

You Never Know

A Journey in 16 acts

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It would be nice to believe that one's life is based on a series of rational, thought out decisions. However, much of the time, life offers improvisation, whim, outright luck and serendipity.

Here are 16 of these acts that shadowed my voyage:

1. I am a long-term reader of The New York Times. I have read the paper for more than 50 years. Perhaps it was my father's influence. I start the day turning the pages of the newspaper. In terms of its art's coverage, I hope to find some artist or exhibit that will stop me in my tracks. This almost never happens.

However, one of the few times such a great response occurred was to an article on the exhibit of the contemporary Spanish artist, Antonio López García which was on view at Staempfli Gallery in New York in 1968. It was a Sunday review of the work of 2 artists at two different galleries. The reproduction was of a painted relief sculpture by López of a woman sleeping. I saw the exhibit on the very last day and it was to that point the single best exhibit I had seen of a contemporary artist. That exhibit at Staempfli would certainly be one of the top 10 exhibits I have seen.

Why? The work had great heart and humanity. It depicted the figurative spirit without going back to figurative art of the 19th century. It has mystery and an insistent, stubborn and haunted presence and spoke in modern or modernist terms in a natural and communicative way.

2. A chance conversation with a friend, Shirley Pullido, led me to apply for a Fulbright Grant. Shirley had spent a year in France on the Fulbright Program. It sounded very exciting. I did not think I was advanced enough to apply. In 1969, I was just 2 years out of art school (the Brooklyn Museum, which I attended from 1964-1967). Shirley was very encouraging and thought I had advanced greatly. She spoke of the great year she had and how much her art and life were impacted by the year abroad.

3. I applied for a grant to study with Antonio Lopez Garcia at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. It was a very exciting prospect. Asked to list a second choice, I chose Germany to study graphics and the art of Dürer. I was asked by the Fulbright Foundation to bring some work down. I believe that I submitted *N's Kitchen* (in the present exhibit) and *The Kelton Press* (reproduced in the catalog).

A number of months passed and a letter arrived from the Fulbright Program. The grant to Spain, *unfortunately*, did not work out. However, I was awarded a fellowship to study in Germany.

4. I was quite disappointed by this turn of events. It was only in retrospect that I came to the realization that given these two choices, the better one was chosen by the fates.

Lopez is a fantastic artist and if I had gone in that direction, I would have probably joined a group of acolytes who followed this great Spanish artist and whose work was clearly influenced by his. Germany brought me into a situation which was upending, problematic and open (for myself) to *great* personal growth and questioning. It forced me to lean back onto my own resources and strengths.

5. Going to Germany in 1970. This was just 25 years after the Second World War had ended. Renée and I took a deep breath. What would Germany bring for us?

Was this decision the right one to make? Renée's father was quite ill at the time.

Did this award make sense for us at this particular moment? If I had been asked what the chances were of returning from Germany with The Fulbright Triptych,

I would have said: *no way*, not at all possible. On the other hand, I would never have worked out a painting like the Triptych had I been living in Madrid.

6. The Fulbright Program puts you on your own in Germany. Your apartment, living space, studio are your responsibility and living space was not easy to find with the meager stipend that the grant provided. I was assigned to the art school in

Kassel where I would be studying printmaking. (Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Kassel) We drew a circle of about 50 miles around the city of Kassel.

There simply weren't any apartments that were available. As luck would have it, we bought a car, so instead of settling into living near the art school, we had more mobility. Our exploration brought us to Göttingen, a beautiful university town, Hannover Münden, a charming village, Raboldhausen, which looked like a Breughel town (my first choice) and finally to Hessische Lichtenau. In the last town, we encountered an interesting man, Willi Neumann, who was very enamored of all things American.

We found ourselves walking around the town with Willi and it was Willi who pointed out the empty windows on the third floor of a building nearby. The landlord showed us the apartment. This type of apartment was not much in demand, the *dachzimmer*, meant that each room on the top floor had a slanted wall. It seemed to me to have very little atmosphere or character. I remember mentioning to Renée that it didn't seem inspiring or exciting. I didn't feel that it would provide an atmosphere that would push my work. Renée was exasperated by how long this apartment chasing was taking. She pointed out that the apartment was large, about 8 rooms, had open spaces and I would find a world to explore here. Furthermore, if we didn't take the apartment, she was going to *kill* me.

I used the living room as a studio. Since we were on the third floor, the windows faced out onto a long and deep view. The room extended to the right of the windows. To the left, a small space existed, and then there was a wall., which was perpendicular to the windows.

How lucky this all was! What I didn't get at the time was that the ambience in this apartment wasn't the issue. What one saw or did with this atmosphere was the crucial element.

7. I worked on drawing and graphics during the first half of the year we spent in Germany. Over the many years of my career, I have enjoyed drawing and have attempted to push the drawing media to extremes, almost making this media the equivalent of a painting. Marie Bilderl was worked on during the year in Germany. It is in the present exhibit. Marie was our next-door neighbor. Arnold, also in the current exhibit, would be an example of this type of extreme presentation within the drawing format.

spent a good deal of time working on an engraving of a garden that I had drawn back in Brooklyn. The engraving, *Angela's Garden*, is circular and can be seen in the current show. I had a table set up by the window. One day I happened to move my chair back about 8 feet and saw the scene, the table, windows, landscape, etc. I was amazed. It seemed to have all the raw materials of a painting. Just a day or so later I imagined two individuals seated on either side of this table.

The entire image came to me in a flash. The images of Renee and myself provided a human presence, some sense of warmth, that designed well against the middle, which consisted of the table, the tools and the landscape which seemed somewhat cooler. The whole would have, I conjectured, a new temperature.

I had not painted since art school. I had begun my career as a draftsman. However, this scene entered my mind as a painting. This was going to be a large project. In retrospect, the project seemed fraught with danger as it was incredibly ambitious. Again, in retrospect, it makes me think of the author Murakami's belief that he could write, a conviction he came to while watching a baseball game. Putting it another way, *how did I believe that I could actually pull this project off?*

8. I have been drawn to exhibits and artists whose work seems to present some type of point of view, some way of facing life or believing in life. In this manner, the art appears to be a verb, a quest, a meditation. My wish was to create a body of work that would present an exhibit with such a point of view. This meant that it would take a few years to accumulate enough works for a show.

In 1972, my daughter, Simone was born. It was an amazing event, totally exhilarating. However, it also came with great responsibilities. I had someone to support, someone who needed me to provide resources, help and love. In 1973, we completely ran out of money. We did not have a trust fund, family savings or an inheritance. Simone was about 6 months old. Everything was crashing. It was such a difficult time. I was pushed against a wall. In an act of desperation, I thought it was time to try to find a gallery that would exhibit my work and bring in some extra financial support.

I remembered Staempfli Gallery and the wonderful López exhibit I had seen. I decided to approach them. It was the first gallery I tried for. I put together a

grouping of photographs and in an act, which seemed wildly impetuous, I decided to approach them without invitation. Arriving directly off the street, I found myself in the office of Phillip Bruno, George Staempfli's assistant and co-director. I mentioned that I had seen an exhibit there of Antonio López García at the gallery 5 years before and thought there was a connection between my work and his.

Incredibly, the gods of luck looked kindly on me. Phillip actually looked at my work. After taking some time reviewing the material, he told me that he would like to show the work to George Staempfli. This was a marvelous turn of events. I am sure a good deal of Phillip's time was spent preventing visitors from entering the gallery or crossing the moat, so to speak.

9. George Staempfli and Phillip Bruno came to my studio in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn in May, 1973, a few days after I visited their gallery. Sunset Park was an area that was very working class, populated by small industry, factories, shops and a low key working class community.

George and Phillip arrived, well-dressed, in the mode of their, very upper class Madison Avenue/ East 77th Street Gallery. At the time, the Triptych was in progress, the middle panel was 2/3 to 3/4 complete and the wings were white, waiting to be painted.

The visit was a totally nerve-wracking moment. Much depended on it. One had the sense that the next chapter was being written and it could go in a variety of ways.

The studio was large, it was a loft-like space, but very low-key. After about 30 minutes of total silence, George Staempfli said that he believed my Triptych was a great painting and that he would like to own it. It was a completely overwhelming moment.

10. A few days later, an elegant letter came from Staempfli announcing that he and Phillip were very impressed with my work, especially the large unfinished triptych and that he proposed *buying* the painting *unfinished*. The purchase would be paid out over the next 2 years and would give me the opportunity to work on the painting, without having to do any other sort of work. A veritable *deus ex machina* arrived and set the whole course of the voyage in motion.

11. On the next to last day of the exhibit at Staempfli, a highly enthusiastic review of the show was published in The New York Times. On the very last day, many people came to see the work. John Russell had written on art for many years and had been hired by The Times as their senior art critic. His review was certainly one of the factors that brought my family to the American Academy in Rome for a 2 ½ year period, beginning in 1976.

12. In 1988, I received a phone call from Miller Williams. Miller mentioned that he was coming to New York and he was interested in getting together. I had met Miller, a marvelous and deeply talented poet 11 years before at the American Academy in Rome. I had not spoken or heard from him since then. Miller was one of the most impressive individuals I had encountered during my almost 3 year stay at the Academy. I asked why he was coming to New York and Miller mentioned that he was the Director of the University of Arkansas Press and that the purpose of his visit was to sign up authors for a few books that his press was publishing. I had the presence of mind to ask if he would entertain the idea of using a single image of mine to enhance a book of poems. Miller wasn't committing to this and implied that the two arts were not necessarily compatible. Miller suggested we meet at the Algonquin Hotel, where he was staying. I brought with me what felt like a half pound of photographs and one actual drawing. Miller took a great deal of time looking at all of the pictures. When he finished he told me how moved he was by the work and wanted to do a book on all of it. He gave me a schedule, asked me to shake on the deal and the book, my first, was published 2 years later in 1990.

13. In 2009, I was invited to a wedding in New York's Chinatown. This was a large-scale event with some 300 guests and it wasn't an evening that I was particularly looking forward to. However, I found myself seated at a table of 12 and, curiously, next to Daniel Slaeger, an editor. I was struck by his interest in European literature, writers such as Robert Musil, Wislawa Szymborska and Umberto Eco. We spent about 3 hours talking, while the wedding, with tiger dancing, fire and swords, swirled in the background. Daniel responded strongly to my work, especially The Fulbright Triptych. Two years later, as the Director of Milkweed Editions, he published The Suspension of Time, a book of 45 essays on my triptych.

14. I communicated with Alec Barker, the director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology in July 2013, presenting the possibility of an exhibit at the museum. After a bit of a delay, Alec responded with enthusiasm about the proposal. Alec mentioned that he had just spoken about my painting The Sink to the docents of the museum. From this initial inquiry in 2013 to September, 23, 2017, it's been quite a voyage.

Just a few days ago, Alec and I spoke about the idea behind this essay, "You Never Know". Alec mentioned that the theme sounded a great deal like serendipity, a term which was coined by [Horace Walpole](#) in 1754. In a letter he wrote to his friend [Horace Mann](#), Walpole explained a reference to a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*. The princes, he told his correspondent, were "always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of".

15. Which brings me to the final example for me of this curious word, serendipity, and what surely is the most profound experience of serendipity on my journey. Some 53 years ago, I encountered Renée at a party in Brooklyn. I was tremendously smitten, but was too shy or too timid to respond. Two weeks later some friends of mine invited me to go with them to Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. In those days, beachgoers hadn't discovered the effect of ultraviolet rays and so the beach was massively crowded. If I was to guess, perhaps a half million people were present. The beach isn't my favorite place to go to. It's a bit confining and placid for my worked-up personality. In any event, there I was with my friends and we found a place to sit within these crowds. You could barely see the sand as bodies were crammed in wall to wall. When I looked up, sitting at the very next blanket was Renée. Four dates later, (about 6 Days) I proposed. How very, very, very lucky I am!

16. You never know.