



## Nine Lives: Remembering Paul Klein

by Neil Goodman

Paul Klein died on October 11th, 2020. Diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2014, he was initially given six months to live. Through optimism, support, and a strong will, Paul lived an additional five and a half years. He is survived by his wife, Amy Crum, his children, Lucas, Megan and Brice, and his stepdaughter, Iris Kohler.

For those of us who knew him, we might say that Paul was direct, occasionally blunt, yet engaging, curious, challenging, supportive and infinitely generous. Paul occasionally said what you did not want to hear and occasionally said what you really wanted to hear. He loved art and artists, and most passionately, the community of artists. This connection was at his core, and like his family, defined who he was and how he will be remembered.

For many of us, we think of Paul, we think of his namesake gallery, Klein Art Works. Opened in 1981, it was originally located within the cluster of galleries on Superior Street. After the devastating gallery district fire in 1989, Paul relocated to May Street, buying and then renovating a former auto repair shop. With vaulted ceilings, a steel-clad floor, and an adjacent sculpture garden, the gallery had a certain kind of New York panache. As a pioneer in the developing Near West Side, the new Klein Art Works quickly became an important fixture of the Chicago gallery world as well as a destination for artists, curators, and collectors.

Klein Art Works was initially known for a strong commitment to well-crafted modernist abstraction with artists of both regional, national, and international reputations. An edited list would include included Sam Gilliam, Jun Kaneko, Robert Stackhouse, Ken Price, Jackie Kazarian, Ed Moses, Tony Berlant, Sabrina Raaf, Steven Heyman, Dan Ramirez, Josh Garber, Susanne Doremus, Miki Lee, Gary Justis, Charles Arnoldi, Michael Kessler, and Lincoln Schatz (to name a few). In this peer context, an exhibition at Klein Art Works was an important milestone as well as a signifier of career recognition for a Chicago-based artist.

In the later years of the gallery, Paul expanded and redirected his focus to include new media and more conceptually based installations. As his interests shifted from the work that had earlier defined his gallery, his collector base did not, and he closed the gallery in 2004. In the course of his career as a gallerist, however, he was well respected for both the quality and consistency of the work exhibited and his support and commitment to the Chicago gallery world.



Paul Klein. Photo from Chicago Tribune.



Sam Gilliam, Wizard, 2000, mixed media. Photo: Klein Art Works internet archive.



Gary Justis, Exhibition: "This is the Thing," 2000, Klein Art Works, Chicago. Photo by Paul Klein.

As one door leads to another, the closing of the gallery was both timely and fortuitous. In 2008, he was commissioned by the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority to curate and orchestrate the art for the recently completed McCormick Place West pavilion at the McCormick Place Convention Center. At more than forty thousand square feet, this was a massive undertaking, as the artwork included commissions, site specific installations, and purchases. The curatorial prospectus under Paul's direction focused inclusively on Illinois- and Chicago-based artists. This venture also allowed Paul to parallel his developing interests as well as to commission artists reflective of a broad and diverse base, both aesthetically and culturally. With over fifty works by thirty artists, a segmented list of the participants would include Bernard Williams, Nick Cave, Mary Lou Zelazny, Vera Klement, Preston Jackson, Michiko Itatani, and Sabrina Raaf, amongst many others.

In totality, both McCormick Place West and South (curator and project manager by Joel Straus in 1998) form one of the largest and most ambitious public collections in the City of Chicago. If Paul's focus was distinctively regional, Joel's approach was more blended in scope. Collectively, however, their mutual achievements created a vibrant, engaging, and accessible portfolio showcasing regional, national, and international artists.

Beginning shortly after the closing of his gallery, Paul initiated a series of online posts entitled "Art Letters." On a weekly basis, Paul reviewed gallery exhibitions, museum exhibitions, and art fairs. As internet posts are timely as opposed to magazine reviews which are published months after an exhibition has closed, his "Art Letters" became the quintessential road map for current exhibitions. With the dispersal of the gallery world into varying districts, this overview was also a very good guide for what to see and where to see it. "Art Letters" also replaced the reduced art criticism which had been a staid part of the weekend edition for both the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. For many artists, Paul's "Art Letters" were quite often an exhibition's only review, and for many young artists, perhaps their first review. Although "Art Letters" was in some sense rogue for its time as a self-published online journal, it became an important part of the gallery world and functioned as both a critique and a roadmap for those interested in contemporary art.



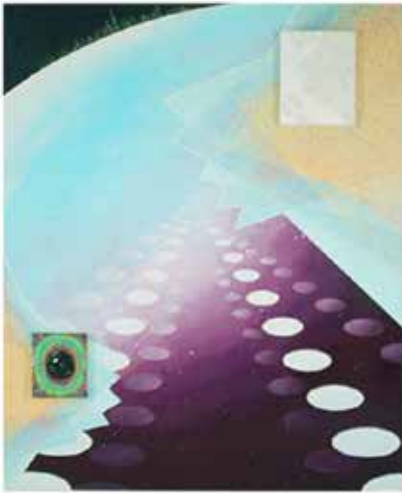
Dan Ramirez, *The Peacock and the Hawk / El pavo real y elalcon*, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 inches. Permanent Collection National Museum of Mexican Art. Photo by Michael Tropea.



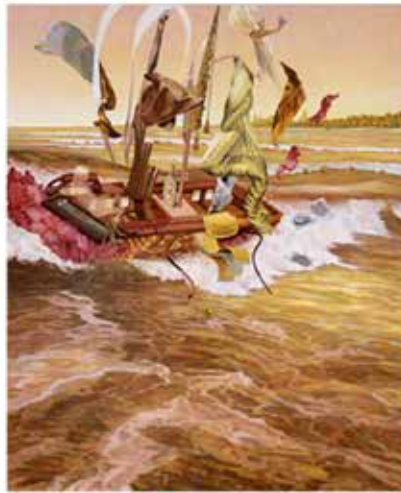
Nick Cave, *Garden Plot*, 2006, found beaded and sequined garments, wood, 8 ft. in diameter. Photo by James Prinz.

In conjunction with and independent of "Art Letters," Paul formed "Klein Artist Works" as a for-profit tutorial for artistic career development. With an accompanying book *The Art Rules* published in 2015, the course was a definitive navigational handbook of the art world. If art schools developed aesthetics, Paul's course developed careers. Through numerous interviews, discussions, and studio visits, Paul initiated the uninitiated, providing the skills and tools to negotiate and navigate an uncertain and highly competitive terrain. When viewing the online site for "Klein Artist Works," there is also an amazingly amount of remaining information posted publicly which gives a very definitive picture of the scope and depth of his course. These include interviews by artist, dealers, collectors, consultants, curators, writers, and business advocates. Collectively, this is a comprehensive and profound oral history, and with the multitudes of posted interviews and discussions, a powerful record of our time.

If we return to the broader question regarding the value of a "traditional" artistic education, we might be well served to look at "Klein Artist Works" as an inventive model for the future, and with his blend of pragmatism and poetics, a valuable resource for those developing and pursuing their dreams of financial and artistic success. For many artists in the Chicago art world and beyond, he both opened a door and taught another generation how to walk through it. Paul used his vast experience in offering guidance and direction to artists at various points in their careers. This nuts-and-bolts attitude helped his students learn the tools of the trade, and his course was quintessential Paul. His approach was direct and honest, simultaneously nurturing and encouraging, while teaching that you get further with a clear path and a defined destination.



Michiko Itatani, "Lake Effect" painting from *Infinite Vision IV-I*, 2007, oil on canvas, 107 x 88 x 4 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Mary Lou Zelazny, *I ♥ I Go*, 2007, acrylic, acrylic on paper on canvas, 8'11" x 7'4". Photo courtesy of the artist.

In many ways, "Klein Art Works" embodied a certain nostalgia for many of us who came of age in the '80s and the '90s. Alternative spaces were intermingled with for-profit galleries, and the emerging art world in Chicago seemed at the brink of establishing itself as an important art center, second only to New York. As art communities are most often generational, the closing of the gallery signified a change of guard. New galleries moved into the forefront, and other interests became more topical. As we look back on our time, we see that many of these artists that Paul represented as well as many galleries of that generation were at the apex of a shifting cultural landscape.

Writing a memoir is both a privilege and a responsibility, as a life's work is recounted, and for the brief time that you read it, their presence is felt. Each memory is specific to that person, yet collectively the loss is felt and echoes throughout their community. A person's accomplishments are however public, and in that respect, we recount who they were and the impact they made. With Paul, his trajectory was constantly moving forward, and if opportunities were lost, they were found again, as he remained active, vital, and engaged in spite of declining health. This determination seemed to characterize Paul, defining him both personally and publicly.

As one tends to remember beginnings and endings, I remember the last time I saw Paul. I had known Paul for more than thirty years, and I knew his health was declining and that his future was uncertain. I invited Paul to my studio, probably knowing that this was our last time together. I was preparing for a retrospective in Denver and had recently completed a series of large-scale fiberglass sculptures for the exhibition. He looked at one of the works and, with his direct Paul Klein candor, stated that I had "really accomplished something!"

In retrospect, I would like to reverse the compliment, and like many of us, say it the other way: "Paul, you really accomplished something!"

Paul will be missed, his presence will be felt, his contributions will echo, and in a life well lived, our thoughts are with his family and his wife Amy.

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the Los Angeles correspondent for the *New Art Examiner*.



Portrait of Paul Klein by Carol Pylant, 2016, oil on panel. Photo courtesy of the artist.