

Interview with Paul Resika

October 31, 2002

What does Arcadia mean to you?

That's what painting is. I think that's what painting is about. When you make a work of art, you try to make it perfect. That's heaven. That's life. My latest artistic theory is the following: Goldilocks and the Three Bears. I bought a little painting up on the Cape and I asked them to wrap it – so I could take it out and not make a big fuss. So the woman at the gallery wrapped it with an enormous cardboard box. So it was *this* big! [gesturing] And I said, I don't want it wrapped like this. I want to take it out. So she took the big thing off, and handed it to me with no wrapping at all. I said, "Don't you know the Goldilocks story?" And she said, "Oh, you want it just right." So it was a cute story. So she was smart enough to know the Goldilocks story. But she wasn't smart enough to wrap it right. Anyhow, Arcady is just right. Of course, the thing with painting, is if you love your own painting, you think it's just right. Then after a while it doesn't always look just right. I know when I did that head – I thought it was just right. [referring to one of his paintings – a portrait, from the 1950's.] Of course, that was when I was in Italy and I was trying to paint like seventeenth-century painting. No one could teach you to paint like that. That was the past. When you would go to Italy – you would see all the "melting pot" people. We

were Americans. We didn't have this "mosaic." We didn't think of ourselves as "Jewish American." If I was a Jewish-American, how could I be an Italian? Whereas if I was an American, I could become an Italian, as all Americans can become. I could become a Venetian of the sixteenth-century. That was the great thing about this country, which has been fragmented by this so-called "mosaic." So now you can't do this anymore. You don't have that certainty – that you come from this extraordinary land where it doesn't matter what your people are, it doesn't matter at all.

But that idea of inventing yourself – really having the nerve to think you're Tintoretto – only Americans have that, and I'm not the only one. As a matter of fact, I became a disciple of Edward Melcarth who's been forgotten now but then he was painting like the Venetians and it was this idea that the Union Halls were going to be like the *Scuole*. He got as far as actually doing a painting for the Longshoreman's Union in San Francisco, and I worked as his assistant on an enormous painting like a Tintoretto – it got lost – but I worked on it – in Venice. So who taught me Venetian painting? An American, from Louisville. We all forget how wonderful this country is – because all the intellectuals say how horrible it is, and we all grew up saying how horrible it is. But it gave us this great chance. I may be one of the later immigrant children – my mother was a Russian. She came here when she was about twenty years old. She had six sisters and the older ones all had thick Russian accents.

Where was your father from?

No one ever knew whether he was born in Poland or whether he was born here, because he was an American. He was one of those families that completely forgot their past – completely and had to scratch their way up. Some were insane. One sister married a man who was a great Norwegian corporation man – her son became this man Casper Sen, who you may have read about in the Times for giving the most money to the Republicans. In other words, they were completely scattered. My mother's family was completely sure they were Russians – and Americans. My father was completely self-made. He didn't have a nickel, and he became an engineer, and he became a business man, and he had a place up in Harlem – a motor shop. He had a few people working for him, but I never worked for him. It never became something really huge. I remember his friends who had electrical shops in Harlem – all owned by Jews and Italians. I remember the other boys who I knew – later in life they became the great contractors who provided all the electricity for the World Trade Center and things like that.

How did you become an artist?

My mother loved painting, and that's how I began. So everytime I did anything, I was encouraged. So I went to every kind of art school, after school – every kind. Even when I

was nine years old. All my mother's sisters had them framed – there were museums all over the place of my work! My mother used to buy old Barbizon paintings in nice frames and I'd paint over them. Seascapes.

Who was your first art teacher?

I'll tell you about my first art teacher that I remember. In the children's classes I don't remember who they were. It was down in the American Artists School, which is this thing in history – Diego Rivera taught there and everyone else. And I actually went there – next to the Armory on West 14th Street. I don't know how I got there. How did I get there at age eight? I guess I went there on the streetcars. Near where we lived, which was 140th Street and Convent Avenue, there was a huge Victorian building. The WPA had an art program in the basement for young people, and I would go there. And there was a painter with the last name Paul. I don't know what his first name was. And there were easels built onto the wall. And we would work in oil.

How old were you then?

I was then about eleven. Mr. Paul showed me how to paint – and those paintings were exhibited in WPA exhibitions. Then it came to get serious – so my mother had someone

she knew – his name was Sol Wilson. He was painter of seascapes in the manner of Ryder and Courbet and Corot. And he had a studio on 16th Street and 6th Avenue. He had a Saturday class with mostly middle-aged people – not kids. And they would buy his pictures. He would paint in a corner and there would be a set-up – either a landscape set-up or a still-life. And I would go every Saturday. I remember the first time I went, I brought a whole portfolio of the work I had done. My mother took me there, I was eleven years old, into his studio, and so I was in an art studio. I went to look at what was there and he told me never to touch a painting that was facing the wall. So I learned etiquette. I learned how to wash my brushes too. And he told me, yes, I could come and he would give my mother some kind of scholarship. Not that she needed it. She was really doing it, I suppose, to help him, I suppose, because this was the Depression day. He probably didn't have a nickel. He charged five dollars I remember. That wasn't cheap in those days. I had a feeling my mother was also doing a good deed. She knew Sol from one of her communist cells – she was trying to make the world better. My mother was a communist – and she always told that in her cell there was a black man who had terrific skin – she loved his skin – you couldn't prick it with a pin – and she said, that's Count Basie. I once told that to someone and he didn't think it could be true. But you never can tell in that period. At any rate – so Sol Wilson accepts me – and in that building on 6th Avenue and 16th Street, there's about ten painters. There's one guy named Harry Schoulberg who sells the art supplies and makes frames. And there's one guy called Jim Lechay who came later – who

was about thirty-five, and Philip Reisman, and downstairs is Moses Soyer – the brother of Raphael Soyer. They all had classes. All the people come on Saturdays and Sundays for classes. That's how they live. And at one point Jim Lechay got a job out west. And De Hersh Margolies moved in – quite an interesting artist. There was such a fantastic family of artists here. That was more or less wiped out by the Abstract Expressionist bullshit. Which made it seem like there were only five or ten, of one kind. Whereas they all were raised together. They all were mixed up. But this business came on that you had to be rich. None of the artists ever were going to be rich – that was out of the question. Never. Your wife was going to be a schoolteacher. As was the case with most of them – Newman and Gottlieb – their wives were schoolteachers. Gottlieb's wife became a supervisor, so she was even higher in the school system. Newman's wife became a principal or a supervisor. These were real racketeers, these guys. They were good artists, well, Gottlieb was a good artist. Newman, I don't think was anything.

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[We are looking at a painting from 1946 – just after Resika studied with Hofmann, and a portrait in much tighter realist style from about 1951]

How did you get from this 1946 painting to the portrait?

I had to work. But you know what I did? I went to Italy. That's how.

Did you feel as if you were rebelling against what you learned at Hofmann's?

Of course. Always rebelling. I'm always rebelling. You have to rebel to be alive. I'm not like, say, Bob De Niro, who was a great friend of mine, who knew what he was, very young. He painted beautifully when he was twenty-five, and when he was sixty-five. He found form very early. Even earlier than, say, Morandi. Even Morandi it took longer to find that still life that he painted over and over again for thirty years. And that's a wonderful thing. On the other hand, it's not as interesting as Matisse. But Bonnard also found his style which he could develop and do some grand thing. Picasso was so great that he was great all the time. He didn't develop any grand form. He's just as great with the boy with the horse [*Boy Leading a Horse*, 1906] at the Museum of Modern Art and then he made the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and then he made the *Three Musicians* and then he made the *Guernica*. Each one is a decade apart, and each one is the greatest picture of its period. But there's no advancing in the same way – not as much as Bonnard's grand advance. Every great artist does things later that he couldn't have done before, but still, it's very hard for Picasso to top that painting, the boy with the horse. It's perfect. El Greco couldn't have painted a greater portrait. Or Rembrandt.

Did you feel as your work was changing that you were finding your form?

I never even knew what it was to find one's form. That's a thing I learned about much later, when I had found it. I found a form of some kind. No, I never thought I had found anything [earlier on]. I just kept working.

When I was painting these Venetian pictures – I didn't just go in and start painting like Tintoretto – I went to Italy because of Piero della Francesca. I was an American. Our training at that time was strictly Giotto, Piero della Francesca – Florentine art, really. Tuscan art. Venetian art was looked upon as too decadent. It had nothing to do with modern art – American art. But Hofmann talked a lot about Renoir, Cezanne and Michelangelo. I would say those were three artists he talked about the most. And Picasso, I suppose, and Matisse, maybe. But not that much. I remember Michelangelo. Michelangelo explained form and volume. So when I went to Venice, not knowing much, I was really interested in the earliest Venetian painting – Bellini, Giorgione, and of course Giotto and Piero della Francesca. I remember when Paul Georges and Lisette came to visit me. It must have been 1951. And I remember it so vividly – because when Georges died I wrote to Lisette about it. I remember looking out the window and seeing them – they were such young kids - walking along, the snow was falling. But I know they were in Italy mainly to see Piero della Francesca – and me. But that was the main thing they wanted to see – Piero della Francesca. That's nothing to do with Venetian painting. But after I was in Venice for a couple of years I began to understand Venetian painting – Veronese, and of

course Titian.

What drew you to Venice?

I met someone in Rome, Peter Ruta. I met him at a bar. I had been living in Paris. My wife [Annabelle Gold, Resika's first wife – later known as Annabelle Gamson] was a young dancer and she got a job in Rome. So I came to Rome. She was dancing in a nightclub. I didn't know where I was. I knew I was an artist, but I didn't know what I was doing. I went to this bar – it was the artists' bar. I don't know how I found it. There was this American – or German American. And he said I've just come from Venice and I know a place – a palace. He said, the rent is twenty dollars a month, and you can have the whole palace, and you can learn about Venetian art. Go there, he said, that's what I would do. So went to Venice just like that. I was young and my father was giving me an allowance, because I didn't go to college, so he was giving the money. It wasn't much but I could live very well on it. So I went to this palace – it looked out over the water – and built for artists, too. It was amazing. I went to the Academy, I went to the free school. I met Armando Pizzinato. He was part of the new group of Communist Realist painters. [Renato] Guttuso became the best known. But they were all fairly good painters. There was a decadence in Venice by that time. The models would have high heeled shoes on. In Paris I knew a lot of people from New York - like Reginald Pollack who remained a good

friend. Reginald Pollack lived next door to Brancusi. So in that period I would see Brancusi. But it wasn't like now – it wasn't like seeing a god. When I saw Picasso, it was like seeing a god. Picasso was then about seventy years old. And he was the god of painting.

Then in Venice I met Edward Melcarth, who was always coming to Venice. I had seen one show of his in New York before I left New York – at the Durlacher Gallery on 57th Street, and it was a show of big Baroque pictures, by an American. When I saw them, I was very impressed. So when I met him, I was ready. There was something in it that I knew was wonderful. He was a great hater of modern art, he hated it. So he was an early turncoat, refusnik, like Balthus. But not as successful as Balthus. He was quite connected though; he was a friend of Peggy Guggenheim. He was also a great homosexual. But a very manly homosexual. He made those eyeglasses that Peggy Guggenheim wears in old photographs.

So you sort of adopted that for a while – the “refusnik” tendency?

Oh yes. I was definitely a refusnik. I can call it that now – but I didn't call it that then. I think all of us had something of that – all the figurative painters. I mean, to go against what everyone is doing, you have to have that. I am the first of this generation to become a figurative painter – the first of this whole generation. Before Harry Jackson, before

Georges, before Larry Rivers. I'm the first, but no one admits it. They know it. Not that it matters, because, as I point out, Edward Melcarth, who was a generation earlier, did the same thing. And Balthus did the same thing. And in a certain way, André Derain did the same thing. But they had such a great culture, that it wasn't like they were crazy. But with me it was sort of like being crazy – like throwing everything out, like saying, oh, that's not good. When I came back from Europe, and people wanted to see Cezanne or Monet, I would just laugh at them. I thought they had to see Titian or Veronese. So I was a very funny duck. And I was living right on Washington Square, so the Cedar Bar was my bar – in the sense that I didn't have to travel to get there. Peter Heinemann was also right there. He was younger than me. So he was a kind of refusnik too, but not so extreme.

He had never painted abstractly.

He had never painted abstractly, so he didn't have to change, but then he never went so classical either. But at the time you think you're the only one. And the people you know, they think you're crazy. I knew all the people from the Hofmann school. And I knew Hopper – I met him when I was moved into the Washington Square Studios when I was about 25 years old. We didn't know each other well, but he knew I was a young kid who loved his work. We'd meet in the park and walk together. Sometimes I would meet Hopper and have a conversation with him in the park, and then we would meet Hofmann,

and have a conversation. Can you imagine? It sounds like Parnassus. It was the most marvelous thing in the world. It just happened I knew them both. When Hofmann lost his wife, I remember sitting in this little restaurant, where I used to go almost every night. It was called Fellin. I remember it was a cold, rainy night, and I looked out the window, and I saw Hofmann with his nose pressed against the glass, looking in. And he was all alone. And I ran out and brought him in. And we had the most wonderful conversation, about all these things I'd been thinking about all those years. How I was opposed to him, but I came back to him. I said, "Remember the argument we had about perspective, Mr. Hofmann?" He said, "oh, don't remember that, it doesn't mean anything." But of course it did mean something. It did mean something to me.

What did it mean to you?

Well, when I was at the Hofmann school, and I'd already had enough of it, I got very annoyed that Hofmann would say, you don't have to have anatomy, you don't have to learn perspective. Because he had that kind of training himself, but he denied it to us.

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I worked for twenty years from nature. Every day practically I would go out. I went out to New Jersey – to this wilderness, painting. I believed in it. That's why I have light in my pictures. Somebody like [Elmer] Bischoff doesn't have light. I asked his wife recently if he

ever worked from life, and she said no, never. I don't know if she's right, but that's an interesting thing. Bischoff is a very good artist, but I think that working from nature, outdoors, you have to adjust the values. You begin like that gray one [another Resika painting we were looking at] but in the years after that, you notice they have much more color. So that was painted in 1980, so that was after 21 years of doing it. But the light is the main thing.

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The first show we all [Resika and fellow Hofmann students] were in was called Provincetown '47. Paul Georges was in it, Wolf Kahn. I still have the painting that was in the show. I once asked Georges if he still had his. Everyone was painting furniture at that time, for some reason. We were painting what was around us, because that was our way out of abstraction. Larry Rivers was in the show – he was painting abstractions – he was copying Nell Blaine's abstractions. He was the only one who became really famous. He had no training, no background whatsoever – just nerve, and talent, and intelligence. And he was a very nice guy – which doesn't always go with those other attributes. But he was no painter, I don't think. He just hit the right thing.

Did you know Leland Bell at this time?

No, I didn't know Leland or Ulla [Louisa Matthiasdottir]. I knew Nell [Blaine] but I didn't

know Leland or Ulla. Somehow I just didn't know him. I didn't know him in the Hofmann period, or when I came back as a classic artist. I knew who they were, but then after a few years, we did meet, and he became a good friend. He was always friends with De Niro, and De Niro I always knew. De Niro was very poor, he lived in a walk-up five flights, down below Washington Square, he didn't have a nickel. Everyone knew he was poor. I didn't know Al Kresch either. Al and Lee and Ulla were a separate group, and they were clear in what they were doing. They never had this "refusnik" thing about them – or at least not as much. They were clear they were modernists – it was a different modernist camp – they were never against modern art. They never had this nonsense. I remember talking with Leland about it, how we were very different. He never said that modern art was no good – that was crazy. He understood it through French art – through Derain. He didn't ever become an Italian, or a Spaniard. They were much healthier, they understood, they were more sophisticated than I was. I was more romantic, and trying to figure it out for myself, thinking that I was the greatest who ever was, that I could do it myself. I don't know how I got this idea. From my mother, I suppose. So in a way I lost a lot of time, fighting these things, but that was the way I had to learn. Gorky went through all the same thing. He trained himself, he did it all on his own. But not so stupidly as me; he was much smarter than me. I went this way, this extreme classical way. Gorky would have appreciated it. De Kooning liked what I was doing, because he understood – the queerness, and all that. He understood that. Greenberg would come up to see me in

Harlem, with [Leo] Castelli, before Castelli was an art dealer. He brought him to see my paintings. Can you imagine? It's crazy. When people would come up and see what I was doing, they must have thought I was off the mark. They did wonder, they must have thought I was lost. But I was lost working on my own thing. So when I became a landscape painter, they gave me a certain amount of – Hess gave me an article right away. It was that world, it was much more of a world. Had I not been a kid with Hofmann, they probably never would have written that article about me when I was only thirty-eight. So I got a certain credit for that, so I could hold out and find a way.

Do you still think of yourself as a landscape painter?

No. I don't think so. Although I was in the park today and I was looking at the pond, with the sunlight cast on it, and the ducks, and it looked like a – not so much Barbizon – but like the greatest painting I ever saw. All the leaves were all green and yellow and brown behind, and the ducks going by. I almost thought, I could paint this painting. But I didn't. So I don't think I'm exactly a landscape painter. I don't know what I am. I don't know if I've found my form. Larry [Salander] certainly made this show that looks like somebody that found their form.

How do your motifs come to you?

The last one? The figure? That came last July when I was forced to live on the pond. I didn't want to be there, I wanted to be in my studio. In the morning there's a beautiful porch, and a tree outside. I thought, I'm going to make it my studio – it was just desperation – stuck in this beautiful place! Before you knew it, I got interested in the figure against the outside – it became the figure in the corner. And I did that painting *Sisters* [2001]. The figures are a little bit like Elizabeth and Miranda and Sonia [Resika's daughter and stepdaughters]. And now I have this girl posing for me.

What is the nude about for you?

The nude is something that you cannot treat lightly, and now I can treat it a little more lightly. So I am happy to say that. It's very hard to say that, because it's so basic, you know. I shouldn't say "you know" because some people have no problem treating it lightly, or distorting it. But I had a tremendous problem, because I had got into this great training. People warned me about it. I had an uncle who was a painter who warned me about studying anatomy, when I left Hofmann. He warned me that I would never get out of it. He said, you're too old to study it. I was about twenty. He said, you'll never get out of it. And he was right. Absolutely right. It affected my drawing for my whole life. But now it doesn't anymore. So there's something about it. But still, if you're an artist, everything you do has to be art. So no matter what madness you have or attitudes or ideas,

it has to be art anyhow. If it isn't, it isn't. If it is, it is. It doesn't matter what the form is, how dark it is. That's something else. That's something for other people to judge. Not me. I just know I love doing it. I've always been sure of it. And always thought I was doing the right, perfect thing.

This is a reference to the title of the essay in the catalog of an exhibition of Paul Resika's work, on view at the time of this interview. (New York, Salander O'Reilly Galleries, 2002. *Paul Resika Paintings*)

An exhibition of Bischoff's work was at Salander O'Reilly Galleries simultaneously to Resika's exhibition there at the time of this interview.

Blair Resika's family house in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, situated on a pond. The house where Paul and Blair normally live on Cape Cod, is in Provincetown, where Resika has his studio.

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