

The Buddhas of Eighty-Third Street

It was the last days of September 1983, and a chill was in the air. I jumped out of bed, pulled on my sweatshirt and jeans, and headed for the studio. *Skull and Roses*, my latest painting, was waiting half-finished on the easel. I mixed a color. It was cadmium red blended with burnt orange. I loaded my brush with the thick, creamy pigment, but I couldn't apply it to the canvas. I simply couldn't paint. I tried again and again until my arm tensed and ached from sheer frustration, and then my fingers began to cramp. The episode was so upsetting that I left the studio and headed for Broadway, where I sat on a bench and wasted away the hours, thinking about this bombshell of a painting block that had hit me. I listened to the rumbling motors and honking horns of Upper West Side delivery trucks and buses, silently watching the neighborhood residents shopping, pushing baby carriages, and going about their business.

Sprawled on nearby benches were mentally ill patients from the Eighty-Fifth Street shelter, addicts slumped over in stupors of drugged dreams, and neighborhood alcoholics who swigged from bottles wrapped in brown paper bags as if the bag would conceal its contents.

At first, I thought it was just a phase, a temporary block. I'd had them before when I was younger; they usually lasted a couple of days

and rapidly dissipated. I could easily get back to work, and sometimes I even felt refreshed. But now I was fifty-two and this one was different. It was as if a sheet of steel had dropped between the canvas and me, like Richard Serra's sculpture *Tilted Arc*, solid and impenetrable.

I went to bed that first night, safe in my husband's arms, and woke up when the sun came shining through my bedroom window. I wasn't sure that I had ever fallen asleep. I slipped on my jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, ready to confront the canvas again, hoping things had changed. But the block appeared before me with increased intensity. I froze in front of the easel, my body stiffened, my hands trembled, and I had to get out. I bolted from the studio and headed for Broadway. It was a brisk morning, and the few remaining leaves blew about me as I made my way up Eighty-Third Street.

Someone had already occupied my bench. He was a nervous wreck who stared at me suspiciously. He hadn't bathed or shaved in weeks, but I could read beneath the stubble and grime that he was young—sadly, only in his twenties. His leg vibrated up and down like a seismic tremor, shaking his loose pants, red shirt, and rumpled plaid jacket. I nodded to him as I sat down, but he shot me a wild-eyed, terror-filled look. I understood. He didn't frighten me; he was most likely schizophrenic. He fired a quick glance at my paint-splattered jeans and decided I belonged. We sat there silently, staring at nothing, the Buddhas of Eighty-Third Street.

Being a New Yorker and sketching in parks, restaurants, and back alleys, I had observed over the years that people with schizophrenia like to dress in vivid colors. They put together crazy outfits: print scarves, hats, beads, pins, anything with a lot of energy to keep up with the high-voltage electricity in their brains. They reminded me of my mother. She was not schizophrenic, just a larger-than-life gambling addict who liked to wear beaded sweaters with rhinestone brooches. She sewed lace collars onto print blouses and adorned herself with pearl necklaces. She either tucked her hair into a sequined jet-black snood or wore fanciful hats draped with a netted veil and embellished with peacock feathers or clusters of artificial flowers. Her hats were worn tilted to one side, and in spite of her extravagant taste for ornamentation, she exuded an air of elegance.

Another week passed, and still, I couldn't paint. The block had clamped its venomous incisors into my neck and paralyzed me. To make matters worse, I was under pressure. Time was running out. I had a

show scheduled to open in November at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery in SoHo. The gallery had already placed the ads, collectors and museums had been notified, and articles were being written. Along with Chuck Close, Richard Estes, and Robert Bechtle, I was a Photorealist at the peak of my career, and I was the only woman in this groundbreaking group of artists who were to have a profound effect on art history. My work was in collections of major museums throughout the United States and Europe, and colleges and universities were inviting me to lecture—but since the painting block hit, I wanted no part of it. I refused all invitations, withdrew from friends, stayed away from art openings. All I could do was sit on the bench, immobilized in a state of depression verging on despair.

Art was my vehicle, yet in spite of the years of study and hard work, my world had collapsed. I was reduced to a semi-hypnotic state, with my mind wandering back and forth in time. It was five o'clock and the sun was setting when I felt something irritating my throat. I cleared it a few times, but it got worse; I began to cough, splutter, and then choke. The exhaust pipe of a stalled bus was belching out black, toxic fumes, its foul smoke enveloping the whole center island. I doubled over, my throat constricted, and tears flooded from my eyes. Backed-up cars honked their horns and my lungs hurt. I couldn't breathe. There was a scramble and everyone on the benches scattered in all directions looking for fresh air. I staggered out of the fog and coughed my way home.

The Portfolio

Days later, back on the bench, I closed my eyes to the bright sun. My thoughts zigzagged back to the time I was thirteen, when I unequivocally concluded that life was not worth living without art. Yet here I was, forty years later, stranded on the Broadway bench without the very thing that held me together. I felt depressed, disillusioned, disconnected, dazed, and derelict, all Ds . . . just like my report card grades.

I woke up the next morning not wanting to return to the Broadway island of smoke, isolation, and exile. But the idea of facing my unfinished canvas was even more upsetting. So I bypassed the studio and headed for Broadway, where my usual spot was waiting. The bus and its offending fumes were long gone, the air was clean, and it was a pleasant day. I made myself comfortable and settled in for the long haul.



What had brought me to this point of desolation? How did it all begin? Even as a young girl in primary school, I had wanted to become an artist—to learn art’s rules, study its techniques—but I had no idea how to do it or where to go. Fortunately, one day in early 1945 I bumped into Flora, a girl who lived in my building. Flora received private lessons after school and kept apart from neighborhood children, but, just this once, Flora stopped and offhandedly mentioned that she was taking the test for a high school that specialized in art. Overcome with excitement, I bombarded her with questions. She was reluctant to offer details but eventually revealed the name . . . it was the High School of Music & Art on 135th Street in Harlem, and you needed to take an entrance exam and bring a portfolio.

From that moment on, I became obsessed and thought of nothing but getting into this school where I could learn the craft of art. I was also worried and perplexed, because I didn’t know what a portfolio was. I asked my mother; she knew nothing and wasn’t particularly interested in finding out. However, mom was more than willing to let me pursue my ideas so she could carry on with her gambling addiction.

Ironically, my mother had strong artistic abilities, yet failed to value them in herself or in me. She embroidered tablecloths, crocheted blankets, designed her own needlepoint pillows, and set up carefully arranged flowers. She cut reproductions of Old Master paintings from magazines and placed them all over the apartment. A Rembrandt self-portrait hung over the green velour sofa in the living room. He wore an oversized beret and pleated smock. That’s when I realized that artists worked in specific outfits. Rembrandt hung next to a fifteenth-century Italian artist named Ghirlandaio, who painted a beautiful young boy looking up at an old man whose nose was grotesque, bulbous, swollen, and infested with hideous warts. It hurt just to look at him. I knew the boy loved the old man in spite of his deformity because of the beautiful expression on his face, and I also knew the painting was great in spite of its subject matter. But I couldn’t understand why my mother liked it. She gravitated toward the strange and unbalanced and sought out disturbing images. Her tastes ranged from kitsch to the most profound expression of high art.

Right next to the Ghirlandaio was Jan van Eyck’s 1434 *Arnolfini Portrait*. The people in these paintings became my friends. They inhabited

the house and kept me company when I was home alone. They looked after me as they glanced down from the living room wall.

Rembrandt was the grandfather I never had, Mary Cassatt my good aunt, Paul Cézanne my steadfast uncle, Amedeo Modigliani my wayward brother. Art itself took on the role of substitute mother and family. Not only did it invigorate me but it also protected me from the confusion of the outside world. The concept of art took over my life. The history of art became my history; the making of art, my truth; and the essence of art, my religion.

Centered over the piano was a romantic print of a violinist flinging his instrument in the air in order to kiss his beautiful young accompanist. In the bathroom, a sexy Alberto Vargas pin-up girl with bulging double-D breasts, nipples popping out of her tight white blouse, hung over the towel rack. Vargas was an illustrator for *Esquire* and *Playboy* magazines and one of the first artists to use the airbrush. The airbrush was considered a mechanical device used only by lowly retouchers and illustrators for their slick commercial work. In spite of Vargas's subject matter, his technique intrigued me and filtered into my decision to go against art-world doctrine and experiment with the airbrush years later. Chuck Close and I were to legitimize the use of the airbrush in fine-art painting.

I found myself attracted to images of passion, sorrow, love, anguish, joy, and inner truth. Artists concretize these emotions and freeze them on the canvas. It is one of the miraculous offerings of art.

Besides the drawing test to be given at the school, I had two weeks to create ten works for my portfolio. I pulled out a few sheets of erasable bond typewriter paper and two yellow Mongol pencils from the family desk in the foyer. In those days, pencil sharpeners had to be screwed to the desk and rotated by hand. Only schools or offices had them, so I used my father's single-edged razor blade to sharpen my stubby pencil tips.

I searched the apartment for subject matter and found a bottle of Old Grand-Dad whiskey stashed under the kitchen sink. Old Grand-Dad's craggy face, with his round, wire-rimmed glasses and deeply etched age lines, reminded me of the old men I hung out with in the park. I liked old men. From as early as five or six, I sat on their laps and watched them play chess and checkers. I was alone most of the time because of my mother's gambling addiction. These men were like parents to me. Besides, unlike the cliquey girls, they accepted me and tolerated my mood swings. Looking back on it now, I was lucky none of them were perverts.

Old Grand-Dad would be my very first drawing. I set to work on our white enamel kitchen table and proceeded to render every hair on Old Grand-Dad's head. Then I spit on my fingers and smeared the graphite to achieve dramatic chiaroscuro effects. I thought it was terrific; I didn't know any better.

Using a picture in the *Daily News* advertising *Mrs. Miniver*, a movie about World War II, I drew a portrait of the British actress Greer Garson. The reproduction was so blurry I had to refocus her face in my drawing. That presaged what was to come years later in my Photorealist painting of Marilyn Monroe. My next drawing was a cartoon of two girls walking, taken from an illustration inside a Kotex box. The last few sketches were of the old men playing chess, the horse chestnut trees I loved so much, and the pigeons pecking away on the cobblestones.

That was it; my ten drawings were done. It was time to get a portfolio to put them in. I asked my father where I could find one, but he had never been to an art supply store and wasn't even sure what a portfolio looked like. My brother Milton might have known, but he was away at college, about to be shipped off to war.

My mother said, "Ask at the local five-and-ten-cent store. Woolworth's has everything."

Getting to Woolworth's on 181st Street was a long and potentially dangerous walk because I had to cross Broadway and enter Amsterdam territory, where the Irish Dukes beat up the Jewish kids. We were secular Jews who only observed major Jewish holidays like Yom Kippur and Passover, but it didn't matter if you were religious or not—you were likely to be verbally abused or physically attacked. But I needed that portfolio. I half-ran, half-walked, never looking back until I found Woolworth's, all lit up with its red-and-gold sign above the entrance.

I pushed open the swinging doors and asked the first salesgirl I saw, "Where can I find a portfolio?"

"A what?"

"A portfolio, you know, to put things in."

The girl chewed her gum and shook her head.

"Never heard of it."

I moved to the next aisle, and asked again.

"Do you know where I can find a portfolio?"

Nobody knew what I was talking about, so I decided to fiddle with a basket of lipsticks at the cosmetic counter. I pulled the off the caps and

tested the colors on the heel of my thumb. The cosmetic salesgirl stood there chewing her gum, oblivious.

“Do you know where I can find a portfolio?”

She looked up. “Yeah, take a look at the stationery counter, over there.”

I made my way to the next aisle, where stacks of loose-leaf binders, steno pads, paper clips, erasers, rubber bands, and other assorted paraphernalia were bunched together in little cubicles. And there it was! A small, brown leatherette folder with the word PORTFOLIO embossed diagonally across the front in shiny gold script.

“Wow, am I lucky!” I thought.

The only thing that puzzled me was the writing paper and envelopes inside. I paid the salesgirl with my allowance money and headed home. Once inside, I pulled out the paper and envelopes and slid my drawings into the slots, amazed at how perfectly they fit.

It was hard getting to sleep that night. I tossed and turned and woke up the next morning nervous and wired. I asked Flora if she would go with me, but her parents were already escorting her and didn’t offer to take me along. I was trying to figure out what trains to take when my father offered to drive me. It was a kind and unexpected act that I am ever grateful for. I sat beside him, clutching my portfolio, as his old Buick Riviera chugged up the steep hill at 135th Street to Convent Avenue.

“That must be the school!” I said excitedly when I saw the stately old Gothic building.

My father pulled over to the curb to let me out. I swung open the heavy door, put one foot on the sidewalk, looked up, and gasped in horror.

Right across the street were several dozen students walking determinedly toward the front door, all carrying huge black cases, which I instantly knew must be portfolios, *real portfolios*, not like my inexcusable five-and-ten-cent-store letter-writing tablet.

My God, there was Flora walking between her parents with the biggest one of all. She never let on, never told me what a portfolio was or how prepared she was. I was later to find that inside of Flora’s huge black case was a series of watercolors, pastels, and oil paintings. She had been attending classes at the Art Students League all year in preparation for this day. To her credit, even though she hid her training, Flora did tell me about the test for Music & Art. She was my first experience with the fiercely competitive art world.

I yanked myself back into the car and slammed the door shut. I slouched down and sat there feeling stupefied and stupid—betrayed by Flora and crushed by the thought of my impending doom. Ashamed and embarrassed, and not wanting to leave the safety of the car, I asked my father to take me home or at least drop me off at the bus stop. With a stern look, he leaned over and pushed me out.

“You’re a Flack, and Flacks don’t give up. Take the test!”

I watched the old Buick disappear down the hill and stood at the curb, shaken. I must have stayed in that spot for quite a few minutes, because when I looked up, no one was around. I was alone on the street; all the students had already entered the building. *What have I got to lose?* I took a deep breath, walked through the front door and found my way to the test area, where I saw the formidable mountain of black portfolios piled high in front of the room. I edged my way to the front, slinking along the side wall and hoping no one would notice me or my ridiculous writing tablet. I slid it in between two giant portfolios, turned around, spotted an empty place, and took my seat.

Within a minute the instructor appeared and distributed several sheets of eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch newsprint paper and a stick of black charcoal. I had never seen or used either of those items before. We were told to arrange our chairs in a circle, leaving enough room in the center for a model to pose. A senior student dressed in black leotards took her place on the model stand. The instructor held up a stopwatch and explained the rules.

“I will be timing you. Start drawing only when I give the signal. You cannot make another line after I say ‘Stop.’ There will be four five-minute poses and two twenty-minute poses. Are you ready? Everybody start.”

Down went her hand as she pressed the button on her stopwatch. The only sound heard was the scratching of charcoal sticks as they moved back and forth over the rough newsprint paper. I felt a burst of adrenaline shoot through my body as I began to sketch. It was the first time I had ever drawn from a model. I felt exhilarated; everything around me faded away. I was alone with the model, the charcoal, and the newsprint—all firsts.

I felt a sense of my own power and command. I could translate that figure onto paper. I sat up even straighter and looked around to get a glimpse of my competitors’ work. From what I could see, my drawings were good. I knew they were good. Three weeks later, I received the letter.

Dear Audrey Flack:

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for entry to the High School of Music & Art.

9

It was a miracle.

Another chance meeting occurred the year I graduated from Music & Art, when I bumped into a schoolmate, Margie Ponce. Margie would eventually become Margie Israel, wife to Marvin Israel, the renowned artist, photographer, art director, and lover of Diane Arbus. In 1945, Margie declared that she was going to take the test for Cooper Union, an art school that was tuition-free. "It doesn't offer a college degree, just a three-year graduate certificate," said Margie. But I jumped at the chance and immediately investigated how to proceed.

My immigrant parents were unable to help financially. No woman in my family had ever gone to college. *Too much education spoils a girl's chance of getting married* was my mother's warning, and she repeated it endlessly like a mantra. I decided then and there to go it on my own.

It was a bright summer's day when I took the A train from 175th Street to the Eighth Street station in Greenwich Village to compete in the grueling test for Cooper Union. I put on my Saint-Gaudens necklace for good luck. It was a small bronze medal that I hung on a simple chain. Saint-Gaudens was the fine art award presented to the most outstanding artist at Music & Art, and I loved the sense of validation it gave me. I was surprised that the medal showed a woman wearing a long skirt, drawing from a plaster cast, instead of a male artist. I wondered if boys also got the medal of this woman.

I rubbed the medal as I walked to Cooper Union from Sixth Avenue over to Astor Place via Eighth Street. Eighth Street was a wide cross-town shopping area buzzing with cars, buses, pedestrians, and stores the likes of which I had never seen: specialty shops with exotic window displays, and jewelry stores that designed custom wedding rings, not at all like the boring standardized jewelry the Washington Heights matriarchs wore. One small shop made hand-crafted leather sandals, each one uniquely designed by the owner, a young bearded hippie who left his workbench and took an imprint of your foot by tracing each toe on a piece of cardboard. By my senior year, I had saved enough money to order a pair of custom-made Roman gladiator sandals with lace-up ankle straps.



Fig. 1 Cooper Union. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / David Shankbone (CCA-SA 3.0).

My eyes glanced at a sex shop with life-sized mannequins wearing nothing but feather boas and lace panties with slits where they shouldn't be. Oversized dildos with the cocks pointed upward rested against their bare ankles. This was a world far removed from the family-owned Jewish bakeries, grocery shops, and kosher butchers of Washington Heights.

As much as I wanted to take in the thrill of Eighth Street, I had to get to the test on time, so I fast-walked across Mercer Street and Fifth Avenue until I arrived at the spacious triangle of Astor Place. A crowd of students had already gathered outside Peter Cooper's visionary building. Built out of huge blocks of brownish-purple stone, it looked like a mysterious temple crowned with a row of gigantic pointed skylights. For me, Cooper Union seemed to dominate the entire Lower East Side of Manhattan like a giant monolith.

At the stroke of nine, the oversized metal doors swung open and hundreds of anxious students rushed in to secure seats. I spotted Margie and waved, but we got separated. The tests were designed to determine intellectual and artistic abilities and took two days to administer. Every twenty minutes a new booklet was handed out. We had to complete as many pages as possible before the next one was distributed. Cooper

Union would select ninety students out of three thousand candidates. Only forty-five of us would graduate. The thrill of being one of the graduates is difficult to explain.

I was seventeen years old and a student in one of the greatest art schools in the country.

Avant-garde artists taught there and worked in surrounding studios. They were serious professionals like Peter Busa, Steve Wheeler, and Will Barnet, who formed the Indian Space painting movement; Charles Gwathmey, a star of the Social Realist group; and Nick Marsicano and John Ferren, who were part of the hot new Abstract Expressionist movement. These artists were producing some of the most radical and shocking art forms of the century.

Abstract Expressionism was electrifying the city, revolutionizing the art world, and riveting the public. It would be historically and socially epic. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline were to become legends. And here I was, a young, aspiring artist, miraculously scooped up by this whirling tornado and deposited in the center of one of the most exciting periods in all of art history.

Because Cooper Union was free, it didn't have dormitories, cafeterias, bookstores, or lounges. Students lived at home with their parents and commuted back and forth on buses and trains every day. A few slept in a rented loft in the neighborhood. After my first semester, with money from odd jobs and an occasional sale of a drawing or watercolor, I was able to rent a cheap loft in a condemned building on Eighth Street right alongside the Third Avenue elevated subway. It was illegal and considered too dangerous to inhabit, but I knew I could get around the tilted staircases, broken banisters, and wet rot that weakened the floors. I was thrilled to have a studio of my own! John Grillo, a handsome, talented Ab Ex painter, rented the top floor. Bob Lander, a comic-book illustrator who inked Spiderman, rented the first floor, and my studio was in the middle. I could watch Lander work from the sinkhole in the center of my loft, and when he needed some extra help to meet deadlines, I helped ink Spiderman for him.

My studio was directly across the street from Cooper Union, its second-floor windows on the same level as the elevated train tracks. The tracks were supported by powerful steel T-beams that had become so encrusted with rust over the years that chunks of orange-colored crumbling metal chipped off and stained your fingers and jeans if you accidentally brushed against them. The overhead railroad ties cast slatted



Fig. 2 Audrey Flack, ca. 1950. Photo courtesy of Audrey Flack.

shadows on the streets below and spread a dull pall over the neighborhood. Everything was sooty black and gray, except for the door to my condemned building, which the previous tenant had painted bright cadmium red. It was the only upbeat color in that godforsaken Bowery. Like a Jasper Johns target painting, it sucked in color and breathed out energy. I was living in the center of the action, looking out of the eye of the bull.

The local trains rattled into the Astor Place station every five minutes, blowing a storm of cigarette butts, crumpled newspapers, paper cups,

and threadbare rags. The winos who took shelter under the tracks slept in makeshift tents, oblivious to the earsplitting, high-pitched shrieks of the metal wheels as the local trains screeched into the station. Most of the time I worked with cotton stuffed in my ears. The screech was muted when the express train whizzed past, but the reverberations from its accelerated speed shook the building, rattled my windows, and buzzed my feet as if they were plugged into an electrical socket. The art world was open to me—but so were the pitfalls of Abstract Expressionist life. It was exhilarating, but also rough and fast.