The Provincetown INDEPENDENT

EXHIBITION

Avery, Gottlieb, Rothko, and the Other Cape

Three painters spent summers on Cape Ann, then moved the conversation to Provincetown

By C. Sean Horton Oct 21, 2026



Blue at Night, 1957, by Adolph Gottlieb. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo by Troy Wilkinson, © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society, N.Y.)

For years, a copy of *Coming to Light* sat in a stack of books in my Midtown apartment. It's a catalog from a 2002 exhibition at Knoedler & Company in New York devoted to the summers Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko spent in Provincetown between 1957 and 1961.

Each summer, the catalog made the pilgrimage to Provincetown in my suitcase, packed with the best intentions of reading it on the beach, only to return to the same stack unread. From the markings inside, it looks like I bought it at Tim's Used Books. Its luck changed late this summer, when news of an exhibition in Gloucester reminded me to pick it up again.

"Avery, Gottlieb & Rothko: By the Sea" was on view at the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester from June 30 to Sept. 27 and is opening on Oct. 24 at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. The show tells the story of that other Cape, where Avery, Gottlieb, and Rothko spent summers together before their Provincetown years.

The curator, Eliza Rathbone, acknowledges a debt to the Knoedler exhibition. She began her career at the National Gallery of Art under E. A. Carmean Jr., who organized the Knoedler show, and in the new catalog's acknowledgments she credits it with having "triggered my own interest" in the artists' earlier summers by the sea. The two shows even share a painting, Gottlieb's *Blue at Night* (1957).

The Gloucester story begins in 1920, when Avery discovered the coastal city and made it his summer home. By the decade's end, he had taken two young painters under his wing: Rothko, a fixture at the Averys' cramped New York City apartment, and Gottlieb, who had joined the circle by 1929. In 1932, Avery had brought his young friends to Cape Ann, and by 1934, the Gottliebs and the Rothkos had joined the Averys for the summer, renting houses on Calder Street in East Gloucester.

The exhibition gathers 82 works from 26 lenders including 16 museums across the country. At the Cape Ann Museum, Rathbone essentially split the show in two. To the right of the entrance, an airy gallery held the major late canvases of each artist. To the left, a series of more intimate rooms traced their story chronologically, with early paintings, watercolors, and sketches arranged alongside photographs and biographical material. Nearly half the works have never been shown publicly, and presented in this context, the pictures begin to read like an archive.

In the side galleries, the work looks less like an art movement in the making than a summer well spent. Much of it is small and quick: sketches and watercolors made from life by friends who escaped the city to paint together, trying out subjects — bathers, boats, beaches, and the obligatory harbor view. There's a looseness to it, a freedom from the pressure to arrive at a signature style. For Avery especially, these pictures were raw material; his routine was "sketches in the summer, into paintings over the winter" as described in *Coming to Light*.

The common thread is Avery's influence, which shows in the flattened space, the simplified forms, and the color doing most of the work. Well before Rothko and Gottlieb turned to abstraction, they were already learning to pare down what they saw. That common ground cuts both ways. At times, the installation repeats itself with one harbor view echoing the last, and telling whose is whose isn't always easy. Avery's *Red Sky, Blue Sea* (1958), a broad field of blue held between bands of orangish red and yellow, soft-edged and nearly weightless, could pass for a

Rothko. Rothko's *Untitled (bathers on the beach)* (1934), with three reclining figures drifting across flat planes of color that only hint at a beach, could pass for an Avery. Swap the labels, and few visitors would notice.



Red Sky, Blue Sea, 1958, by Milton Avery. Mixed media on paper. Private collection. (Photo courtesy Xavier Hufkens, © 2026 The Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society, N.Y.)



Untitled (bathers on the beach), 1934, by Mark Rothko. Watercolor and graphite on watercolor paper. National Gallery of Art. (© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society, N.Y.)

Largely overlooked are the women of this artistic circle. The exhibition catalog notes that Sally Avery, Esther Gottlieb, and Rothko's first wife, Edith Sachar, were all working artists at the time and part of "the conversations and the work," yet Sally, who supported the family by designing ads for the *New York Times* while Milton painted, is the only one who gets a single small watercolor here.

Across the hall, the main gallery held a commanding presentation of their signature works: Rothko's hovering fields of color, Gottlieb's emphatic forms, and Avery's late seascapes. The shared maritime subjects of the smaller rooms have given way to three increasingly distinct languages. What the Gloucester work makes visible is how close they once were and how differently each carried those early experiments in simplification, color, and abstraction forward. It's easy to read the room as a conclusion, proof of how far the three painters traveled from those Gloucester summers. But *Coming to Light* suggests the room is also the beginning of a new chapter.

The best evidence hides in plain sight, both in the exhibition and on the cover of the new catalog. Avery's *Black Sea* (1959) reduces a shoreline to its essentials: black water, a jagged line of white surf, and pale sand. The catalog also names where it came from, a beach in Provincetown, which makes the emblem of the Cape Ann exhibition a picture of the other Cape.



Black Sea, 1959, by Milton Avery. Oil on canvas. The Phillips Collection. (© 2026 The Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society, N.Y.)

In Gloucester, the younger painters had followed their mentor; in Provincetown, the mentor followed them. Gottlieb arrived in Provincetown first. He had been spending summers here since the mid-1940s, and he took part in Forum 49, held in 1949 at 200 Commercial St., a onetime Ford garage now shared by Kiehl's and Toys of Eros. The Averys came for brief visits in 1955 and 1956; after the second visit, they wrote to friends that they "fell in love with the place." In 1957, they settled in for the summer, as did Rothko, who bought an unassuming house at 250 Bradford St. the following year and turned its entire second floor into a studio. He once described his "ideal life" as one in which artists worked alone all day and met every evening to talk, much as the three friends had done in Gloucester a quarter century earlier.

Carmean, the organizer of the Knoedler show, calls the summer of 1957 "a regathering of painters whose close association dated back almost three decades." It had been 14 years since they last were together in Gloucester, and by 1957 all three were widely recognized; nobody was leading, and the lines of influence ran in every direction. That exchange wasn't always comfortably acknowledged: Rothko resisted references to Avery's influence, while Avery denied ever having been his "teacher."

The next summer, Avery broke his routine and began painting big canvases on the spot, “like the abstract boys,” as he told Nat Halper, whose H.C.E. Gallery in Provincetown showed them that season. “We pulled them up on a rope,” Sally recalled, and she credited Rothko with giving her husband “the courage to do it.”

The summer of 1957 would be their only one together in Provincetown; Gottlieb was already on his way out. He is reputed to have said, “When you are a young artist, Provincetown is the place to be. When you make it, move to East Hampton.” Gottlieb apparently took his own advice.

Provincetown is very good at claiming its artists, and Gloucester has every reason to do the same, but Avery, Gottlieb, and Rothko probably didn’t stay put long enough to belong to either. Artists move. Friendships move with them.

Gloucester and Provincetown are two Capes where Avery, Gottlieb, and Rothko engaged in a conversation spanning more than 30 years. Avery liked to sit out in the evenings on his deck facing Provincetown Harbor, watching the Moon rise over the water, a view he painted as *Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea* (1959). Two exhibition catalogs now sit side by side on my shelf here in Provincetown as the Sun goes down over the same bay, somewhere toward Gloucester.

Shared Affinities

The event: ‘Avery, Gottlieb & Rothko: By the Sea’
The time: Oct. 24 to Jan. 24, 2027
The place: The Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW, Washington, D.C.
The cost: $20
