



PAUL CAVATHIRTYYEARS

SID SACHS - You were born in New York in 1949. Do you remember your first "art experience"? Was anyone in your family involved in art? How did you come to it?

PAUL CAVA - Actually I was born in Brooklyn, a distinction not lost on old Dodgers fans. I grew up in Bay Ridge, the land of *Saturday Night Fever*. My mother ran a beauty shop called Fantasia during the late 1950s and she did most of the Brooklyn Dodgers wife's hair at the time. I would go to the beauty shop on Saturdays and meet the players when they picked up their wives – that was heady stuff for a kid from Brooklyn. My two older sisters were both into drawing so the idea was not so foreign to me but I came of age artistically in the early 1960s around the age of 14. My first 'art' experience was with Beat poetry. An astute librarian at Bishop Ford High School, where I was a student, reached out and introduced me to the world of contemporary poetry. He must have seen something in me because I became obsessed with it.

S - You studied poetry with Jose Garcia Villa. You spoke about handing out poems in the sculpture garden of MoMA. When?

P - At the age of 16, when I was in high school in Staten Island, I took a poetry course with Villa at the New School for Social Research in NYC. A few years later while a student at Staten Island Community College I studied with a wonderful teacher and poet, Armand Schwerner, who introduced me to many of the New York School poets like Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin and Paul Blackburn. Schwerner also brought in other amazing artists like Merce Cunningham, Morton Feldman and Michael McClure to speak to the students. At that time I was the editor of the college literary magazine *The American Standard* which was a compilation of loose sheets with printed poems. I would go to the Thursday night jazz concerts at MOMA with writer friends to distribute these poem leaflets. We would also go to the readings at St. Marks in the East Village. I also had my first photography show around 1967-68 at Supernova, one of the first cooperative galleries in Soho. We were a loose knit group of artists organized by Robert Baker, a writer who taught at the college in Staten Island. We had a huge ground floor space at Prince and West Broadway across from Bob Baker's loft space. We were involved with exhibitions and multi-media performance and would occasionally travel to different venues as far away as Halifax to put on our events.



TOP
Untitled (Eakins #1), 1981
collage and paint
unique, 5 1/4 x 7"

BOTTOM
Man/Woman, 1997
collage and ink
unique, 7 1/4 x 5 1/4"

ABOVE LEFT
Untitled (Bicentennial), 1976
Gelatin silver print, 8 1/8 x 13"



S - When did you arrive in Philadelphia? As a New Yorker why did you move here? It is a hard art city yet you stayed. Can you give some of the pluses of the area? You spoke of working as a framer (So did I and so did Larry Becker). How did you decide to open your gallery in 1979?

I think I remember you said you found a batch of *Camera Works* in an antique store to finance it. (Or is it apocryphal?) Is that how you financed it?

P - I received a BFA degree in Cinematography from Richmond College, which at that time was an experimental branch of City University of NY (CUNY) in Staten Island. I took a year off after CUNY living in my VW bus and decided to enter the graduate program in photography at RIT. I met a woman at RIT who convinced me to check out Philadelphia after school, so

with my car bursting with everything I owned, and my two vomiting cats, I made the schlep on a hot August day to Philadelphia – Dirty Frank's bar to be exact. I think this was 1975. Like most students in the arts who try to get a job after graduate school I was introduced to the world of unemployment, so I took a job in a frame shop and after that I worked at the Commissary restaurant waiting tables with Vaughn Stubbs and others. Rent was cheap in those days. While in Rochester for two years I made a point of researching the important modernist photographers associated with the Stieglitz circle at the George Eastman House so when I arrived in Philadelphia I was somewhat informed. I would visit antique and book shops on the weekends looking for old photographs and struck gold at an antique shop on Strawberry Street in Old City where I purchased a large cache of *Camera Work* magazines.

This discovery helped me focus my attention on photography but it wasn't what financed my first gallery; that came a little later. I had approached Michael Hoffman who at the time was the curator of Photography at the PMA about a job. I told Hoffman that I was planning a summer trip to France and could begin in the fall. Hoffman offered me a position as his assistant, which he said, would begin when I returned and asked if I would seek out and document for him some major early photography collections while in Paris during the summer for a special exhibition that he was planning. I did as he asked and I also spent many hours at the Bibliothèque Nationale researching their holdings in early French photography. In short, I became quite knowledgeable about early French photography and made good use of that knowledge later on. Upon my return I was informed by the museum that there was no position for me and that Hoffman did not have the authority to make that decision. I turned my attention again to seeking out photography and came upon a trove of 19th century French Barbizon photography collected by the American Barbizon painter Charles Henry Miller. The print sales from this collection financed my first gallery on Spruce Street, which I opened in 1979. I lived behind the gallery for five years before moving into my second gallery space at 17th and Walnut.

S - You like a whole range of photography but the Photo-Secession and those photographers who used non-silver processes seem important to you. Does this breadth of interests have something to do with your studying at Rochester Institute of Technology with the Eastman House nearby?



P - While I was at RIT I practiced a range of experimental printmaking activities including offset lithography, intaglio viscosity printing and non-silver photographic printing. In fact, part of what made Philadelphia attractive was the possibility to study and work with Gene Feldman who ran Falcon Press and had made a reputation for himself as someone who used offset lithography in a creative way. I was interested in this because of my thesis work in using large photographic etchings as streetworks to be exhibited on the floor. I was leaning toward offset lithography as a more practical medium and did some experimental work with small offset printing presses at RIT toward this end. When I arrived in Philadelphia I did offer my services to Gene as an apprentice and worked at Falcon Press without pay for two weeks when sadly Gene died of a heart attack. My interest in non-silver processes stemmed from my frustration with traditional straight photography. I was searching for an expression able to accommodate my interests in poetry, film, multi-media, printmaking and painting.

S - And your current interest in tintypes both 19th century and those of contemporary practitioners....

P - Around 1997 I began a series of works which were drawn and painted upon with ink. These were dark disturbing images based upon portraits of the genocide victims of the Khmer Rouge, reproductions of details of old master paintings of Christ, and bisected images of male and female nudes. At that same time I began collecting large plate tintypes, which had a very similar look to my inks. I can't say for sure if I began collecting tintypes because of the inks or if this work came about because of my reaction to the tintypes but it is an interesting relationship.

S - In your collages, you will often use photographs that index a real person or event. Sometimes you take the photograph or use a copy of a found image. That image is placed upon a ground of old paper or engravings (often with naturalist motifs). The engravings are old, the photographs often warmly toned as to give a sense of nostalgia or time. The lyrical calligraphy of writing exercises or the ledger books is so beautiful. Even the ink drawings were usually placed on top of reproductions of Old Master paintings.

Each part of your process evokes the past. So here you are in the twenty first century. How do you fit into your time? Do you feel somehow part of an anomalous parallel world?

P - I understand the gist of your question but I feel you are stacking the deck a bit, for example, in the Ink series I paint over other contemporary subjects besides old master paintings. There are the images of the victims of the Khmer Rouge and the Model and Man/Women series, hardly romantic or nostalgic. In any case, I will cede your example for the sake of the larger point that you are making. I may use elements of the old in my work but seek in relation to other pictorial elements, a timelessness and most importantly an intimacy through metaphor. That is what I feel gives the work relevance and engages it in the here and now. I go for an unnerving sensual experience not for a nostalgic comfort zone. My concept of time is inclusive of the past but with a pulse. I often ground my work in natural forms because they are outside of specific culture and universal. Upon this ground I try to portray the humanist condition of being alive in a world where fear, love, anxiety, desire, and loss cross fertilize. It's a sexy, messy business but someone has to do it, right?



TOP
The Gift (For Alison Croggon), 2005
pigment print on rice paper, unique
10 5/8 x 9 3/4"

BOTTOM
Denise (Blue Beard), 2003, antique map
ink and colored pencil and iris print
unique, 12 3/4 x 13 1/2"

LEFT
Bobby and Jackie, 1974/1999
Iris print on Nepalese paper
unique, 20 x 20"

S - I remember seeing Vincent Gallo, Marcus Leatherdale, Jock Sturges, Joel-Peter Witkin, Wilhelm von Gloeden (some pretty radical works for its time in Philadelphia) but also Phillip Guston, Ray Metzker, Francesco Clemente, Robert Motherwell in your Spruce Street gallery (which comprised of two rooms in the front of your apartment).

You were Jock Sturges' first dealer. How did that come about?

Later in your larger space in Old City you showed Tom Nozkowski, Neysa Grassi, Susan Tiger, Sharon Horvath, Mel Bochner. I think these were great achievements for Philadelphia as there was a consistent level of taste and yet a willingness to take chances and show both established, local, and experimental artists, painters, and conceptual artists. I was sad to see your gallery go. Did you have a favorite exhibition or one you are most proud of from those twenty years?

P - You have a great memory Sid but let's not forget local artists and photographers David Lebe, Becky Johnson, Steven Baris, Philip Govedare, Mark Goodwin, John Carnell, Robert Asman, Judith Joy Ross, Susan Fenton, Nancy Helebrand and Judith Steinhauer. Many of these artists had their first Philadelphia shows at my gallery. Since I was never really a business person I selected work I truly liked and artists I believed in so I guess I'm most proud of my support of the lesser known artists at a critical time in their careers. Jock Sturges was unknown when I began to represent him. I was his first dealer and we both went through a difficult period when his studio was raided by the FBI. The repercussions were chilling. My records were subpoenaed and the phones tapped. 20/20 came down to cover the story. You have to give Sturges a lot of credit for fighting this fight. It was traumatic for all involved but in the end it launched his career and increased interest in his work. I published two portfolios and several catalogues of his work.





S - In your own work you often deal with collage or layering that is related to collage. Even the early Bicentennial photograph feels like collage in the way the space is divided. The early collages with watercolor, paint chips, Eakins photographs dispersed across open space remind me of your teacher John Wood. Is that just my reading into that?

P - John Wood wasn't a teacher of mine in an academic sense. He was an early influence in that his work showed a way out of the box that was straight photography then. In the early 70's apart from Rauschenberg and Warhol there weren't many artists using photography in a transgressive or painterly way, especially artists coming from the world of photography. In Rochester I became

aware of John Wood who taught at Alfred University and Betty Hahn who taught undergraduate at RIT, both of whom were on my thesis board along with Tamarind master printer Bruce Porter who also taught at RIT in the printmaking department.

S - You mentioned you felt an affinity to Kurt Schwitters and also Robert Rauschenberg. Yet they have a raw disjunctive quality in keeping with their Dada aesthetics and your works are much more lyrical, sensual and often erotic. In fact you often use the nude in your work and had an affinity for showing them also in your gallery. You also have often used your wife Denise Avayou, an alumna of Philadelphia College of Art and a graphic designer as a model (and muse). How does it feel to be Philadelphia's Stieglitz? What is your ideal sense of the erotic and its function in art?

P - Well, it's true I felt an affinity to Schwitters and Rauschenberg but it's also true that I felt a strong affinity to Giorgio Morandi, Robert Motherwell and Sean Scully. The sense of touch that these artists imbue their work with informs my approach to materials. How a photographic element aligns to a drawn gestural mark interests me formally and emotionally. The use of the figurative or nude in my work is mostly a stand-in for self I suppose – the unavoidable condition of being alive in a physical body. I feel that all art that is animate and emotionally powerful is based in Eros, the life force, the sensual. When I am confronted by art that is primarily a construction of ideas I feel the form has been hijacked by the theoretical – it lacks the sensual which is the heart of art for me.



S - If you had one major influence who would it be?

P - After Santa Claus I stopped believing in heroes, but I would like to think that Brother Emmet, the Franciscan librarian at Bishop Ford High School, pointed me in the right direction towards the light of poetry, the idea of metaphor and juxtaposition and the artists and poets who put it to work. Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Gertrude Stein, Schwitters, Rauschenberg, Motherwell, Brakhage, Morandi, Guston, Scully, and Nozkowski have all had a hand in the way I think about art.

S - In a way, your use of materials, emulsions, digital transfers, paint, and collage seems related to the poetic qualities of the work, an affinity with touch and skin. Did your use of film early on influence your sense of montage and layering?

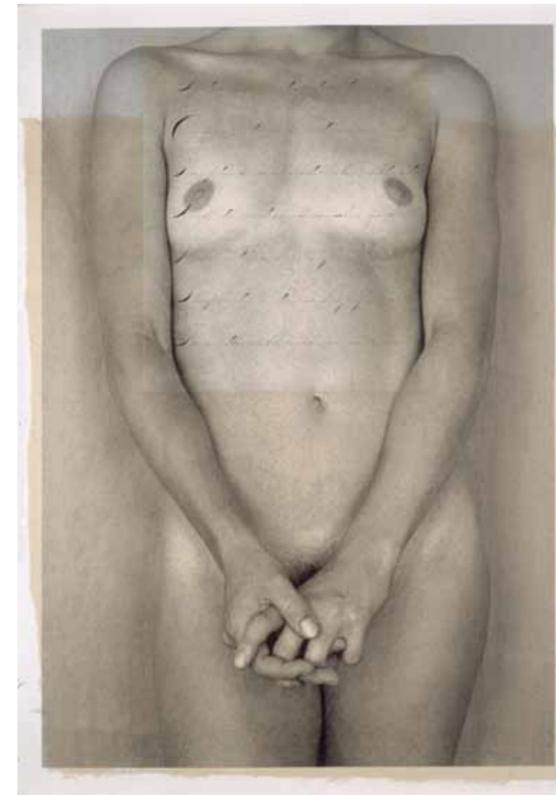
P - Certainly the film work of Stan Brakhage impressed me. In his dazzling film, *Mothlight* from 1963, he taped moth wings to the actual film. This was a revelation to me in terms of how an artist can approach his medium. In cinema the natural juxtaposition and editing of images also had a strong influence on the way I compose my work.

S - Did you find it difficult to switch to digital technologies after years of hands-on approaches or do you see these as a continuation with more efficient means? It seems like an incredibly smooth transition yet I can't imagine it being one. Was it? Do you see any irony in the almost nostalgic use of past imagery – French postcards, biplanes etc., and the latest technologies to grab images and print?

P - Well, I go back and forth between working by hand and working digitally, but while you are in the process you lose yourself in the work and it's the same. You know these images I use in my work float through my mind like an early Georges Méliès film so I think you are hitting on something with that earlier question about film influencing my sense of montage and layering.

S - Recently you have gone back to making straight photographs with no layering. In a way they seem like they might be related to the paintings that you made in the mid-1980s that later became incorporated into hybrid photographic work. Do you have any idea where this new work is leading? Is this a new era?

P - You must be referring to my recent series of windows and curtains that are quite abstract. For me the process of making artwork is somewhat cyclical. I work in one direction for a period of time then move it to another place. There was a period of time in the 1980s when I only worked on paintings and drawings. I do seem to return to the photograph as ground zero. Right now I'm enjoying the clarity that the single camera image is offering.



ABOVE
Sylvia (Calligraphy), 2001,
iris print on chine colle and antique
penmanship paper, unique, 18 x 13"

COVER
The Source, 2007,
pigment print and collage
unique, 10 5/8 x 14"

Paul Cava is represented by
Gallery 339, Philadelphia PA



TOP
Sexual Nature #11, 2003
archival pigment print
edition of 10, 6 x 17 1/2"

ABOVE
PMA (Golgotha), 2010
Digital Pigment Print
edition 15, 14 1/2 x 14 1/2"

ABOVE LEFT
Nemaloon 2, 2005,
archival pigment print
edition of 5, 16 1/2 x 13 1/2"

BELOW LEFT
For James, 2007, collage
unique, 22 x 30"



PAUL CAVATHIRTY YEARS



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