NEW YORK

Big Paul Georges Wanted a Hotline to Old Masters

"Posthumous Series" Audacious, Brilliant—His Own Memorial

The American painter Paul Georges, who died last year at the age of 78, was a big man who thought big and painted big, and in the final stages of what had often been a turbulent career, he produced something especially big for us to remember him by—the paintings that, with characteristic candor and bravado, he dubbed "My Posthumous Series." This is the work on view in *Paul Georges: Last Paintings* at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries.

Georges never was a tidy or a patient painter; the dynamism of his painterly performance often ran somewhat ahead of his ability to control it. More than 40 years ago, in reviewing an exhibition of Georges' early self-portraits, Fairfield Porter took note of "a graphic, firm impatience and hurry over details" in his work, and in this respect, certainly, Georges' go-for-broke energy and ambition only accelerated with time.

Moreover, his pictorial aspirations were rarely less than exorbitant, and if the resulting work sometimes fell short of the impossible goals he set for himself, he just as often achieved an amazing—if less than perfect success. For as Porter also observed in that early review, "The paintings are impressive in their skill of handling and solidity, combined with a jarring color that holds its place."

Is the color less jarring now, in the "Posthumous Series" paintings, or have we simply gotten used to the sheer wattage it commands? Its intensity certainly doesn't strike me as in any way diminished. In the big self-portrait called Painting in the Studio (2001), Georges pulled out all the stops, lavishing brilliant color on a beautifully modeled, impossibly complex still life of fruits and flowers and an interior space defined by vertical stripes that may or may not be a mocking allusion to colorfield abstraction-while at that same time adding a painting of a female nude in the background, and not neglecting to provide a golden highlight to the modeling of his own spectacular nose. As for "cool," I doubt that Georges even knew what it by Hilton Kramer

meant. Even in a mostly gray painting like *Angel at the Skylight* (2001), which includes yet another self-portrait, the current of hot-tempered anger and anxiety is unmistakable. (And by the way, the angel we see through the studio skylight is no bloodless sylph, but a very earthly creature—a flying nude, so to speak.)



Paul George's Painting in the Studio, 2001

So who was Paul Georges, anyway? For latecomers to his paintings, the memoir that Rhonda Lieberman has written for the show's catalog is essential reading. Ms. Lieberman, a painter who studied with Georges at Brandeis University in the 1980's, provides a very entertaining and sometimes alarming account of that experience.

"In contrast to the hyper-professionalized and p.c. climate about to blight the art world and the academy," she writes, "in Georges' studio painting and life were about being Free!—not alienated. Myth was embraced, not ironized. There were nude models, a white male guru with a hotline to the Old Masters, earnest disciples, bad wine, an almost archetypal distinction between Edenic unselfconsciousness—and being enslaved by the 'baloney' that keeps us down You can't understand Georges without knowing these were life problems and they were also painting problems—with painting solutions!" (You can see that Georges' penchant for excess is reflected in the syntax of his former student's memoir.)

Ms. Lieberman also quotes an interesting observation made by Georges' daughter Yvette: "He came from a different era—the rough and tumble art scene of the 50s . . . People drank, fought, insulted each other—and the next day you forgot it. The times changed, he didn't." His painting, too, had an important connection with the 1950's. Fairfield Porter said of Georges' early self-portraits that "they probably could not have been painted before the advent of 'American-type' abstraction"—in other words, Abstract Expressionism.

Another way of putting it would be to say that Georges wanted to paint like the Old Masters—hence the angels and muses that populate the "Posthumous Series" paintings—but with the kind of freedom that was Abstract Expressionism's hallmark as well as its nemesis. It was an impossible ambition to realize—that hotline to the Old Masters never returned his calls—but in attempting it, Georges nonetheless produced some of the most accomplished paintings of his time, and none more remarkable than the paintings in "My Posthumous Series."

Upon reaching a certain age, artists begin to wonder how their work will be judged by posterity. In this respect, too, Paul Georges was inordinately impatient. Rather than wait for posterity to render its judgment, he devoted his last years to a series of paintings that would, in effect, offer instruction to future viewers on the nature of his ambitions and accomplishments. And when he was done, he died, having successfully created his own memorial exhibition. *Paul Georges: Last Paintings* remains on view at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 20 East 79th Street, through March 29.