

Robert S. Neuman, a second generation Abstract Expressionist and son of the American West, who over the course of six decades crafted an artist canon guided by his abiding sense of humanism and staunch individualism, died on June 20<sup>th</sup> in Boston. He was 88.

His death was confirmed by his wife, Sunne Savage, who noted that he passed peacefully in his sleep.

With the pulse of the Bay Area Abstract Expressionist movement close to his ear, Mr. Neuman first received a commercial artist's education at Oakland's College of Arts and Crafts. He transitioned to painting in his graduate studies, ultimately defining himself as a figurative Abstract Expressionist with a color saturated aesthetic and painterly sensibility. His prolific body of work quickly grew to encompass extended series paintings distinguished by a specific theme or motif, making him a perennial outsider amidst the realignment of the American art scene towards pure abstraction.

Since first showing his works in the 1950's at West Coast exhibitions alongside Morris Graves, Robert Motherwell and Sam Francis, Mr. Neuman's paintings have appeared in major exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University and elsewhere.

Mr. Neuman's passion for the arts had its genesis in the most incongruous surroundings: his parent's hardware store in Idaho. He passed the hours after school amidst the shelves and sawdust by listening to Dick Tracy and Popeye on the radio, and making sketches inspired by their adventures. During high school, he "borrowed" commercial grade paints from the store to paint the nearby scenic Western vistas. Mr. Neuman later credited his rural upbringing with helping him succeed as artist — despite being bereft of art books, galleries and artists — by teaching him "to just meditate and absorb things around [him]."

This propensity towards outward observation provided the stimulus for many of his quintessential series of paintings. In 1979, while on honeymoon to Spain with his second wife Sunne, he began his "Alhambra" series of paintings after visiting the legendary palace. In these works, cascades of vibrant color take on the role of the ethereal shafts of Spanish sunlight Mr. Neuman witnessed shooting through the columns and corbelled arches of the Alhambra like threads through a needle.

Throughout his career, light and color were the underpinnings of Mr. Neuman's philosophy of aesthetics. An earlier trip to Barcelona, Spain, on the Fulbright Fellowship in 1956 had instigated a series of works named after the city and inspired by the startling brilliance of the morning sunlight in the city's narrow calles. *E Otra Vez* (1958) from this series is an example of one of his earliest mature works. Nearly three decades later, his series of Tachist "Rose"

paintings featured thick impasto virtually sculpted onto the canvas to showcase the play of light and color across the agitated surface.

Far from having strictly formalist concerns, Mr. Neuman's creative efforts were also driven by an enduring interest in human culture and human nature. His first series to utilize true symbolism was "Pedazos del Mundo", or "Pieces of Our World", which features vibrant circles encasing energetic and pulsating lines and shapes that represent the bewildering but beautiful cultural fragmentation of the human world. More intimate in scope, his mixed-media "Ship to Paradise" series depicts medieval barques filled with motley crews of meticulously rendered souls sailing in search of salvation from the mortal world on an existential sea.

This sense of humanism comes most prominently to the fore in his "Lame Deer" series, motivated by a visit to the site of Lame Deer, Montana, near the site of the Battle of Little Big Horn. Looking across this eerie portion of the Western landscape, Mr. Neuman was struck by the quiet plight of the Native American tribes that remain displace nearly two centuries after westward expansion. Canvases from these series split sky from earth, and in works such as his celebrated *Lame Deer (Big Eagle)* (2007), populate vivid and tumultuous chromatic landscapes with the skeletal outlines of teepees to underscore the deceit and injustice the Great American West has borne witness to.

Robert Sterling Neuman was born in the historic mining town of Kellogg, Idaho, on September 9th 1926, to Swedish immigrant Katherine Samuelson and the American-born Oscar Neuman. He attended the public schools in the area through high school, where his mother secretly convinced the school superintendent to allow him to take the only art course three times; this clandestine act of encouragement remained unknown to him until he graduated from art school, though he later referred to it as "a godsend."

After finishing high school, Mr. Neuman briefly studied at the University of Idaho, where he was a devoted member of the fraternity Beta Thi Pi and served on the home front in the Army Air Corps during the waning days of World War II. In 1946, he was honorably discharged from the military and married fellow Kellogg, Idaho, native, and his 7th grade sweetheart, Patricia "Patty" Fedderson. Later that year, he enrolled in the California School of Arts and Crafts under the GI Bill to study commercial art where he was friends and classmates with artists Peter Voulkos and Nathan Oliviera.

Despite never taking an oil painting class as an undergraduate, Mr. Neuman experimented with the medium outside of the classroom, and to his great surprise, won a prize at the Oakland Museum with one of the first paintings he submitted. The young artist found himself hooked by the expressive potential of the medium and pursued painting in his graduate work, studying

under James Budd Dixon at the San Francisco College of Fine Arts and with German Expressionist Max Beckmann at Mills College.

In 1953, Mr. Neuman was granted a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Stuttgart, Germany under German Expressionist Willi Baumeister. On the sea voyage to Europe, Mr. Neuman and his wife Patty made a lifelong friend of artist Panos Ghikas, who was the only other American in Stuttgart on the Fulbright Fellowship. While in Europe, the Neuman's were struck by the hospitality of European artists, and were welcomed to visit Jean Paul Riopelle and Georges Mathieu—although the latter mistook him for fellow American expressionist Barnett Newman.

After returning from Germany, Mr. Neuman accepted a teaching position at SUNY New Paltz and relocated to the East Coast. He became fast friends with fellow newcomers to the art department Jules Oltiski and William Daley, as they grew together as artists and teachers. He also began his first series of paintings, "The Black Paintings," inspired by the gloom of occupied Germany.

In 1955, he and Patty welcomed their first child, Elizabeth, and the next year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in Spain. While in Europe, friend and Italian painter Alberto Burri helped Mr. Neuman launch a one-man show at the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice. The exhibition garnered the praises of art collector and socialite, Peggy Guggenheim. The owner of the gallery offered Mr. Neuman a contract to return to Italy, though he reluctantly declined.

Upon his return to the United States, Mr. Neuman and his growing family settled in Boston and welcomed a second daughter, Ingrid, in 1959. He found a studio space in the neighborhood of Brookline next door to artist and close friend Albert Alcalay, who would later prove instrumental to helping Mr. Neuman secure a teaching position at Harvard. In the interim, Mr. Neuman began to experience wider visibility and success as the city experienced a veritable artistic renaissance. In the early 1960's he had his first sold out show in the early years of renowned Pace Gallery. The gallery was founded by one of Mr. Neuman's former students Arnold "Arne" Glimcher, who insisted on showing Mr. Neuman's work in the gallery's first ever exhibition.

Mr. Glimcher had been a student of Mr. Neuman's at the Massachusetts College of Art where he had taught briefly in the late 1950's before drawing the ire of the college's President for simultaneously teaching at Brown University. Mr. Neuman took a full-time position at Brown University in 1960 before joining the faculty of Harvard's Carpenter Center in 1965. Mr. Neuman's time at the Carpenter Center was tumultuous; his stubborn individualism and fine arts background clashed with the visual design driven senior faculty, mostly composed of architects.

Despite this schism, Mr. Neuman relished helping to organize student art shows and pushing the boundaries of how the shows were displayed. His daughter Ingrid remembers a visit to "The Circus Show" in the lobby of the Carpenter Center, which simulated an entire circus out of found materials and was replete with a life-size alligator made out of egg cartons and paper-mache trapeze artists. Indeed, Mr. Neuman and his students both agreed he was at his best as a teacher when he was encouraging them to push the boundaries of their own individuality and leading by example with his own wry, irreverent humor and intractable artistic temperament.

In 1972, three years after the death of close friend and Carpenter Center director Mirko Basadella, Mr. Neuman was asked to move on from his post. He and his first wife Patty had divorced the previous year and he later admitted that the period marked a low point in his personal and professional life. Later that year, he was offered the chairmanship at Keene State College's fledgling "art department" which only consisted of a few rudimentary classes until his arrival. Mr. Neuman spent the next two decades building the department from the ground up until he retired and was awarded Professor Emeritus in 1992.

In the intermediary years, Mr. Neuman met gallery director Sunne Savage after a fateful visit to her Sunne Savage Gallery in Boston. They married in 1979 and the same year welcomed their only child, Christina. A consummate teacher, Mr. Neuman delighted in his role as a father. He encouraged his children to truly see and savor the world around them, and actively engage with their own creative potential.

Scenic Mount Desert Island in Down East Maine, with its verdant evergreen forests encroaching on sandy colored cliffs and dazzling views of the cobalt sea, served as a backdrop for many of the Neuman children's most blissful and relaxed days and nights— thanks in part to their father's notorious penny-pinching. A child of the Depression and with fiscal sensibilities sharpened by the financial ups and downs an artist's life, Mr. Neuman made a name for himself as a prolific barterer. He bartered for pediatrician appointments for his children with the famed Dr. Berry Brazelton of Cambridge, for a motorcycle and at least two station wagons, but he cemented his status as local legend when he traded a painting with gallery owner and close friend, Allan Stone for a house on the island in the 1960's. His daughter Ingrid would later remark that she supposed this knack for commerce made her father quite the businessman, considering he was an artist.

Mr. Neuman quickly ingratiated himself in the artistic community in Maine. On summer mornings he would drive into town on scenic Sargent Drive. He rarely took the faster main road and instead savored the sound of the gulls, the sight of small boats on the glass-like surface of the fjord's waters and the opportunity to assess any changes in the landscaping or decor of his neighbors' front yards. Once in town he would "hold court" at the Wingspread Gallery, where he held exhibitions annually for 18 years. Amongst his fellow artists, he would offer his opinions on their work as vociferously as he critiqued his neighbor's lawn decor.

At his house on the island — christened "Pooh Corner" — he made a wicked fish "chowda", and obliged his children to enjoy the outdoors by refusing the presence of a television and insisting each room of the house be furnished with fresh picked wildflowers every day. The home was also a haven for local and visiting artists, museum groups and curators to stop by and discuss art day and night— even the youngest artists were welcome. When Allan Stone and his young daughters visited, Mr. Neuman helped them customize their 3-speed Raleigh bicycles with oil paint. In the evenings, he would retire to his barn house studio where his "Space Signs" and "Stacks and Piles" series were born, each inspired respectively by the breathtaking views of the night sky and the earth bound trail cairns that dot hiking routes across the island.

After his retirement from teaching and until his final months, Mr. Neuman continued to paint prolifically and act as an informal mentor to young artists he met at gallery openings. In 2012, Mr. Neuman's "Ship to Paradise" series received a special exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, New York, and was favorably reviewed by the New York Times. His work has also been the subject of numerous retrospectives organized by the Sunne Savage Gallery in his adopted homes of Maine and Massachusetts, his home state of Idaho and at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York City with an exhibition catalogue published by Bates College.

His work can currently be seen at the "Director's Cut" exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Maine, and at "Dancing with Dystopia" at the Allan Stone Projects. His work will be on display later this year at the Star Gallery in Northeast Harbor, Maine, and plans are currently being made for an upcoming retrospective and monograph curated by Joe Ketner.

Mr. Neuman's generous artistic spirit lives on in his daughters Christina, Ingrid and Elizabeth. His tradition of gathering his family the Saturday before Easter to craft elaborate Easter eggs — where he of course crafted the most magnificent specimens using wax, string and rubber bands as his family looked on with green stained fingers and awe — will persist every year in his honor.

Robert Neuman is survived by his devoted wife of 36 years, Mary Susan “Sunne” Savage and their daughter Christina, his first wife Patricia, and their daughters Elizabeth and Ingrid, and four cherished grandchildren, Aliza and Gemma Lurie, and Charles and Grant Godfrey.