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A Lifetime of Evading Trends

By PIA CATTON
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Painter Paul Resika waves off any talk about the process of putting paint to canvas. "Painting is a silent poetry," he says, nestled in his Upper West Side studio.

But after more than eight decades of painting, there's really quite a lot to talk about. Mr. Resika, the 84-year-old native New Yorker has lived and worked through most of the major movements of art in the 20th century—steadily rejecting or ignoring them all.



Paul Resika, in his Manhattan studio, has been painting since the 1930s.
Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

This has not made him one of the 21st-century's blue-chip auction stars; instead, he holds a unique place as an honest outlier with the freedom to paint as many flowers and ponds, with as much abstraction or classicism, as he wants to.

Mr. Resika is now the subject of a two-gallery exhibition examining his extensive past and his vivid present. At Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects in SoHo, eight of his paintings, one from each of the past eight decades, are on view in the exhibit "8+8" through Feb.

10. Starting Thursday, a collection of eight paintings made between 2010 and 2012 will be shown at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, where he is represented.

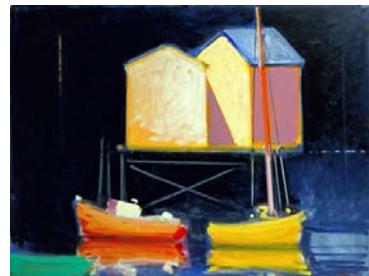
Best known for his paintings from the 1980s of the piers and boats of Provincetown, Mass., Mr. Resika's work prior to and after that veers off in stylistic directions guided only by his personal explorations.

"He went from abstraction to representation to abstraction," said gallery owner Lori Bookstein. "As he's gotten older, he's gotten more abstract."

Mr. Resika exhibited abundant talent as a child in Harlem, and his mother enrolled him in classes immediately. In his teens, he studied with the abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann, a period of his work presented at Steven Harvey with a dark, geometrical painting, "Composition," from 1947.

"When you are that age, you can eat anything, do anything," Mr. Resika said. "You don't know what you're doing. By the time I was 18, I had been painting for 10 years."

Studying with Hofmann, the young painter was at the red-hot center of the contemporary art of the day, a connection that has made him attractive to collectors who focus on the Hofmann school of painting. But it also set him on his own path.



Paul Resika's 'Bright Night' (1996)
John Goodrich

"[Hoffman] gave us a basis to know that painting is not anything but painting. It's not literature or life," said Mr. Resika. "It was not trends or business."

And so, he promptly rejected his modernist training. In 1950, Mr. Resika went to Italy, where he learned the techniques of Venetian painting related to perspective and anatomy. Then, during the next two decades, as his native New York was exploding with pop art, new materials and limitless artistic freedom, Mr. Resika was busy painting Corot-inspired landscapes in New Jersey and New Mexico.

In the 1980s, when he and his wife spent more time at their home in Cape Cod, he began making the haunting paintings of boats, boathouses and piers for which he became famous. So many works sold from that period that in order to include a major example in the retrospective show, Mr. Harvey had to borrow from a private collector.

But static was not his way. "He could have kept turning out those boathouses," said Ms. Bookstein. "When he needs to change, he changes."

Indeed, Mr. Resika spent the 1990s exploring brilliantly colored landscape and house paintings, mainly stemming from his visits to Provence, but also moving into a more abstracted views of the Provincetown scenes. "There are still boats and the architecture of the pier, but they become more like cubes. It becomes truly abstract," said Mr. Harvey.



'Dancing' (2011/12)
Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York

In the past two decades, Mr. Resika has made a full return to abstraction, painting ponds of lily pads that begin to look like deep-space galaxies or precision geometry lessons. Through it all, though, he has continued to explore subjects so traditional as to be outré, such as flowers and vases and the human form drawn from life. His new paintings sell for between \$24,000 and \$85,000, according to Ms. Bookstein. "The secondary market tends not to be in the auction market," she said. "A lot of people are looking for the early work."

More paintings are constantly in the works. Mr. Resika's studio is dotted with large canvases that he is either working on or thinking about working on. "I always come to the studio because it's my habit," he said. "I sleep more."

Two works in progress suggest a continued exploration of color, but no submission to one style or another. One is dotted with large circles in various shades of bright orange; another, more dynamic, features a long, lithe flower that bends or pulses like a curvaceous dancer in a bright field.

While he is complimentary of the selections made for the "8+8" exhibit at Steven Harvey, Mr. Resika has his own ideas about what would represent him best. "I would have chosen differently," he said, re-imagining the show's setting: "First of all, it would have had to be at the Guggenheim or the Museum of Modern Art!"

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'Composition' (1947)
John Goodrich