BOOK REVIEW: “A Daughter’s Memoir” Takes On Peter Selz and Modern Art

April 29, 2014
by James Croak

“My father who sparkled like a firecracker, whom I craved, idolized, but didn’t really know.” – Gabrielle Selz in “Unstill Life: A Daughter’s Memoir of Art and Love in the Age of Abstraction”

Gabrielle Selz has published her first book, a memoir about growing up in the art world with her singular father, Peter Selz, a former chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.

German born and Jewish, he emigrated to America ahead of the Nazis’ persecution and rose to the top of his profession with boundless enthusiasm and charisma, championing the motley lot of American artists who gathered in New York City in the ’50s and ’60s. No figure was more central to the mainstreaming of this curio known as “modern art” than Peter Selz. Literally scores of artists owe their influence to him and MoMA became a center of culture under his curating. He is also a scholar of definitive books and papers about German Expressionism and American Abstract Expressionism, and The New York Times appropriately named him Mr. Modern Art.

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It’s common for more than one book to arrive on the same subject about the same time, as the literary world has a common nervous system and tends to type in the same direction: such is how movements are formed. A biography of Peter Selz was released in 2012 entitled “Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art” by Paul J. Karlstrom with Ann Heath Karlstrom.

The new book by Gabrielle Selz, “Unstill Life: A Daughter’s Memoir of Art and Love in the Age of Abstraction” (W.W. Norton & Company, May 5, 2014), covers some of the same ground, but as a whole reads better. The former is written at arm’s length, descriptive of the events, rendered in the infinitive form, and a tad stuffy, which is *de rigueur* for history writing; the latter is written from within, a young girl’s emotive response to her unique surroundings, a poem to her father. It is also a bildungsroman for Ms. Selz, who with this book emerges as an impressive and polished storyteller.

Much of the first half of Selz’s book is given to the bawdy art scene that centered around apartment parties and bar stool lectures in New York City. The inebriated and carefree social life of New York School abstract painters appears in numerous books and films, such as the 1976 “Next Stop, Greenwich Village,” or “Pollock” (2000) and it is not new to most readers with an interest in the

subject. But Ms. Selz adds flavor with humorous and engaging vignettes from a child's point of view of Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Ad Reinhardt and others, often referred to as "The Boys." This downtown scene so dominated the direction of world art that when young Gabrielle asked her mother what a "hinterland" was, she responded "anything outside of Manhattan."

Mr. Selz introduced the kind of relationship chaos into his life that is more typical of the artists that he selected than of a museum curator. He is shown to be a prig, issuing his second wife a new first name as he believed her given name "sounded like a cleaning lady." The devil is in the details and there are layers here to disassemble: the renaming reveals an ugly European classism wherein cleaning ladies are somehow on the bottom and art historians on the top; more pointedly it demonstrates Selz's marked narcissism and an era that tolerated it: any contemporary man who asked a woman for her hand—and, by the way, I'm going to rename you—would be shown the door.

Said rebranded spouse instructed young Gabrielle and her sister not to hug her as she didn't like "clutchy children," so perhaps this ice tray deserved Selz. After her, there would be the uproar of a third, fourth, and fifth wife, with regular interludes of Selz wandering back to the original.

Abstract Expression was displaced rather abruptly by Pop Art, whose banality was foreign to the AbEx crowd and deemed intolerable. When Sidney Janis gave a show to a group of Pop artists at his renowned gallery, much of his stable, "most of The Boys," except de Kooning, quit the gallery en masse. When Peter Selz asked Frank Stella for the time in the lobby of MoMA, Stella responded "time to leave, Selz." Peter Selz followed his advice and decamped to Berkeley to be the first director of the new Berkeley Museum of Art at UC Berkeley, so new it had not yet constructed a building.

A chapter about the Westbeth building in NYC—a 1969 city project to provide inexpensive housing to artists—is especially engaging. Located in a former Bell Labs building on the lower West side, it was converted by Richard Meier with utopian visions of an artists community bettering the world. After Selz went west, Gabrielle's mother moved her and her sister into the building and things more or less went well until they didn't.

Artists are not a cheery lot and three people would commit suicide at the Westbeth, including the much-admired Diane Arbus. This on top of the family friend Mark Rothko killing himself elsewhere. Gabrielle went all-Edgar Allan Poe and began reciting poems about death by suicide at the dinner table. Time to move, her mother decided, and they left for the hinterland, aka Deerfield, Illinois.

Her annual visits with her father in California sound like an idiot's guide to Haight Ashbury, as her middle-aged father grew his hair long, wore tie-dyed pullovers and drew up protest signs for his teenage daughter to carry. "Like Robin Hood and his Merry Men in Sherwood Forest, they band together and face down the police pigs," gushed Peter Selz. But the young Gabrielle knew better, to her the hippies looked "shabby and poor and had to sleep in the park". Had she stayed in the Haight for a time like this reviewer, she would know about the multiple drug murders, rapes, ubiquitous theft, and some rather exotic diseases leaping from love-child to love-child.

Gabrielle would suffer a near fatal motorcycle crash with her boyfriend Michael that put the damper

on her youthful, and helmetless, sense of invulnerability, and spend a long period of time convalescing, gradually learning to walk once again. Her mother used Gabrielle's prone state to monologue about her choice of men. "Michael was drunk. It's the sort of thing your father would do…" she warned. "Michael didn't mean to hurt me!" Gabrielle implored. "Of course not, and he won't mean to hurt you the next time, either," returned the mother.

Gabrielle would go on to finish an art history degree and emerge as an art writer, after a long incubation an especially knowledgeable one, as this book shows. The second half of this memoir includes her erudite concatenation of the various contemporary styles and endeavors linking the ever expanding art world, a world that first her father and now she herself have enjoyed and enriched. For a first book it's impressive; actually for a second or third book it would still be a contender, with lean engaging prose, an alertness for detail, and her consummate storytelling. One of the season's surprises.

BASIC FACTS: "Unstill Life: A Daughter's Memoir of Art and Love in the Age of Abstraction" by Gabrielle Selz. Published by W. W. Norton & Company, 352 pages, May 5, 2014. www.gabrielleselz.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Author Gabrielle Selz is a professional art critic who contributes reviews to Hamptons Art Hub and to The Huffington Post. Additionally, her writing has been published in magazines and newspapers including *MORE Magazine, The New York Times*, *Newsday* and *Fiction*.