

# PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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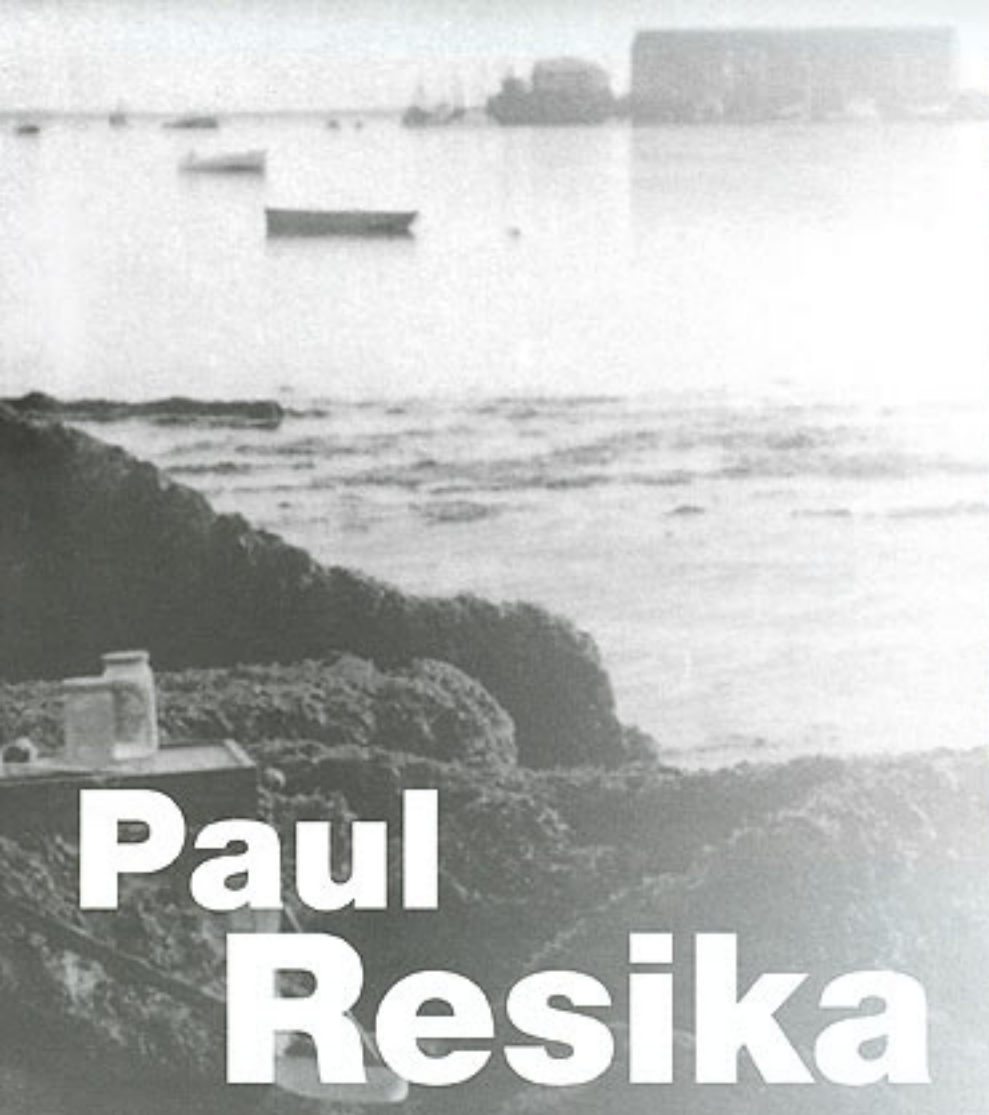


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# Paul Resika

BY JOHN YAU

Street. As a teenager, Paul had a studio above his father's shop. Here is where Clement Greenberg brought Leo Castelli to see the work of a precocious young artist. According to Castelli, it was either 1947 or '48. Paul remembers that it was the first time he had ever seen someone wearing a camel-hair coat. His mother, who was Russian, loved painting and, as Paul has said, "she got it." That love wore off on Paul in a big way. When he was 12, he began taking art classes with Sol Wilson in a building on West 16th Street. Moses Soyer also taught art classes in the same building.

Paul could have continued taking classes with Wilson, but, in 1945, when he was 17, he began taking night classes with Hans Hofmann in New York. Still only in high school, he already knew where the action was. In 1947, having finished studying with Hofmann, he went to Provincetown for the first time, ostensibly to paint Hofmann's studio walls. That same year a jury, including Hofmann, Adolph Gottlieb,



FACING PAGE (TOP TO BOTTOM): *ROCKS AND SEA*, 1943, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 32 INCHES; *THE SUBWAY*, 1947, O/C, 38 x 47 INCHES; *SWEENEY AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES*, 1946-47, O/C, 36 x 30 INCHES.

THIS PAGE (TOP TO BOTTOM): *FLOUR CARRIERS OF THE GIUDECCA*, 1952, O/C, 83 x 63 INCHES; *PORTRAIT OF IDA (THE SPANISH GIRL)*, 1955, O/C, 14 x 10 INCHES; *THE MEADOW*, 1961-62, O/C, 20 x 30 INCHES.

PAUL RESIKA PAINTING THE PROVINCETOWN PIER, 1986.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY BLAIR RESIKA



and Boris Margo, selected work by Resika for *New Provincetown '47*, a group show at the Jacques Seligmann Gallery, New York. The other artists were Leatrice Rose, Larry Rivers, Wolf Kahn, Robert Goodnough, and Paul Georges. They were all young then, but Paul was the youngest. In 1948, Paul had his first one-person show at the George Dix Gallery. Here is where an already fascinating story becomes even more interesting. After this initial burst of attention, Paul didn't show again in New York until 1964. And the journey he took between these two exhibitions tells you a lot about Paul's character, both his willfulness and his independence.

Early in 1950, Paul moved to Paris. From Christmas 1950 to 1952, he lived in Venice, and began working like the old masters, particularly Tiepolo and Veronese. After that, he lived in Rome for a year. He tells me that after he got back from Europe, he painted "portrait commissions, trompe l'oeil works for people's houses, and lived in museums." This lasted until 1958, when he started painting outdoors, and has been doing so ever since. When I ask if I can see what he did after he got back from Europe, Paul shows me a small portrait of a woman's face, a softly glowing oval framed by a dark brown ground. And yet for all of its evident love of the old masters, the portrait seems strangely contemporary, which is to say it is neither sentimental nor nostalgic. Also, it anticipates Paul's lifelong preoccupation with light and its relationship to gravity and solid forms. Paul's preoccupation with the elemental world registers his shift from living in museums to being in the world. You might say that the shimmering light and rich color of Venice was beginning to take hold of his senses and imagination, but that it wasn't until after he was back in America that he could begin painting outdoors. It was the new world that he wanted, rather than the old.

"After I returned to New York, I lived on Washington Square North, near the Cedar Bar. All the artists who came over to my studio and saw these



CLEAR MORNING, 1994-95, OIL, 51 x 64 INCHES

paintings told me that I was crazy." It is easy to see why. In the middle of the Abstract Expressionist milieu, with Pop art and Minimalism on the rise, Paul was thinking of Venetian paintings. Having already studied with two teachers, Wilson and Hofmann, Paul set out to teach himself. Nothing, it seems, was to be rejected or ignored.

In our intense, meandering conversations, Paul has talked about his admiration for the late work of Andre Derain, hardly a fashionable point of view. He has talked about postwar painters such as de Kooning and Hofmann, as well as mentioned his dislike of the direction painting took after World War II. He particularly admires Gorky and de Kooning, both of whom were superb

draftsmen. And, almost without fail, he has mentioned little-known artists whom he admires and in some cases has known. When it comes to the artists Paul has known and met, one is tempted to think he must be making some of his life up, but he isn't. When we looked at the paintings he did in Venice, he mentioned that the only painter in New York who didn't put him down for what he was doing was Alfred Russell. Drawing a blank, I asked, "Who is Alfred Russell?"

Russell, Paul tells me, was an abstract painter who showed with de Kooning and Pollock. In the mid 1950s, at a symposium on the human figure that everyone attended, Russell denounced abstraction and the Art World. Soon he was *persona non grata*, and his name was expunged from the records. At the same time, what Paul didn't tell and perhaps didn't know, Russell was studying to get his doctorate in art history. Russell was a classicist who couldn't reconcile the ancient with the new.

Later, after doing some research, I learn not only that everything Paul told me about Russell was right and without exaggeration, but once again I became aware of the existence of another fascinating, if largely invisible chapter in art history. In 1955, Russell moved to Paris and began copying works by Poussin and Caravaggio among others. He returned to New York a few years later and taught in the MFA program at Brooklyn College until 1975, when he retired and moved to France.

Hanging around with Paul, you learn how complex the story of painting is, as well as how simplistically it has been told. Once you realize how many different painters came to question modernism, abstraction, and the art world in '50s and '60s, you want to know more about what is largely an untold story, one in which Paul Resika plays a crucial part.



Last summer, while we were both in Provincetown,

LEFT: STANDING NUDE AND CHILD, 1968, OIL, 30 x 40 INCHES



I saw a painting in Paul's house that instantly held my attention. It was a small, spare, moody interior that synthesized both representational and abstract elements without siding with either. It was something that could have been done by Paul, but I knew it wasn't. Paul told me it was by Joseph De Martini (1896-1984), another artist I had never heard of before. A few days later, just before we had dinner at Bubala's by the Bay, he drove me to the Julie Heller Gallery to show me a painting of De

Martini that he liked, a stark abstract interior with a schematic easel and table. As Resika pointed out that it shared something with the late paintings of Derain—their somberness and sense of isolation. A few weeks later—though, at the time, neither of us knew this would happen—his wife Blair gave him the painting for his 75th birthday.

Paul's passion for art is hardly confined to people he knew or knows. Recently, when I was at his studio on the upper West Side—William

Merrit Chase had his school in that building—I saw a beautiful drawing by David Burliuk (1882-1967) of Arshile Gorky. Considered the father of Russian Futurism, Burliuk, who wrote poetry as well as painted, also helped nurture the Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. After Burliuk immigrated to America, he became known for his portraits, although he painted in many genres, including still-life, landscape, and fantasy. In the latter case, he is comparable with a far better

ABOVE: JULY, 2001, OIL,  
52 x 60 INCHES

LEFT TO RIGHT: JOSEPH  
DE MARTINI, *UNTITLED*,  
OIL ON PANEL, 13 x 12  
INCHES; ALFRED RUSSELL,  
*WAVE-CORPUSCULAR-MOVEMENT*, 1951,  
OIL, 44 x 30 INCHES;  
DAVID BURLIUK,  
*PORTRAIT OF ARSHILE  
GORKY*, 1932, PENCIL,  
PASTEL AND INK,  
12 x 9 INCHES.





known Russian artist, Marc Chagall. In the eyes of many, portraiture might seem like a retreat from modern art. In this regard, Burluk shares something with Derain, who is primarily celebrated for his Fauvist paintings. In his later work, Derain sheds his high-key color and begins employing a somber palette to depict still-lives and country scenes. And yet looking at Burluk's portrait of Gorky, which Paul points out has been added to, possibly by Gorky himself, one realizes that many of the definitions of what is and isn't modern seem beside the point. Paul's feeling that Gorky might have made some "corrections" on Burluk's portrait is borne out by the drawing. A few changes have been made after the drawing was ostensibly done. This level of visual acuity comes from seeing without preconceptions, something Paul does very well.

I mention De Martini and Derain because Paul belongs to a tradition that includes them. It is a tradition of



artists who, over the course of their career, have a deeply profound argument with the painting of their time. At the heart of their argument is their rejection of the model of progress, which is one of the overarching narratives applied to modern art. Ever since Manet and the birth of modernism, art has been understood as a series of progressive innovations that many theoreticians and critics believe culminated with Pollock's poured paintings (1947-1951). In constructing this narrative, these theoreticians help define painting as a repressive, ever-narrowing field of possibilities.

Although Paul's love affair with Provincetown began in 1947, I think it truly started to blossom in 1984. That summer, he rented a house for six weeks on the East End of Provincetown. In November, he bought a house with a spectacular view of the harbor and ocean, and spent the following summer there, and pretty much every summer since. Is it simply a coin-

chance that being in Provincetown for a long period of time coincides with a change in Paul's work? Or was it because he realized that Provincetown brought him into closer proximity with light and air, water, and reflection, the elemental world? For it is while he and his family are living in Provincetown that Resika starts painting the pier, its strong horizontal and vertical forms, in all kinds of light and weather.

For much of the 1990s, fishing boats were a recurring motif, their prone, truncated, interlocking bodies. When I think about the course that Paul has taken over the past twenty years, from the pier to the boats to his recent paintings of a woman alone, I see his real subject being the polymorphic nature of paint. It is in the paintings inspired by Provincetown that Paul really begins to take off. In his depictions of boats (flat, geometric forms) occupying an elemental world (water,

light), the viewer recognizes that the artist is reflecting on the relationship between materiality and immateriality, the solid world and the dissolving power of light and water. And, emerging out of this interaction is an increasingly erotic condition. The abstract ground in which Paul places the figure of the woman shifts between amniotic sea (paint) and vivid light. The ground has become a rich sustaining possibility, an eden of paint.

Filled with light and sensuality, Paul's paintings go against both the ironic and puritanical, self-serious currents of postwar painting. Like Puvis de Chavannes, an uncategorizable painter he admires, Paul synthesizes three very different strains of painting: the classical, the romantic, and the symbolic. His 1968 depiction of his wife Blair standing nude in the woods, holding their daughter Sonia, isn't a pastiche. Rather, this early painting signaled Paul's growing belief in a

domesticity that is edenic and rapturous. Instead of depicting what has happened since the expulsion from Eden, Paul focuses on a self-contained female figure that occupies an elemental world of colored light. In the recent paintings, the figure is reading. Nearby, there might be a tree, boat, cat, table, or vase of flowers. It is a hypnotic, dream-like world as well as a place of lucidity and calm.

*JOHN YAU is a poet who writes about art. This summer he will teach at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. He recently was appointed Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University.*

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: MORNING ON THE POND, 2003, PASTEL, 19.5 x 25.5 INCHES; BOTTOM: PINE BRANCH, MOON, SAIL, O/C, 60 x 52 INCHES, 2003-04; BELOW: NUDE, CATS, AND FLOWERS, 2003, O/C, 48 x 40 INCHES. UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED ALL IMAGES ARE BY PAUL RESIKA, COURTESY SALANDER O'REILLY GALLERIES, NYC AND BERTA WALKER GALLERY, PROVINCETOWN.

