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The Loaded Brush: New Resika Work Is Without Peer
His Current Paintings Are 'Like a Reverie,' Evoking Distant Women

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The American painter Paul Resika, born in 1928, studied with Hans Hofmann while still in his teens and had his first solo exhibition in New York at the age of 20. He's thus been a notable presence in the New York art scene for nearly half a century. I long ago lost track of the number of exhibitions he's had over the years, yet I do not hesitate in saying that his current show at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries 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. But you'll have to hurry, for the show closes on Saturday, Nov. 30. (Owing to obligations that required my absence from New York in recent weeks, I am late in writing about it.)

Viewers familiar with the paintings Mr. Resika exhibited in the 1990's will be in for a surprise. The motif that dominated the paintings of that decade—profiles of boats resting in tranquil seas of luminous hasn't entirely disappeared, to be sure, but when the boats make their occasional appearances in the new paintings, they're given the role of fragmented, receding memories. What dominates now is a new repertory of images, most prominently reclining female figures—some reading, some not; some nude, some in wraps; but all conspicuously placed in the lower-left foreground of the pictures so as to underscore their priority in the painter's imagination.

Also present in the new paintings are isolated still-life images: potted plants, bouquets of flowers, isolated vases on floating tabletops. There are landscape images as well: tree trunks and branches shorn of their foliage. These and other, less easily identified marks of the brush—are those S-curved forms meant to signify the serpent in the garden of life?—are enclosed in a poetic, color-drenched atmosphere of Proustian memory in which every material object is likely to be the bearer of some symbolic implication.

These are the richest, most complex paintings Mr. Resika has given us, and not only for their audacious melding of interior and outdoor space and their inspired juxtaposition of pictorial motifs traditionally seen in isolation from each other, but also for the virtuosity they command in uniting so many of the pictorial conventions that have been central to the aesthetics of modernist painting. As a colorist—a 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. If we didn't know that in his youth Mr. Resika had studied with Hofmann or know how important Matisse had been to Hofmann's own development, we might have inferred both from these new paintings.

Yet what also elevates Mr. Resika's new paintings above so much of what we encounter nowadays is the distinctive vein of feeling they encompass, for these are pictures that strike us not only as virtuosic performances of the painter's art, but as profound meditations on the

nature of experience. In his essay for the catalog accompanying the Salander-O'Reilly exhibition, John Yau gives us a very accurate account of what might be called the paintings' existential subtext: "Like a reverie," Mr. Yau writes, "the painting is both accessible and mysterious, absolutely vivid and remote. However close to the edge the woman is placed, she seems to exist in a world altogether separate from ours. It is this quietly disturbing duality, this sense that the world Resika depicts is both immediate and distant, that gives the paintings their emotional tone. We are able to witness a world we can't quite enter. We are possessed by a dream. And in this dream, everything is familiar, but nothing is quite what it seems."

It's a world with which the human mind is increasingly likely to be occupied as it ages and begins the long travail of revisiting in the privacy of its own consciousness the scenery of past experience. In that world, reality is not always distinguishable from illusion, and chronology is suspended in favor of untamed juxtaposition of episodes and events that in real time appeared unrelated. In other words, it's a world that we more often encounter in fiction and poetry than in the art of painting. And it's one of the triumphs of Mr. Resika's new painting that without resorting to easy anecdote, or indeed any sort of literal narrative, it succeeds in evoking this vein of aging memory so brilliantly while remaining scrupulously faithful to the discipline of painting itself.