

CHOUINARD: A LIVING LEGACY

THE MIDDLE YEARS (1946-1960) – James Aitchison

Apology

The influence Chouinard had on the Los Angeles art community has been addressed by others much more qualified than I. What I bring to this arena is neither scholarly nor groundbreaking; I can speak only as an appreciative artist who was fortunate enough to spend a little time at the old school. My observations and ruminations are subjective. I am not a passive observer but a participant looking back.

Since being asked to write a little something about the middle years, I have read a great deal: pored over old issues of *Artnews*, dipped into the slimy sea of *Los Angeles Times* microfiche, cracked the petrified binding of yellowed biographies not read since shelved, and mused over esoteric art mags from the turn of the (last) century. I have ingested, but in no way fully digested, the flavor of the era. Only after discussing my take on some of the more intellectual and hotly debated historical data with literature professors and art collector Bram Dijkstra did I realize I did not know what the hell I was talking about. To do the era justice would require more than I am able to give, and it may not be healthy for an artist to be aware of too much subterranean subterfuge: gossip. As critic Harold Rosenberg said, “Statements by artists are to be regarded with suspicion and never taken as the last word as to fact or attitude. Jealous of their originality, artists are prone to deceit and self-deceit.” Maybe that is why I cannot articulate it. It is mine. Sharing my adventure is my *a priori* charge...



Royally Tattooed by Ray Rich, 1998

The Gathering

...Like my chat with Neil Fujita, who is now a resident of New York. (His watercolor, “Fort Moore Hill,” [1948] from the collection of Jan Ray Rich, is among works in the Middle Years venue.) He was gracious and understanding of the happenstance of my assignment and thought the best way to handle it would be to send me a broadside, title *Seeing is Feeling*, and excerpt from the memoir is currently writing. He did, and it is beautiful. “It is our duty to communicate the ultimate meaning of what we see,” he writes. “...objects have a past and a future. When we know the object’s past or can guess its future, it transcends experience and becomes an embodiment of knowledge and expectation. Could Matisse have painted an orange without ever having tasted one?”



Fort Moore Hill by Neil Fujita, 1948



Golden Journey by Hans Burkhardt, 1967

net referred to him), signed “to Ray and Janet.” Ray said, “Oh, Johnny drew that after Janet had our first baby and gave it to us. The legs are too short, though. Johnny always started at the top and worked down, so he had to always make the legs short. He was Armenian, you know. They love kids. Johnny really loved children.”

I spoke to non-Chouinardians about the impact of Chouinard. Two of Chouinard’s most prominent instructors, Emerson Woelffer and Matsumi (Mike) Kanemitsu, studied at schools far different from Los Angeles in climate and temper: The Chicago Art Institute and New York’s Art Student League. Chicago Art Institute graduate, noted painter Walter Wojtyla, analyzed it this way: “the [Chicago Art Institute] instructors weren’t much, but it really didn’t matter. It is by looking at the masters you learn about art. Not from teachers. We had a pretty good collection there in Chicago.”

When this exhibition started to grow from a profound idea and inchoate sketch into an actual possibility, I came to discuss the whole enchilada: art schools, Chouinard, Rico Lebrun, Kanemitsu, and more – over a martini with Sternberg (a Brooklyn native). His first reaction was to say, “Go to the studio and close the door, dammit!” Then, weighing my questions more seriously, he reflected on over 40 years of teaching at the Art Students League, with appreciation for his excellent students who came from Japan to study printmaking, among them Matsumi (Mike) Kanemitsu, and from Italy, Rico Lebrun. “Lebrun taught at Chouinard for a while, didn’t he? He stayed in my studio on 14th Street in New York when he first came over from Italy and took classes at the Art



Going Home by Dan Lutz, 1946

When the wee Ynez Johnston invited Ed and Vivian Flynn and me into her quietly joyous studio home to select a piece for the Kruglak show, it was a calming and uplifting experience. Her presence is magically and mysteriously lyrical, like smiling teardrops of wonder, much like her work. When I asked where I might find an Emerson Woelffer bronze, she quietly said, “Oh, I have one in the other room.” I asked what her relationship to Chouinard was. She said, “I taught there for a while.” Then, without a shade of regret or apology, she demurred and said, very simply, “But I don’t think I was a very good teacher,” and smiled. Then I said, “Well, Ynez Johnston, there are three artists who learned a lot today.”

Then I spoke to Jack Rutberg about Hans Burkhardt. I pressed him on his thoughts about the Middle Period. He did his best and gave me a lot of heartfelt biographical information about Hans. The most memorable tidbit was an insight into Hans the critic: Rico [Lebrun] was a great artist, Rutberg quotes Hans, “but he used too many lines.”

While visiting Ray and Janet Rich (both Chouinard graduates), who have a lovingly assembled collection of works by faculty and alums, I spotted a Johnny Altoon (as Ray and Janet



Mother and Child by John Altoon, 1954

Students League. He was the best artist to teach out here. But Chouinard as compared to the League? The art students must be where the museums are – The Met.”

Then I met Walter Pomeroy. When we spoke on the phone for the first time, he asked me what I was looking for. I said I was looking for a work by Guy Williams, an Altoon, etc.. He said, “Oh, well, why don’t you just come over and have a look. I don’t really know what you want.” I did and walked into a whole room full of Guy Williamses. While I photographed the work I had selected for the show, Walter called Guy. “There is some guy here who wants to use one of your pieces in a show. I don’t know what it is all about. Why don’t you talk to him, OK?” Then over the phone I heard the same kind, gentle voice I’d heard for the first time in 1962. “Oh yes, Jim. That is a nice piece.”

Perspectives on the Exhibit

At the Kruglak Gallery, I have assembled works by a number of former students and teachers. Many of them taught the Last Generation artists. Judging by the number of artists still working, then did one hell of a job. Many of the Middle Generation faculty were artists first and teachers second. Mrs. Chouinard sought them out. They were big personalities, not professional educators. Much of what an art teacher does for a young artist is ephemeral, anyway. I believe Mrs. Chouinard recognized this mysterious phenomenon. This usually happens in the arts: dance, art, music, or poetry. You get it, but you’re not sure what you got. You only find out after you get out.



Chouinard Series #24 by Robert Inman, 1998



Untitled by Fred Hammersley, 1946

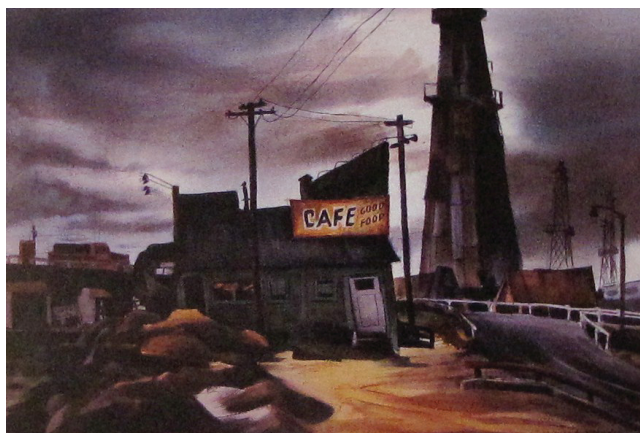
Chouinard was more than just a school. It was an idea in Time. When Mrs. Chouinard looked for a place to set up her art school, she chose wisely. Los Angeles had an “art district” then: Westlake. The area was home to the Los Angeles Art Association, to art galleries, frame shops, art supply stores, and art studios. Chouinard was a piece of real estate so profound that, if still perking, the MacArthur Park neighborhood, (now Ramparts) in which it was originally set might instead be called the “Soho” of Los Angeles.

When Mrs. Chouinard set up shop at Chouinard’s second site, on Grand View in Westlake, Los Angeles was an expanse of flat land, still surrounded by orange groves. It pulsed with wealth and choked with poverty – movie star mansions and dust bowl refugees, railroad money, and railroad bulls, Santa Anita Race Track and migrant worker camps. The two worlds collided on one cultural stage, entertained by such dramas as that of Ameer Semple MacPherson, or sometimes a cultural feud; like the one between the Los Angeles Art Association and County Supervisors that spawned the creation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, all played out under the watchful eye of the Los Angeles Times.

My uncle, Phil Robbins, an artist and an innovative photographer, had a studio in the Westlake district. He did not drive a car. There were streetcars then. My aunt and uncle had a summer place in Long Beach and commuted by Red Car. He was a professional photographer and taught photography at UCLA, but was also a watercolorist, the primary medium of artists at the time and the primary medium of students and instructors at Chouinard before 1950. Watercolors were cheap; oil base paints were expensive and scarce. This remained the case until well after the end of World War II. The raw pigments came from Europe. Something was always going on to prevent shipments from getting through. Wars, mostly.

In the mid-1940s, GIs returning from World War II took full advantage of the GI Bill of Rights to attend class at Chouinard. Works by many of those former GIs hang in the Boehm and Kruglak Galleries. The GI wanted to forget about war and get on with building a career. But some established artists returning from the war remembered the war in their work. Millard Sheets, Phil Dike, and Leonard Cutrow returned changed artists. Their watercolors took on a more humanistic quality.

California was still a seat of artistic regionalism in 1945. Chouinard students had a way of thumbing their sunburnt noses at New



Café by Leonard Cutrow, 1950s

York. The 1950s and '60s saw an infusion of talented faculty from Europe, New York, Japan, and other distant but much more cosmopolitan climes. In December 1958, critic Jules Langsner (who taught art history at Chouinard from 1960-1967) in his "Art From Los Angeles" column in *Artnews* reviewed works by Lorser Feitelson, Robert Chuey, Roger Kuntz, James Jarvaise, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Richards Ruben, Rico Lebrun, Hans Burkhardt, and Richard Haines, all exhibiting simultaneously in Los Angeles. All but Kuntz had taught or were teaching at Chouinard. Of this group, only Emerson Woelffer, Matsumi Kanemitsu, and John Altoon are missing, representing the core group that brought Chouinard into the modern era. These artists provided the frame of reference for the students of the final years, who have indisputably dominated the Los Angeles and southern California art community ever since.

The philosophy Mrs. Chouinard brought to Southern California never wavered: corral motivated young artists, hire the most dynamic artists working in the West, and turn them loose. Before all else, teach them to draw. So it was until Chouinard closed its doors in 1972. Students were required to learn to draw. Sounds simple, even vacuous, to today's ears. A Chouinard student arrived already being able to draw pretty well. At Chouinard they learned to draw better and to know why. Among Rico Lebrun's letters is this thought:

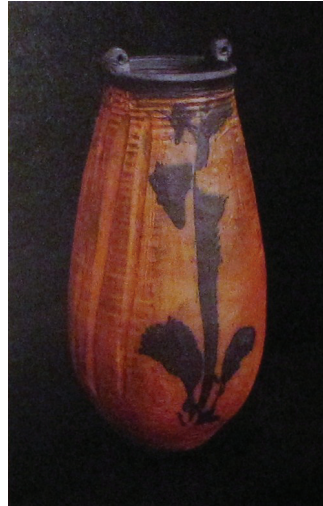
"Better men than you have never had this nightmare touch and yet they pass for draftsmen. They thought Toulouse-Lautrec had it because he 'surprised' the perverted visage of the riffraff: but that is just skillful malice of talent. Grunewald surprised the story of flesh truly - I bet you he was constantly in a more traumatic and dangerous place. Cynical zest is small; despair of ever finding God in the flesh, great."



Exploration of an Iris by Ruth Osgood Salyer, 1952



Untitled figure study by Robert Irwin, 1952



Left: Ceramic Pot by Otto Heino, 1997



Below: Emily with Fruit by Sam Clayberger, 1998