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HOUSE CALL

A High School Crush Inspired Larry Poons's First Work of Art

The abstract painter used the canvas to channel his emotions

By Marc Myers

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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. He spoke with Marc Myers.

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 first 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



Larry Poons with his mother, Esme, at home in Tokyo in 1937.

PHOTO: MELVIN C. POONS

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

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



Larry Poons at age 3 in Far Rockaway, Queens.

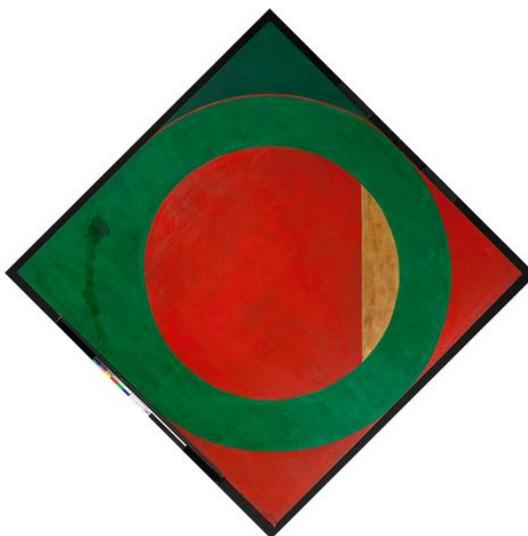
PHOTO: MELVIN C. POONS

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. I applied to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

Works by Larry Poons

A look at the artist's changing styles and techniques.



'Rock and Roll,' c. 1958, Oil on canvas, 56 x 56 inches. Mr. Poons offered this painting to a woman who inspired his first painting in high school, but she passed. © LARRY POONS/VAGA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY

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During my first year in Boston, I took my guitar downtown to a bar called the Hillbilly Ranch. There was genuine bluegrass going on there. One night, the Lilly Brothers were playing. When they saw my new Martin D-28, they asked me to sit in.

By my second year, the idea of becoming a formal musician was fading. In my room on campus, I had been painting daily. It was as enjoyable as pedaling a bike.

In 1956, I was accepted at the Greenwich Village Art Show. I set up my paintings. The painter next to me, Don McAree, mentioned that my geometric paintings were neoplastic. I had no idea what he meant.

Back in Boston, I enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. But soon I was in the same boat as in music school. I realized I couldn't draw.

I left school and moved to New York in 1957. Don and I became friends along with Howard Smythe, who also was a painter. We opened the E-pit'o-me 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 went and responded immediately to the color. I was so knocked out, I wrote him a letter. He invited me to a party,

Barney was the first real artist I ever met. He treated me like an equal, 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.



Larry Poons with his 'Art of the Fugue,' #2, in his studio on Maiden Lane in Manhattan, 1960.

PHOTO: MELVIN C. POONS

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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