

MANSION

HOUSE CALL | LARRY POONS

A Crush That Led To a Brush

The painter fell for a girl in school in a Francis Ford Coppola-directed play



JASON MANDELLA (PORTRAIT); MELVIN C. POONS (HISTORICAL); © LARRY POONS/VAGA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY

The first time I painted on canvas board, I was lovesick. I had a crush on a girl in high school and had just finished reading Irving Stone's Van Gogh biographical novel, "Lust for Life."

I took my easel to a nearby park and painted trees. As I worked the paint with a small brush, it helped get my feelings out.

I was born in Tokyo in 1937. My grandfather, a New Yorker, had started an export company there. My father, Melvin, and his brother

took over the business.

About a year later, we left in a hurry. Japan's war with China and a concentration camp loomed over everyone. Back in the U.S., we settled in Far Rockaway, Queens.

We lived near the beach. I remember the brightness and the sand. I also remember my mother arriving home from the hospital and stepping out of the family Packard with my baby brother, Ronnie.

My father commuted into Manhattan to the family business. In the late 1940s, my parents moved

to a Moorish house on the North Shore of Long Island in an old section of Great Neck.

My mother, Esme, was tall and attractive. But for some reason we didn't get along. We had an odd relationship that I've never been able to figure out. She rarely talked to me. Neither did my father.

As a result, I was a solitary kid and turned to music. At some point in grade school, my father bought me a Stella guitar. I taught myself to play with an instruction book. I also listened to Tex Ritter's records and

followed along.

In high school, I heard Hank Williams sing on the radio. It was like smelling a flower for the first time. I had no control over how I felt.

Around that time, I also discovered poetry. John Faybrick, an English teacher, laid Carl Sandburg on the class. He had us pick a favorite poem out of Sandburg's "The People, Yes" and read it to the class.

When I came to the end of the poem I chose, the class was thunderstruck, just as I had felt. I liked that. I had communicated something and everybody was stunned.

I had a handful of school friends, including Francis Ford Coppola, who was in the grade behind me. He was known then as Frank. He directed school plays, such as "Finian's Rainbow." That's where I fell in love with the girl. She was a dancer in the cast.

Painting, music and poetry all spoke to me, especially music. In my senior year, I applied to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. But by my second year, the idea of becoming a formal musician was fading. I had been painting daily. It was as enjoyable as pedaling a bike.

In 1956, I was accepted at the Greenwich Village Art Show. Back in Boston, I enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. But I realized I couldn't draw.

I left school and moved to New York in 1957. Painters Don McAree, Howard Smythe and I became friends, and we opened the E-pit'ome Coffee House on Bleecker Street in 1958.

One day in 1959, Howard insisted I go uptown to French & Co.'s gallery to see a show by Barnett Newman. I responded immediately to the color. I was knocked out. Barney was the first real artist I ever met. He treated me like an equal



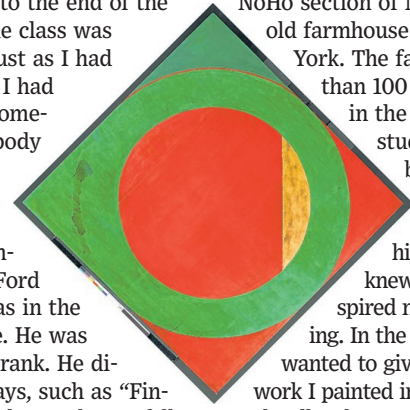
Larry Poons at Yares Art gallery, Manhattan, in November, far left, and at age 3, left, in Far Rockaway, Queens. Below, "Rock and Roll," circa 1958.

and I felt part of the art world.

Today, my wife, Paula, and I divide our time between a loft in the NoHo section of Manhattan and an old farmhouse in upstate New York. The farmhouse is more than 100 years old. I paint in the 400-square-foot studio space in our barn.

The girl I had a crush on in high school never knew she inspired my first painting. In the early '60s, I wanted to give her a geometric work I painted in 1958 called "Rock and Roll." She wouldn't accept it.

—As told to Marc Myers



Larry Poons, 82, is an abstract painter best known for his "dot" and "throw" paintings. "Larry Poons" (Abbeville), a book-length monograph of his work from the 1950s to the present, will be published in September.

POONS ON PAINTING

Wish you could draw? Not at all. I realize now that drawing is not what painting is about.

What is it about? Split-second struggles with yourself and color. That's the nature of paint.

What is painting? Survival. You're never sure about what you've done. That's ultimately its sum total.

So, there's comfort in insecurity? There has to be if you're a painter.

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