

Paul Resika: To the Lighthouse

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Paul Resika, *The Candle*, oil on linen, 50 x 40", 2007.

In early September, Paul Resika's wife, Blair, met me on the lawn of their spacious house, with its stucco arches and red-shingled roof, and led me to his nearby studio on the tall bluff in North Truro, Massachusetts, known as High Head, which overlooks both Cape Cod Bay and Pilgrim Lake.

Paul stood at his easel, his back to me, painting a vase of dinner-plate dahlias that was set on a table outside an open side door. His large stretchers leaned against the walls of his studio, which is roughly the size of a four-car garage. He turned and said, "We just had a party for our anniversary, and many guests brought flowers. Blair wants me to paint them." He paused. "The funny thing is, the bouquets look just like the women who brought them!"

Resika turned eighty last August, the same month his show opened at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, MA.

Throughout his career, Resika has relentlessly explored, challenged, and changed his work, and the paintings from this show continue that progression. They give new life to the familiar image of the lighthouse, through radiant color and geometric placement. The lighthouses seem to be not simply the subjects of the paintings, but beacons drawing the viewer to the surrounding images. *Leaping Fish – Full Moon*, an oil-on-linen, appears almost a competition among the fish, moon, and lighthouse for dominance, but a fourth element—the yellow light of the tower—bristles with a fire that ignites the entire composition. Resika said, "I was working on some big pictures I couldn't solve, and then I put the lighthouse in the corner and it started to work." Resika's lighthouses are winningly paradoxical—they warn away, but they also beckon and invite.

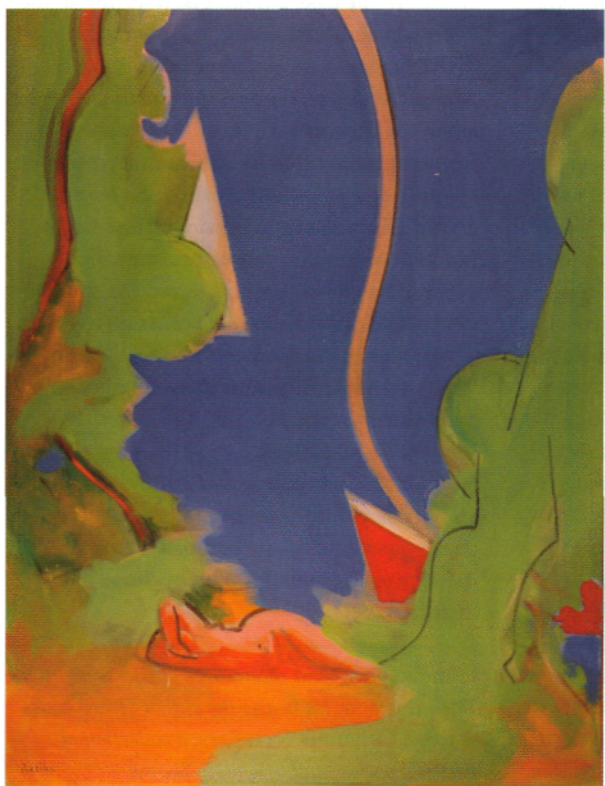
Above all, Resika's extraordinary skill as a colorist is displayed in these paintings. Hilton Kramer has written: "As a colorist-painter who draws in color with a loaded brush—he is now without peer in his own generation, a generation that has often made color its most important pictorial interest." This work also brings to mind Hans Hofmann's observation that "In nature, light creates the color. In the picture, color creates the light."

Resika grew up in New York City and, at twelve, took art classes with Sol Wilson. When he was seventeen, he studied with Hans Hofmann at his School of Fine Arts on Eighth Street, and followed Hofmann to Provincetown in 1947 when he was nineteen—ostensibly to paint Hofmann's house, but mainly to be in his presence. Coincidentally, Wilson later spent much time on the Outer Cape, further connecting Resika to the area.

Resika had a one-person show in 1948 at the George Dix Gallery when he was only twenty, but he did not show again in New York until 1964.

What happened during this sixteen-year period?

The answer characterizes Resika's career—he studied, painted, and made a way of life for himself in order to do both.



Paul Resika, *Ariadne and Sail*, oil on canvas, 51 x 38", 2004–2005. Courtesy of the Berta Walker Gallery.

In 1950, he went to Europe and lived at first in Paris, and then moved to Venice for two years, followed by a year in Rome. In Italy, he studied the Venetian masters, working as an assistant to Edward Melcarth, and taking free classes at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome. When he returned to the States, he lived in the West Village, still painting in the Venetian manner, and earned a living by doing decorations and murals in private homes and painting commissioned portraits.

During these years, Resika spent his free hours in museums. He says he has drawn El Greco's self-portrait (*Portrait of A Man*)—which he calls his favorite picture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—hundreds of times. "Whatever you cannot do, you admire."

In his studio on this fall day, Paul shows me his latest work. Only a month has passed since his Berta Walker show, and he has further developed the lighthouse paintings. When we were arranging a time for this visit by phone, I could hear his excitement about these new pieces. It reminded me of Emily Dickinson's estimation of the

artist's dilemma and joy: "I work to drive the awe away, yet awe impels the work."

A painting of two triangular dunes framing the ocean resonates sensually of a reclining woman. It takes a few moments for that chord to be struck, but soon the picture comes into view as both landscape and suggestive figure. Resika then reveals a big canvas, fifty-one by thirty-eight inches, which had been facing the wall. A new stage—geometric angles depict the sea, and above, a boat; not one, but two spheres punctuate the sky. This gives a feeling different from his other work—it is abstract and magical: a sky lit twice, by rival moons.

Resika has always gone his own way, starting as a boy deciding to become an artist, and continuing an independent path through his years in the Village. At that time, he was a representational painter working out of doors when abstract expressionism was



Paul Resika, *Girl with Leaping Fish*, oil on canvas, 40 x 32", 2003–2004. Courtesy of the Berta Walker Gallery.

in vogue and pop art and minimalism were beginning to emerge. Although in the 1970s Resika was associated with the Figurative School, which included Fairfield Porter, Leland Bell, and Robert De Niro, he is not attached to movements. "Abstract expressionism," he says. "What does it mean? Nothing!" He laments that some artists attach themselves to a group aesthetic and never leave it. He tells me, "To love a school is a bad thing."

Our talk involves the artist's need for freedom, not only for time in which to work, but for freedom from convention, fashion, and expectation. Resika has had just that over his lifetime—his work has evolved from landscapes, to fishing boats and piers, to abstract marine paintings, to female figures, to geometric depictions of foliage, to the current lighthouse paintings, which have just turned a corner into fuller abstraction.

There is no separation between Resika's art and life. "All I do is paint," he says matter-of-factly, a sentence that feels like an understatement considering his long and productive career. Paul Valéry wrote, "the greatest liberty is born of the greatest rigor," and when Resika discusses his ambitions, it is clear that he works with an uncompromising rigor to be in the highest company; not just of other artists,

but in his own canon. Hilton Kramer wrote of Resika's 2002 show at Salander-O'Reilly, that it "tops everything I've seen by this remarkable painter. It's a triumphant achievement not to be missed by anyone with a keen interest in the art of painting." In that exhibition, Resika moved away from the boats once central to his work, replacing them with sensual female figures that seem to spring from the canvas three-dimensionally. Surrounding the women is an ethereal space, a combination of indoors and out, as lyrical and dreamlike as the women are earthy. And in that space, a single vase or a fresh bouquet—you feel that if you reach for one it will vanish or retreat, but the women will remain. These sirens foreshadow the lighthouses of his recent work in that they simultaneously caution and attract.

We discuss the 2001 documentary film, *Boats Like Sails*, directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Allan Miller, who trained his camera on Resika in his New York studio as he painted a piece from start to finish. In the film, Resika changes the painting again and again, wiping out spheres, redrawing masts and bows, altering colors. At one point, he feels he has found the right yellow for a section he has re-painted numerous times. He speaks little in the film, but at this moment, he smiles and says, "That's it!" He paints furiously, and sits back when finished, only to notice, as the camera pans across the canvas, that another, paler yellow now competes with what he has just done. Resigned, a bit fatigued, but undaunted and amused, Resika smiles and stares at the painting, saying, "The other girl came into the room. What can you do?"

Amazed by his accuracy and strength in drawing the outlines of the objects in the painting, I ask him how he can sweep this loaded brush with such precision. He considers the compliment and says, "Every artist is proud of his edges."

Toward the end of the film, he signs his name, satisfied. But in the next scene, he returns to the studio, points to a mast, and says, "What is this? It's nothing." He rubs out his signature and begins again. Even after the painting was finished for the film, he continued to change it, and completed it a year later. The film is a model of how an artist must be ruthless in revision.

Resika's conversation during my visit is filled with admiration for painters past and present. He takes me into his house, once a restaurant, Vista del Mare. The rooms are

filled with paintings and drawings, and he points out favorites, including Joseph De Martini, a friend who died in 1984. In a room off the kitchen, there is a wall of De Martini's small paintings. Resika pulls out a chair for me.

"Look," he says, revering the word. "Look." "A good painter," he says, a phrase he repeats about many artists over the course of the afternoon. One of the De Martini paintings is unusually striking, a white nude glowing in a shadowy background. While darker than Resika's palette, De Martini's female shares the curvaceous and angular intensity of some of Resika's figures. Resika says, "You can't tell what's around her, where she is, in a studio or outside." He paces around, hoping I appreciate it as much as he does.

Other rooms display paintings by younger artists: Donald Beal, Paul Bowen, Polly Burnell, Irene Lipton, Rob DuToit, Ray Nolin, and Resika's son-in-law, Gregory Amenoff, chair of Columbia University's Visual Arts Division. Resika mentions that both Beal and DuToit were his students at Parsons School of Design. In 1977, the head of that school asked him to initiate and direct an MFA degree program. Resika agreed on four conditions: that every student receive financial aid; that only artists lecture—no art historians; that the students would do no writing, only reading; and that he would not have to attend any meetings—providing him with the precious liberty that eludes most academics. Resika served as director for ten years.

A sculpture by Gilbert Franklin, a present from Blair for his birthday this summer, rests on a desk in a small reading room. Books surround an armchair in a corner—Alan Dugan, Louise Glück, John Keats, Samuel Menashe, Ezra Pound, and Theodore Roethke among them. Resika loves poetry and poets are drawn to his work. Mark Strand wrote the copy for his 2007 New York show. Previous catalogues contain essays by W. S. Di Piero, David Shapiro, and John Yau. John Ashbery, Michael Benedikt, and L. E. Sissman have written about him.

As we walk from room to room, we pass a piano, and a shelf with several martini glasses and two silver pitchers, one labeled for gin, the other for vodka.



Paul Resika, *Green Isle*, oil on canvas, 63 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 50 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", 2007–2009. Courtesy the artist.

The dining room walls display his vibrant flower paintings, and Resika lifts a vase of bright and vivacious multi-colored zinnias, another offering from the anniversary party.

"Doesn't this remind you of Heidi Jon Schmidt?" he asks laughingly, referring to the lively novelist who brought the bouquet.

As I crossed the lawn toward my car, I glanced at Cape Cod Bay and the tiny cottages along the thin arm of North Truro's shore, a scene captured often by Resika in its mutability and beauty. Resika's world, John Yau said, "is both immediate and distant," an insight not as paradoxical as it seems. Immediate because the lyrical gestures amid the staunch geometrics provoke the senses, as do the strong colors, the pungent orange, the buoyant blues. Distant because these semi-abstract and other-worldly images show a beauty impossible to possess.

On this afternoon, I felt I had not so much seen these paintings as been permeated by them, especially by the beacons that invite the viewer to gauge his own bearings by their light. ■

John Skoyles' most recent book of poems is *The Situation*. He is also the author of two books of prose, *Generous Strangers*, a collection of personal essays; and a memoir, *Secret Frequencies: A New York Education*. He teaches at Emerson College.