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BARNABY RUHE, PhD

My background is interdisciplinary, with a BS in Science, History, and French: an MFA in Painting: and an interdisciplinary PhD in "Shamanism and Contemporary Painting Process" where *I* used Anthropological original source material and borrowed field techniques in researching artists at work. Psychology along the archetypes, Phenomenology as a cutting tool, Art History and Art Criticism. I was a Lieutenant Historian in Vietnam, receiving a Naval Commendation Medal for discovering cached documents from the French Indochinese War. I studied Martha Graham and African dance techniques, was a Cellist in the UMBC Chamber Orchestra, and was several times Captain and Coach of World Champion US Boomerang teams. My thesis and another book, Zen Boomerang, are in manuscript.

Recurrent themes in my paintings over the last twenty-five years include *alia prima* - one-shot painting in the spirit of Manet, Fragonard, Henri, and of course the expressionists. Blank space, as I discovered in David's *Death of Marat*' while teaching Art History at the Naval Academy from 1970-1975, has been used to isolate gesture in my painting and to invoke the VOID. My abstracts, portraits, and figurative works are all painted in the same spirit of attack, jumping in while letting go, embracing chaos, improvising at an exact phase in the painting process in order to experience Rorschach free-association. As in Jazz, an overlying structure guides serendipity while 'in the groove.' Miro was dead on when he insisted that his automaticism yet adhered to 'plasticity of construction.' Modern dancers call this seeming contradiction 'bound flow.'

My unlikely art career began at the Naval Academy at the end of Plebe Year. Stuck in Sick Bay with a light flu, I spent a glorious week sketching. I would never have gone to an engineering school in the first place if the Abstract Expressionists had not fallen from the spotlight by 1964, replaced by Larry Poons' hard-edge lozenges, not to my persuasion. At seventeen, I didn't guess artists could make a career against the grain of fashion. But I seized the petite sketch pad as an escape from my military Gulag, twelve drawings a day anywhere anytime, 3000 racked up by 1968 when I graduated and was on my way to Boiler School to prepare for Destroyer duty when I broke my leg in an automobile accident. Eight glorious months painting ripoffs of Franz Kline, and I was fast becoming an odd Naval Officer. After two tours in Nam, the Navy owed me one, so I asked to teach at the Academy and soon ran the Art History course, concurrently

getting my MFA in painting at Babe Shapiro's program at the Maryland Institute, the only place in the States where you didn't need a BFA to get in. My first exhibition was back in Saigon in 1972 showing 300 portrait sketches of wary war weary Viets.

My 1973 "*Bach Cello Suite #3*" was painted with earphones, awash in sound, thinking Kandinsky's visual equivalents of music motifs, hard on the track of his 1910 Spiritual in Art Only years later to recognize that he was just a bit rigid, not on your basic jazzman's 'groove,' backed off from his own thesis. My 1984 Art/World review of Kandinsky reads:

"The transcendence of Apollo, scientific and premeditated ruled in Kandinsky's Bauhaus. Dionysus and his irritating arrows of Eros, random and disorderly, was dismissed. Die Brucke was burned; Pan was reduced to 'panic'; and K's expressionist tendency was reduced to the faint odor of Chanel No. 5 pervading an antiseptic clinic."

Brash words from a callow young Turk, a challenge I pursue these past twenty five years, to adhere to his 1910 treatise even as he abandoned his own field.

I quit the Navy in 75 and moved to NYC to find my art crowd. In 77, I used officer skills to organize the WHITNEY COUNTERWEIGHT, an artist-run extravaganza with 100 artists in five Soho galleries. The seven jurors were selected on a quota system with four women, three Hispanics, two Blacks, and no names given at the slide viewing. We achieved great demographics. The COUNTERWEIGHT presaged the Times Square and Terminal shows as well as the East Village phenom. Alice Neel painted my portrait to help match the Director's Grant from the NEA.

In 1978 I ran a marathon and the same year coined the PORTRAIT PAINTING MARATHON genre, with a 26.2 hour non-stop painting binge. Exhaustion and performance stress became tools for insight within the painting process. I've held over a hundred marahons since, some as long as 60 hours, discovering that so much work is hacked out that I can shift styles and explore directions in a condensed space of time. Excessive productivity breaks through the wall of the modern mind to reveal the painting animal lurkingbeneath. The *other* paints damn good. A ritual of sitting engages the viewer directly as she steps into my painting. I go for their *ka*, their life spirit, by hurling paint in order to echo the energy fields passing across their faces. A journalistic approach to reality demands that one paint portraits *alia prima*, in a rush, in order to deal with spirit. Painting in galleries, the viewer enters the painting in sitting.

Duane Hanson and Pearlstein may paint dead people, I don't.

In 1981 I joined the staff of Art/World writing four reviews per month and rising to Senior Editor under "Boss" Bruce Hooton. Sounding off at raucous staff lunches at the Hotel Wales were Gene Thornton, Frances Beatty, Sarah Stuyvesant King, Paul Jenkins, Robert Motherwell, Judd Tully, Bob DeNiro, Cecily Pennoyer, et alia. My sharp critiques of market motives, museum mishaps, and con artists may have jeopardized my own career as a painter, but it was a thrill to have Leon Golub write to A/W: "(Ruhe) is not afraid to swing out, to tell it like it is." I challenged Clement Greenberg's Formalist Reductionism in my PhD thesis "Painter as Shaman" where process is more crucial than product. He snorted "ineffables! we don't discuss it." when I asked him about the spiritual journey Pollock was painting from. Pollock the trance dancer, who knew.

My 1982 "*Fake Porno*" series of twenty paintings played out innuendoes of sexual politics. Since my female collaborator sketched out my body outline on the panel, she set her own terms in the dialogue. Tension on the picture plane.

My 1987 PORTRAIT PAINTING MARATHON at Barbara Braathen Gallery in Noho set twenty 'specific' portraits *decalled* onto 'random' abstract backgrounds, both painted *alia prima*, but separately. At the opening, I collaborated with Hassay Jazz Band to paint an 8x8 foot abstraction to music. Unlike paintings created in a studio, the surface remains alive and simmering, the musk's energy remains as an astral ghost. I got percussive with my brush attack. Hassay came up during a TV interview with: "but we were following you." I've collaborated over 20 times with such as Dave Brubeck and Gaumer's Saturday Night Live Band. Jazz embraces the hazard of improvisation within an openwork structure, as do shamans on a trance journey.

In 88 I joined the board of Artists Talk on Art to recreate the spirit of The Club, and moderated panels on *Cro-Magnon Then and Now*, *Graffiti*, *Shamanism*, and *American Expressionism with George McNeil and Joan Semmel*. My latest panel is an interview with Pat Olesko.

My 1989 PhD offers a counter to Greenberg's Formalism, proving Chaos to be integral to the expressionist painting process. Letting go in Dionysic frenzy uncovers the greater order of the unconscious. Improvisation need not be a dirty word. It relates to an inspirational phase that psychologist Ernst Kris found to precede an elaborational phase. Arnheim (reluctantly) posits improvisation in his Entropy and Art, and anthropologist

Victor Turner guides us with his shamanic *liminal* phase in his Ritual Process. My thesis brought these thinkers together across their respective disciplines.

In 1993 I was honored with a Pollock-Krasner grant to paint mural-size abstracts. At artist Robert DeNiro's memorial service, I explained that he employs a "clash of contraries" within his painterly syntax, which 'fires the Ongon.' An Ongon is a Buryat Shaman dreaming prop made from a set of ordinary objects that become symbolically loaded within a ritual context. My PhD shows how artists can paint quite ordinary motifs but set them afire by creating tension between unlikely pairings. A haiku poem has that unexpected synaptic jump between lines, and Lenny Bruce could whammy you at the end of a joke.

Across the twenty five year span of the first half of my painting career, I have tried to stretch stylistically, despite the market's need for trademark styles, a signature. But I have been consistent in immersing myself in the unpremeditated moment, and enjoyed collaboration as a way of forcing the *clash of contraries* onto the picture plane. This ritual act fires the Ongon, lighting up the picture into a presence. Either art functions, or who cares.