

## ART SHOWCASE

## Philippe Pasqua



PHOTOGRAPH: JEAN LOUIS LOSI / ARTWORK: PHILIPPE PASQUA

Getting under the skin is a recurring theme, as in 'Philippine' (2010).

SPOTLIGHT | Philippe Pasqua

## Self-taught French artist achieves success on his own terms

One of the rare "outsider" artists to achieve great success in his lifetime, Philippe Pasqua bucks the trends in every way or, more accurately, simply ignores them. He bypasses the traditional channels of the international art world, for example, by not allowing any gallery exclusive representation of his work. And he is completely self-taught, although his work exhibits none of the naïveté often associated with other self-taught "outsider" artists.

While his paintings are inevitably compared with those of Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville, and his sculptures with those of Damien Hirst, his affinities with the sensibilities of the other artists he admires and whose books fill his shelves — Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Tom of Finland, Eric Fischl, Miquel Barceló, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Christopher Wool, Robert Mapplethorpe — is clear: a bad-boy attitude, an interest in the visceral, the sexual, the transgressive.

"I look at their books and feel close to their work," he says. "We inspire each other." But, as the critic Emmanuel Daydé has said, Pasqua "has no fathers," another sentiment the artist agrees with.

Pasqua has been painting figures for some 27 years, during a time when both painting and figural art were largely disdained by the art world. He obsessively paints the faces and bodies of the same models, many of them friends, over and over again, occasionally introducing a new one when he meets someone who "touches" him. His subject matter is the person alone; the backgrounds are empty, although there is an occasional prop for the model: a wheelchair or an Eames lounge chair.

The portraits are faithful depictions of the models, who would easily be recognized by anyone who knows them, but they are much more than that. What gives them their impact and makes them so intriguing and disturbing is their monumentality and the way they are painted, in a frenzied, almost violent style, with bold brushstrokes, splattered paint, and eerie, powerful color combinations.

**'I have always painted what covered the skull,' Pasqua says. 'The skull itself was the missing element'**

Pasqua seems to want to get under the skin of his subjects or even peel it off to reveal the flesh. In "Philippine" (2010), for example, the blood of the model appears to be rising to the skin surface and oozing through the pores. That bloody red is often paired with icy blue, however, and some paintings go to the opposite extreme, placing the model in a distant world of cool hospital greens and blues and sterile whites.

In his sculptures, he gets under the skin in another way, using real skulls, which he might cover in gold leaf, for example, and to which he then attaches preserved butterflies that he says represent "the soul flying away." Lately, he has been making variants on this model, going to Carrara, Italy, to buy marble, into which he then sculpts a death's head, leaving the massive block of marble as

the plinth, and sometimes pouring large quantities of paint over the head and letting it run down the sides of the marble base.

Other models of skulls might be sheathed in leather and then tattooed, giving them a new type of skin. Pasqua has also begun to sculpt tombstones of late.

Why does he use living people as subjects for his paintings and skulls for his sculptures? "I have always painted what covered the skull," he says. "The skull itself was the missing element." He adds that he does not feel the need to paint skulls, while he does feel the need to paint flesh. As the critic Daydé points out, in Pasqua's work "every head is a death's head."

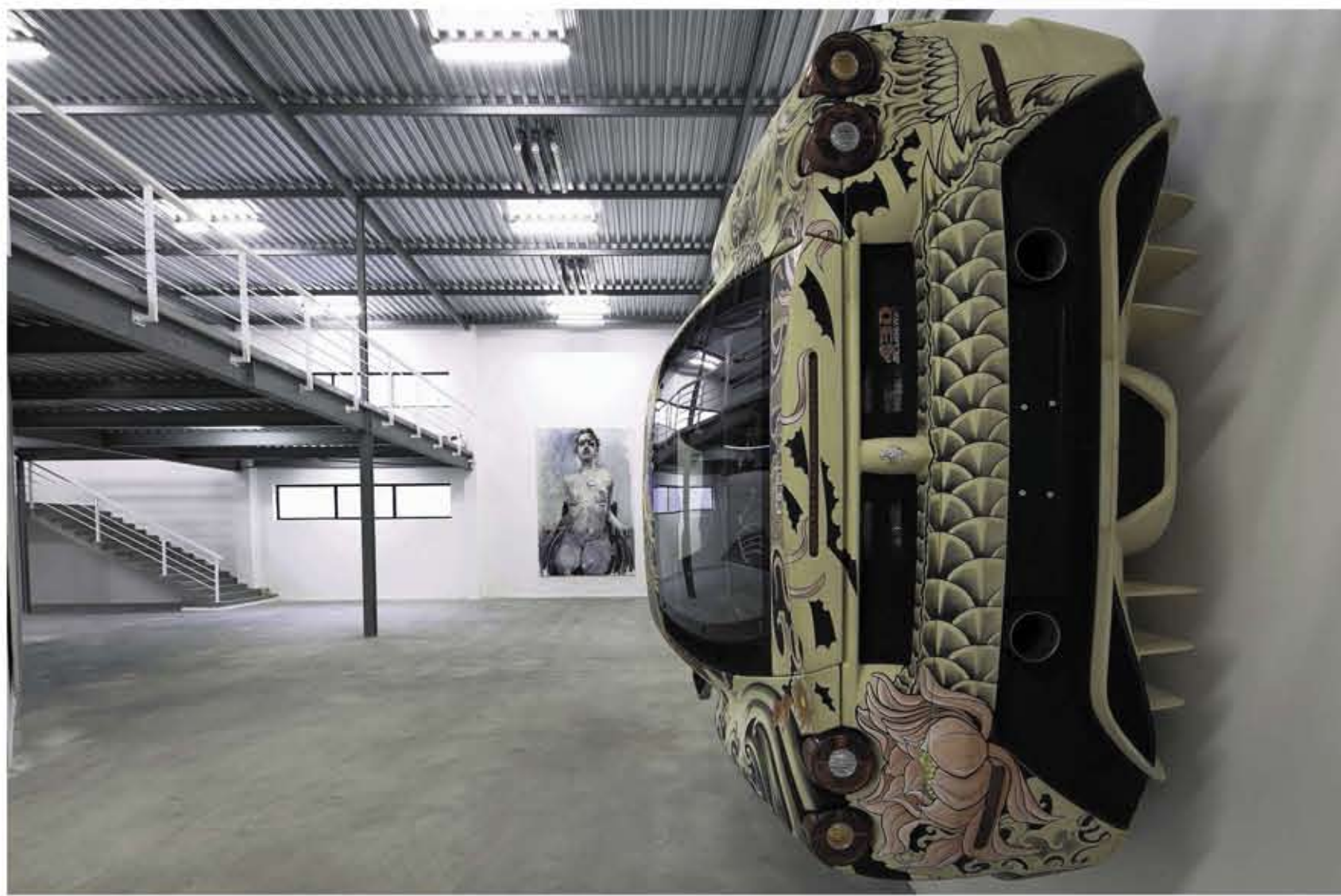
In the early stages of his career as a painter, Pasqua's subjects included ghosts, satyrs, devils, crucifixions and skinned animals. He later moved on to the "Voodoo" series of monochrome paintings with ghostly images of skulls or shrunken heads, then the work changed again and took as its subject matter phallics, images from pornographic films, dental operations, bondage scenes and orgies. Next came chubby babies and nude figures with Notre Dame Cathedral as the backdrop, followed by a series of graphic, step-by-step depictions of childbirth. Hospital scenes continued to fascinate him, and he then did a series, based on visits to hospitals, of people being operated on and in the recovery room. This led to another series called "Trauma," detailing sex-change operations.

At the end of 2001, Pasqua left behind all of these subjects and began to paint what he still paints today: portraits of people of all sorts — men, women, transsexuals, people with Down's Syndrome, cancer patients, people with bruised faces.

He now considers everything he did before as "experiments." Today he feels that he has finally found his style, but he adds that he "tries to evolve with each painting. I try to paint each one as if it were the first time."

For each painting, Pasqua takes a series of photos of the model in his studio to avoid lengthy sittings. He then chooses one of the photos, tacks it on the wall next to the canvas and starts painting directly onto the canvas. When the work is finished — he usually has several in progress at any one time — he always frames it in a Plexiglas box. "It visually finishes the work," he says, "and I like to protect my paintings and drawings."

But is Pasqua perhaps protecting viewers as well by creating a distance between them and an image that might be too raw or harsh, while also letting them see their reflections mingling with the image? ■



Philippe Pasqua will mount an exhibition at his storage and exhibition space, called The Storage (Warehouse Exhibitions Studio), in March 2011. In the space is a Ferrari that he converted into a monumental work of art.

STUDIO | Work of art

## The outsized world of Philippe Pasqua

Philippe Pasqua's studio in a northern suburb of Paris is a work of art in itself, born of Pasqua's particular way of painting and his tendency to accumulate. Like many an artist's studio, it is a huge industrial space with a high ceiling, white walls and large skylights. Around 10 works in progress are nailed to the wall on ceiling-high canvases in various stages of advancement. Each one has a photo of a model tacked up next to it, the source of the image. Stepladders stand ready all around the room, while more ladders lean against the walls here and there to enable the artist to reach the upper parts of the canvas.

The resemblance to most artists' studios ends there, however. On the floor are open cardboard boxes of new paintbrushes and tubes of paints, alongside mountains of empty plastic water bottles, paint tubes and cartons, and other detritus. In a corner of the room next to the door leading to Pasqua's living quarters is a pile of about 20 pairs of paint-spattered high-sided sneakers.

Several trestle tables in the center of the

room are covered with piles of used paintbrushes, all stuck together and stacked neatly with their handles pointing in the same direction — Pasqua uses each brush once and then adds it to the pile and takes a new one. Some of the stepladders are also decorated with these sculptural forms created by mounds of discarded brushes.

**The artist prefers to nap on the sofa in his studio between bouts of painting night and day**

The tables are used as his palette, to mix colors, and in the center of each one is a crater of molten paint. Bottles, photos, and other bits and pieces are also embedded in the paint on the tables.

The paint-spattered floor looks like a Jackson Pollock painting, and the walls and columns are striped with color where Pasqua has wiped his brush on them. Photos and rejected drawings that have fallen to the floor are slowly being buried by new assaults of drips from the artist's brush.

A wheelchair and an Eames armchair sit in a corner awaiting the next time they will be used as props for a painting.

One table holds a DJ setup with two turntables to drive a formidable sound

system; Pasqua likes to blast electro, reggae or rap music while he paints.

Piled near the stereo system are dozens of slides, and next to them sit two skulls, one of them real, with only a few discolored teeth remaining and four enormous black and orange butterflies attached to it. This skull is partially covered in gold leaf, not all of which adheres perfectly to the surface, allowing bits of it to tremble spookily in the air.

This may sound like chaos, but in fact it is all highly organized, with like objects piled together, and tables and ladders placed where they will be most convenient. When the tables and piles on the floor begin to take over the space, Pasqua clears it all out and starts over.

The orderly living quarters next to the studio in the same building are a startling contrast, with the enormous main space filled with monumental works of art (among them a large painting by Jenny Saville, an artist Pasqua is often compared to, of a naked woman whose features and body are flattened against a glass wall) and designer furniture, including two gigantic purple sofas, one of them made of braided velvet-covered tubes and the other made up of

what look like jigsaw-cut sections that can be rearranged in different configurations.

In a corner near the glass doors to the garden, where two brown-and-white bulldogs (who are among Pasqua's favorite models) stare through the glass, is a "Sensory Deprivation Skull" chair by Atelier Van Lieshout, its sides opened up to reveal its cozy sheepskin-lined interior. Ron Arad, one of Pasqua's favorite designers, is represented by a few pieces, including one of his sleek rocking chairs and a steel ping-pong-table sculpture.

A few of Pasqua's own works are scattered here and there, including a painting and a giant, round, white marble ashtray with a skull in the center, the whole tattooed with an octopus's tentacles.

Even the utility room in this design showcase is handsomely outfitted with a huge stainless-steel washer and dryer, and rolls of toilet paper artistically stacked on their sides in round openings. Upstairs is a bedroom furnished with a round black bed, a Ron Arad prototype that doesn't get much use, since the energetic Pasqua prefers to nap on the sofa in his studio between bouts of painting night and day. ■

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY | Obsessive and transgressive

## 'Magnificently beautiful and wounded'

Philippe Pasqua has been compared to a "serial killer," the "Boston Strangler" and a "plastic surgeon," and his work described with adjectives like "obsessive," "obsessive" and "manic-depressive." Those are words of praise from the French critic Emmanuel Daydé, who also says that Pasqua "practices painting as if it were an open-heart operation." Others have called his work "sensational," "theatrical," "a visual tour de force."

Pasqua is an artist of few words who does not indulge in analysis of his work, but others certainly do. When asked what he thinks of such strong accolades, Pasqua just smiles and says, "I like it."

The bloody images have a lot to do with subject matter that Pasqua has now left behind — such as childbirth and sex-change operations — but they still apply to a kind of violence in the way he paints portraits.

The critic David Rosenberg, who has written several appreciations of Pasqua's work, also uses a great deal of brutal imagery: "Pasqua's paintings give the viewer an exceptionally violent physical shock; they are a vision of surgical precision." Pasqua does not paint skin, he says, but flesh: "What appears is the tension, the tendon, the muscle, the circulation of energies and humors."

Another critic, the late Pierre Restany, summed up Pasqua's "carnal universe" as "a sort of organic frenzy and at the same time spontaneous realism pushed to the highest possible degree of its internal logic." That "surgical precision" Rosenberg sees in Pasqua's work has a purpose, according to another critic, Michel Waldberg, who writes: "Pasqua has thought a great deal about the dogged job of destructing-reconstructing the real; he continues to inform us, above all, about the essential strangeness of the world and the human figure."

A softer side can be seen in Pasqua's drawings, which take up the same subject

matter as his paintings, but — perhaps because the powerful effects of hot and frigid colors and violent brushstrokes are absent — seem tenderer. "The face or body becomes halo, mist, smoke, line, vibration," writes Rosenberg. "Here it is not so much a question of flesh and matter, but rather of form, outline and delicate texture."

Of the Plexiglas boxes that Pasqua uses to frame his works, Rosenberg says: "This same wall is found in places where there is a heightened focus on life, death and sexuality: the glass wall that separates newborn babies from the world in maternity wards; the glass wall that separates people in prison visiting rooms or behind which the witnesses watch an execution; the glass wall that separates the viewer from a peep show or a prostitute. The barrier that our desire comes up against and on whose surface our reflection merges with what we are watching."

The last word goes to the writer Cynthia Fleury, who describes Pasqua's work as "magnificently beautiful and wounded." ■



When he is at work in his studio, Pasqua likes to listen to electro, reggae or rap music.

## A Bacon reproduction started an artistic journey

A self-taught painter and sculptor who was born in 1965 in Grasse, France, and moved to Paris with his family when he was 10, Philippe Pasqua still lives and works near the French capital. His life as an artist did not begin until he was around 18 years old and happened to see a reproduction of a Francis Bacon painting in a book.

"It fascinated me," he says, "and made me want to paint." He set to work teaching himself to paint by doing — he has never taken an art course.

He started exhibiting his work in Paris in the early 1990s and is now included in many French and international collections. A number of leading critics, including Pierre

Restany and Michel Waldberg, have written about his works, and "Philippe Pasqua, l'Insaississable" (The Elusive Philippe Pasqua), a film directed by Nicolas Reynal and produced by France Télévisions, was shown on France 4 this summer.

Pasqua's work has been shown all over the world, with one-man shows last summer in the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, as well as in galleries and art fairs in Paris; New York; Hannover and Hamburg, Germany; Venice, Italy; Santa Monica, California; Metz, France; Mexico City; Brussels; and other places. His work has also been included in numerous group shows and has been the subject of many books and monographs.

SHOWCASE | The Storage (Warehouse Exhibitions Studio)

## A warehouse that also serves as a vast exhibition space

Philippe Pasqua has always gone his own way, ignoring all the tried-and-true formulas for success in the art world. This year, he took another unusual step. After acquiring a warehouse in the Paris suburb of Saint Ouen l'Aumône as a storage space for his works, he decided to use it as an exhibition space as well. He dubbed it "The Storage (Warehouse Exhibitions Studio)" and opened a show of his own work, "Mea Culpa," at the end of September.

The inaugural show was a success, with more than 1,000 people (from France, Italy, Russia, Belgium, Britain and the United States) visiting the immense, multilevel, all-white spaces of the building, which Pasqua describes as "pristine, the opposite of my studio."

One of his white marble vanitas sculptures, a death's head with butterflies, is displayed in the garden.

Also on show is Pasqua's Ferrari Scuderia 430, which he recently converted into a monumental work of art by covering it in tat-

toed leather. Hung on the wall for the "Mea Culpa" show, it sold for \$1.5 million.

The surface area of The Storage, which is still a work in progress, will be expanded from 3,000 square meters to 7,000 square meters over the next two years.

Pasqua is planning to mount another show of his work in March 2011, this time focusing primarily on drawings and sculptures, and will also create a vast sculpture garden for The Storage, which is open to the public by appointment.

His work will also be exhibited in 2011 in major one-man shows in South Korea, Greece and Kiev, as well as at a number of art fairs, including Art Paris, Drawing Now in Paris, Art Basel and Art Brussels. ■

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PHOTO: MARTIN DEL POZZO / ARTWORKS: PHILIPPE PASQUA

The inaugural show of Pasqua's work at The Storage, "Mea Culpa," in September was visited by more than 1,000 people.