Pascal d´Aigremont

THE ARTFUL LIFE

Pascal and I met in 2005 at the Taos Cow in Arroyo Seco. Coffee culture was alive and well. Back then, few people sat quietly vacant behind digital screens. Strangers talked to strangers, encouraged by smiles and eye-to-eye contact.

I was welcomed into the clutch by Pascal, the eccentric French artist; Rhonda, the psychic; Stan, the Zen priest from Brooklyn; and a man called Don (I didn't know if that was his title or his name). Sipping coffee under the trees next to the arroyo with these unforgettable characters was a pleasant initiation into Taos life.

Pascal's accent was so strong I had to focus with deep concentration to understand what he was saying. That's probably what won him over—who doesn't want to be listened to with great intent? I still missed much of what he said in the beginning. I'd fill in between the lines and keep listening and asking questions. I learned much about art, painting, philosophy, and life as our friendship grew.

Pascal lived in a small shack near the Cow. It couldn't have been bigger than 12'x12'. No running water, no kitchen, just one room full of his paintings and sculptures. As you entered the door, there was just enough room to step to the two wooden stools set before a small wood stove with a kettle on top. Opposite the door was a bench-like bed under a window, where models sometimes posed. And always, there were easels supporting paintings in progress. The smell of burnt wood, pipe tobacco, oil paints, and other mediums infused the space. He said the shack was perfect for his old dogs and him. It was cozy, raw—an essential artist's retreat.

Pascal was an Outsider before the term Outside Artist was coined in 1972 by French painter Jean Dubuffet. Pascal's art was raw, art *brut*.

Dubuffet characterized art *brut* as:

Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses—where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere—are, because of these very facts, more precious than the productions of professionals. After a certain familiarity with these flourishing of an exalted feverishness, lived so fully and so intensely by their authors, we cannot avoid the feeling that in relation to these works, cultural art in its entirety appears to be the game of a futile society, a fallacious parade.

Pascal valued his freedom and creativity. He lived life on own his terms. He had joined his father's business as a young man, soon to realize that he didn't want to be in business. He was an artist.

He left family and home. Sailed the Mediterranean with a group of friends. Joined a circus. And came to America.

He recalled, while working the circus, watching a boy teasing the chimpanzees with food. He'd offer it and then pull back, never surrendering the morsels to the chimps. Pascal watched the two chimps retreat

to their platform where they whispered and schemed. When the kid returned, egging them on again, one chimp reached through the bars, caught the kid's head between his hands, and gave him quite a fright. Letting go, the chimps bounced back up to the platform and had a great laugh. Pascal recognized the conscious intelligence of these animals. They were more like us than some people would have you believe. He acknowledged the consciousness of all animals, perhaps even preferring them to most humans.

Sailboats and the sea are a key motif in many of his paintings. Apes, too, show up, as do centaurs, certain women, and Pan, the nature spirit.

Mostly, the art is figurative. Pascal marveled at human anatomy. A composition with too many people just sitting around would become boring, though. His figures are making love, making music, dancing, intertwining, and communing with Pan. There is beauty, symbolism, and humor in this art.

"I don't know if I'm any good, I just have to do it," Pascal would say. "I paint everyday." And sculpt, and sketch, and draw.

The first painting Pascal gifted me was a small piece of a couple copulating in a meadow with rabbits watching on the sideline. On the back of the canvas was his poem about people doing it like rabbits.

The second was of bathing beauties in the sea. The lines of their backs, the slope of their necks, and the soft sea colors compose a beautiful femininity. Like in so many of Pascal's works, form and color blur the lines between figurative and abstract.

Symbolic of the life he was creating, the self-taught artist burned his Doctorate of Philosophy certificate. Yet, he remained an everyday philosopher. "A thinker," he would say. He spoke six languages, read the great works, enjoyed classical music, and was quick to wit and laughter.

In his later years, it became apparent he'd had a stroke, as he was mixing five languages in the same conversation— French, Spanish, Greek, Latin, and English. (He also knew German. As the Nazis were invading, he thought it wise to understand their language.)

The stroke led him to leave his Arroyo Seco shack and move to his La Llama apartment. World Cup then became his regular coffee shop.

He was born in France in 1928 as an only child, raised mainly by his mother, grandmother and uncle in a large country home with big doors to many rooms. He began creating art at a very young age to entertain himself. It was pre-WWII, and his father was part of the Resistance and gone most of the time.

Pascal was captured by the Nazis when he was 15 years old. They wanted to find his father through him. He never knew where his father was. He found the whole situation absurd. So absurd that he couldn't help but laugh. A soldier responded with the butt of a rifle.

Pascal relied on his memories of the large doors and locks in the mansion where he was raised, as well as his wits, to escape the Nazis, while they transported him and ten others to a location where they could intensify their interrogation. The Nazis took over a farmhouse enroute. When a guard accompanied one of the prisoners outside to the outhouse, Pascal rigged the lock so it would look and sound as if it had locked, but it hadn't. Later, he and others disappeared into the night. He spent several years, until the end of WWII, hiding out in the mountains of Spain, and as a member of the Resistance.

It was a formative time for Pascal. He never forgot about the millions of people lost to the war. He painted some disturbing images—medicine to the memories. Yet, most importantly, he "decided" to be happy.

Pascal came to the United States around 1975. He was a cowboy in Montana (it's hard for me to picture him as the cowboy archetype). He moved south to Navajo country where he lived, loved, and painted for several years before moving to Taos. Many of his paintings have small unpainted sections, often at the perimeter, reminiscent of a Navajo weaving—an opening to let the Spirit in or out.

Pascal died April 5, 2020. This is the first show of his work since he passed. It's an opportunity for those who knew him, and those who wish they had, to celebrate his life and art.

To honor Pascal's generosity and his love of animals, part of the proceeds from the sales will be donated to the no-kill animal shelter, Stray Hearts. Another animal lover, Philip Bareiss, is donating time and space at Bareiss Gallery, 15 Route 150. Art prices will be lower than what you might have seen in the past, or will in the future, to give anyone who'd like to own a piece of this remarkable artist's work a good opportunity, while benefitting animals at the same time.

Bring your open hearts, and your Pascal memories, thoughts, and anecdotes to share — there will be a sketch book and juicy anonymous entries are welcome.

Opening Celebration
Saturday, November 6, 2021
4:00-7:00 p.m.
Bareiss Gallery
15 Route 150, El Prado NM 87529

Through November 7-28 by appointment, 575-770-0085

— Kelly Pasholk