



PIERRE
VASSURA

NEW WORK
1983–2018

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In March of 2017, the Or Gallery in Vancouver received an unusual email from Pierre Vassura asking; would we like to exhibit his life's work? Although we had received a multitude of diverse art proposals over the years, neither Jonathan Middleton nor I had yet been asked to contemplate the exhibition of a life's work. The email included a link to his website; out of curiosity we followed the link immediately. The online photographs of Pierre Vassura's paintings and sculptures presented a bright polychromatic world of highly designed, eccentric, geometric and abstracted figuration. It was apparent Vassura was creating an advanced and singular world, one he was very skilled at representing.

We arranged to visit his home studio in Richmond and upon arriving were astounded by what we encountered. Vassura had us enter through the garage, because as we saw later, the main entrance was blocked with large-scale sculptures. Much like his paintings, each surface in Vassura's home is completely decorated. We saw his paintings hung side-by-side filling the walls, along with collections of bygone small arms, swords, decorative knives and Eastern masks. A plentitude of tables and shelves overflowed with ceramic vessels and collections of objet d'art and antiques that included coins, shells, and African and Oceanic sculptures. Upstairs, the floor space of the guest rooms and office as well as the closets were completely filled with paintings and sculptures leaning back to back, some stacked two levels high.



Only the master bedroom was spared, somewhat, from this *horror vacui*. Vassura's studio was also stacked with completed artwork, and his most recent work had become restricted to painting on paper in order to conserve space.

Reflecting on Pierre's original email to us at the Or Gallery, the idea of a life's work, his life's work, was an unusual idea to consider in that contemporary art space; one attended so often by young artists and students and where the current issues of contemporary art are hotly debated. In contrast, Vassura had been maturing artistically outside the avenues that we understood for contemporary art. In fact, he had been working in private. Only once since his arrival in Canada did he exhibit paintings and sculptures, in 2002 at Vancouver's Italian Cultural Center. Vassura and his artworks have lived outside of exhibitions, careers, merchandising, and the endeavours of cultural capital that consume the art world, yet he himself has lived a life inside of art, working tirelessly on his project.

To me, Vassura's perspective on art making is summarised by this quote "only the artist knows art, can put judgment on it and criticize it because they are doing it". If this is true, it may be the solace an artist requires, to work consistently alone. Vassura is paraphrasing the 16th Century Italian writer Giovanni Battista Giraldi. The text continues: "The viewer can only try to understand [art], try to discover its forms and content." This implies a barrier between what the artist may experience, and what is available to us as viewers. However, Vassura's work is hardly opaque. It is graphic, figurative, colorful, and precisely designed; these attributes are a joyous invitation to the visual. Furthermore, the majority of his work embraces classic literature including the *Decameron*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Aesop's Fables*, and sacred texts like the Bible and also tarot. Vassura is aware that these classics may be fading from our own cultural understanding, being erased by entertainment technology and consumerist myths. Yet, considering the classics as historical ground in the deepest sense for our contemporary stories may be a thoughtful challenge while viewing Vassura's art.

Pierre Vassura: New Work 1983 – 2018 reflects the thirty-five year period of Vassura's residence in Canada and is primarily comprised of works he created during this time.

The sculptures, paintings and drawings exhibited are polychromatic with flat, hard-edged forms, and detailed design. On one hand Vassura's work holds a strong centralized gestalt with mandala-like energy. On the other hand, Vassura's baroque visual sensibility lends itself to iteration, and many series of his work repeat formal motifs with cycling colour variations.

In his ambitious sequence of paintings titled *Analogy of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Inferno – Cantos 1 To 10*, abstracted figures are enmeshed with the pictures' underlying formal structure, and across the series, from one canto to the next, variations in the figurative imagery force themselves against the pictures' underlying design creating thematic variations and returns, analogous to a piece of complex music.

Vassura considers his visual art to be analogies for the stories and poems that his works refer to, and he has described his work as "analogical formalism". Vassura rejuvenates themes from classic stories, to act as stepping-stones to be used in search of the "foundations of art, original freedom and the core aspects of being human". This is a massive claim, but after reading the manifestos written by Vassura, I know it is a claim he champions. The challenge and the pleasure of this exhibition is the opportunity for viewers to meet these claims through his colourful and nearly psychedelic compositions. For example, in Vassura's work on paper *The Wind and the Sun*, based on one of Aesop's Fables, humankind is seen in relation to the elements of Sun and Wind who happen to be arguing over which of them is stronger. To settle their debate, they wager on who can cause the man to remove his cloak. The Wind blows furiously but with each gust the man grips his cloak tighter. The Sun, by contrast, showers the man with warm rays and he quickly removes his coat. In Vassura's painting, the human figure is split symmetrically, coloured half yellow-orange by the Sun and half green-blue by the Wind. If we interpret the fable traditionally, as "kindness affects more than severity",



we see the Sun and the Wind learning this lesson. In Vassura's work however, the man remains between the two elements, depicted holding himself firmly to the ground in what I interpret as a resistant, undecided state, illustrating the difficulty humans have in living ideal lives.

In contemporary art discourse, the history of art as a pathway to universal ideals may sound anachronistic. However Vassura's commitment to his project, and the high stakes he raises for human experience, are precisely what sets his work apart and compels my interest. Vassura values individuality and the new equally to the universal. He has described filling the void with his creativity, but he is not so naïve as to think he could fill the void completely. After all, the void is infinite! Rather, Pierre Vassura understands that it is the quality of the material sent into the void that matters.

Eli Bornowsky

Eli Bornowsky is an artist, curator, and writer based in Brooklyn, NY. His paintings have been exhibited widely across North America. Bornowsky has curated exhibitions at the Or Gallery including a series of experimental sound performances and his writing has been published in several art catalogues and periodicals.

Jonathan Middleton is an artist, curator, and publisher based in Vancouver, BC. Middleton served as Director/Curator of the Or Gallery (2007 – 2017) and the Western Front Exhibitions Program (1999 – 2005). He was the founding publisher of the art periodical *Fillip* (2004 – 2008) and currently works as co-director of Information Office, a design and publishing studio focused on the contemporary visual arts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Curators would like to thank Pierre Vassura, and his family, especially his daughter Ludmilla Rold for assistance and giving us the opportunity to work with and think with Pierre's art, which we will continue to enjoy and learn from throughout the exhibition and into the future. We would like to thank Shaun Dacey, director of the Richmond Art Gallery for accepting our proposal to exhibit Pierre's work as well as Paula Booker for curatorial assistance on many aspects of the project and to Matthew Brown and the rest of the Richmond Art Gallery staff.

Pierre Vassura was born Romagna, Italy in 1935. The son of an architect and teacher, he enrolled in agricultural studies following the death of his father at age thirteen. Farming was not his passion however, and at age twenty Vassura moved to France in search of artistic experiences. He first secured work as a ceramic designer at the Faïencerie de St. Clement, and later a ceramic studio in Cote d'Azur, Vallauris-Juan les Pins. Vassura became a technical and production expert in several ceramic factories in Switzerland, France, Italy and Israel and he participated in Israel's vibrant emerging ceramics industry with Palceramic in Haifa. With the Beit-Hagefen Art Gallery, Vassura first exhibited his paintings in Tel-Aviv and Haifa from 1963 to 1965. In this fruitful period, Vassura also met his future wife, Fotiny with whom he would have two children. In the early 1980's Vassura and his family moved to Richmond, BC. In 2002, Vassura exhibited a mature body of work at Vancouver's Italian Cultural Centre, *Pierre Vassura: New Work 1983 – 2018* is his first major solo exhibition.

Images, cover: Pierre Vassura, *Analogy of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Inferno – Cantos 1 to 10 (Midway Upon The Journey of Our Life)* (detail), enamel on wood board. Inside, left and right: Pierre Vassura, *Analogy of Aesop's Fables (The Belly and the Members)*, enamel on poster board; Pierre Vassura, *Polychromic Analogies – Octopus*, enamel on wood board.

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LOCATION

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