

# Folk Art

## MESSENGER

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# IN SEARCH OF HERSELF

BY GARY MONROE

## The Art of REVA FREEDMAN

found her meaning through painting. An unending verve set her free to discover her aesthetic and her self. Her art is not a matter of patterns and textures, but rather one of life and death.

Reva Ralston was born in Toronto, Canada, on January 9, 1919, to Jewish immigrants; her mother was from Romania and her father from Poland. Her parents were hardworking people who early on recognized her musical talent. Reva was a child prodigy and was recognized as having perfect pitch. She performed with the Toronto Philharmonic at the age of 13. According to her daughter, Sue Felner, "she didn't have much of a childhood," and she adds, "Maybe that's where her paintings came from." Reva Freedman seemed to express existential qualities through painting. Her

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process revealed archetypal forms; hers are not decorative abstractions.

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Family Celebration (signed)

who rebelled against authority and had no patience for conformity at any point during her life. Her son, Ron, points out that "the time she spent painting was the only time that she seemed to be truly at peace, with nothing to prove to anyone." It was also the only time she felt heard; seemingly this—*being heard*—was at the root of her loneliness. Reva's interest in music began to blossom at age six, playing the piano and, two years later, the violin. She discovered the potential that painting held for self-expression, or for *being heard*, finally, in middle age.

As a Jew living in a non-Jewish community in Toronto as World War II brewed, her family faced anti-Semitism. "She was one of three Jewish kids in her grade school," explains Sue. This further foisted Reva into a void, living in her own alienated world. She was alone and perhaps felt targeted. "She spent a lot of time hiding," says Sue, adding, "She didn't have an identity when she was young."

Reva graduated from the Toronto Conservatory of Music. She played in the Promenade Symphony of

Toronto and the Toronto Philharmonic Orchestra. While performing in the Catskills in upstate New York, Reva met her future husband, Morris Freedman. He was a soldier at the time and was attracted to her physical beauty as well as her violin playing. He admired her confidence and



Songbird



The French Caterpillar



World Renowned

multiple skills while providing her the freedom to do anything she wanted; his support would have a great impact on her art making.

They married in 1944 and moved to Laurelton, Queens, and soon afterward relocated to Great Neck, Long Island. "She played housewife," Sue explains, "playing bridge, having a social life, and raising three children." Reva continued playing violin and viola in the Long Island Symphony, where she performed as a soloist and played in chamber music groups. She was an avid reader and was interested in current events. She enjoyed visiting art museums and hunting for antiques.

Annual trips to Florida provided Reva with a reprieve from cold New York winters. The family vacationed, as many Jewish families did, in Miami Beach. Hotels then offered poolside activities. Guests could take dance lessons, play Bingo and take art lessons. During a vacation in 1961 at The Barcelona, a swanky hotel near the famed Fontainebleau, Reva participated in a painting class. She was 42 years old at the time, and this proved to be an event that would shift her life focus. Years later she was featured in a *Miami Herald* article (April 26, 1987) about that fateful day saying, "We were supposed to paint a photograph of a barn. I kept changing it. I made the barn disappear and turned it into a mountain. I felt like this was the most exciting thing, and I was hooked. I'd had a misconception of what art was. I thought you had to have a natural ability for drawing when you were young. I didn't have that."

The snowbirds relocated to Miami as retirees in 1974. Soon Reva would become an original painter and fulfill her creative ambitions, or at least find solace through painting. No longer would she be restrained. She would become herself. The days of being co-dependent on a conductor and other musicians were past. Making music was a form of self-expression but it required structure. Reva intuitively knew that technique could stifle creativity, as had been the case for her.

Painting meant freedom and she was hooked. Reva could not get the sense of abandon and revitalization from playing music that she got from the visual arts. She enrolled in formal art classes, but these were not satisfying; before long she was rebelling against her teachers' parochial ways. She didn't care to fit in or go along to get along. Something was itching; she was searching to express herself without the reserve of tradition.



Fish Tale



Reva at first played with different stylistic approaches. She collected artists' monographs and emulated Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Willem De Kooning, Jackson Pollack, Joan Miro and Red Grooms but would quickly arrive at her own way of painting. She disregarded the styles of others rather than synthesize their influences. She believed that anything could be art and experimented with different media, even checking for things that people were throwing away that might be recycled and integrated into her own creations. She became fascinated by how many different ways she could paint the same thing so that all the iterations held different meanings.

Reva's artwork became less and less referential to any subject and any genre, while her paintings became increasingly wilder. She would claim as useful many things that others would hardly consider. She incorporated traditional and non-traditional material into her pieces: tar paper, canvas, watercolor paper, burlap, acrylic paint, oil paint, tempera,

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Cerebral

watercolor, markers, foam, newspaper, duct tape, scotch tape, aluminum foil, towels, hair, wood, bark, name tags, napkins, comics, magazines, ribbon, felt, fabric, ink, wallpaper, jigsaw puzzle pieces, chalk, pastels, t-shirts, glitter, puff paint, masking tape, cardboard, glue, ink pens, paper plates, candy wrappers, cellophane, and coffee can labels. She painted "like a wild woman, looking for a fix slopping paint left and right, the brighter the better," as she described it.

Reva also fashioned sculptures from Styrofoam. Her abstracted scenes made by assembling odd shaped pieces used to pack and ship merchandise were like dioramas from another world. "Each of Reva's Styrofoam creations looks as though it may have been born purely of form. But on closer inspection one contains timepieces that are reminiscent of Dali, another has animals at the circus. Some display the playfulness of Red Grooms. One can continually explore each piece to find something new, true to Reva's own mantra on life," said Annette Ricciardi, Reva's daughter-in-law.

Reva stood for individuality. She said that everyone saw the same thing



Encore

differently, so no one should teach people to see any one way. Technique was only a starting point for her. Though it is not quite right to say that she went about breaking the rules, for she never really learned them. That is, Reva rejected the conventions her teachers were instructing from the start. She had no room for theory.

Reva became more and more obsessed; she was soon painting day and night. Her condo became a big artist's studio. Paintings in progress and completed ones were tacked everywhere, hung one above another while many more were stacked in closets so that they would often cavalcade out when the door was opened. She often worked on five paintings simultaneously.

"Smear it a little here, I smear it a little there," she explained as she brushed and sponged florescent colors across large sheets of tar paper that were tacked onto her walls in every room—living room, dining room, bedroom. Her labor found cohesive and resonant forms through the intuitive act of painting.

In 2001, Reva's husband Morris began to suffer at an accelerated pace from Parkinson's disease. Reva was distraught over Morris' failing health and how it might affect her artwork. She wrote a grant request mentioning her husband's poor health to get funding for her painting. It was a ploy. Money was never an issue. Nevertheless, when Morris was sick, Reva plunged even deeper into art making. Music and painting provided her with a diversion from the unhappiness she was experiencing with his illness.



Oggi

A year later, Reva was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. "She started exhibiting strange behaviors," Sue says. Her behaviors started to change after Morris passed away, "They became extremely erratic." The couple had been married for 57 years. "My mother had been devoted to my father when he had Parkinson's disease and would push him to participate in her quartet concerts at the library and in the art shows she had," says Sue. Now she was alone with an apartment full of her paintings. As Reva's health failed, she painted even more manically, stacking paintings upon paintings throughout her apartment, under her bed and on top of furniture and even spread out across the floor.

Reva Freedman died on March 29, 2011, but not before realizing her

central aspiration. Her paintings hung in six Norton Museum of Art's Horrt exhibitions. Inclusion in this prestigious annual juried show was a source of pride. Her paintings were recognized with a one-person exhibition at the Hollywood Art and Culture Center in 2002. She was represented in other regional group exhibitions. "The recognition was everything she was looking for," says Sue, who now serves the family as their mother's archivist, caring for and promoting her life's work consisting of some 1,200 paintings.

Having begun art making at a time when women were just beginning to be accepted into the art world through rigorous academic training, Reva was intent on making her voice known as a largely self-taught prolific painter. Though she reveled in people's delight in her artwork and the attention the few exhibitions that included her work brought, she was still an outsider working in obscurity. This was likely in her nature. She grew up alone, rejected convention and authority, and died feeling alone—at least as a fine artist.

Reva Freedman worked in a mysterious realm between consciousness and materialism. Living life fully for one's art is necessary to sustain and distinguish it. There can be no reservations or excuses or doubts about one's commitment. This unconditional quality was well suited for Reva Freedman because it leads to living internally, and she lived this way all her life. She had purpose; she knew where she was going. Her trove of paintings is proof of her survival.

Reva Freedman's artwork was more about process than product; her paintings gained presence as if she were communing with cosmic forces. Once, about becoming a painter, she commented, "Whatever I attempted seemed to have a life of its own... barns became mountains... roads turned into rivers and back again... amazing what a little paint could do. I felt like God. Who else could have moved scenery around like that?" ❏

*GARY MONROE, from DeLand, Fla., has published 10 books about Florida's self-taught and vernacular artists. His most popular title, The Highwaymen: Florida's African-American Landscape Painters, launched an interest in these forgotten mid-century artists.*