

# Best of the Philly Free School Flickr Set



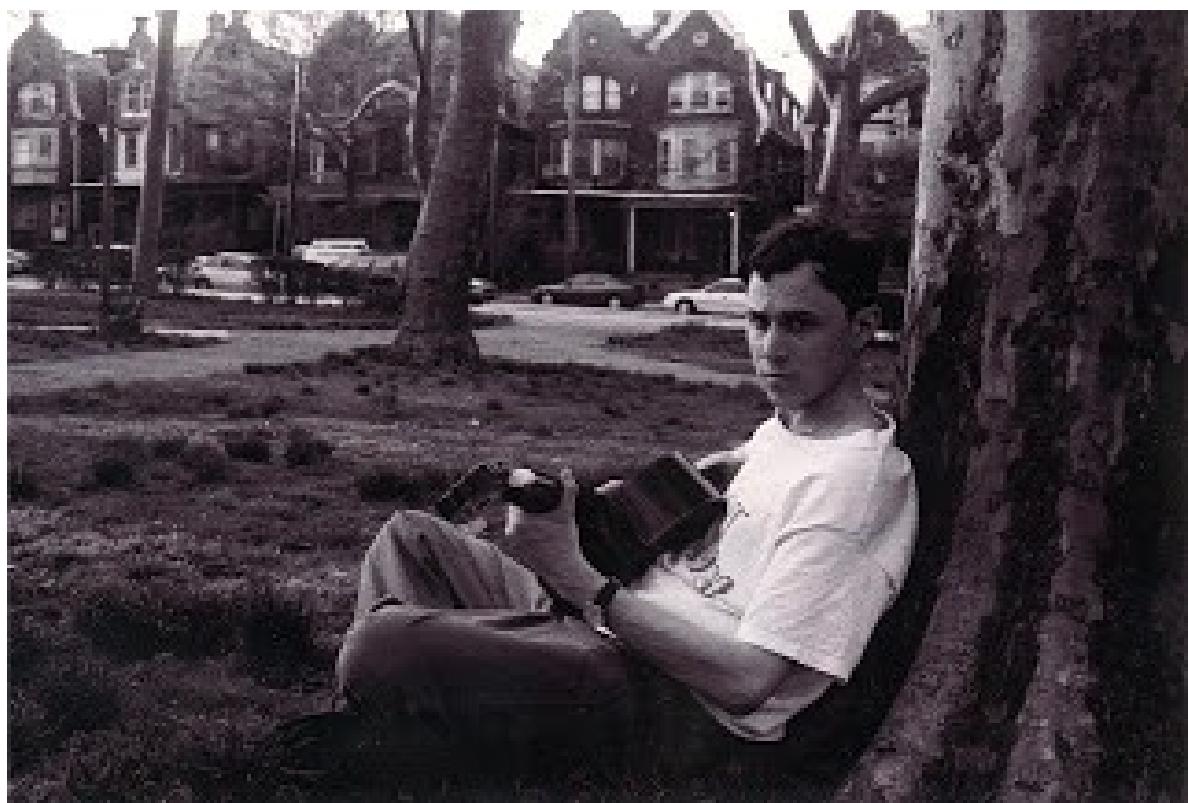
## Preface

We, as an artistic community in Philadelphia in the Aughts, went out of our way not to stay on the surface. We wanted to create art which had some depth to it. As such, the tendency in Philly for us was not to put too much effort into our appearances. We dressed casual, and offhand. It just so happens that many of us were also photogenic. What animates this collection (and raises it above the level of *La Boheme* meets *Beverly Hills 90210*) is that many Free School artists were also competent photographers; particularly Mary Harju and Abby Heller-Burnham. The trio of Mary Harju paintings herein included make their own statement—“The Fall” is a testament to the vicissitudes of my relationship with Ms. Harju, and her absolute formal proficiency; her self-portrait, “The Vessel,” demonstrates the raw courage of the best confessional art, drowned in luscious Spanish coloration; and her 2007 portrait of me explores the subject’s devilish androgyny and the issue of who the witch is and who’s being bewitched. The inclusion of Abby Heller-Burnham’s masterful urban mood piece, “The Skaters,” is meant to lead curious viewers to her entire oeuvre; and her photo portraits of me (alone and with Mary, which is on the cover here) demonstrate that a serious painter’s facility can be successfully applied to taking quality photos as well. Mary had the same knack, as her stark black and white portrait of me in Clark Park in West Philadelphia shows. Many of the anonymous portraits here are also stunning—the sleek moodiness of Mike Land at the Last Drop, and the loopy insouciance the camera caught from deep-in-his-cups Nick Gruberg.

In some ways, Center and West Philly architecture speaks for itself—the facades pictured here are elegant and decrepit in equal measure. The atmosphere generated is almost Parisian, which brings to light another Philadelphia Gemini (I have elsewhere ascribed the sun sign Gemini to Philly) contradiction—portrayed by the American press as an ugly, Detroit-level loser’s/underdog’s paradise, its architecture aligns it more with the nicer sections of western Europe. The portraits in this collection are all expressive—Matt Stevenson’s brusque ragamuffin exterior is unmistakable, as is Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum’s Neo-Romantic decadence and the dark punkishness of the Bad News Bats. That’s a key element of the entire Flickr set—darkness. Not that we were ones to mope; just that we, as a collective, preferred to dwell (as most serious artists do) on the dark side of things. The strangeness of this conglomerate of artists is profound—that we shared a vision which not only chafed against the rest of the Philadelphia art community but against the entire history of indigenous American art, all in the unselfconscious spirit of youth, and from one urban heart of America. On a fundamental level, we didn’t know who we were or what we were doing, and we benefitted from this lack of knowledge. Had we known what the odds against us were, we might’ve been stymied; but the fertility of the Center City scene sheltered us, and we were able to persevere. Darkness and innocence are strangely mixed in the Philly Free School—as is queerness and straightness. Those of us who weren’t queer were queer in spirit. The queerness we shared was a taste for shadows, apparitions, multiple meanings, and a passionate engagement with art’s Collective Unconscious.

Adam Fieled, 2013

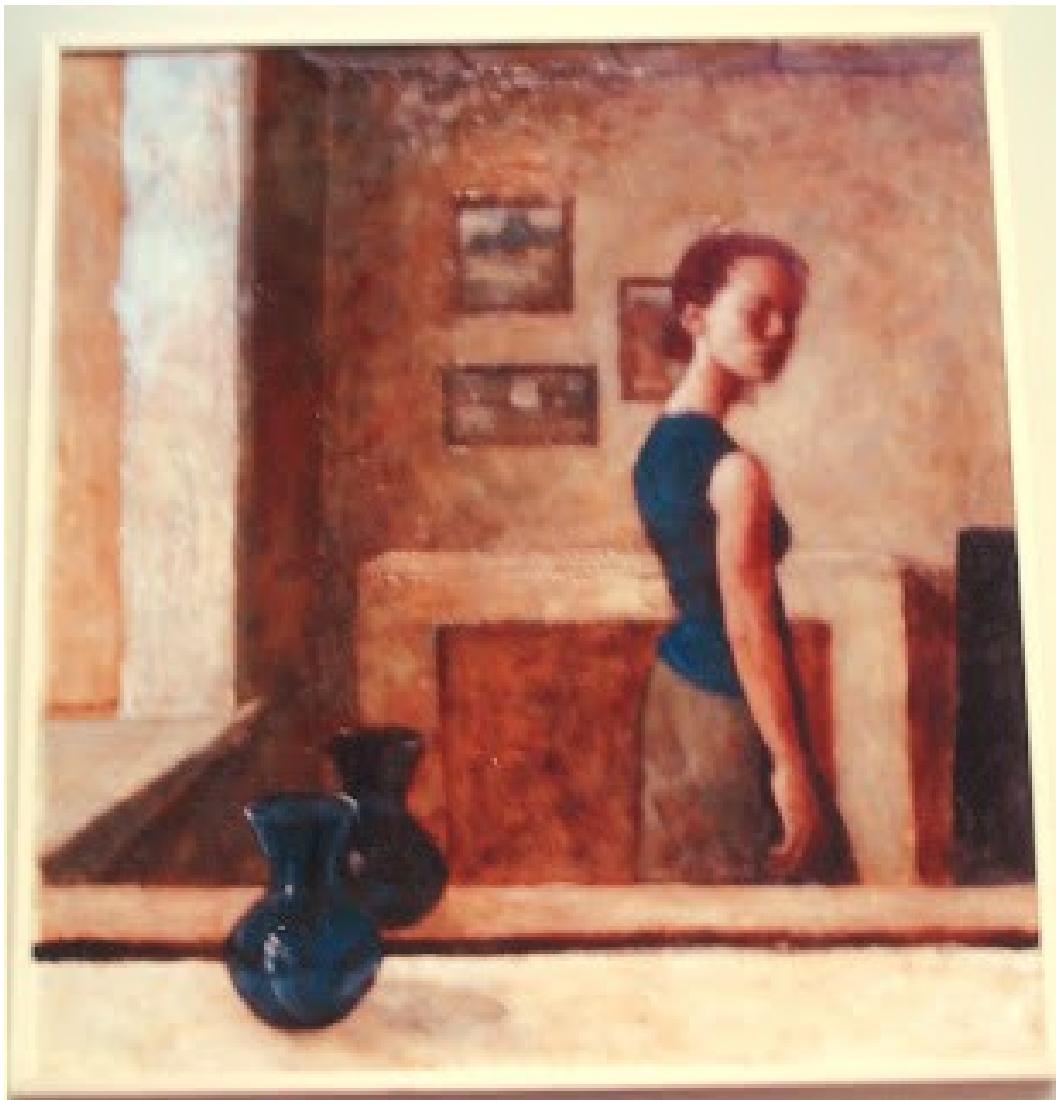
**“Adam Fieled in Clark Park, West Philadelphia, by Mary Harju”**



**“Mary Harju at 4325 Baltimore Avenue, West Philadelphia,  
early Aughts”**



“Painting (“Self-Portrait: The Vessel”) by Mary Harju”



“Painting (“The Fall”) by Mary Harju”



“Painting (“The Skaters”) by Abby Heller-Burnham”



**“Portrait of Abby Heller-Burnham (Anonymous)”**



**“Mike Land at the Last Drop, Center City”**



**“Portrait: Nick Gruberg (Anonymous)”**



“Portrait: Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum (Anonymous)”



**“Flier for 7/29/06 Show at Highwire Gallery: Jeremy Eric  
Tenenbaum”**



“The Last Drop Coffeehouse, Center City Philadelphia”



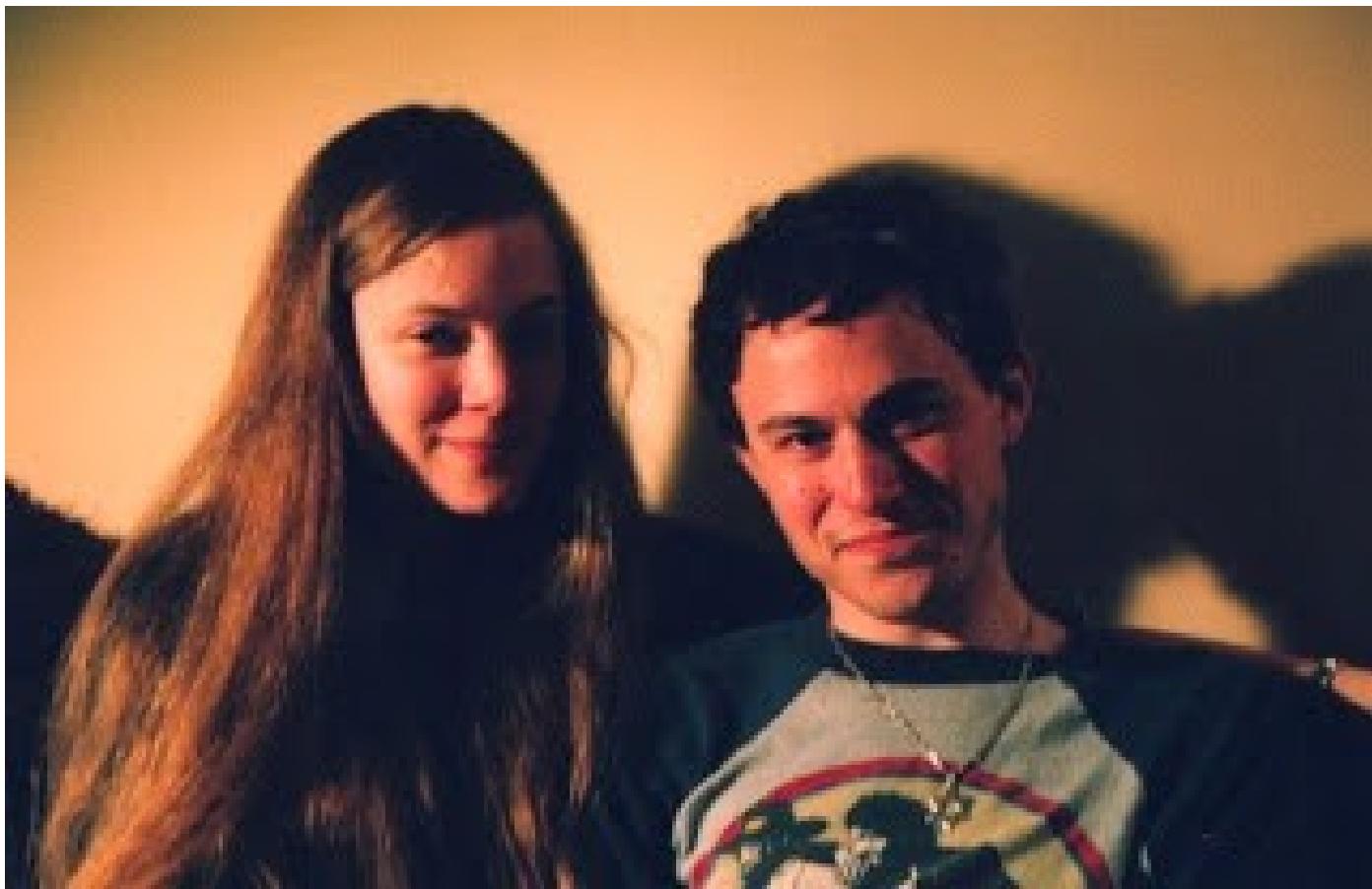
**“Portrait: The Bad News Bats”**



**“Adam Fielek and Mary Harju in the Montreal Botanical  
Gardens”**



**“Portrait: Adam Fieled and Mary Harju by Abby Heller-Burnham”**



**“Portrait: Adam Fiedel by Abby Heller-Burnham”**



**“Portrait: Adam Fieled by Mary Harju”**

