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Carl Palazzolo

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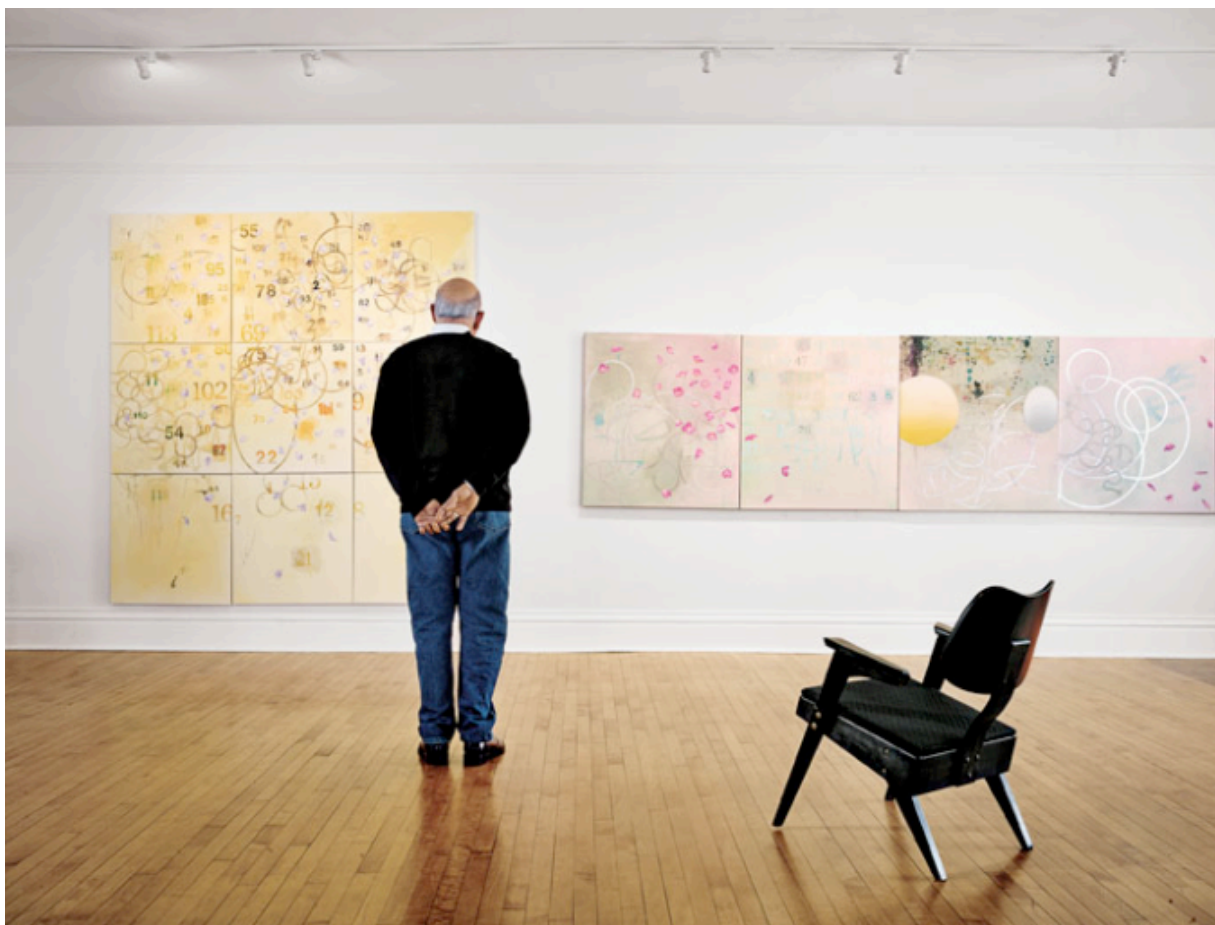
ARTS

ART NOTES

A Studio Confidential With Carl Palazzolo

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON
PHOTOGRAPHY CASEY DUNN

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The painter contemplates two works destined for his show opening this month as Texas Gallery, "Carl Palazzolo: Recent and Remembered Work." From left: 'Orfeo,' 2014, and 'Solange' (detail of five panels), 2015. Vintage mid-century chair in foreground. Vintage mid-century chair in foreground.

On the eve of his second solo at Texas Gallery (April 2 – May 2), Whitney Biennial-exhibited painter Carl Palazzolo recalls the best advice Clement Greenberg ever gave pal Stephen Mueller, why going for gravitas is the ultimate end game, a very grand dinner party with Joan Mitchell, and the night he met partner Vance Muse.

A rare Deco-era building at Midtown — a 3,000- square-foot former dance hall — is home to artist Carl Palazzolo. Flooded with sunlight, imbued with the perfume of the past, the limpid, luxurious interior is filled with well-thumbed books, DVDs of Italian cinematic classics, a collection of works by notable friends and Arts and Crafts pottery. But mostly, this retreat (hidden in plain sight above an architectural practice tucked into a Spanish Revival-style structure) serves as a salon to gather and above all, a place to contemplate and create art. Memory, suspended time, a sense of other lives and travels to distant lands and faraway places all hover in the air, hanging by hidden threads, much like the canvases and watercolors that Palazzolo paints, where objects float and the temporal and concepts of space dissolve and reconfigure. Traverse the flight of well-honed stairs to the second floor, where a simple “CP” marks the opaque glass door. The curious visitor crosses a portal as mysterious as the door to Bogart’s detective office in *The Maltese Falcon*, a vortex where Dusty Springfield croons on the soundtrack and *The Leopard* screens into eternity. In an exclusive chat with the internationally exhibited, famously private painter, whose career spans an undiminished 45 years and counting, Palazzolo discusses inconsistency, loss, and finding beauty.

Cinematic obsession.

Always a huge fan of the great Italian films of the 1960s, I wanted to spend time with the idea of using film and film actors as subjects for painting and drawings. I have a large collection of black-and-white photographs of directors, actors, cinematographers and writers who worked in Italy during that period. The problem was how to give them a unique life on canvas so that it wasn’t just an illustration of a person or idea ... They were a joy to paint (also not something I always say), and I continue to live with one. So, as you can see, Sargent to Fellini, I’m obviously not concerned about consistency. In fact, I avoid it.

Your quest for the sublime.

The apprehension of beauty is what I’m ultimately after. The unearthing of the sublime in likely as well as unlikely places. Whether ruminating on the late afternoon light in Monet’s haystacks, deconstructing the enigmatic daughters in Sargent’s painting or paying homage to the influence the legendary Italian films of the ‘60s had on my life as a young artist, the memory of what has passed is ever present in my work. Not as nostalgia but in awe, with profound gratitude.

Becoming a Houstonian.

Each winter, I would come down for a little more time until ... I think it was, my fourth winter. The city had worked its mojo on me. I found everything so easy and welcoming — the people, the weather, the availability of space. Sort of like the polar opposite of New York City at the time. I’d lived there since 1975, and I was ready for a new chapter in my life.

Being bicoastal.

I’m usually in Maine from June until the end of October. September and October being my favorite time to be there. I try to spend a few weeks in New York on my way to Maine and back to Houston. And I’m in New York for much of December.

On landing the dream studio.

My Houston studio brings me such joy, I really hate to leave. I searched for nearly a year and a half before I found it. [Partner Vance Muse and I] live in the Museum District, and I wanted to walk or ride my bike to my studio. I remember being shown a space in one of those industrial parks where you could land a small aircraft. I thought, ‘I know sculptors in NYC who would kill for this space.’ But all I needed was a well-lighted large room. Preferably with a bar nearby. I came upon a listing for my studio on Craigslist. A two-story white Deco building from the ‘20s. It was bigger than I needed — actually, rather grand. It had been a yoga studio with the largest wall covered in mirrors. So I dismissed it. A few days later, my now landlord phoned and asked if I was going to take it. When I expressed misgivings, he offered to remove the mirrors, fix the wall and install track lighting! After dealing with New York landlords, I was sort of stunned. I wondered if it had been a crime scene. But, of course, it was another example of what I love about Houston. People want to make things happen. They want to make the deal, meet new people and generally say “yes” rather than “no.” So, after thinking about it (for about four seconds), I decided that instead of

keeping all of my New York studio in storage, I could move everything into this space as if I were living there. My books, my music, art by friends. And every day I turn the key to that door, I feel massively lucky.

Lining up the crayons.

I've made every attempt to make the space feel like a refuge. In all my studios, from Boston to New York to Maine, it's important to me to be able to spend time in the space, even if I'm not actually painting. If I want to read or listen to music or visit with friends, I need the space to be calm and comforting. I also have something of the neat freak about me. I know a lot of painters who thrive on chaos, but I am emphatically not one of them. A writer friend in New York used to call me frequently and say things like, "Well, okay, the pencils are all sharpened, and I've changed the blotter, but I think the desk could use a little polish" before he could even think about actually writing. I think all



Paintbrushes await.

artists do that to some extent, but I try to curb my more OCD tendencies, like making sure all the crayons are facing the same direction. You will notice that for the *PaperCity* shoot, I couldn't resist. Embarrassing, really.

On your easel.

This group of paintings will be shown at Texas Gallery in an exhibition entitled "Carl Palazzolo: Recent and Remembered Work." The title works on a number of levels, given that my work deals with memory, loss and a rumination on finding beauty in the temporal and fleeting. The exhibition will also include a drawing done in 1967 while I was still a painting student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I came upon it while looking through some old files, and it so related to a series which I was working on at the

time that I felt it needed to be included. There's a strong current of recurring vocabulary in my work. That fact sort of crept up on me. I've sometimes felt like a retrospective of mine would look like a group show. Not that I don't like that idea.

On a half-century of painting.

My imagery over the course of 45 years has morphed and shifted. Yet the creation of a visual language, which reflects the passage of time and the aftereffects of loss, has always been the common denominator.

Stalking Sargent.

Although I have rarely made a signature painting, I spent nearly 10 years working on deconstructions (and sometimes reproduction) of John Singer Sargent's masterpiece *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit*. While a student [at the Boston Museum School], I would spend hours lost in the dark mystery of that painting. It wasn't until 1990 that I gave myself permission to actually start riffing on the images. By that time, I had already been exhibiting in New York and was identified as an abstract painter. A number of people, artists among them, warned me about using imagery in my work. I remember hearing the term "career suicide" for the first time. But I really was aching to spend time with this painting, so I just pushed on. My dealers in New York City, Bernard Lennon and Jill Weinberg of Lennon, Weinberg were enormously supportive and did a very elegant catalogue for the show ... Sales, great reviews and a reproduction in *The New Yorker* were welcome justification for this leap.

What Clement Greenberg told you.

The great critic Clement Greenberg said at a lecture or critique that none of us in that group would make a truly deep and true painting until we were in our 50s, if ever. He basically thought that painting was an old person's activity and that it was not advisable to show before you were in your 40s. His point was that only through living a life and reaching deep into the lessons of the life can a painting approach anything like gravitas. At the time, we all thought he was "out of it" because we, of course, were all young geniuses ...

Inspirations:

Jean Cocteau: First saw his gorgeous film *La Belle et Le Bête* at a revival house in Cambridge while a student. Can you imagine the effect on a young art student? It has everything: poetry, mystery and jaw-dropping beauty.

Dusty Springfield: Dusty is a Goddess. As Burt Bacharach once said, “You hear three notes, and you know it’s her.” I have an autographed picture of her on the wall of my painting area. I listen to a lot of different kinds of music and always have and she’s been a favorite since I first heard her in 1965. There’s a small painting hanging in my studio, which I did as an homage when I had a show in London.

Charleston calling: My great friends and collectors David and Carol Rawle started inviting me to spend a week during the Spoleto Festival nearly 30 years ago. Consequently, they also invited my great friend Stephen Mueller to join. Stephen and I would travel from NYC to Charleston every May, armed with watercolors and paper. Every year, we would set up on two great tables in their sumptuous Italianate garden. It was like Romper Room for adults. We’d paint, take a break and visit, paint, take a break and visit ... Around 5 o’clock, Carol and David would return from work and look at what we’d done that day before having cocktails and going off to a Spoleto performance. Totally idyllic. As Stephen once remarked, it was like the most luxurious artist residency in existence. And the longest ... it went on for 28 years. Stephen also remarked that to make a watercolor, you had to feel like a prince or princess, totally unfettered. Two years ago, the Gibbes Museum presented an exhibition as the official Spoleto art offering of the watercolors that we had done there. Italian cinema watch list: Simply not enough space for all the Italian films I love and which were important to me. I could watch Luchino Visconti’s *The Leopard* every week. And *La Dolce Vita*. I was saddened to learn of Anita Ekberg’s death recently. Are there two more iconic scenes than her in the Trevi fountain or the one with a white kitten on her head? I can’t think of many ... The Antonioni trilogy: *Eclipse*, *L’Aventurra*, *La Notte*.

How many volumes are in your library? How are they organized?

Haven’t a clue, and I’m afraid to say they aren’t.

Nighttime reading:

- The complete work of Euan Uglow, a much under-praised British artist.
- *Don’t Get Too Comfortable* by David Rakoff. I love Rakoff’s righteous anger coupled with his side-splitting humor. His notorious tirades ... are cheer-inducing.
- *Honeydew* by Edith Pearlman, a recent collection by a little-known master of the short story. Seemingly simple yet profound.
- Clarice Lispector, a criminally under-read Brazilian writer. *New Directions* did a stylish job of publishing four of her outstanding works last year: *Near to the Wild Heart*, *The Passion According to G.H.*, *Aqua Viva*, *A Breath of Life*.

Collections.

Arts and Crafts pottery. Early 20th-century group photographs. Navajo blankets. Miniature birch-bark canoes. Consecutive editions of *Emily Post’s Book of Etiquette*. Too much stuff.

Wish list.

To get rid of everything and live like a monk.

Go-to Houston sources for finds.

Alas, I can’t stop myself: The Guild Shop, Bluebird Shop, Assistance League. And when I want to give a friend a special gift, Sloan/Hall and Thompson + Hanson.

Artists that you follow or trade with?

I have work by Billy Sullivan, Robin Bruch, Georgia Marsh, Paul Heroux, Delia Doherty, Rene Ricard, Carol Beckwith, Matthew Barney, Kathy Bradford, Randy Twaddle, Stephen Mueller, Tom Price, Cora Cohen, Leah de Prizio, Chuck Holtzman and Linda Etcoff, among others. On my wish list: Rachel Hecker and Page Kempner.



Palazzolo's elegiac 'Counting Absence #11 (for D.S.),' 2004

Next trip.

Charleston, in May.

Signature apparel item.

Anything that makes me look presentable. (Read: thinner.)

You never leave home without.

An attitude. I love being home.

Entertaining en studio.

Generally, I have people in the studio for cocktails and then go on to dinner. A favorite evening would be to walk around the corner to Piola. It's a very casual and very good Italian restaurant which serves the only gnocchi I will order in a restaurant. I grew up with homemade gnocchi, so that's saying something.

Favorite meal chez casa.

Vance makes a great penne with broccoli rapé and sausage. My default pasta is one I grew up with: spaghetti with cauliflower and chili flakes. An arugula and braised-fennel salad. Marcella Hazan's flour-less chocolate cake with almond flour. Imagery Estate Winery 2013 Aleatico Rosé from Sonoma County. And not just because I designed the label.

What's playing.

The soundtrack from last year's Academy Award winner for foreign film, *The Great Beauty*. While I'm painting, there is a constant mix, which might range from Maria Callas to Steve Reich to MC Solaar.

Next chapter.

Being in Maine and getting back into my studio groove. My NY dealer is waiting for a show. (Is there a book titled *I'm Painting As Fast As I Can?*)

On meeting partner/writer Vance Muse, communications director for The Menil Collection.

January 9, 1979. It was a snowy night on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In spite of the blizzard (or because of it), we each took to the icy streets around midnight and made our separate ways to a rather desolate bar called, appropriately enough, The Bar. A dive with a good jukebox, the joint wasn't what you'd call jumping that night — a situation that we made the most of.

Best Manhattan anecdote.

My early years living in the city, I was invited to a dinner for Joan Mitchell, who was represented by the legendary Xavier Fourcade. Xavier could be formidable but was always gracious and supportive. His partner, Bernard Lennon (later to become my dealer), had seen the three-person show of which I was in, at Boone and introduced himself. We

became friends and saw each other with some regularity. Bernard, knowing of my admiration for Joan's work, wanted us to meet. At that point, Joan was not the household name in the art world she would become. Fourcade was largely responsible for resurrecting her career in this country. However, Joan had a reputation for, shall we say, volatility and not suffering fools. I wasn't sure I was up to it but thought it would be bad form to decline such a rarified invitation. It was a seated dinner in one of the splendid rooms of the townhouse gallery. High ceilings, baroque moldings, highly polished floors.

There were four round tables of six, and included in the group were major curators, museum directors and collectors. I was thinking of ways I could vanish without anyone knowing, but with place-card seating, it was impossible. When we were seated, I saw that the entire room was entirely hung with recent large de Kooning paintings! Xavier represented de Kooning as well. (I said, "Legendary.") It was hard to make conversation when all I could do was sit there and take them all in.

I was trying to cement the moment into my memory. Here I was, relatively fresh into town, unknown and certainly not "polished," and I was surrounded by the most glorious art, the most discerning people and a painting idol, Joan Mitchell. Joan, as the evening progressed, was, to use a phrase, over-served, but instead of becoming unpleasant as I had been warned, she was positively coquettish.

She asked me a few questions about my work and then told Bernard to take her to my studio the next day. Unfortunately, she was overbooked that day but eventually visited me on a subsequent trip from France, where she lived. I would see Joan occasionally when she made her almost royal visits. Often my dear friend Billy Sullivan would have the daunting task of escorting her to galleries and studios. Billy's stories are the stuff of legend. Her memorial service was at the Whitney Museum, where not nearly enough of those stories got told publicly. I'll always be grateful to Bernard and Billy for bringing us together.

First brush with Houston.

I met Warren Hadler through my friend Danny Clayton, who had a frame shop and small gallery space on Bissonnet. I'd done a show of small paintings with Danny in 1980. Warren and his partner owned Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries in NYC, as well as Houston. Warren asked me to do a show here, and Danny was encouraging, so I said yes. It was a fairly sizable show of large work, and I remember I kept asking Warren if he was sure he wanted to commit to such an undertaking. Warren was undaunted by the challenge of showing work by an artist relatively unknown in Houston. He was simply one of the kindest and most agreeable people with whom I ever worked.

And convulsively funny. It was a totally positive experience. I remember the opening was packed, which surprised me, as I really had lowered my expectations, given that I was the new kid on the block. The response was gratifying for both Warren and me, and we decided then and there to do another show when I was ready. The evening of the opening, there was a slight cold front (according to Texas temperatures), but it still seemed balmy, given that I'd just come from cold and windy New York City, and I was amused to see women wearing furs. Warren saw me checking out the attire and whispered to me, "I only wear mine when I'm shopping for frozen foods." I so miss talking to Warren. The other thing I noticed is that people were dressed in colors as opposed to a New York City opening, where the sea of black was omnipresent. (I think one can wear gray now and not be asked to leave.) Fredricka [Hunter of Texas Gallery] was actually at that opening that evening (no fur), because she and I had met in New York, having been introduced by my friend Stephen Mueller. Fred and Ian [Glennie] had been working with Stephen since he was still in graduate school at Bennington. They were also working with my dear friend Robin Bruch, so we pretty much knew the same people in SoHo at that time.

On connecting with Texas Gallery.

When I started to spend time here seven years ago I saw Fred and Ian frequently, and they would visit my studio, which at that time was a room in an apartment. We did some business, and it seemed to just evolve into our deciding that it was time to do a show. I had just finished a show in New York, and I had a body of work I had been working on here. My New York gallery, Lennon, Weinberg, and Texas Gallery had a good working relationship, and Jill Weinberg agreed that a show with Fred and Ian was a good idea. The response to the Texas Gallery show honestly caught me by surprise. I just wasn't expecting anything like that.

Maine by summer.

My Maine studio is a converted two-car garage plus a little more space. Not nearly as large as my Houston studio, but

very well organized, with one wall completely screened and open to the forest. I've worked very well in that studio for most of the 30 years I've been there. I usually leave unfinished work from the previous season so I don't have to stare into "the big white," as an artist friend refers to a blank canvas. It's like having leftovers in the refrigerator — so much easier to start cooking. I made the large nine-panel painting titled *Orfeo* in Maine and also several of the drawings which will be in the Texas Gallery show. If a work is finished in Maine, it almost always comes back with me to Houston.

Ah ha moments: Boston beginnings.

I've never thought of life as a series of "ah ha" moments but rather overlapping experiences which help form the way you proceed with your journey. Not to say that there aren't people, places and things which don't pirouette to mind when I'm running the story of my life on the blue screen in my brain ... The Museum School in Boston had a prestigious reputation for its painting department. I remember when I discovered that both Ellsworth Kelly and Cy Twombly had been there, that my resolve to get myself there was like a dog with a bone. Being in Boston during the mid-1960s was clearly transformative. It was the era of Vietnam protests and a general loosening of societal restrictions. I distinctly remember my second year, after I had chosen painting as my major field of study and was admitted into the studio of Jan Cox, who was the head of the painting department. Jan was a formidably elegant gentleman who wore hand-tailored suits and ties to class. He was a very respected artist who was part of the COBRA (Copenhagen, Oslo, Brussels, Rotterdam and Amsterdam) group. With thick silver hair and smoking Gauloise cigarettes, he had the air of a poet about him. He lectured us that first day about how we presented ourselves to the world. According to Jan, as painters we "were all princes and princesses and should dress accordingly." Of course, this was at a period when everyone was trying to look like Bob Dylan or Joan Baez, so Jan had his work cut out for him. There was an upright piano in the largest of the painting studios on which Jan would play Erik Satie while we painted. It was all very *Children of Paradise*.

Boston in the '60s was an appropriate and fertile arena for a young art student. It was also in Boston where I met Joan and Roger Sonnabend, who would become life-long collectors and very dear friends. Joan owned the much respected Obelisk Gallery, and I worked for her installing exhibitions while a student. I would recommend working in a gallery or museum for any aspiring artist. It was invaluable training in understanding the life I was about to enter. Joan and her partner gave me my first one-person show at the beginning of 1975, the same year I was chosen for the Whitney Biennial. I was still living in Boston, but Joan convinced me that this was the moment to move to New York. Roger, her husband and chairman of the board of Sonesta Hotels, offered me a monthly stipend to ease the financial pressure. Sonesta was in the vanguard of collecting work by young and established artists for their hotels worldwide. There were a lot of young artists for whom Joan and Roger offered a lifeline.

More history: On the Manhattan leap.

Towards the end of 1975, I moved into a 3,000-square-foot loft on Bowery between Houston and Prince. My good friend, the brilliant painter Billy Sullivan, shared part of the space and was very generous in introducing me to many artists and writers, many of whom became lifelong friends. Billy lives with the legendary curator and writer Klaus Kertess, and it was through Klaus that I had a studio visit from Mary Boone, who included me in a three-person show with Ross Bleckner and Stephen Mueller in 1979. This would be the beginning of my exhibition history in New York. Being included in the Whitney Biennial is, of course, a milestone for any artist, but I can't truthfully say it was game changing. It was more as if I felt like part of a family of young artists for whom New York was there to be a community. I don't even know if that feeling exists any longer.

Parting thought.

Clearly cities have become increasingly inhospitable to anyone for whom spending enormous sums of money on real estate is a problem. Of course, most artists would fall into that group. I would sincerely hope that Houston doesn't continue to turn a blind eye to the real estate needs of its artists. Houston is in an enviable position at this moment to develop neighborhoods in which artists could be offered equity in their spaces and, at the same time, because of the artists' presence, attract tenants. This would only work if it were an integrated neighborhood, not just a building.