

PAUL REED – PAST AND PRESENT

by Joy Chambers

"Age only matters when one is aging, now that I have achieved a great age, I might just as well be 20."

- Picasso at 80

Paul Reed was a first generation member of the Washington Color School, DC's only homegrown art movement to transcend regional status and become nationally known. Powerful critic Clement Greenberg championed Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis as the leaders in post Jackson Pollock avant guard. But in DC, the arts leaders - critics, curators, collectors - added four more local painters to its pantheon - Paul Reed, Gene Davis, Howard Mehring and Tom Downing. During its reign, all six painters scaled the heights of U. S. artistic success as measured by critical reception, exhibits and sales. By 1970, art world leaders championed minimalism as the frontier of avant guard abstraction, relegating color field to a historical style. Reed continued painting through the ups and downs of celebrity. He paints today. He has outlived all the other members of the Color School. His Workhouse retrospective illustrates the maturation and continuing vitality of his creative output into his ninth decade.

This article hopes to contribute bookends to David Gariff's masterful critique and appreciation of Reed's artistic style. It spans seventy years, explaining the birth of the Color School and ending with Reed's current daily work habits. It echoes an observation John Berger made of Picasso:

"There is not, I think, a single example of a great painter – or sculptor – whose work has not gained in profundity and originally as he grew older. Bellini, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, Poussin, Rembrandt, Goya, Turner, Degas, Cezanne, Monet, Matisse, Braque, all produced some of their very greatest

works when they were over sixty-five. It is as though a lifetime is needed to master the medium, and only when that mastery has been achieved can an artist be simply himself, revealing the true nature of his imagination." (John Berger, Success and Failure of Picasso, 1965)

Clement Greenberg birthed the Washington Color School. He was the most influential critic of modern art in the 20th century. His pronouncements were ex cathedra in the art world. He was an early champion of American abstract art, particularly Jackson Pollock, in the 1940s. He defined Abstract Expressionism. By the 1950s, Greenberg has tired of the layered brush strokes of gestural abstraction with illusionistic depth and was seeking the next wave of the future of abstract art. DC legend has it that Greenberg took Noland and Louis to Helen Frankenthaler's studio to inspect her Mountains and Sea, an unprimed canvas

onto which she has poured oil paint. The two painters collaborated for over a year experimenting with this technique and preaching its virtues to other DC painters. Frankenthaler's studio revelations lead to the foundation of the characteristic flat surface Color School style - staining unprimed, unsized canvas with acrylic paints that were absorbed into the canvas without surface brush strokes.

Noland and Louis were relatively unknown in 1960 when Greenberg deemed their work the next step in American abstraction. He used his immense authority and mastery of national artistic networks of curators and power brokers to build their national reputation. In 1965, the Washington Gallery of Modern Art's curator Gerald Nordland presented the work of six local painters whom he designed as "The Washington Color Painters," which was also the name of his exhibit. Six art stars- Reed, Mehring, Davis and Downing in addition to Noland and Louis - were born. Critics, curators and collectors flocked to the Color Painters. They began to see DC as an artistic as well as a political capital.



Paul Reed in his studio.

Photo Credit Lulen Walker

The past is past. This day Reed paints. We see him in his Arlington home studio. Notice his computerized images of past paintings that he views for current inspiration. Notice the convenient height of the table making it easy to apply acrylic onto muslin. Notice the hat he wears when he walks a few steps out his back door into the adjoining park for his daily amble. And the contentment of his smile. May we all age this gracefully.

artistic world. There is no more revealing setting to illustrate the goals and ideas that have motivated Reed's lifelong devotion to the art of painting and his endless exploration of the many and varied properties of color."

I hope you join me in enjoying and taking inspiration from the life and works of Paul Reed.

Joy Chambers is both an artist and a lawyer. She was trained in photography at the Corcoran School, her jazz photographs have been published by Oxford University Press and her GU dissertation investigates the late photographs of Alfred Stieglitz. She curated an exhibition of Paul Reed's late works, which is currently hanging at the Workhouse Arts Center in Lorton. For the last 15 years she has produced and hosted a monthly cable TV show focusing on the arts.

Joy's longstanding professional interests center around the ways the brain and mind age. As an attorney, she has taught "Law and Psychiatry" at George Washington Law and Medical School. She is a Fulbright Senior Scholar and has taught American family law at law schools in India, Bangladesh and Tajikistan. She is currently Professor Emeritus at Amity University's Institute of Advanced Legal Study in New Delhi. She was briefly trained in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and in law at Harvard and George Washington Law School. Her Old Town Alexandria law firm specializes in trusts and estates. Her particular love is helping clients plan for their later years and helping artists and collectors plan their estates.

And she's been a friend of Paul and Ester's for over a decade.

Photo Credit LuLen Walker



Transparent Painting, Paul Reed

Here we see a window in Reed's living room displaying a recent painting akin to those which grace the windows of the Workhouse. As Gariff describes Reed's home:

"His most recent paintings, washes and drizzles of paint stained on unstretched, raw muslin, illuminate the rooms of his house. Attached to his windows, they create a vision of modernist stained glass that serves to unify and blur distinctions between interior and exterior, light and color, art and nature. As if in homage to Matisse and Rothko, light and color enliven this domestic space and present a personal microcosm of the defining nature of Paul Reed's

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at the Workhouse Arts Center
Saturday, February 12
6-11pm

Come and share your creative side with your partner! The reception and dancing will begin at 6pm in W-16. Workshops are being offered in glass, ceramics, fiber arts and painting!

\$20 (per couple: dance & reception), \$75 (per couple: workshop of choice, dance & reception)
*some workshops may require materials fees

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