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## A Scrambling of Clues: Paul Resika, Geometry and the Sea

David Carrier | May 16, 2018

**Paul Resika: Geometry and the Sea at Bookstein Projects and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects**



Paul Resika, *Rose Dawn*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 38 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bookstein Projects

Might a bookish analysis provide the best way to understand the art of a marvelously intuitive painter? Perhaps! In his great treatise on figurative art, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) Ernst Gombrich offers a far-reaching thesis about the history of European painting. In a process of what he calls ‘making and matching,’ an artist starts with some simplified pattern, which Gombrich calls a schema, and then adapts it to match the particular visual features of what is represented. In cubism, which marks the beginning of the end

of this tradition, so *Art and Illusion* claims, “the scrambling of clues” baffles perception. And then Jackson Pollock, going one step further, prevents “us from interpreting his marks on the canvas as representations of any kind . . .” Then visual deadlock is what results when there’s no way to consistently match the pictorial content to some depicted site in physical reality.

Often Paul Resika’s paintings from the 1980s show seascapes from Cape Cod, where he maintains a studio. These works, it might seem, are far from the modernist tradition of abstraction. But now, as if working in a highly personal way through a Gombrichian history of figuration, he juxtaposes backgrounds of clear skies, with yellow suns, with jagged pyramids in the foreground. And this show falls into two, distinctly different parts. Bookstein Projects shows a roomful of these enigmatic works, Resika’s more conventional paintings, variations on this theme. And at Steven Harvey’s gallery, in addition to the beach scenes, you also see several works, which are harder to place — *A Quiet Romance* (2017), showing a conch shell on a similar background, and, in the back room, the magnificent *Self-Portrait with Rag* (2017). Resika, you sense, keeps his options open. For this reason, my schematic history hardly does justice to the bold originality of all of these paintings. Look at *Triangle- Sun* (2017) at Harvey, or *Rose Dawn*, also 2017 at

Bookstein. These prickly images set against the sky, which have no sources that I can identify, are a law unto themselves.



Paul Resika, *The White Sky*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bookstein Projects

In some of these recent paintings, *The White Sky* (2017) for example, (on view at Bookstein) you see the edge of the sea on the horizon. The sea and sky backgrounds of these landscapes could be painted from nature, but what are we to make of these geometric structures – which, and here I contradict one statement by the artist in the gallery press releases, do not look remotely like any sand dunes that that I have seen at the beach, neither in Cape Cod nor elsewhere? Rather, I would argue, it is as if Resika self-consciously chooses to juxtapose a seemingly non-figurative form against these natural settings, in pictures that are half abstract, and half figurative. What a strange juxtaposition of figurative and abstract-looking elements – and what an original way, certainly never envisaged by Gombrich, to deal with the traditional issues of pictorial representation. As far as I know, this is a remarkable, seemingly unprecedented development in Resika’s long evolution. MoMA’s display “the long run,” which runs

through November 4, chronicles the development of artists after their breakthrough moment. This exhibition includes an enigmatic recent work by Lee Bontecou, a late painting of Elizabeth Murray and one picture from the seemingly endless ongoing development of Frank Stella. These two shows of Resika’s very recent paintings nicely supplement that presentation, for at ninety his art, too, has undergone a dramatic transformation. In old age now, he prepares to leap into abstraction, as if returning to the concerns of the art world of Hans Hofmann, with whom he studied in the mid-twentieth century. How surprising and how absolutely admirable is his determined ability to remain essentially unpredictable!

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Paul Resika, *A Quiet Romance*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 28 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects