do. You can't decide arbitrarily I would like to





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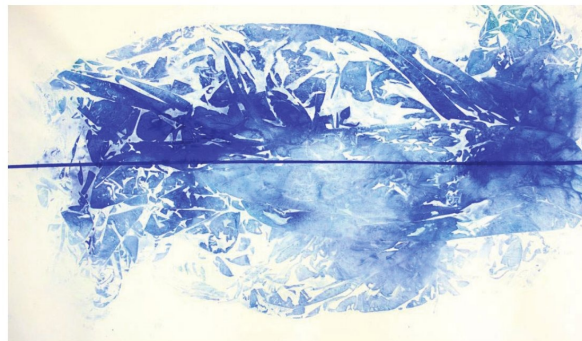


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OPPOSITE TOP Judy Cotton's painting, *Thin Blue Line*, is a 36- by 60-inch acrylic on canvas, 2014. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDY COTTON

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT *Swan* (2012), part of Cotton's Nature Morte series, is a 36- by 36-inch oil and acrylic on canvas. Cotton said the series, which depicts animals and birds after their deaths, was her way of paying tribute to the creatures. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDY COTTON

OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT Judy Cotton's *Rower* is in the collection of the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDY COTTON

TOP Artist and memoirist Judy Cotton, 81, whose artwork has been shown around the world, lives by the Connecticut River in Lyme. PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDY COTTON

paint six trees today," she continues. "That has never worked for me. I have to trust my instincts."

While Cotton's mediums have varied, she has always been inspired by water. "I'm always working with water, even when painting about the desert. It's an Australian obsession." Now she lives by the Connecticut River. "Water is something that has always fascinated me. I have not run out of interesting water."

She and her husband of 37 years, Yale Kneeland III, discovered the land while bringing their son to school. They had lived in New York City for four decades—he was a conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for many years—and were looking for a little cabin. They stopped for coffee in Lyme and learned some land was for sale on the Connecticut River.

"We had sworn we would never build because that's how you get divorced," Cotton says. "But we walked onto this piece of land and a man was sitting there with his pet goat, Silas, and my husband had had a pet goat. We fell in love and bought three acres.

"It has been abidingly peaceful," Cotton says. "When you're traveling and come back, you come back and you think, 'Here. I live here.' It has a strange gentleness..."

"The Connecticut River Valley is a luminous landscape," she continues. "There is something about the quality

of the light. The amount of liquid in the air allows light to bloom. It is very enriching to be in this landscape. There is color everywhere." ☞

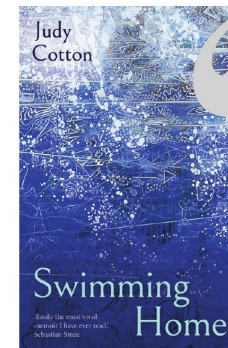
Turn the page to read an excerpt from Cotton's memoir, *Swimming Home*.

Janet Reynolds is an award-winning Connecticut journalist, editor and content strategist with deep roots in alternative journalism and arts and culture magazines.





Judy Cotton's sculpture, *Adrift* (2018), is made from driftwood salvaged from the Connecticut River, and is part of the Lyman Allyn Museum of Art's Sculpture Trail. PHOTO BY DENISE MINEAU



## 1979

I had just returned to the house in Balmoral when the wallaby died. The day before, I had watched my sister walk through the lowering beauty of the light to feed her, as if it were an ordinary thing to do. It was. Stumbling out of bed with jet lag the next morning, I heard a small struggle in the bush below, and looking over the verandah saw the wallaby lying among the tree ferns, head flung back in a rictus that had it almost meet the sturdy whip of tail that was her counterpoise. Above the white muzzle, her large dark eyes were blank. A small trickle of blood ran from her right ear.

This was the dark undertow of home. Wildness extinguished in a suburban garden, the heartsick dichotomy that faces the returning expatriate, dazzled with the land's savage beauty, each memory a stroke of the lash marking that soon it will be gone. 'You could never live here now,' my sister declared. 'They wouldn't let you.' Who were They? My presence seemed to stir up troubling antagonisms, as if I were some unruly, sea beast disturbing the blue waters locked around this drowsy island. 'Go back where you came from!' seemed to be implied. But this was where I came from.

And yet the child in me does not doubt that I can return to seas that slide in a silver sheet on long empty beaches as if erasing the notion of human existence—return to melting ice cream, bare feet running in bush paddocks, parrots, snakes, bushfires, and trees that seem as eccentric as close friends; does not doubt that miles and square miles of freedom are mine. But that is the child in me. Australia is still my inner landscape that lets me in and shuts me out, so that returning to America I feel as if I've jammed the fingers of my emotions in a door.

—Excerpted with permission from *Swimming Home*, a memoir by Judy Cotton (Black Inc. Books, 221 pages, \$29.99)