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## A FRESH LOOK AT A QUARTER-CENTURY OF PAUL RESIKA

By Vivien Raynor  
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The new taste for figurative painting has caused nonentities to be retrieved from oblivion although they might better have been left there. All the same, the fashion has had the beneficial effect of highlighting artists who, though well known, tend to be taken for granted. Paul Resika is just such a talent, and a show surveying the last 25 years of his output is now at Artists' Choice Museum, 394 West Broadway.

Having studied with Hans Hofmann, Resika began his career in a more or less abstract style, and had his first solo show in 1948 at the age of 19. His second was in 1964. The gap coincides, of course, with Abstract Expressionism's supremacy followed by that of Pop Art, and Resika seems to have spent those years participating in group exhibitions mounted by relatively conservative institutions like the National Academy of Design.

The reason for this was a volte-face on the part of the artist: for all the enthusiasm and euphoria that Hofmann inspired in his students, Resika, for one, felt that he had never really learned how to paint under Hofmann's administration. So, withdrawing the toe he had dipped into the vanguard water, he went to Italy and applied himself to the art and techniques of the Old Masters. After his return to New York in 1953, he took to painting landscapes in the open air, and it was with these that he resumed exhibiting.

It's a measure of how the art climate has changed that the two small works from this period seem among the most attractive in the show. One is a Barbizon-like scene of plowed fields and trees in Amagansett, L.I., (1959), the other an almost naive rendering of rolling green Italian landscape with cypresses and red-roofed buildings (1960).

Thereafter, the color grows bright and the technique fluid - some might say to the point of glibness. Resika will often express a subject with little more than a few rhetorical swirls of pigment punctuated by passages of impasto, as in one little buttery snow scene of 1980. Intoxicated by the act of painting, he can get carried away and, when not combining bright pink with an excruciating green, as in the houses among trees in "Maison Basse," can veer toward contrasts that are a touch sentimental.

An example of such a work that is nonetheless one of his best is "Benevy (In Memoriam)" (1984), a seascape dominated by two near-black rectangles representing large and small pier structures. Bold as the composition is, the combination of dark buildings edged with flashes of orange against a mango-colored sky and dull blue-violet sea are almost too much in their lushness, and it's the same with "The Bull and the Tower," one of a Mexican series that is also memorable. Here, the brilliance of the red-orange sky equals that of the more coral-red field below and, as if that were not drama enough, there's a tall purple mesa in the background. Standing in the field, meanwhile, is a solitary bull that is, to quote from Lawrence Campbell's well-written catalogue essay, "as black as a Bible." Inability to go all the way with Resika may indicate residual puritanism in the beholder. John Yau, in his catalogue essay, sees the artist's chromatic abandon as an expression of eroticism; but to this observer, it looks more like the fervor of a preacher whipping himself and his congregation to salvation.

The artist has, nevertheless, been well served by his curator, Paul Russotto who - feeling that Resika previously had "only offered one side of himself," took pains to have the exhibit reveal the others. Collectively, Russotto's selection of landscapes, portraits, and still lifes, including a notable study of a gutted fish, stresses the stages by which the artist achieved his considerable technical expertise while also conveying a sense of impetuosity that was not evident before.

Apropos, a particularly arresting work is the mysterious homage to Rousseau's "Sleeping Gypsy" - an undulating yellow landscape marked by crescents of red under a full moon in a pale sky. The comparatively thin paint and the chalked outlines of the forms bring to mind the early de Kooning. A recent work, it could presage another about-turn, this time against the tide of representational art. Fifty canvases strong, the show is supported by a smaller group of late works, uptown at Graham Modern, 1014 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street. (Through May 19.)