



1. When you started working as an artist who were your companions? I have the sense you were quite a loner, right?

When I returned to New York in 1977, after graduate school, most of the artists I knew were friends from Yale, or friends of friends from elsewhere. That expanded pretty slowly. I was looking at some of the artists that Thomas shows now back then but I didn't know them.



I did dance next to Ron Gorchov at a drunken party in the 70's. It was a small world. I am pretty private, and though I did occasionally exchange studio visits with friends, my wife Rona and I were each other's primary audience. Though our work couldn't have been more different, we shared a lot of interests, including looking at historical work from beyond the 20th century, and moving our own work towards figuration.

2. With whom did you start exhibiting in NYC? And where was your first exhibition abroad?

I was in a group show at Tilton Gallery pretty early on. Before he opened his gallery, Jack had worked with Betty Parsons, who saw my work at Yale, and told me to come see her when I got to New York, so that's probably how he knew it. My first solo exhibition in New York, which included abstract paintings and paintings with ears in them, was with Jose Freire at fiction/nonfiction. I started showing with Daniel Newburg Gallery, who had a kind of international viewpoint, a few years later. My first solo exhibition in Europe was at Galerie Alfred Kren, in Cologne, in 1989.

THOMAS BRAMBILLA



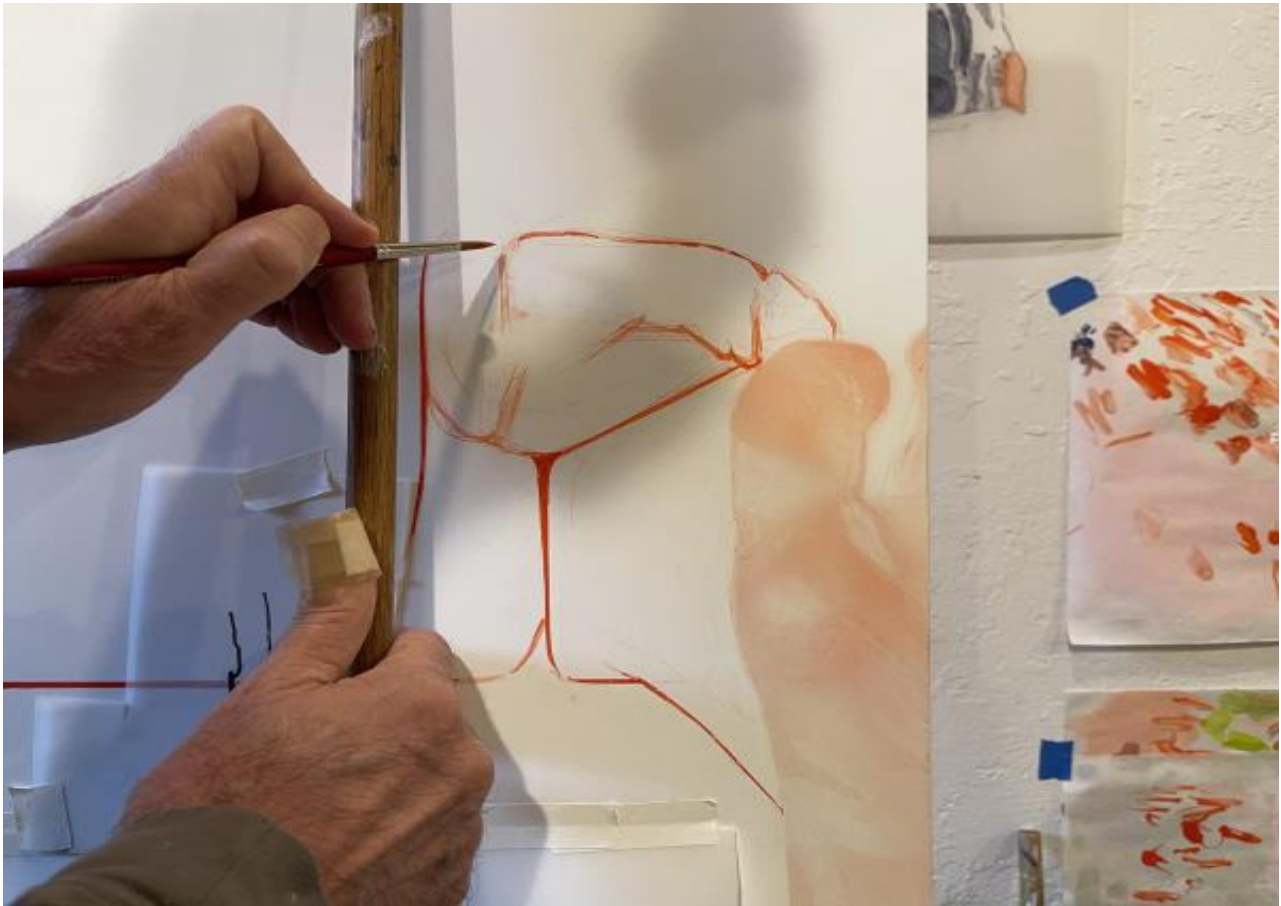
3. What was your relationship like with Ileana Sonnabend?

I first met Ileana in Venice, shortly after Rona joined Sonnabend, at a lunch including several of her artists, and knowing the history of the gallery, I was pretty intimidated. She had a quiet, powerful presence, but I was seated next to her and we laughed together at bad jokes I made about food.



As time went on, I felt really lucky because we got to travel with Ileana and Antonio, a couple of weeks each summer, looking at art, and that continued until Ileana died. We continue to travel with Antonio, several weeks each year, recently looking at a lot of Romanesque and Gothic sculpture and paintings in Spain. Traveling together and seeing that work means the world to me.

4. The technical aspect of your work seems to be very important and is certainly interesting. Can you briefly describe it?



In some ways I work like a 15th century painter. I need a clear drawing to start a painting, so I make a lot of drawings towards each one. When I have one I like, I transfer it to an aluminum honeycomb panel that I've prepared with a lot of coats of gesso and sanded. Preparing the panels takes about a week so I do them in bunches. I like working on a very white, smooth, absorbent surface. I work mostly in thin relatively transparent coats of paint, because the white ground helps make the color feel like light. I put the paint on a lot of different ways. I use big brushes, and tiny ones, both hard and soft, that I've collected across the years, and some parts are sprayed. Because most of my layers are thin, I can put color on top of color to adjust it or make changes as I go. I also put paint on and take it off with cotton swabs and paper towels, and when I want to make big changes, I have figured out ways to take paint off and get back to the white ground.

5. Is it true that you have worked in fresco? Can you tell us more about it?

There are ways that the color glows in frescoes- and looks as if it might vanish- that I loved deeply after that first trip to Italy. It took a while to figure out, but I worked in fresco for several years after that. We

were shipping some abroad and it was pretty impractical- fresco paintings were never meant to be portable -and they were heavy and fragile. Eventually I found other ways to work, trying to keep some of what I loved about those surfaces and color in my paintings.

6. Your paintings seem to be permeated by historical art. Which artists from the past are you inspired by? And regarding the present?

I was already in love with early Italian painting when Rona and I made what was my first trip to Italy in the early 80's. I'd had a reproduction of a painting by the Master of the Osservanza up in my studio for years. I remember being completely knocked out by Masolino, Sassetta, and Piero della Francesca. And seeing Fra Angelico's frescos in those cells in San Marco was transformational for me. I love Netherlandish work and especially love its influence on gothic painting in Spain.



There is a mix of naturalism and something close to caricature there that is very important to me. Before we travelled in Spain, a lot of that work and the artists were unfamiliar to me. As we spent more time looking, I began to think that Anonymous is my favorite artist- probably because I'm drawn to artists who don't fit- and in history Anonymous has the biggest range. I love Spanish Gothic painting! Philip Guston's, John Coplans', Louise Bourgeois' and my wife Rona Pondick's work have all been very important to me, but that's just a small sample. I've lived in New York a long time, and seen a lot of contemporary and historical work, and there are plenty of others who have inspired me. These days I am often surprised and happy to be interested in and to feel some affinity with work by artists who are younger than I am.

7. Were your works similar to what we see now, or were you painting differently at the beginning of your career?

When I saw those Fra Angelicos in San Marco, several years before I began showing, I was knocked out by the imagery, the color and their physical presence. My first solo exhibition in New York was made up of frescoes, and it included both colored abstract paintings, and black and white paintings with life-sized ears.

8. Rona is a sculptor whose work has been widely exhibited in the US and internationally. What is your relationship like with her regarding the work? Do you exchange opinions or ideas? Do you influence each other's work? How so?

For the first 35 years of our life together Rona and I worked in spaces that were side by side, where we live, so we were in each other's studios daily. We are very different, but we've talked about each other's work, and our own across all that time.



We have also looked at contemporary and historic art together for a lifetime, and Rona's being a sculptor gave me access to sculpture in ways that I'm really grateful for. I think she feels the same way about painting. We're both pretty opinionated, and in the past we tended to see more differences than similarities in our work. When we got asked a few years ago to do a small museum show together, as we gathered material for the exhibition, we were both surprised to see how many relationships there are in what we make. Across time, we've come to realize how much we share interests, especially in ways that the body and form can make psychologically suggestive meanings. And though what we make is very different, I think one of the things we have in common is our love for work that is rooted in and reflects some of the complexity of real life and lived experience.

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