

## ART SHOWCASE

## Work in Progress: Philippe Pasqua

EXHIBITION | The Storage

## A compelling mix of calmness and drama, writ large

Visitors approach the building through a Japanese-style garden with bubbling fountains and a long reflecting pool flanked by freestanding stone walls and bridged by a squared-off stone arch. In the center of the pool, a colossal, gleaming chrome-plated bronze death's head sprouts multiple butterflies from its skull.

This compelling combination of subtlety and overstatement, calmness and drama, in which aesthetics and tranquility are paired with the menace of death and violence, are typical of the artist who created it, Philippe Pasqua.

The building is The Storage, a former warehouse in the Paris suburb of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, which Pasqua converted in 2010 into an outsized, multilevel exhibition space, where he holds yearly exhibitions of his work. The current exhibition, "Work in Progress," which will continue through June, features mostly new works, along with some older pieces.

Inside, in the first of a series of cavernous white-painted exhibition rooms, a monumental, anatomically correct aluminum sculpture of a Tyrannosaurus rex skeleton clings to a wall as if caught in the act of crawling up to the ceiling, casting a disturbing shadow. One of Pasqua's latest works, it has been described by the art critic José Alvarez as "light and gracious, troubling and docile."

On the facing wall of the otherwise empty room is a rare self-portrait, in which Pasqua depicts himself in a style similar to that of his other monumental portraits — a face, alone on the canvas with no background, painted in raw, bold strokes that make the skin look as if it has been flayed. The self-portrait, with one clear blue eye staring intensely at the viewer, differs from most of his portraits in that half the face is missing. "This is a very classical self-portrait," says Alvarez, "in which the face is half devoured: half skeleton, half covered in flesh. It's impressive."

This self-portrait might be said to create a link between two of Pasqua's obsessions: portraying the flesh in his paintings and what the flesh conceals in his sculptures of death's heads and skeletons. The artist has also recently begun to paint death's heads in large format for the first time. "It amuses me to show what's under the face," he says.



Pasqua's "Chrome Bronze Skull" (2012) takes pride of place at The Storage, the artist's exhibition space outside Paris.

Taking the opposite tack, he sometimes covers real skulls with leather and has them tattooed, effectively giving them new skin. He presents these objects as sculptures and also photographs them against black backgrounds. Examples are on show at The Storage.

Also featured in the exhibition is another new series: portraits of children, particularly two little girls named Aora and Stella. These, when painted in Pasqua's usual style and in bloody shades of red, take on a frightening aspect, as if they were ill or deformed (although the original models were not). The

artist's fascination with the extremes of the human condition can also be seen in two earlier series, a few examples of which are being shown on the second level of The Storage: "Blocs" ("Operating Rooms"), graphic depictions of patients on the operating table and in intensive care, and "Trauma,"

showing sex-change operations, both based on photos taken during visits to hospitals.

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PROCESS | The artist at work

## Art measured out in brushes and high-top sneakers

Philippe Pasqua's closely intertwined life and work are played out in multiple ways. He works in series, currently painting monumental portraits of various human subjects and sculpting, painting, drawing and photographing death's heads. And inside his vast studio/living space in a former industrial space in a northern suburb of Paris, every object is multiplied dozens or even hundreds of times.

The artist has a very particular way of painting. Tacked on the wall beside each canvas — 10 or so may be under way at any given time around the studio — is a photo he has chosen from among those he has taken of his model. As with most artists, much time is spent staring at the canvas, but when Pasqua springs into action, any hesitancy disappears. He attacks the canvas like a dancer, jumping around and slashing at it with quick, sure gestures, spattering the floor and walls around him with paint. Since the canvases are so large, he must often climb up one of the several ladders standing around in the studio to reach the upper sections.

As he works, an accidental sculpture grows around him. Several large trestle tables serve as palettes, and a volcano of paint takes shape in the center of each one as the work progresses. Around it rises higher and higher a stack of brushes stuck to each other — Pasqua uses each brush only once, then sets it down on top of the others with the handles pointing in the same direction. On the floor, next to boxes and boxes of new brushes and paints, rise heaps of discarded paint tubes, plastic water bottles and other detritus. In the corner near the entrance to the next-door living space is another pile, this one of identical pairs of paint-spattered high-top sneakers.

When the floor of the studio becomes a sea of objects that threaten to engulf it, he has the whole lot hauled away and starts again with fresh trestle tables.

Pasqua used to blast electro, reggae or rap music while working, but he has recently lost interest in that.

"It used to be very important to me," he says. "Now I can't listen to it anymore. It's as if I rejected it." He now prefers the sound of silence. ■

PORTRAIT | An idiosyncratic path

## The conundrum of Philippe Pasqua, an artist of multiple contradictions

Philippe Pasqua is a conundrum. An enormously successful painter and sculptor in a world where monetary reward is but a dream for most artists, no matter how talented, he is not as famous as his success should imply. His work is often compared with that of Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Damien Hirst and Jenny Saville, yet while he has a following of devoted collectors and has shown his work around the

world in galleries, foundations and other private institutions, he has not yet been entirely accepted by the powers that be in the international art world.

Pasqua, who was born in Grasse, France, in 1965, and moved to Paris as a child, is especially atypical for a French artist, and not only because of his bad-boy personal style (dreadlocks and casual, American-style clothing) and a penchant for shocking or morbid subject matter in his work. He is a loner, an outsider who has totally eschewed the ordinary path to success for a French artist — i.e., a big-name art school, loyalty to a gallery and a reluctance to rock the boat.

Right from the beginning, he has beaten his own path through the thickets of the art world. Going to art school never occurred to him, and he came to painting through sheer happenstance. Walking down the street in Paris one day when he was 17 or 18 years old, he felt an emotional jolt when he saw the cover of a book on Francis Bacon in the window of a bookstore. It seemed to speak to him, and the message was, "Maybe you could do this, too."

"It gave me a real shock," he says. "It said, 'Try, so I went home and tried.'"

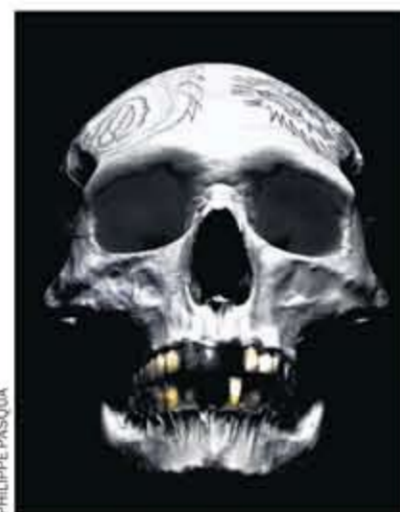
He began by painting such subjects as ghosts, satyrs, devils, crucifixions and skinned animals. This was followed by the "Voodoo" series of paintings populated by floating skulls and shrunken heads, and later by depictions of phalluses, dental operations, bondage scenes and orgies, and images from pornographic films. Babies then

captured his attention, followed by nude figures posed in front of the cathedral of Notre Dame. Later came a series of clinical depictions of childbirth, operating-room scenes and the ill, and transsexuals undergoing sex-change operations.

These phases of his career eventually led him, around a decade ago, to the style in which he continues to paint today: monumental portraits of faces of real people of all types: men, women, children, transsexuals, people with Down syndrome, cancer patients, people with bruised faces. He chooses his subjects by feeling. He recently met a little girl named Aora, for example, and something about her struck him, inspiring a new series of paintings of children (Pasqua has a little girl of his own, still a toddler, but has not painted her yet).

Skulls, present in his work from the beginning in the "Voodoo" series, have become a major obsession recently, and he now approaches the vanitas theme from many different directions, through painting, sculpture and photography. Real skulls are sometimes covered in gold leaf, with preserved butterflies attached to them, or with tattooed leather. Or he might sculpt a gigantic bronze skull covered in butterflies and plate it with shiny chrome, or make an enormous Carrara-marble ashtray with a skull staring up from its center.

For a man with a provocative image and seemingly expensive tastes, Pasqua is curiously ascetic. He works nearly nonstop, sleeps little, does not drink or smoke, is a



Three recent works: Human skull covered in tattooed white leather (2012), "Stella" (2012) and a self-portrait in oil on canvas (2012).



vegetarian and is known to his friends and collectors as a generous man.

The art critic José Alvarez sees a sort of playfulness in the artist's approach to his work. "He has the childish desire of an artist to do what he wants to do, to experiment with things for his own pleasure, without thinking about the market," he says.

Alvarez was intrigued by "the workmanship, quality and imagination" of the artist's oeuvre. "I discovered an artist who is very endearing and interesting," he says, "who is strangely disconnected from the milieu and totally invested in his painting and sculpture."

Although Pasqua has traveled widely and lived in New York City for a time when he was younger, he says his surroundings do not really matter much. "Where I am doesn't affect my work," he says. "No matter where I am, I shut myself up at home and am pretty much unaware of what's going on outside. My ideas don't change because I am here or there. I know exactly what I want to do now. Places have never influenced me."

He does appreciate a warm climate, however, and the tranquility of green spaces, so he has transported his studio to a forest in the South of France in

summertime in recent years. As with everything the artist does, the move is a major production, with four trucks transporting his equipment. "It's like a circus on the move," he says.

The circus will soon be on the move again, as he is building a studio in Portugal, outside of Lisbon, where he will spend winters away from the cold of northern France. When he finds land to buy, he will move the collapsible, barnlike wooden studio to the new location and build three other identical buildings to serve as his home, a guesthouse and a gym with pool. ■



"Agathe" (oil on canvas, 2013), one of the artist's monumental portraits of real people.

## Exhibitions around the world

Philippe Pasqua's artwork is being showcased in a number of exhibitions around the world.

The third edition of the Artstage Singapore (Jan. 24-27) fair in the city's Marina Bay district will be the scene of a solo show mounted by the Zernack Contemporary Art Gallery of Tel Aviv. A monumental sculpture of a chrome-plated bronze skull will be shown in a space designed for large-format works, along with a number of recent paintings and drawings, as well as Pasqua's photographs of skulls.

At the Art Revolution Taipei fair (May 3-6) in Taiwan, Pasqua will represent the French contemporary art scene with a 500-square-meter (5,380 square feet) stand, while Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami will represent the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan, respectively. The fair's theme this year is "transmutation."

In France, Pasqua's paintings, sculptures and photographs are currently on show in the exhibition "Work in Progress" (through June) at



Pasqua's "T-Rex" (aluminum, 2012) has been called "light and gracious, troubling and docile."

The Storage in the Paris suburb of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône. In Paris, they are being shown at the Galerie Laurent Strouk on the Avenue Matignon in an exhibition titled "Skull" (through Jan. 23), along with works on the same theme by Damien Hirst.

In 2012, Pasqua's work was featured

in solo shows at the Fondation Fernet-Branca in Saint-Louis, France (September-December), and, in November, at the Galerie Hyundai ("Carnal Universe," an exhibition of drawings) in Seoul, South Korea, and the Zernack Contemporary Art Gallery in Tel Aviv, Israel.

THE CRITICS | Fascinated and intrigued

## A painter of 'power, authority and credibility'

The self-taught artist Philippe Pasqua is notoriously loath to analyze or even discuss his own work, preferring to leave the job to others. Many critics have risen to the occasion, most recently José Alvarez, who recently published a major work on the artist, the monograph "Philippe Pasqua" (Editions du Regard).

Alvarez was more or less unfamiliar with Pasqua's work until a friend took him to his studio, piquing his interest in this solitary artist. The more he researched the "spontaneously expressionist" Pasqua's work, the more Alvarez, who is also the director of the art-book publisher Editions du Regard, became fascinated with him. "He is a curious personage, completely atypical," says Alvarez. "That really intrigued me." He quickly noted the kinship between the work of Pasqua and that of Jean-Michel Basquiat, especially in Pasqua's early "Voodoo" series, and with the Young British Artists. "He is the pure French extension of the YBA movement," says Alvarez.

Other works that drew his attention included the paintings of patients during and after surgery. "They are raw, violent, strong,"

he says. "I was truly fascinated by their pictorial quality."

Alvarez sees Pasqua as a virtuoso with exemplary technique. He made up his mind to devote a monograph to the artist after seeing his portraits of people with Down syndrome. "I was amazed by their power, their pictorial quality and their accuracy," he says. "Pasqua is impressively sensitive to others. I appreciate the way he paints fragile beings — the tumult of the soul, the sounds, the colors — with great sensitivity."

Another attraction for Alvarez was Pasqua's ability to "paint silence, the silence of people walled up in their suffering," a trait he contrasts with the attempts of Francis Bacon — whose work originally inspired Pasqua to paint and to whom he is sometimes compared — to "paint a scream."

Like Alvarez, the critic Paul Ardenne, author of "L'Image Corps: Figures de l'Humain

dans l'Art du XXe Siècle," ("Body Image: The Human Figure in 20th-century Art"), among other works, sees Pasqua as an artist in the classical vein whose work exhibits great sincerity. "It comes from the depths," he says. "His work interests me because it has real power, real feeling. Many artists work with the body, but don't manage to incarnate it with such power, authority, credibility."

Ardenne also finds great humanity in Pasqua's work. While Pasqua's paintings may sometimes be shocking to look at, he says, "He is fascinated by human beings — humans who might be monsters, but who are first of all humans." He sees the strong feeling in Pasqua's work as setting up a "sharing of sensibility" that travels back and forth between the viewer and the painting, the viewer and the artist. "It gives the impression of a sort of human solidarity that implicates us. That's what explains his success." ■

Work in Progress: Philippe Pasqua by HEIDI ELLISON