

DAY TRIP

## *At Jackson Pollock's Hamptons House, a Life in Spatters*

By ELLEN MAGUIRE

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FIFTY years ago this summer, on Aug. 11, 1956, Jackson Pollock drank himself into a rage and crashed his Oldsmobile on a curving road in Springs, a bucolic bayside hamlet in East Hampton, N.Y. His lover, Ruth Kligman, survived the accident, but Pollock, who was 44, and another passenger did not.

When Pollock died, he was light years from the focused state in which he had created his most acclaimed work and thousands of miles from his wife, Lee Krasner (like him, a pioneering Abstract Expressionist painter), who had fled to Europe to escape his abusive rants and blatant infidelity. But he was only about a mile from his modest wood-shingled house overlooking the tranquil salt marshes of Accabonac Creek, a site now open to the public as the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center.

Ordinarily only one painting by Pollock and two by Krasner are at the house and studio, but from Aug. 3 to mid-September, 13 Pollock paintings and works on paper on loan from museums and private collections will be shown there as well, in a commemoration of his death. And in any year, a tour of the home, studio and neighborhood that Pollock and Krasner shared provides not only a window into their lives and work, but a sense of the Hamptons in a time when artists sought refuge amid their serene salt-scrubbed dunes and iridescent light.

From East Hampton village, with its mansions and expensive shops, roads lead through a less manicured landscape to the hamlet of Springs, where the status-seeking crowds fade and pebbled beaches ring Gardiners Bay. Towering silver maples and a sprawling cherry tree shelter the two-story former farmhouse that Pollock and Krasner bought there for \$5,000 (all of it borrowed) in November 1945.

“It was the last great real estate deal in the Hamptons,” said Mike Hinkemeyer, 65, a bearded history professor turned novelist (one of his pen names is Vanessa Royall), and volunteer docent at the museum.

Built in 1879, the house was heated by a coal stove and lacked an indoor bathroom when the couple moved there from New York, hoping to ease Pollock's long, bruising struggle with alcoholism and depression. “It was a healing place,” said the artist Audrey Flack, 75, who

spent time with the couple in Springs. "And they were in great need of being healed."



East End artists The Pollock-Krasner House, where Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner lived  
Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

Krasner, part pragmatist, part masochist, neglected her own ambition to mother her husband: she cooked, cleaned and courted Manhattan art collectors by phone from Springs. Her unshakable conviction that Pollock was a genius, combined with the isolation that made it easier for him to head to his studio than to a bar, helped him stay productive — temporarily, at least — and his work at this rustic house seized attention and established him as a virtuoso of the avant-garde.

Behind the house, the lawn slopes gently to dense, tawny salt marshes where blue herons wade and wheeling osprey hunt for fish. Cedar groves at the horizon soften a moody eastern sky, and the silence yields to birdsong and the rustling of red foxes in the heavy brush. Art history buffs will recognize an arrangement of granite boulders as the site of a photograph of Pollock and Ms. Kligman taken on the day of his death.

This peaceful view will endure: the Peconic Land Trust has acquired a scenic easement from the owner of 26 acres of shoreline across the creek, and Krasner, years before her death in 1984, donated two and a half acres of wetlands to the Nature Conservancy.

According to Helen Harrison, 62, the director of the museum, affection for their environment wound its way into the artists' work, especially Pollock's "Sounds in the Grass" series — although the influence is not immediately apparent. The couple believed authentic art was rooted in the unconscious, and they sought to capture the essence of an object or experience, not its appearance, and painted spontaneously, without preparatory sketches.

In Pollock's studio, a renovated barn flooded with northern light, he had space to spread huge canvases on the floor, an act that galvanized his diverse methods into the energetic pouring technique he called "direct painting." Apocryphal stories abound about the dramatic moment of the drip's birth — one says that Pollock kicked paint across one of Krasner's canvases — but Pollock had experimented with the approach as early as 1936.

Visitors remove their shoes — “like it’s a holy place, which it is,” Ms. Flack said — and don padded slippers to tread the paint-splattered floor, where Pollock’s footprints are still visible. He drew in the air above his canvases, using brushes, turkey basters and sticks, allowing the paint to fall in strokes and splatters. Sometimes he poured paint straight from the can, adding sand, string or nails.

After Pollock’s death, when Krasner was 48, she stepped permanently from his shadow and took over the studio. The size of her canvases increased, as did critical acclaim for her work.



Pollock’s “Free Form.”  
Museum of Modern Art

Across the lush lawn is the house. In the simple, graceful interior are flourishing plants, driftwood, gleaming white walls, shelves lined with books and dozens of jazz record albums. Seeing where the couple ate pot roast and displayed their beachcombing bounty (and in later years, exchanged unprintable expletives) brings home their humanity.

“They got up every morning to do their work,” said Ed Harris, who visited the house in preparation for his film “Pollock,” in which he played Pollock as well as directing. “Life was a day-to-day proposition for them, just like it is for everyone else.”

Hanging over the kitchen cupboard is the only painting by Pollock on permanent display on the property: “Composition With Red Arc and Horses.” During Pollock’s lifetime, many of his paintings hung in the house. “It was magical, like a cathedral,” said Ms. Kligman, who lived there with Pollock for a month after Krasner left. Now living in Manhattan, she spoke by phone about her days with Pollock. “I’m an artist,” she added. “I’m not just the girl that was in the car.”

Upstairs, the bedroom brims with light, seashells and glorious views. Mr. Harris stayed overnight in the room while learning about Pollock. "I had a good night's sleep," he said with a laugh. "No visitations."

When they lived together in Springs, Krasner and Pollock often went to nearby Louse Point, and it's still a good place for a beach walk. Parking at the point requires a resident's permit ("This is the land of no," Ms. Harrison said), but you can find a way to get there without a car. Rent a kayak from Springs General Store, where Pollock once settled his bill with a painting that now belongs to the Pompidou Center in Paris, and paddle through the shallow waters of Accabonac Creek to come ashore at the point, a narrow neck of land captured by Pollock's neighbor, Willem de Kooning, in "Rosy Fingered Dawn at Louse Point." Face the bracing salt breezes off Gardiners Bay, watch the gulls dive in the glimmering light and deconstruct a canvas that Pollock and Krasner considered essential viewing: nature.

### **Visitor Information**

TO reach the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center (830 Springs Fireplace Road, East Hampton, 631-324-4929, [www.pkhouse.org](http://www.pkhouse.org)) from the west, take the Long Island Expressway to Exit 70 and follow Route 111 south. Take Route 27 east to the village of East Hampton. At the light, turn left on Main Street. Bear left by the windmill on North Main Street, and turn right on Springs Fireplace Road. The house is four miles up on the right.

The museum is open Thursdays through Saturdays May through October. This summer, during the Pollock exhibition from Aug. 3 to Sept. 17, the museum will be open Sundays as well. In May, late September and October, guided tours, which cost \$10 and must be bought in advance, are offered by appointment from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. In June, July, August and early September, tours are scheduled at 11 a.m. daily; visitors may wander unescorted from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. (admission, \$5); the meticulously researched audio and print guides are free.

A kayak rental at Springs General Store (29 Old Stone Highway, East Hampton, 631-329-5065) costs about \$40 for two hours. The store sells made-to-order sandwiches and freshly baked brownies, and has outdoor seating.