

The New Orleans AVANT-GARDE[©]



ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

text and images by Patt Lemarie



Patt Lemarie

Inspiration is the catalyst that motivates an artist to create. It's the muse, the spark, the vision that moves one through the process of that creation.

Ah, my fickle friend, "Inspiration." Artist Chuck Close once said, "Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and work." A lot of truth is in that statement. One must get out her brushes and paint on days when the muse has fallen asleep and refuses to awaken. However, inspiration works both ways; being highly motivated with a specific idea may produce a piece of work that does not meet expectation, but in the midst of that disappointment can lie an inspiration one didn't expect and lead to something even better.



I am inspired to be an artist by other artists: such as Matisse, Bonnard, Vuillard, Cassatt and Morisot. Contemporaries I follow are Richard Schmidt, Kevin Macpherson and Laura Robb to name a few.

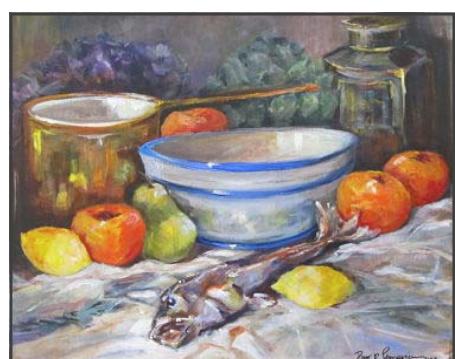
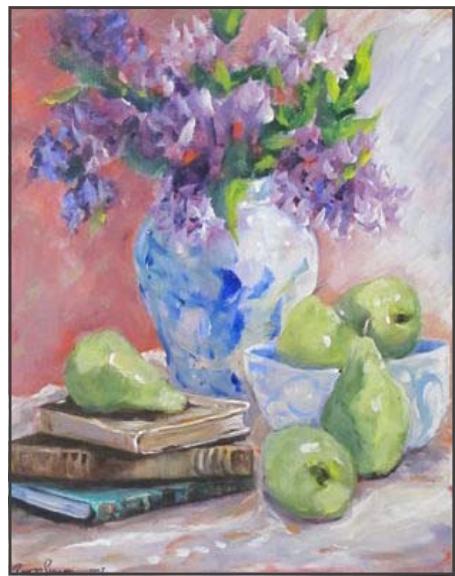
I did not choose to paint in the style of Georgia O'Keefe, but I was inspired by her tenacity as a woman to make art her career.

I am motivated by color and the tools of the trade — paint, canvas and brushes. I love the way the paint loads on the brush and, when applied to the canvas, clings to the web and weave of the fabric itself. I can paint thickly in some areas, thin in others. I find sheer joy in just moving paint around the surface, mixing colors, wet into wet.

Being partial to Still Life although I paint Landscape as well, I paint the things I have chosen to surround myself with. Objects that have special meaning to me — china pieces, teacups, old books, small boxes, textiles and antiquities — are worked into paintings. The way in which the fringe of a tapestry or the folds of fabric lay on a tabletop, the glint of light on a platter, the reflection in a copper pot or a silver urn filled with flowers awaken my senses. The ability to arrange and re-arrange the composition in an endless variety of ways makes Still Life work enticing and unique.

To portray three-dimensional objects on a flat plane and give them a life of their own, sometimes cloaked in dark mystery, other times a happy riot of joyous color, provides satisfaction. The emotional elements of light, shadow, color and movement are essential to both my Still Life and Landscape work.

"The object of art is not to reproduce reality but to create a reality of the same intensity" (Alberto Giacometti). I am ultimately inspired to do just that.



GEORGE DUREAU INTERVIEWED

by Phyllis Parun

George Dureau was born in New Orleans, his early years spent on Bayou St. John. As he whimsically said, he was from a "high white back 'a town family." Dureau was educated at LSU and Tulane. He spent several years in advertising at Kreegers and got his start in fine arts at the Downtown Gallery. This interview excerpt for "L'art de Vivre" was conducted at Dureau's apartment on Esplanade Avenue on May 3, 1979. He was 48 years old.

P: When you had those pieces at the retrospective at the CAC, my initial impression was that they were figureless. Now, the human form is your primary subject.

G: I have always known how to draw a little. I started when I was 9 years old. I was a talented child but educated abstractly at LSU in the 40's, and I ended up doing rather hard edge painting. But in 1959-60 after about 3 years in advertising, I realized that I really did want to be a serious painter. When I reviewed that and tried to analyze it, I realized that I wanted to be a figurative painter, but that was quite out of mode. So I had to build for myself a way of painting. I knew from then on that I would have visions of what I wanted my paintings to look like, and what they look like now is exactly what I had imagined. I mean, I

had these big Michelangelo things flying at me, you know. I have always been really insecure about the presentation of my things, and so I started Still Life in order to develop painting technique. Then I moved into Landscapes and finally, little by little, started adding figures into the landscapes and into architectural situations in the painting. And then, bit by bit, the figures kept coming closer because that was always going to be the more important thing. The painting of figures was what I was really after. And it was just very unconscious, but the figures became bigger and closer, and ultimately I just dropped the props. I allowed the pictures to become more classical and perhaps more meditative or introspective and less connected to real life activities. They became metaphoric or more symbolic, the figures and the paintings. I started drawing symbolic, metaphorical things in the pictures, and that is when the sometimes ridiculous angels and the winged things all started happening — the little spirits running in the pictures.

P: Could you say how long you have been interested in the human form as a subject for painting and drawing?

G: I guess I let it out of the closet in the middle 60's. That's when I started doing beach pictures — the clothed figures, now that we look back at them, are pretty carnal. In fact, they are more carnal than some of my naked ones.

P: Do you find yourself returning to the human form at decisive points in your development?

G: Well now, I don't have to return to the human form anymore because I can't seem to get loose from it. But I do think that the nude is the central thing we can talk about in art. I think it will go on being the central thing till the end of time. I cannot imagine Michelangelo or Leonardo being what they were if what they did was just bananas and lemons, can you? Trees?

P: Do you feel that there is a proper subject for painting and drawing?

G: I am entirely humanist. I am wildly sensitive to human needs and human concerns. I find it impossible to be fulfilled by an art which is outside of that.

P: How much of your drawings is an attempt on your part to produce an ideal art form?

G: There are thousands of ideal forms that I can perceive. I can think of a thousand different male torsos that I like. I don't think of the ideal form as the Greeks might have because for one thing, we don't have just Greeks around here. We don't have just one race. We don't have one body type. There are obviously thousands of body types now. I also don't disapprove of people being formed differently. As we all know, it doesn't bother me for someone to have one arm. And I think that some one-arms are more ideal looking than other one-arms. I mean, they just represent the thing in a neater, more complete way.

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WHAT MAKES ME AN ARTIST

by Valentine Pierce

I have had many evolutions as an artist, including my newest endeavor, selling my crafts in the French Market. I gave away so many handmade items that people finally convinced me I should sell them. I'm trying that.

My artistic bent runs the gamut from writing to graphic design to photography to handcrafts, including crochet (my favorite) and sewing (my second favorite). When I was a child, I wanted a typewriter that did everything. I was twelve, and I used to cut photographs from the newspaper or magazines and type my poems on them or iron the color images onto wax paper (my first transparency) and type on that.

Despite my many interests, one thing has remained constant in my life: writing — poetry, essays, short stories, journalism, even a novel that may one day get finished. At the heart of all of these is poetry. People often ask what inspires me, and my response is I am a vessel, a receiver, and when my antennae is up, poetry is everywhere, everywhere, and I just pluck it from the space and pen it to paper. Then I give it a voice — my own.

I never set out to write poetry. I have never managed to write a decent poem that way. My poems are given to me by the universe.

More than once, I decided I was going to quit writing. It had no voice and no audience. When I told my guidance counselor I wanted to be a writer, he



Valentine Pierce

told me to get a real job. Being a sheltered oldest girl in the projects, the only writer I knew at the time was Maya Angelou, and I wanted to be her.

The first time I made the choice, I threw out what I thought was every single poem — about 500 I'd written over the course of four years. My good fortune is that some of them were in a notebook tucked away in the closet. To this day, I regret that. Another time was when I was going to the 1991 Writers' Conference here in New Orleans. This is where I met Mona Lisa Saloy, Lee Grue, Kalamu ya Salaam.

I brought poems and a short story. The poems were reviewed by the editor of the *New Yorker*. I still cannot read her signature. The *New Yorker* editor did not understand my work. The short story was reviewed by Peter Cooley. I was kicking myself for the short story, but Peter Cooley told me I could fix the ending in about 20 minutes. He was right, and I did.

Then we had to read our poems aloud. Next was lunch. So many people came up to my table, I could barely eat my food. They were bragging on my work, talking about the power of it, the imagery. Told me not to quit writing. How did they know?

I think the reason people find my writing visual and visceral is because when I am writing, I am inside the work. I can see the whole thing, every word and image. I usually write in a heat, non-stop, until I get it all on paper. I don't worry about words or punctuation or spelling or anything. I just write as fast as I can, get it all down. Then I go back over it. Sometimes I type the first breath of it if I am at a computer when it hits, but I don't have time to wait for a computer to boot up. I am anxious, excited, overflowing, and I need to catch this poem spilling out

WOMB POEM

by Valentine Pierce

Wednesday, 12mr08, 1:47 a.m.

I am trying to birth a poem
But it is not ready to be born.
It hunkers down in my belly,
Denies its due date,
Refuses delivery.

Warm, cozy womb poem
Wants another day,
Another week
Of life inside.

To be born, it knows, is to die
In one life, live in another —
Not altogether better.
Better is warm, cozy womb
Home.
Even the promise of a sugar tit
Can't convince it.
Doctor says it could be breach;
This poem must be Black
Because it's already got the
Blues.

of me. My poem would be gone if I waited on a computer, so I keep pencils, pens, paper everywhere.

Once a friend and I walked into a restroom and found a pile of those brown folding paper towels on the floor. A young woman reached for a towel from the stack, and as she pulled the top one, I watched in awe as the one below flew up and floated across the room, settling on the pile like a brown butterfly settling on the forest floor. My friend looked at me and laughed. "I know," she said, "it's a poem."

I think my work has the power to move people so deeply because everything I write is true or as true as it can be, i.e. it all rings true — every joy, sorrow and heartbreak, every lustful desire and spirit filled laugh and eternal night. Truth.

Writing, poetry, that is just who I am, what my place is in this world. When I tell my stories, share my work, I often find I am telling other peoples' stories as well because so many of us have the same stories. It's just that some of us get to write them down and present them to the world.

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P: *What is it that keeps you working on the human form?*

G: Until I read Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*, I thought I was just crazy. I didn't realize that I belonged to a great tradition of the nude as a wonderful form of art — not just a subject but actually a form of art. He says in that book that mundane people are sometimes amazed that Degas, in creating classical art out of these ballerinas, would sometimes draw the same pose over and over and over with increasing difficulty. Well, this is exactly true. I would draw the same person or perhaps different people in the same pose, and I would do it over and over. Like the repeating word, all of a sudden, it would become disembodied, and sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worst. You suddenly are like a child again, and you are drawing the thing, and you make mistakes all over. So, that is the reason. Because I think that within confines, within limitations is the most fabulous kind of liberty. That's why I find the greatest liberties in art. It is an adventure within an assignment that I have given myself.

P: *It seems that a good percentage of your work is particularized; that is, you are dependent a lot on the portraits of the models. You don't try in any way to make them universal by departicularizing them, do you?*

G: No, that's not how I do it. Yes, it is more than just particular people, but it doesn't go dry if you can always call on particulars to back you up. So that if this statement I'm making about a man and a woman does not become universal, it at least is particular. It

can't fall completely flat. There is at least one case in which somebody looked like that, you see?

P: *You are revitalizing classical art, then?*

G: Yes, always. But it doesn't matter how corny the subject you choose if you take it from scratch and use real people and make the thing happen for you.

P: *Do you think that audiences appreciate revitalization of classical art at this time?*

G: I think that the people who buy me know that that is what I'm doing. An advantage I have is that I'm not scholarly. I never know whether something in my art is going to look like Velasquez or Manet or Corbet.

P: *What is art to you?*

G: It is the giving of understandable form to the presently worldly experience that I have. You see, I am not afraid for my work to look like the past. I'm not afraid for it to look like the future, either. I'm not afraid of art history. So frequently my work looks like I am deliberately painting like the past. I'm not. It is just that where I go backwards, I don't think that's bad. The great painters that were admired have gone backwards and forwards, and the great ones have gone forward because they weren't afraid to go backwards. The things that were so revolutionary, for instance in Michelangelo, were his returns to antiquity.

P: *How many times a week do you hire models?*

G: I don't hire models as such. If there is somebody I want to paint, I paint them. And sometimes it is all week long, and sometimes I don't draw any person for two weeks or something. The major part of the work I do privately, not with people sitting in front of me or on the

posing stand. I just grab them, and I draw fast. And then hold in my head, we hope, what it looked like in terms of color and such. But color is fairly inventive. I don't really paint up the person exactly.

P: *Do you pay your models?*

G: I do pay some. I pay some if that's what they need. Sometimes people want a photograph. Sometimes, if I am drawing them, people will want a drawing. People are quite different in whether they want one of your drawings or want the photograph.

P: *What are some of the problems that you're presently working on in the center of your work?*

G: Well, these big canvases are kind of a memoir show. I have about 20 so far, and they are 4' by 8'. They're all the same size, and I simply use them as a notebook. It's funny, people figure that it must be shocking to have all those paintings in my bedroom. One painter from California thought it was outrageous that I looked at my work all day. He obviously thought I was a pretty vulgar, strange person, that I had art pouring off the walls all the time. But that's what I am, and that's all I am. I've let my whole life slide into my art now.

P: *How would you feel if you didn't have these canvases around?*

G: It happened once. And it was terrible! Someone swiped a bunch of them out of my house. It was really bad. I have to have them around me. But my whole life is really like that. I live completely in my painting, and I no longer can tell whether I paint because I like something out there or if I like something out there because it

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would help me in painting. When I look at people, I don't know whether I am looking at them as drawings or as people or as what?

P: How did your photography grow out of your drawing and painting?

G: My painting has always been a la Degas and Manet from way back. It has always been kind of photo-oriented. I mean that as a strange, cropped view of things. For some reason, I attained the age of 40 and never bought a camera. I had never taken any photographs. So I got this old, broken two-and-a-quarter camera, and well, instantly they had a life of their own. I took all of this drawing and painting and the way I composed and just thrust it right into the camera immediately. So my very first pictures looked a lot like those rather square-looking canvases of mine that are head and shoulders and the arms sticking out. Then, instead of just using those pictures to draw from, they had a complete life of their own.

P: Art really is that which persists, isn't it?

G: Today, people are not looking. They aren't ready to contemplate, and they are not ready to learn how to read drawings. And this is why I have a

rather large following in photography because it's people with lazy minds, mostly. They love the photographs because it is super cheap fast thrills. And drawings are just too much trouble for them to read anymore. Because you have to read drawings. The audience has to participate because drawing is symbolic. I mean, those lines that go around, be they ever so pretty and descriptive of the shoulder and down to the fingers following down over the elbow, those are inventions. The viewer has to come along and contribute something. He has to have had some experiences of touching someone's arm and elbow and finger, and it has to make some connection in his head and start him experiencing that.

P: In terms of the nudity in your photographs, do you suggest that models pose unclothed, or do they suggest it?

G: Half and half. Some people love to take their clothes off. Some people only if asked will do it. I can ask someone to pose for me, and they can say no, and I don't write it off. I'll photograph whatever someone wants because film is so cheap, you know, why not? They probably know more about themselves than you do. So you just photograph the way they want to be. And then

maybe the next time, they say, "I want to pose nude." Then you have that. Also, some people I don't particularly want to photograph nude. I don't view it gloriously or pejoratively. It doesn't have any particular supersex charge whether they do or they don't. Some people are very sexy when they take their clothes off, and other people just stand there completely serene, almost as if they are better clothed. Some people feel more comfortable and more beloved and regal when their clothes are off. You can see why sometimes. And then other people become slightly lurid. Some people play with themselves and produce a sexual looking picture, and other people just stand there as if they're a hand of bananas.

P: Somebody is going to ask you why you find the subject of amputees and dwarfs fascinating.

G: They are allegories. I am using physically different kinds of bodies and forms to express ideas that may have come out of the person or that I think are in the person. To try to express my opinions about those people.

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Living Artist Forum at Genesis Gallery on Magazine Street, New Orleans, LA 1983.

From left: Roger Green, Art Critic; Phyllis Parun, Arts Activist; Stu Carstadter, Artist & Founder of Delgado Art Dept.; unknown; Robert Gordy, Artist

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P: The profane is sacred?

G: In my work it is. Well, I guess it is in my life, too. I am not interested in drawing a shockingly big sexual object. That's not the most important thing. If I am talking about sex, that might be important. But that's not what I'm talking about half the time. I am usually using their bodies in allegorical things to talk of broader things in life, or maybe just ideas are being expressed. My neighbor says it's because of my Catholic background. I think he's right. The concept that body and soul belong together and that we really have a physical side functioning all the time. That is why I have these absolutely carnal angels. I see everything as being very normally, naturally carnal.

P: How necessary is it to the visual image that your figures retain a sensual element?

G: I think it's just my brush strokes that my lines frequently ... they were discovered sexually, and now I am using them for other things. I'm very tactile, and ... I see something, and I instantly know what it feels like because I touch all the time. While I'm talking about the look of something, I'm checking the feel of it.

P: The audience looks at your work, and they see the sensuality, and they see deformity, and they wonder why you find it necessary to include such things.

G: I really believe that all of the things that we are horrified by, our phobias and fetishes, our predilections about things, that they all have a perfectly good side to them if we want to turn to that. It can be reshaped and marshalled up and utilized, and that is the material

for art. I think we dare not throw away anything that was important to us, even if it is frightening, horrifying or socially acceptable.

P: George, why do you stay in New Orleans? Why haven't you moved to New York or San Francisco?

G: I really like provincial. I like being part of a small community, a neighborhood. I like having neighborhood people into my house and being a part of the block. It's a very old-fashioned thing, but there is a defense for it. It's the same thing that the Southern writers did in order to develop, to gain insight into people's lives, not only who they are at any moment but also what they can become and how they can go down and how they can go up. Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, they all did that sort of thing. They watched life change around them. They watched people grow up, grow old, and this is very important to me as a portrait painter.

P: You have reached a status here that I don't think too many other people share. You are accepted; you are popular. You've "made it."

G: I've gone a separate path which started really in 1969. I couldn't imagine why I was entering the best part of my career, but people were not understanding it and not being supportive, so I really went into retirement. Fortunately, I also quit drinking and changed my whole way of living at that time. I at that time decided that I was the art world that I was worried about. I don't believe that the painters we now respect were wonderful, respected parts of the art world. I suspect they went their very own way and didn't worry about whether the art world was ahead of



George Winn and Odetta at Jazz Fest, 1977

them, that they were behind or ahead in the art world.

P: What you've done is return to classicism, and this is considered to be too progressive, I think.

G: The thing is that I believe in both the past and the future, and I reject or accept them as they suit me. Art has never demonstrated any ability to move forward. It's a really curious American concept that art has to imitate science. Art doesn't have a direction.

P: Is the mission of art beyond personal?

G: This is the reason for developing a classicism of your own. The reason for it is to try to make universally understood things so that if something survives from century to century, it is somehow self-contained. All of the Renaissance things aren't beautiful to us, but certain ones will be. They will go sailing right through the centuries because they have enough stuff pulled together, and this internal order is there. It's worth spending a lifetime in the hopes that you might create one or two, even one, that will just sail on past me because the symbols in the picture become self-explanatory — you've done it so many times that finally they actually explain themselves. But those are the important things of civilization, I think, those pieces that come floating through time.