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INTO THE STREAM: PAUL RESIKA AND HIS STUDENTS

By Rena Lindstrom
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There are those who come into this world with the mark of painting on them, and if the Fates are good, they find their way to masters who guide them toward their destiny. In the early 1980's, four young painters, Donald Beal, Rob DuToit, Tony DeFazio, and Lorraine Mainelli, all now working on the Cape, found Paul Resika and the Parsons School of Design MFA program in painting.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

It is a story that transcends time and distance in a tradition passed on from the earliest atelier -- a way now largely lost in the academic system where teaching gets funneled into formal curriculum, when "the professionalism of art practice," cited in a recent *Artnews* article on the challenges of current art education, has risen to the top, and the pressure to include the new crowds out the old.

Resika's own apprenticeship took place in the forties in New York, and later, in the museums of Europe. In those days, the American art world was smaller and concentrated in New York, and in the summers, Provincetown. By age twelve Resika had begun studying with Sol Wilson, Polish born painter who studied with, among others, George Bellows and Robert Henri. Across the hall was the studio of Joseph De Martini, another early influence. Resika found his way to Hans Hofmann, catalyst of the Abstract Expressionist movement while still in high school.

Hans Hofmann, who had known Picasso, Braque, and Matisse as a young painter in Paris between 1904 and 1914, arrived in the US as a visiting teacher in the early 30's, sponsored by American students who had studied with him at his school in Munich. With political tensions stirring in Europe, he opened the Hofmann School of Fine Arts in New York In the fall of 1933, and in 1935, a summer school in Provincetown. Painter David Loeffler Smith, Resika's good friend from the days of the NY High School of Music and Art, says Resika was always the artist. Lively and curious, interested in jazz, in film, he attracted an older crowd of artists, returning GI's such as Robert De Niro, Leland Bell, and Larry Rivers who were studying with Hofmann. In the summer of 1947, Resika was in Provincetown. Others here were Jane Freilicher and Paul Georges. It was an amazing period of artistic friendship, which has been neatly mythologized in the ensuing years.

At just nineteen years, Resika had his first one-person show of abstract paintings in New York. It was, perhaps, too much too soon, and the young painter turned to the past. Traveling to Europe, he settled in Venice for two years, studying the Venetian masters. Back in the US, he continued to paint out of doors, from nature, repeating and repeating, always concerned with mastery, recreating his reputation as a figurative painter. It was a difficult time to paint representational subject matter, as most critical attention was focused on abstraction. Writer Jennifer Sachs Samet comments on the painters, including Resika, exhibited in *The New York School Reconfigured* at The Center for Figurative Painting in 2000:

> By working figuratively, they were more literally engaged in a conversation with the history of painting. They chose to take an ambitious step forward - doing what our greatest painters have always done - successfully incorporating modern vocabulary into a timeless image.

This is the artistic heritage of Resika's students working on the Cape now. It is an impressive lineage no matter which trail one takes— Beal, DuToit, DeFazio, Mainelli to Resika to Hofmann to Matisse to Moreau to Ingres to David to Fragonard to Boucher to Van Dyck to Rubens, who himself went to Venice to study Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese.

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Three of these painters, Donald Beal, Tony DeFazio, and Lorraine Mainelli, studied at Swain School of Art and Design in New Bedford before going to Parsons. In fact, at one point, over 40% of the graduate students at Parsons were from Swain. According to one alumnus, "Swain was a little miracle, an academy of art that felt as if it should have been in Paris at the turn of the century rather than New Bedford in the days of disco."

Established in 1881, when New Bedford was a textile center, the Swain Free School concentrated on instruction in textile design and later, arts and crafts. In 1962, David Loeffler Smith, Resika's old friend, became director of the school, and put a stronger emphasis on fine arts. There were usually 20-30 painting students and 2 or 3 painters as instructors, and many visiting artists, including Resika, Paul Georges, Robert DiNiro, and Leland Bell. Wonderful traveling exhibitions came through. Tony DeFazio sites the show “Painterly Painting” where he first saw the work of Louis Finkelstein, which sent him to Yale to study one summer.

It takes time to learn how to make a painting. Donald Beal has spent years looking and painting in Provincetown's Beech Forest, getting away from the sublime vistas of sea and sand. The forest, in its complexity, gives him another language of colors and shapes and structures. In the studio, he begins by making marks on the canvas. "I can't work from a concept," he says, "eventually something asserts itself that seems right. I'm reacting to the marks, trusting my instincts." He's been developing those instincts for a long time. He remembers going to the MFA in Boston with his aunt when he was 7 years old. He saw a Wyeth there. "I couldn't believe it wasn't a flat surface; it opened a whole wild world I knew nothing about." At Swain, he was always in the museums. At the Gardner he saw a Titian. "I was just an 18 year old Massachusetts knucklehead." It was exciting and immediate. When he graduated from Swain in 1981, he moved to Brooklyn. "There were fourteen of us in one neighborhood in Brooklyn. We shared one telephone. We'd meet for breakfast and talk about art. Most of us worked at the same fruit stand over by the bridge at one time or another. Rob was there and Lorraine. We all found our way to Resika at Parsons.”

One day in the late ‘70’s, Paul Resika received a call from the Dean of Parsons asking that he develop an MFA Painting program for them. The program opened in 1978. He tapped Leland Bell to join him as the lead teacher in the program. Beal describes Bell as a big personality. "I was interested in the things Bell valued. He was also a jazz drummer, and he could talk about the rhythmic structure of paintings in a way I could really relate to." Resika and Bell were huge forces in the figurative/landscape painting world.

They developed a winter program, giving students a choice of Paris, Rome, or Provincetown. Tony DeFazio came to Provincetown that first winter of the program.

Provincetown was a total change for DeFazio. Although he grew up in Hyannis, he had never been there. He worried that it might be too close to home, but he found it even more remote, both psychologically and geographically. It was just what he needed. "It was quiet, bitter cold, very solitary. There were three of us. We shared a studio at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, now the Hawthorne Gallery, and lived together in a house in the west end." It held a kind of romance that seemed to fit DeFazio’s art -- dramatic and passionate...”it’s the only way I really have anything to say.” He refers to the strong influence of George McNeil, "beating a path, burning the world down, lifting the weight off the pictorial painter."

DeFazio describes Resika as caring and concerned in a fatherly way. He fostered students along. Whereas Bell was vibrant, emotional, physical, and direct, Resika was less verbal, more intuitive, inspired students to find themselves. He arranged for DeFazio to have access to the drawing room at the Met. There he spent hours and hours studying old master drawings. "There was a lot of flexibility, you could come and go from the studio, visit exhibitions and museums, come back, look again at your work."

For Mainelli, the essential element was not the master-student relationship, the passing of knowledge from one generation to another, but the nature of that knowledge. What was the quality of the experience? Painting was what you *were*, not something that you do. Perhaps this is what Beal means when he says that what Resika really taught him was “how to be a painter in the world.” Being in the presence of painters like Resika and Smith and Bell, interacting with these artists, gave the students the

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tools, the vocabulary, to use what they had, a way of thinking about painting as a language. It connected them to that language, which was also the language of Titian. Through the experience, they entered the stream of painters.

It was being in that atmosphere, adds Mainelli, more than any direct instruction, where "space was made for us to take this thing that we had and make the connection, through it, with the world...not a rarified atmosphere, but sympathetic and understanding of who we were in the world." There was no differentiation between abstract and realist painting; it was the same language. When Resika told students to "paint what you know", he meant to rely on that painter part of you that is way ahead of your conscious self. That is the part that is developed by "going to nature". Resika taught, as Hofmann taught, that working from life, from nature, is the fundamental relationship for the painter; without it, there is poverty of form; everything dries up.

After Swain, Mainelli encountered this poverty in New York. The city seemed a place alienated from life, a place filled with the dried up husks of *ideas*. Some time in 1981, she made it to a gallery symposium in which Resika was participating, and she saw his painting *Gypsy Dune*. It changed everything. "In this dry, arid place, something was alive, something was connected to life. It wasn't painted out of a theory. I knew you had to be in the world to make that painting." She enrolled in the Parsons program.

Beal spent the winter of 1981 painting in Provincetown, sometimes playing cards and drinking bourbon at Christine Magriel's (whom Resika engaged to introduce the students to the town's bohemian culture) Tuesday night poker games, where he earned his grocery money and listened to the stories of artists like Myron Stout, nearly blind, and Denis Johnson. He started to "get" Provincetown, his says, as a liberating and positive place, and began to gain a wider idea of how one might live.

Rob DuToit did not choose the winter in Provincetown. He went to Rome. He had come to New York from the painting program at the University of New Hampshire where he studied with Melvin Zabarsky, who had earlier taught at Swain. You could say DuToit found Resika through Corot, for he had long been intrigued with Corot, with Corot's trees. One day Zabarsky handed DeToit an exhibition card, saying, "This is your man. Check it out."

DuToit was astonished...it was his tree; it was Corot's tree. "Resika confirmed Corot for me. He is a great progeny of Corot." Only, Resika had taken Corot into the 20th Century, incorporated the tradition into his own modern way of painting. "Instinctively I made the connection, the color. It went way beyond my ideas, the sense of atmosphere. I felt a tremendous emotional response, felt the emotional quality of his painting."

DuToit went to New York to see Resika who was "totally welcoming and endearing", and became his student. "It was an intense, rich atmosphere, being there, all together. Resika taught just by his presence. Once, in the studio, he said to me, 'You've found your calling.' "

Still, having models of such mythic proportions can kill you. When the Corot exhibition came to New York, all the painters were there every day. "By the end, I was seeing beyond the beauty and technique. I was seeing that Corot was completely himself, that through the process, he was released into himself." In Rome, too, DuToit was able to connect to the humanity of the great painters from the past. He walked among the same ruins and parks, painted in the same locales.

In 1985, DuToit came to Provincetown for Donald Beal's wedding, and ended up housesitting for a winter. He returned for good in the late eighties and moved into the studio of Fritz Bultman, who had died in 1985. He has been working to "get away from Corot," he says. "I have had to go back, past the 19th Century, back to ancient Chinese painting. It has saved me from Corot. My relationship with the work has shifted. It is more mine now."

Resika, by his presence, his example, his nature, has led this next generation of pure painters into themselves. Resika teaches spirit, says DuToit, "the religion of painting." Mainelli is more down to earth: "It's like water," she says, "you have to find it."

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