

Interview with Paul Resika

November 14, 2002

Tell me about your first exhibition, at the George Dix Gallery, in 1948.

What an event! I was so young, I even had the mumps when it was on, which was a young person's disease. I couldn't go to the opening. George Dix was a very elegant man who always wore white. He looked like an albino. He was an aristocratic man from Virginia, and he had blonde hair, and he looked like the Duke of Windsor or something. He was an Anglophile. I was eighteen; he was probably thirty-three or thirty-four. And he ran something called the British-American Art Gallery. He was just getting started, and he opened his own little gallery. It was the most elegant little gallery. It was all pristine and white, on Madison Avenue and 70-something Street. He had shows of those English painters, who were very popular at that time. They were contemporaries with [Francis] Bacon. The two I remember showing were McBride and Colquhoun. I should go back to say how I met him. One of my friends at the Hofmann school was a man named Glyn Collins. He was about ten years older than me, or more. He'd been a painter for a long time; he was a New Zealander by birth. He'd come to California; he'd been married to

Muriel Rukeyser, the poet. He split from her - he became queer - and he lived with a poet named Walter McElroy. And they sort of took me up, since I was the star of the Hofmann school. I mean, I was a young painter. We all became friends. They all were left wing, and I was brought up with a Communist mother. So there was a whole connection there, between modern art, left-wing politics, the Hofmann school, the latest thing. It was very hip, too. I wasn't aware of how hip it was, but I knew a lot of people who became great figures in the world. I mean, that's how I met Francis Bacon. For instance, one of their great friends was Tony Clark, who was a young painter in the Village then, trying to paint. And he was a man who used to be the greatest - he would have been like Philippe de Montibello, but he died young. It was a whole little world of poets - all young. That was a set I was in. So somehow, I believe, they must have gotten George Dix to see my work. There was another show called "Painters from Cold Water Flats." That was also 1948. A lot of the same people who were in the "Provincetown 47" show were in this show as well. But I can't remember exactly who was in it. It was in the Seligmann gallery - a little section when you came off the elevator, that was for the American, contemporary art. It was run by a woman named Mrs. Parker - a very elegant, slightly hunchbacked woman. I think it was Wolf [Kahn] who knew her, who had arranged these shows. They were among the first modern shows of young people, because everything was very fresh. Seligmann was one of the great dealers - he had Cezanne, Tintoretto, everything. It was international. To get back, through these people, I met George Dix, and he came to my studio in Harlem,

which was on top of my father's motor shop. Everyone came to my studio there - Clement Greenberg brought Leo Castelli. Can you imagine? He had to climb up all these stairs, through all this grease. And Castelli wore a tan coat - very light, like only a Triestine Jew would wear. I never saw such a sight. And with an elegant woman, whoever she was. But Greenberg did tell me it was too soon for me to have a show. But I didn't listen, and I had the show. I had this beautiful show, and only one painting was sold. The George Dix Gallery was the space which then became the Jane Street Gallery.

What paintings were in the show?

[We pull out one of the paintings, *Motor Shop*, 1948].

I haven't seen [this painting, *Motor Shop*] in years. It's a huge picture from those days. No one made huge pictures like that. These are the days before the huge pictures. It's painted so thinly, that I'm surprised by. I do remember someone coming in and writing me a note, saying you're a good painter, but you should have painted with turpentine. Your pictures will not improve over time, and he was right. I didn't have body, so they couldn't get more transparent. I painted like watercolors then. But you see that the armature's baking in the oven. There's all this stuff everywhere - a vice, a calendar, a hook, a fan. It's a big drawing - with Picasso involved. At this time [Paul] Georges and his friend Wither were here,

living on the West side, making these Picasso-esque pictures. But they left before my show went up. They went back [to Oregon], not having any money. The idea was the Guernica. That was our favorite picture, the *Guernica*.

Who do you mean when you say "our"?

Everyone. The *Guernica* was in the Museum of Modern Art, which was not a place of mass consumption. It was a place where you went to meet young girls and see pictures. That's what all of us young people did. And the *Guernica* was the centerpiece. It didn't seem like so much, I guess.

What do you mean by that - it didn't seem like so much?

It seemed like a great painting that belonged to us. It didn't seem like something you'd have to travel to see, or that you'd read so much about. Although, there was a great Bonnard show around that time, which made a great impression on all of us. It sort of made us into figurative painters. These are figurative paintings, that's the point. [referring to *Motor Shop*]. In a way, it's the first break with abstract painting. And that takes place in the 1940's, right at the beginning. But kids are very sensitive - they reflect the world without knowing it. We were reflecting a great thing. It wasn't just me. Paul Georges too.

Though he went back to abstraction again, tried it again. That's the only weakness I ever saw in Georges - he had very little weakness.

When did he paint abstractly again?

When he came back from France, he tried to be like the others. It was the only time I ever saw Georges not be powerful in himself, and be in real trouble. I even remember Lisette in real trouble with him. I never saw it again; I never saw it before. Because they were monolithic, powerful people.

So for me, this painting [*Motor Shop*] marked the beginning of this turn against modern art. It wasn't at that time that, but that's what it became.

It's interesting that you say a turn against modern art.

It was a turn against abstract art, not modern art. Because Bonnard and Picasso were modern. But it was against abstract art - Rothko, Pollock, and in a certain way my teacher, Hofmann. That was what was in the air - what came to be called Abstract Expressionism. That was in the air. And in fact that was the time of the best paintings of the Abstract Expressionist period. There's a show of Adolph Gottlieb at the Jewish Museum right now. So where Gottlieb was going so strongly and so certainly, we were going the opposite

way. He was so certain, and gaining strength every moment. We were going against that. And we got some strength from that too, I guess. But we got no support for it.

What was the response to your show? [the show at George Dix Gallery]

There was a very nice review in *Art News*. I remember some inconsequential reviews. But they reviewed shows in those days. It wasn't like now. People reviewed your shows. You had a show, it got reviewed. There weren't 3000. It wasn't like now. Now you think you're nowhere. There's no answer, like an echo. Zero.

Do you think were as conscious then that you were reacting against something, or is it hindsight now that you're aware of it?

No. We were doing something different. We were very tough kids.

Because something like this doesn't seem to me like a reaction against modern art - it seems so modern and of its time.

No, not at all. It's very modern. Exactly. But later on, when you come to the Venetian pictures, that's when you see the difference. No, we were only against that one thing that

was happening. That great thing - the New York School. Which was really our cousins, our uncles. We knew them all.

But this early, in 1948, even abstraction wasn't really in favor.

In the underground, it was it. And we were part of that. We weren't the corny people - who were saying what's this crazy stuff. We were part of the underground. We were not from the right, we were from the left. Otherwise it wouldn't be interesting. Everybody was sneering at it [abstraction], every critic. Except for Greenberg.

So you went to Italy soon after the time you made this painting?

No. It was another couple of years. And during that time, I married a young dancer, named Annabelle Gold. And I had to get a job, which lasted a very short time. So then I went to work for my father, because that was easier. It was a difficult time. I didn't know what I was doing, really. The painting was changing, it was getting influenced by Beckmann. I started painting landscapes, from nature.

What was it about Beckmann that interested you?

He's saying something about life. More flesh.... I think that's what it was, Beckmann seemed the next ... Of course there were great Beckmann shows. You could buy a Beckmann for a few hundred dollars. And there would only be one painting sold.

As far as the old masters, I had an American, high school education. And I went to the museum. For me, the old masters were Piero della Francesca, Goya, El Greco - it wasn't this whole world, it was just a few people. There was one art history class I had taken. It was by a man named Zucker, at the New School. And everyone used to go. He was like the first German art historian, with slides. I attended the whole year. I think Wolf [Kahn] had tickets. So I could see all the slides - I'd never seen them, even. But that was the only art history class I had. But everything looks the same- Van Eyck, El Greco, because it's all up there the same.

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I think I'm a real colorist. The only one. I might be the only one. That sounds like a crazy idea, but I have a feeling it's true.

Is that something you think you always had? Because these early paintings don't seem to be about color at all.

No, I don't think so. It's just the last 10 or 15 years, maybe just the last 10 years. Or maybe it's just started. I just love painting with color. And light. It has to have light. Light made through color, not through values. But I'm not so - I can't really explain it. I know people say there's light through color and light through values. But I don't really care much for the discussion of it. In other words, I know that it's different. That I don't think of the values like I used to. I used to think, I want to get the values. But when I began - we never talked of values in the Hofmann school. That had no place, not even a mention.

What was the discussion about?

Well, it was really drawing, to tell you the truth. Composition was the main thing. And plasticity. To make the whole thing go in and out, so it was tension and not depth.

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When I came back from Venice I went to study anatomy. By then I was 25 years old.

Where was that? Who did you study with?

His name was Philip Reisman. He was a great anatomist. He was not a great painter, although he painted all his life, scenes of New York. He taught a class on Monday nights.

But it was too late to learn anatomy at twenty-five [years of age]. I was already a painter. But it helped me out, at the time, because I was interested in painting like that. I was really lost as far as knowing what modern painting knew. You'd think I would have known, would have gone through it as a kid. But I didn't, because there was no consciousness. I didn't have any grasp of what modern painting knew about ... I mean, Hofmann tried to tell me, but I was too young and pigheaded to understand. He tried to tell me. You don't do it this way - you do it this way.

What was he trying to tell you?

Well, you don't do perspective, anatomy, these are not the means. But I was always annoyed with Hofmann, because he had had every kind of training himself. And he denied it to me. And I thought that was not fair. But he was really right, he had figured it out.

But he had the chance...

Yes, he had the chance to figure it out himself. Exactly. And no one could draw like Hofmann, because he was trained as an anatomist, so he had this terrific way of drawing. And I knew there was something there. You could copy his way of drawing, but you didn't really know what you were doing. Everyone used to copy his way of drawing, so

much so that sometimes I see recently... Lillian Orlovsky, who was a great friend of mine - still alive - she was part of the old generation of Hofmann students - before me. She's about 85. Her husband was Bill Freed, who was my great friend in the Hofmann school at night, when I went. He introduced me to what Hofmann was all about, on the subway home at night. He was a short guy, a carpenter by trade. Anyway, Lillian showed some drawings of his [Bill Freed's], and I said, those are not Bill's drawings, those are Hofmann's drawings. You know, Hofmann's corrections of his drawings. And she had a big fight with me this summer, saying that I was wrong.

So your friend Bill Freed would explain what Hofmann said, on the subway home?

Yes. He'd tell me what it was. Explain what it all meant. Then I was a young kid, going to high school, so we would ride home together. I was taking these classes at night. I didn't pay attention in high school. My whole life was at night, in the Village. That was my real way into life. I believed that it was there. And I was learning about what Hofmann was all about, from all these other artists. At that time the school was very small, there must have been six or eight people in the night school. But there were these old timers, old ladies and old guys who had studied with him for years and years. And they would just work from that model every night, and they had for 10 years, in the same way. And the two guys who befriended me were Bill Freed and Billmeyer. I can't remember what his first name was.

And so I learned the Hofmann thing from them. And there was one another guy - there was a monitor named Norman Joondeph. And he didn't become an artist; he became a collector of pictures. He also introduced me - he told me what it was all about - because when you come in there, what's it all about? You start to draw, Hofmann won't be in except for Tuesdays and Fridays, so you won't see him very much.

And you didn't learn anatomy from your earlier teachers?

No, my first teacher, Sol Wilson, taught seascape painting and still life painting. He didn't believe in that - you just paint from looking. So since I didn't go to the Academy where they insist on that, I didn't learn it.

Sol Wilson always made us look at Courbet, Corot, and Ryder was his greatest passion. His dealer was Babcock. And that was the dealer for Ryder, and Blakelock, and Newman, who were the only three painters he considered. So they were the only painters I considered. But they are wonderful romantic painters, not academic painters. So that's what I was introduced to - not to anatomy. I just realize now that had I gone to the Academy, they probably would have made me go into this. But I probably wouldn't have listened, because people in art school don't listen anyhow - they just go away to their studio, or they go downtown.

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Little by little you find people who are doing the same mad things [i.e. painting against the grain]. I'd find them. We'd find each other. For instance there was this painter from Vienna, named Ernst Fuchs, who became very famous; he became the richest painter in the world. He led the magic realism movement in Vienna about twenty years ago. And we found each other God knows how. He had kidnapped his little son and he was looking for a place to hide, and he came to live with me. But I painted in the Venetian way and he painted in the Flemish way. He was a kind of genius. So we lived together for a few weeks, and we became friends. You meet people. Like other people, who are not so extreme, like David Grossblatt, who is a modern painter, but still, Balthus is his master, you might say. He owned the first café, the Rienzo. There were bars and coffeehouses, they were very different. The coffeehouses were for the romantic young people, and the bars were for the tougher ones. I preferred the coffeehouses. There were very few of the abstract painters in the coffeehouses. A few - I knew Friedel Dzubas from the coffeehouse. Of course, the old timers, from the Village, like De Kooning, they'd be anywhere. It was a little corny, and romantic - you had to like Italian and things like that. That was foreign to the spirit of the Abstract Expressionists.

What year was it that Greenberg came to your studio?

That was about 1946 or 1947. Greenberg I became friendly with. I liked him very much.

He was like an older brother or something. It was a shame that we lost our connection.

I read somewhere that Greenberg said you were afraid to make an ugly painting.

I never heard that. I think that people used to say that about me, but I don't remember that Greenberg said it. But maybe he did. It's a good thing to have said to me. But I remember someone else saying it to me. I can't remember now who it was. But that certainly was true. People would come up to my studio in Harlem, and see all these paintings - all good paintings - one after the other. Just turned out. Everytime they would come up there would be another fifty paintings. It was phenomenal. It didn't last, but it was those couple of years. [presumably 1956-58]. And then I had that phenomena again when I began painting from nature. And then it happened again a few years ago when I was making those boats. I was just turning them out. But you forget that it doesn't happen all the time. It does happen. You sort of get what you're doing, and you can do it, and your life opens in that way, and everything's right. Your love life is right, your eating is right, your rent is paid, whatever it is - all of the things that it takes to do anything.

I was just reading about Renoir, who said he wanted to make a painting that was pretty.

Oh yes, that's why he's one of my heroes. For everything that implies. And Chagall too,

though Chagall is more raucous. I am not raucous like Chagall. As for Renoir, he's one of the greatest painters that ever lived. Chagall is not, but he has this great quality - great color. One thing that [Michael Stone Richards] said last night [at a lecture at the New York Studio School] was that some art historians are saying there's no beauty in modern art. And that Bonnard is the only example of beauty and femininity. And [Richards] was refuting the idea that Bonnard was a domestic painter; he is a great, terrifying painter. He was not the little master - he was the great master, like Picasso or Matisse. And then [Richards] said a good thing - that beauty is *not* banned by modern art. And that is correct. Because there are very beautiful Picassos, and beautiful Braques, and beautiful Derains. But for instance, my dealer, when I first began showing again - Lou Pollack, at Peridot Gallery, he didn't want to see any sunsets. I was painting outdoors, so there were sunsets. He couldn't take sunsets - those were calendar pictures. And in fact one of my shows at Peridot Gallery was reviewed by John Canaday, who said, "These are rather like calendar paintings." Can you imagine? That was considered the worst thing you could say about a painting. It was a great insult. Imagine, Canaday, this reactionary, making an insult like that to me. But then the next year, he wrote a long article saying I was a terrific artist, very much like that painter who died in the Franco-Prussian War, Bazille. In those days you could get a knock, and you could get something else. Nowadays, there's nothing. Nothing written. No one says anything. It's terrible. No reaction.

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My mother and father had a acre of land with a little house on it. It was in Westchester / Putnam - about an hour away. And there lived the woman who had sold the land to all these New York Jews and Italians was Mrs. West. She had a lot of land, but no money at all. She was an old-timer from that place. She had a daughter named Pennerton West, who had never married, and was sort of mannish, and was a painter. That's how I knew Penny West when I was a kid, thirteen or fourteen years old. I was a young kid painting landscape or something, and she would be amused in me, and eventually she said, "You have to study with Hofmann." She had been a Hofmann student, and she was a friend of [Jackson] Pollock and [Clement] Greenberg. And that's how I knew all of those people, from Penny, of course. She was one of the painters in that world. And so by the time I was sixteen, she said I had to go to Hofmann. That's how I went to Hofmann - it was her. I had forgotten to mention that. Anyhow, when I was finished with Hofmann, she said I could paint in her barn. It was a big barn with a great door - you know, it was a place to paint. So I would live up there in my mother's house, not work, not have to make a living, for six months. And I would go down the hill to this old barn, and paint. It was a good life. A nice life. In between everything. I think maybe my mother and father made me paint the house, in exchange for living up there. I was a bad house painter. I had no interest in it. And I never liked heights either.

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I went to Paris because my friend Joe Plaskett was in Paris. He had stayed in Paris. He had been there two years already. He had settled in Paris - and Paris was the place to go if you were a painter. You had to go to Paris. I went there, and I lived in a little room on the Ile de la Cité, and I got a studio out in Plaisance which is just the most perfect nineteenth-century place. You think you're in the nineteenth-century. No tourism. And there was an old sculptor named Bartelletti. He had done that big statue of General LeClerq. He had a place where he did his plasters, and then he had about ten or twelve rooms for rent. I think it was Reginald Pollock who told me to go there. And I started to paint there. But then my young wife got a job in Rome, dancing with Claude Marchand, an old friend of hers from New York. So she took off, and I was left in Paris. It was Christmastime, and I said, what am I doing here, she's there. And I only know a few people. I never really learned French, so I couldn't really be at home there. In France, you have to know French. It's not like Italy, or other places. Anyhow, I went to the Grande Chaumière to draw, and I went to the Ecole de Louvre - but that turned out to be a debutante school. They had lectures in art history. And at the Grande Chaumière, there was no teacher in the class I took. But at that time in Paris, there were a lot of young artists. I remember seeing Larry Rivers when he had just arrived there. We went to dinner, walked around together. Although, he was interested in different things. He was a more nervous and worldly type, he always wanted to experience everything more vividly. I didn't really enjoy being with him; he was always thinking about his whores. He was a pain in the ass. But still, I remember when he had

arrived. There was a black writer I became friends with, named Smith. Terrific guy.

Anyhow, so I went to Rome. Just to go and see Annabelle. But Italian art was not my goal. My favorite painting in France was a school of Avignon, *Saint Agricole*. It meant more to me than the Delacroixs or the Courbets, or anything. I didn't look at the Watteaus, I looked at this Avignon. That's because of what I was interested in. So, when I got to Rome, I would go to see Annabelle at the show, but then I couldn't hang around all the time, so I began to walk around Rome. And I found a bar on the Via del Babuino, and it turned out to be the painter's bar. I forget what it was called. We can find out, because Peter Ruta knows. He'll remember. And I was in there, and I began talking to people.

And then I met this painter named Ruta. He suggested I go to Venice and paint.

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