

Excerpts from an Interview with Nicolas Carone, by Jennifer Samet  
November 28, 2004  
© Jennifer Samet

*How did you become involved with the New York Studio School?*

I got involved right at its conception. I was teaching at the time at Cooper Union and at Yale. A lot of the young people and artists didn't have any orientation for what was happening in the art world – modern art coming through Cubism, Picasso, Matisse, Hofmann. They approached Mercedes Matter to say, why don't you start a school so we could get some information on modern art. It was started by her, originated with a group of students in a loft on Broadway and Bleecker. She asked me to join. I studied with Hofmann and I was one of the few people left from the school that was qualified to carry on his teaching. I was not just his student but also an artist in my own right when I went to him.

*When did you study with Hofmann?*

I was with Hofmann in the 1940s. I was studying with Hofmann while I was in the army. I was in the army, Mitchel Field Air Force Base in Long Island. I was working in a special unit was making designs for the first Fighter Command; we were making radar maps and working on light tables. My lieutenant was Gordon Bunshaft. He became my friend. He used to drive in his jeep to New York after the sessions were over at five o'clock. I would hitchhike to Hans Hofmann's school; I would go there at night when I was in the army. Many times he would pick me up on the road and take me to New York City. I was going to see my former teacher Leon Kroll. I was his assistant when I was 18 or 19 years old. I was going to visit him. So I said, I'm going to 1 East 67<sup>th</sup> Street, and he said, "That's strange, that's where I'm going. I have a girlfriend and she has an apartment at that address." Well, she is an artist; beautiful studios there. Her name was Nina Wilder, and she knows Leon Kroll and she used to pose for him. The strangest thing about this is that I used to pose for Leon Kroll. I was his model and his assistant and I went to Worcester, Massachusetts where he did the big mural. I worked for him for three and a half years. When I would pose, he would have her pose. You see, that was a strange incident. Gordon didn't know this. I never told him that I posed with his girlfriend. I met her later when he married her. Then she came to Mitchel Field quite often.

This section had architects, designers, artistic people. The other lieutenant, Robert Monroe, was a painter and would talk to me when I was doing my drawings on the light table. He said he had gotten the Prix de Rome before going to the army. Gordon always said, "You'd love going to Rome." Well, if we ever get out of the war, I would. I couldn't go during the war. So I saved the money.

So, Robert said, "Have you ever heard of Hofmann?" I had heard of him from several friends and they all suggested that I study with him. One of them was William Baziotis. He went to school with me when I studied with Leon Kroll, and he would

always say, "What the hell are you doing at the academy? Why don't you study with this guy Hans Hofmann; he's a wonderful teacher." So then Monroe said that, but I said, "How could I go now; I'm in the army?" He said, maybe you can go in the evening, go on your furlough. I had a furlough for two weeks. That's what I did. I went up to Provincetown twice and worked with Hofmann. And then when I got out of the army, I went to study with him on Eighth Street.

That's where it all begins. The Studio School begins with his influence on the art world. Mercedes worked with him, you know that. Mercedes was carrying on that legacy. Since I was also a prodigy of his teaching, that's how I got to come teach there. The teaching starts really with Hofmann's ideas: the understanding of the picture plane and an analysis of the plane, volumes, cubism, analytic cubism, synthetic cubism, abstraction. He took his students as far as he could. Some of the students never got it, even when he was teaching it in an elementary way. It was hard to understand because he spoke with a thick accent. A lot of his students weren't prepared; they didn't have an art school background. I had been to art school, the academy; I was on my own teaching so I had some privileges in this case. From there, after I had been working with him, I went out on my own. I wasn't just following his teaching. I went to Europe; I stayed in Italy for three and a half years. I met some interesting artists while there. I met Morandi, he was over there. He's with me in that photograph. I'll show you. This is Morandi and this is me, and this is [Pericle] Fazzini, he's a very good sculptor.

*What was the occasion of the photograph?*

It was taken in Venice in 1949; this group was mostly Italians, friends of mine. Fazzini was a very close friend. He wanted me to come with him since he was on the jury for sculpture, and Morandi was on the jury for painting. This was right after lunch, Morandi asked Fontana what time do we have to go jury the show, and Fontana said, I think we have about an hour. And they said in that case, I'd like to know what the American Pavilion is like. The American Pavilion was closed. The opening was going to be the next day. He said, "Do you think we could go see the show before it opens?" That's what happened; Fontana went in and asked the concierge if it was possible for Morandi and his friends to see the show and they let him in. \*

[\* Carone was likely speaking of the 1948 Venice Biennale here.]

So, I was in Italy, doing my own research in Abstract Expressionism as well as Surrealism. I met Matta. He became a very good friend of mine after the Gorky suicide. Matta was a very big influence on me. I wasn't only dealing with Hofmann's teaching, you see.

*Can you tell me about the drawing group you ran?*

I was teaching at Cooper Union, and so was Charles Cajori. The students there had to go from class to class. Our students were so interested in what we were teaching that they wanted us to teach outside of the school. My student Joyce said, "Why don't you start a private class because we all want to study with you?" My teaching was not Hofmann, but Hofmann prepared me for what I was doing, helped me understand what I was teaching: Picasso, Matisse, the moderns. My teaching involved a very classic background. I am a draftsman in the great classical tradition. With that, plus cubism, abstraction, surrealism, I gave a nice well-rounded experience. We found a loft on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Joyce would hire the model, pay the rent and electricity. We had three faculty members. We'd come in just like we did at Cooper Union. I'd come in maybe on a Thursday night or Monday night, and Charles would come in the afternoon, and the other guy for the morning class. That's how it happened.

I worked at the Stable Gallery. I was the one hired by her to have a group of painters, which reflected the scene, which was an underground movement of underground artists.

*Can you tell me more about your specific teaching method?*

My teaching method varies; I'm a very inventive and creative artist. I work to carry on a legacy, and my legacy is Abstract Expressionism coming from de Kooning, Pollock, and me. I'm carrying on the metaphysics of that idea. Everyday I work, I find new things, and add them to my teaching. I'm one of the few people in America that can teach cubism, analytic cubism, and synthetic cubism, according to the way it was supposed to be taught. I got it from Hofmann. I got it, I used it today, and I use it in a very inventive way. I'm synthesizing it with the Golden Section. I'm synthesizing it with the Surrealist Manifesto that carries on with the unconscious. Duality of the conscious, unconscious, that's all included.

When I went to Hofmann, he would say, "Carone, too much the figure." I was so oriented in the classical tradition that I would draw the figure like Ingres. I would say, Why did I go to Hofmann? I went to Hofmann because I wasn't satisfied with the painting that I was doing. In 1942, when Peggy Guggenheim's gallery opening, Pollock had his first show there. There was an explosion of a new kind of painting, a new energy coming out of an American spirit. We were all young people but we came from a traditional background.

Metaphysics comes into my teaching. I just thought of it, but it's very important. No one else does it. At that point, I was synthesizing, I am very ambitious, I want to be a breakthrough painter, to put it that way. I am a classical painter in the grand tradition. You've seen those heads. That's not what I'm aiming at, that's what I know how to do. I do that naturally. Like sculpture, I'm a natural sculptor. I made heads that I do in stone I find in the earth near my house [in Italy]. I see a stone and pick it up. It's a boulder, and I look at it, and pick up a chisel, and work.

So, during that period, I had a background of the classical to the highest level. But I was not satisfied. There are a lot of people who do figurative painting. How about Balthus? He stayed within the tradition, he was looking at Piero della Francesca, Courbet. So I do that, but I was not satisfied with that. I wasn't satisfied, but I kept doing it.

There's a philosophy, a metaphysics that's motivating my concepts. What do I add to teaching that do one else does? I was interested in esoteric philosophy. Gurdjieff. Ouspensky. I studied their work, and had a tough time there too, trying to understand the philosophy. In that period, I learned something when Ouspensky wrote a book called *The Fourth Way*. Art is one of the ways. Where is the art in this discipline and how can I use it as a painter? I started to use all those disciplines in the concept of the plane. The picture plane is a very important factor in my teaching. The fourth way was one of the ways to work on yourself, meditations. These meditations incorporated many different religions, could be Buddhism, esoteric Christianity, all these disciplines become conscious or implied in the teachings of Gurdjieff. He traveled a lot, involved himself in many religions. I used it for my teaching.

*How did you communicate these things to your students?*

I never told them where it was coming from, but some of them worked with Gurdjieff in my class. My concept is the picture plane. Most people understand it to be two-dimensional, and you must retain the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. But there is another dimension to the plane. I say the plane changes scale with content. Content is not drawing what you see, but is metaphoric. When you deal metaphorically from your shoulder to the curve of your neck with your hand, that is a calligraphic form there. Metaphorically, you could give a deeper dimension. When it goes from metaphors to multiple metaphors, to symbols, to equations of space and mass, and rhythm of masses, that just isn't in the academic teaching. When I say rhythm of masses, when you arrive at that stage, when you can deal freely with mass and rhythm, you're no longer dealing with space. You're dealing with light. Light is in the mind, not the eyes. It's not optical. There we're getting at the esoteric part of teaching. This could happen when the student is intense enough to bring himself or herself to be evolving in her work subconsciously, dealing with that mass where it could change the painting. From that, I found that the plane is no longer two-dimensional. I don't deal with the two-dimensionality strictly guided by the borders. The content changes the scale of the plane. The actual physicality of the plane remains, but the content of that is mind-boggling. What I'm trying to say is that I came to the conclusion in a philosophical sense that the plane is an idea. It's an idea and not two-dimensional, and that's where I come in. That's what I do when I do my abstract paintings, even when I do gouaches or do a head. I could close my eyes and see what I'm doing. I can see you with my eyes closed. But I may not want to get you; I may want to get the life of you rather than the portrait of you. The spirit of you. And that goes through many phases, it changes scale as you're doing it. That's a creative process.

Say, you take this glass and paint it the exact way you see it, with all the details and shadows and get the glass to look exactly like it. That doesn't mean that it looks like the glass. It's a reproduction of the glass. The image of the glass comes from a process. An evolutionary process that makes a poetic statement. It becomes a glass of water, it becomes an icon. There's a big schism between the appearance and reality. It becomes very mystical, esoteric, and metaphysical. It's in a dimension of the mind. You can't just copy what you see. It's a religious path to go there and it's a risk to believe. That belief is a faith and an idea.