

Natalie Edgar: From Pisano to Pavia

By Jennifer Landes

(03/25/2010) Although Natalie Edgar spent many years writing about art, most notably with and about her husband Philip Pavia, it would be an utter mistake to overlook her work as a painter of expressive and layered canvases of vibrant color and intrinsic grace.

While her relationship with Pavia exposed her to the salon of Abstract-Expressionists he helped create by forming “The Club” in 1948 in New York, she already had her own education and training in the arts, studying painting at Brooklyn College with Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko and art history at Columbia University by the time she met him.

She has been occupied during the past couple of years with her writings about the work of Pavia in two books, one about his sculpture and one about the Club, but she has not stopped painting. Her recent output, and works from the past decade, are on view now in New York City at the Woodward Gallery in the exhibit “From Above,” and demonstrate a mind and eye that are still open to new possibilities as well as refining what is already known.

While the couple decided to raise their children in Springs in 1978, their first residence on the East End was in Southold, “to get away from it all,” she said in a recent interview at her house on Squaw Road. They found that being isolated from the same people who made “Philip the center of everything” was less appealing than they had realized. Instead they were spending all their time in East Hampton and realized it was simpler just to move here.

Moving meant more than just packing a few things, however. On the North Fork, the Pavias had found a potato barn studio and a cauliflower barn that they had fixed up as their residence. She wanted the cauliflower barn to come with them to their new address in Springs, but was sure it was too big to move.

One day she saw a man moving the Southold Town Hall building and asked him if he could move a barn. His reply, she remembered, was, “ ‘Lady, I’ve pulled mansions out of the Atlantic and back to East Hampton.’ ”



The Pavias had their barn moved across Peconic Bay in 1978 on its way to Squaw Road in Springs.

He followed her to her barn and told her he could move it and she wouldn’t even have to take her teacups off the shelf. So they packed up the barn with all their possessions, including a boat, and he moved it across frozen potato fields and then on a barge across the Peconic Bay and up to its present site.

The dramatic gesture did not go unnoticed. She recalled that The Star might have written a story on the move and that Harold Rosenberg had remarked, “ ‘That’s Pavia! He has to do a kind of surrealist trick just to get here.’ He thought it was a pretty funny way of making an entrance,” Ms. Edgar said.



Natalie Edgar in her New York studio in January with her paintings in the background. Hank O’Neal

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She found the area an ideal place to raise children and it provided enough space for Pavia to work in marble. Her sons, Luigi and Paul, who were 8 and 5 respectively, went to the Springs School and rode bikes around the area and around the trails. She continued to commute to Queens College, where she taught art history until 1988, and found another barn to be her studio. She also taught painting at the New School for Social Research from 1987 to 1994.

The house and studio are a fascinating throwback to an earlier, more casual time. In the house, the wide barn doors were replaced by sliding glass doors and the rooms are open and loft-like. There is no pretense of its being a “summer cottage” from 100 years ago. The design of the house is organic and has changed over the years to accommodate studio and living spaces as they were needed. Artwork is everywhere you look whether it is her paintings or her son Paul’s metal sculptures on the inside or Pavia’s giant marble works on the grounds. Five years after his death, marble dust still leaves traces on shoes when walking across the property.

Ms. Edgar and her husband met in 1959 at a dinner for Milton Resnick at the Four Seasons just after she had begun writing for Art News. “It was a long table of people . . . there was this man sitting across from me, who fell asleep at the table and I thought, my god here is a man who’s so together he doesn’t care where he falls asleep. That was Philip. He was always napping.”

He soon visited her at her studio and “talked to me about typography and magazines. As soon as he found out I had some abilities he put me to work” on his journal called “It Is,” which was published between 1958 and 1964.

The couple married in 1966, but Ms. Edgar kept writing for Art News until 1973, and worked on painting when she had the time. Having a break from writing has given her a new perspective. “Now that I’m so focused on painting I wouldn’t want to change that,” she said.

Between her work and her husband’s contacts and associations, the couple never lacked for company. “Out here I knew everybody, not only because I was a writer, but I knew them personally through Philip.” In the early days of their marriage she told her husband she was tired of seeing the same people all of the time. “He said to me ‘this is your family and you’re going to know them the rest of your life.’ That’s the way the art world was, and it was quite true . . . really one extended tribe.”

But it was not just friends he shared with her. “Philip gave me the most interesting life because I was always going to Europe to look at museums.” Such exposure to the Classic and neo-Classical traditions in art left an impression on Ms. Edgar and can be seen in her latest work. “It’s rooted in tradition, not just the latest trend,” she said. “This show I’m very proud about. It’s an absolutely abstract show but someone at the opening asked me if I knew anything about the Renaissance and I said ‘you bet,’ because it creeps in.”

Asked to elaborate, she said she couldn’t specifically, although there are traces of mountainous forms taken from the marble-infused mountains of Pietrasanta in Tuscany in some of her works. She said that Giovanni Pisano’s prophet sculptures from the very early Renaissance also made a strong impression on her. Mostly though, she is looking for complete abstraction and an experience of excitement and beauty. “I like my colors to blossom,” she said. And, “I stay away from contour lines. Contours mean objects and symbols. I don’t think women have much investment in the symbology of society. I don’t feel like expressing attitudes about society.”

Her opening was a reunion of sorts for some of her old friends, including Barney Rosset, Will Barnett, and Paul and Suzanne Jenkins. The Woodward Gallery, which had last shown the artist’s work almost a decade ago, made the artist cry with its presentation, which is up until mid-April. “The work glowed,” she noted. “I thought everybody in their life should have one day like this.”