

HYPERALLERGIC

A Painter's Extraterrestrial Journey Through the Light of Day

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Tim Keane | April 28, 2018



Paul Resika (photo by Blair Resika, courtesy the artist and Bookstein Projects, New York)

In his studio near San Francisco, an accomplished abstract painter once gushed to me about the freewheeling art scene he encountered in New York in the 1960s. "It was great," he said, banging the table and adding an expletive, "Until Andy Warhol ruined everything." After that exchange, I thought about an older generation New York-based artists who probably thought Jackson Pollock's 1949 appearance in *Life* magazine "ruined everything" by turning Abstract Expressionism into the new norm.

On the other hand, some painters are never intimidated by the changing weather. Soon to celebrate his 90th birthday, Paul Resika has been painting since before Pollock broke big. A modernist genre painter, a virtuosic colorist, and a realist painter who traffics in otherworldly moments, Resika has integrated so many idioms of abstraction into figuration that he seems to be giving a middle finger to the art world's ever-changing avant-gardes.

Geometry and the Sea, exhibiting concurrently at Bookstein Projects and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, spotlights Resika's recent seascapes, many completed last year. Set along seacoasts and depicting chromatic transformations of sky and sea, these new pictures also provide insights into Resika's ongoing artistic journey.

As the story goes, the journey began at age 12, when Resika was taken by his mother to studio art classes at a nearby orphanage in Harlem and, soon afterwards, downtown, to study with the Polish émigré painter Sol Wilson. Wilson's semi-rural cityscapes, many set in seaside ports, permanently influenced Resika. His early education was supplemented by his time in Hans Hofmann's famous studio classes. There, he learned to render the voluminous nature of space and the "push-and-pull" interplay between color and form. "With Hofmann you had to draw forces," Resika told Ira Goldberg of the Arts Student League, "there were no things. Everything was about relationships."



Paul Resika, "Red Sun (De Chirico)" (2017), oil on canvas
(courtesy of the artist and Bookstein Projects, New York,
photo by Jonathan Goodrich, New York)

But for Resika, *things* were why he painted. Supported by his family, he studied anatomical drawing and left New York for Europe. In Italy, he was galvanized by the Venetian School painters, especially Titian and Tintoretto. Back in America, investigating with bolder color and imprimatur techniques — painting as luminescence — bolstered his belief in the aesthetic value of traditions that had become uncool, like landscape and still life.

In recent decades, living and working in and around Cape Cod, Resika's imagery has veered between the naturalistic and the mythical. By disarming the viewer with unassuming representations of lighthouses or fish, flowers or hillsides, the paintings lure the eye ever closer, as intermingled colors and fine gradations of light both constitute and complicate those objects.

In fact, Resika's recent seascapes in *Geometry and the Sea* prove Hofmann's painting theory right: relationships *are* everything. The intensities in coloration are contained by austere discs, triangles, and quadrants. Horizons break into vertices and vice versa. Though the compositions are large-scale and

the presentation flattened, their angles look steep and startling, calling to mind the interplanetary views provided by photographs of the earth taken on the moon.

A contemplative spectacle courses through the exhibitions' geometrics. The pictures' foregrounds are dominated by pyramidal outcroppings. These metronome-like projections signify coastal ridges or dunes that disrupt otherwise serene views on to vacant planes of sea and gradated sky.

While each painting conjures a distinct time of day or lunar phase, the images point to a dimension beyond time. The latter effect results from Resika's poetics of space. He exploits oppositions while hinting at correspondences. In "The White Sky," (2017) a freshly risen sun is couched in lush white. The turquoise water yields a horizon violently foreshortened by the blood-red triangular landscape.

Inversions like this abound. In “Red Dunes Green Sea” (2016-17) the orange sky evokes terracotta earthiness while the underlying blues worked into a green sea suggest vegetation.

Here and there, human instruments mimic the elemental. In “Ascent (Sail and Half Moon)” (2009) a towering triangle — a sail unmoored from its ship — yields four areas of blues, pinks, and reds. These vivid polygons stack one upon the other to form a sharp pyramid that cleaves the blue backdrop. The sail’s borderlines parallel the faint margins between light and shadow in a spherical half-moon.

The most unsettling seascapes are those lacking a visible waterline. In these pictures, land masses have a weird, floating gravity that makes the earth look extraterrestrial. In “Blue” (2017) competing variations in hue and brightness generate sensations of heat and cold, nightshade and daylight, but the general atmosphere is one of an eerie, pre-human silence.



Paul Resika, “The White Sky” (2017), oil on canvas (courtesy of the artist and Bookstein Projects, New York, photo by Jonathan Goodrich, New York)

As in all of Resika’s work, there is a persistent ambition in these paintings to articulate the primordial by honoring the ordinary. In “A Quiet Romance” (2017) the pinks and whites of a conch — its stout and beveled shell dwarfing a pearl-like moon — are set in an all-over violet backdrop that stands in for sky and sea.

“Moby Dick” (2017) is the most dynamic painting. It is also the most visually complicated. A white and pink cycloid is conjoined to a pyramidal blue structure, cresting on a white and gray sea surge, suggesting the hunted whale and capsizing ship in Herman Melville’s epic. This crisply delineated, angular mayhem is counterbalanced by a calm, seamless blue sky and ocean — a blue so pervasive it swallows up a sun that is filled by blue impasto. Water here collaborates with sky to deliver ravishment from the universe’s indifference.

As Resika’s art bestrides two centuries with no sign of letting up, it reinforces and refutes the Biblical wisdom that there is nothing new under the sun. Through realignments and manifold perspectives on the same allegorized seascape, these new paintings draw forceful attention to the interdependence between light and time.

Geometry and the Sea provides lessons that are as complicated and as plain as day. The earth’s revolutions and annual orbit around the sun are, on one level, invisible scientific abstractions. They are known only



Figure 1 Paul Resika, "Moby Dick" (2017), oil on canvas (©Paul Resika, courtesy of Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

by the shifting sunlight, changes made visible in the fluctuating colors of immediate elements — stone and moon, air and sky, coastlines and breakwaters.

Through traditional genres such as landscape Resika shows there is no end to exploring how color belongs to light and how that changing light makes the familiar strange. In our visual world, that light seems always fleeting. Resika's art persists by stopping time.

Geometry and the Sea continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Manhattan) through May 20 and Bookstein Projects (60 East 66th Street, 3rd Floor, Manhattan) through May 26.

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