

Paul Thek

Ponza and Roma

January 10 – February 21, 2015

Tuesday–Saturday, 10am – 6pm



Chicken Coop and Distant Island, 1975

Paul Thek: Ponza and Roma is the first exhibition to examine the paintings and drawings Thek made in Italy during the 1970s. Following three sensational exhibitions of his wax meat pieces and the lost legendary installation *The Tomb* at New York's Stable and Pace Galleries in the 1960s, Thek spent a significant part of the 1970s in Europe. While there he created a series of large scale collaborative installations constructed from transitory materials such as sand, newspaper and trees. These installations were exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; "Documenta V," Kassel; the Kunstmuseum Lucerne and Wilhelm-Lehmbruck-Museum der Stadt Duisburg. Concurrently, Thek worked on the Mediterranean island of Ponza and in a flat in Trastevere, having first visited Ponza in 1968.

On Ponza, Thek captured the dramatic landscape of the island in traditional media of pencil, watercolor and oil paint. In Rome, he executed numerous paintings on spreads of the International Herald Tribune. A large number of these newspaper paintings were shown at Iolas Gallery in Paris in 1975. These works include images of Ponza, the sea, an eggplant, and a grape trellis as well as enigmatic personae such as a hot potato with arms and legs, and figures with globes or a valentine shaped heart for a head. Many of these images, and the Ponza motifs, are noted or sketched in Thek's notebooks, a selection of which is included in *Paul Thek: Ponza and Roma*. Ponza was a special place for Thek, a creative and spiritual haven. In his notebooks, he writes of the perfection of the work he made on Ponza and, referring to himself in the third person, "he couldn't live without the special sweetness and purity of Ponza". Three Roman notebooks in which Thek transcribed *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, punctuated by black and white Polaroids of clouds, are included in the exhibition as are selected correspondence and archival materials from the time.

Paul Thek was born in Brooklyn in 1933. He studied at the Art Students League and Pratt Institute in the early 1950s. In the mid-1960s, he produced a well-known body of work, *The Technological Reliquaries*: wax sculptures which looked like raw meat or human limbs encased in Plexiglas vitrines. Large-scale, full-body casts followed, sometimes set into specific environments. Thek's work is included in numerous American and European museum collections with particularly strong representation of his drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 2010-2011, "Diver," a retrospective of his work curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Beginning February 6, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam will have a presentation of the works and letters of Paul Thek which came into their collection in 1994 through the bequest of Franz Deckwitz, a longtime friend and collaborator. A Boijmans Study will accompany the presentation. *Paul Thek: Ponza and Roma* will travel to Mai 36 Galerie, Zürich, March 20 – April 25, 2015.

For photographs or further information, please contact Olivia Gauthier at 212/367-7474 or og@alexanderandbonin.com. Additional information and images can be viewed on alexanderandbonin.com

Alexander and Bonin

Introduction

The following interview between Enzo Di Giovanni and Ted Bonin began at Casa Carmela on October 29, 2014 and continued via email through November. The English version was edited by Ted Bonin for alexanderandbonin.com and the Italian version was edited by Enzo Di Giovanni for ponzaracconta.it

Ted Bonin: When did you meet Paul Thek?

Enzo Di Giovanni: I think it was 1969. I was 6 years old. Paul came to Ponza and just happened to end up at my house. He spent much of the year in Ponza; probably at that time Ponza became his real base of operations. From here he made preparations for exhibitions held throughout Europe. He stayed at my house for several years, although not consecutively, then when my family and I moved for a period to Gaeta, Paul found another place in the same area, known as "the Scotti" region.

Bonin: When did you first see an artwork by Paul Thek?

Di Giovanni: Probably a work in which I myself participated! When Paul came to Ponza, he always brought me many gifts (plasticine, colors, various objects). I watched while he painted his newspapers, or filled the house with objects collected on the beaches of the island. In addition, he included me in some installations themselves. I particularly remember a small pear tree that we had on the terrace, we spent most of an afternoon decorating it.

Bonin: Can you describe it?

Di Giovanni: I remember that we covered it with all kinds of things. At that time there was colored toilet paper, which recalled the garlands with which one decorates Christmas trees at home. And then press cuttings, mirrors, pieces of iron, objects of daily use, consumption, such as cans of beer or tomato. I still have a clear memory of those moments for me it was probably a game, but I had the realization that there was a search, a strong symbolism in the things that Paul did. Even though I was only a child, I knew that we were "creating" something, and I was very proud to be part of it. I was absolutely sure we were making art, and I really liked the way it was done: an art that is breathed from the bottom, in the life of every day, which gave nobility and interest to objects which outside of that context would have been useless, waste. It may seem strange that a 6 year old would make this kind of observation, one could think it the reworking of the present, but I assure you it is not. I was a child of unusual sensitivity and I'm sure Paul sensed that and it created a thread between us.

Bonin: What about Ponza was important to him?

Di Giovanni: When Paul arrived in Ponza it seemed the most natural thing in the world to me. He was not a tourist, he was a person who had found a home. Maybe a home that he'd tried to find elsewhere, to no avail. This was my feeling. I of course knew nothing of his art before, the paintings on paper and canvas that he worked on in Ponza are different than what he had made before, in the environments produced in Lucerne, Rotterdam, Stockholm and other European cities. But it was clear that in Ponza, he had found a balance between his expressive research and what nature put in front of him. It was all there, within reach of his eyes and his hands. I remember the room in which he lived: small - and was never alone - with a few items; a chair, a table and an iron bed that he painted in the colors of the sea. On the floor stones, he painted newspapers.

Alexander and Bonin

Di Giovanni: You only have to look at his production from that period: the extreme fragility of his works, the poverty of the media (newspaper, stones, sand) representing the very fragility of the island. And at the same time its primeval beauty, the beauty that Paul was trying to show by any means, and created everywhere: beds, tables, cabinets. I do not think I've ever seen such a total empathy between an artist, his work, and the environment in which he lived. For Paul, this was Ponza.

Bonin: There was a long gap between these early years when you knew Paul and now. When did you begin to look for his work again and where did you find it?

Di Giovanni: After the end of the period in which Paul stayed in Ponza, I had lost all contact with him. In recent years, I managed to track down some publications on Paul, thanks mainly to the growing web presence of his work. At the same time, I later discovered, and it was a surprise, that there were several people in Ponza who remembered Paul, and that some of his paintings had been preserved despite the many years passed. Obviously time is fluid and doesn't erase anything, and today we can say that Paul is still clearly present in Ponza.

Enzo Di Giovanni: This is your first time coming to Ponza, what was it that prompted your desire to know this place? And what impression did it have on you?

Ted Bonin: From Paul Thek's writings and the works he made while on Ponza it has always been clear to me that it was a special place for him and I have long wanted to experience Ponza. In the past year I have been working on an exhibition for the gallery which looks at Thek's work made on Ponza and in his Rome studio. The span of the works in the exhibition dates from his first visit to Ponza in 1968 until his last in 1978 and will include finely rendered pencil studies and oil paintings of Ponza as well as paintings made on International Herald Tribune newspapers. The selection of the newspaper paintings is based on his notebook writings where he records diverse thoughts and actions including dreams and lists of subjects he is painting. A selection of these notebooks will also be included in *Paul Thek: Ponza and Roma*.

Di Giovanni: Why do you think Thek chose Ponza in particular as his adopted home at that time in his life?

Bonin: In his notebooks he frequently writes of the peace and clarity Ponza brings him. None of the many other places Thek lived in are mentioned in that capacity. Amongst several avenues of spiritual fulfillment he explored, Ponza was arguably the most successful.

Di Giovanni: I know there are many Thek notebooks still unpublished. Do you think it possible to one day publish those that relate to the time spent in Ponza?

Bonin: The short answer to your question is yes. We are presently photographing all of Thek's accessible notebooks (approximately 100 exist) and ideally they will be published with accompanying texts by a range of authors who focus on individual notebooks or groups of notebooks. The notebooks worked on in Ponza or which mention Ponza would certainly be an important focus. However, like the artist, his notebooks move fluidly through time, place and content and cannot be completely categorized.

Alexander and Bonin

Di Giovanni: What is the spirit of the show you are planning in NY, [and] what do you think it will add to the artistic and personal story of Paul Thek?

Bonin: The spirit of the show we are planning for New York will be the most personal one we have organized. It will have only a few references to his exhibitions in museums and art galleries. It is very much about his home as studio, his development and practice of themes and his instincts to paint and draw in ways both classical and contemporary. In Ponza he often painted with his long-time friend and collaborator Franz Deckwitz. Their paintings depict certain motifs and a comparison of their Ponza work would reveal a parallel search similar to that of Cezanne and Pissarro -- but that is the subject for another exhibition!

Di Giovanni: In recent years, there has been a rediscovery of Thek, why? Do you think as an artist and as a man Thek still has something to say to the world today?

Bonin: Thek's rediscovery has been in force for more than 20 years and reflects an interest in non-Modernist centric practices. During Thek's lifetime that diversity was not generally considered an asset but in the past twenty years we have seen many contemporary artists explore similar practices and its larger acceptance. As Mike Kelley aptly wrote in 1992 "so much recent art looks like Paul Thek's"¹.

Di Giovanni: Now that you know Ponza, do you think that it would be possible to organize an art event about Thek, which could become a kind of bridge with New York?

Bonin: That would be wonderful. Having seen the place that inspired and soothed Thek, I would like the Ponzese to see the work he made in this beautiful environment.

Di Giovanni: The fact that there has been a major reassessment of Paul, especially after his death, may run the risk that his art and his memory are somehow manipulated, giving a vision not conforming to reality; how to avoid this?

Bonin: It is said that the title of Susan Sontag's 1966 *Against Interpretation* (which is dedicated to Paul) came from something he repeatedly voiced: "I'm against interpretation.". However, once an artwork or the documentation of an artwork is out in the world it is not possible to control all the ways the work is viewed or interpreted. It is possible to attend to requests to exhibit the work and to clarify its history. Since Thek re-used elements of his work in different contexts over the years, one must see their history as one that evolves, is born, reborn, reused. We do not recreate his temporary installations as it would not be possible to achieve his touch but when existing works are to be exhibited, lifetime documentation is consulted. I should add that the generous efforts of a handful of insightful curators and art historians has helped to disseminate an accurate representation of his work.

Paul Thek Ponza and Roma will be on view at Alexander and Bonin, New York from January 10 through February 21, 2015 and at Mai 36 Galerie, Zürich from March 20 – April 25, 2015

¹Mike Kelley, *Death and Transfiguration, a letter from America*, originally published in *Paul Thek*. Turin: Castello de Rivara.