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'You Become Better with Age'

Artists who are going strong at 80 and up find that old age offers freedom, self-assurance, and room to explore

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

At what age do people hit their stride professionally? Categorically speaking, athletes, engineers, politicians, television writers, salesmen, and actresses all have varying norms and shelf lives, sometimes affected by physical attributes or societal expectations. Seemingly immune to ageist perceptions and traditional notions of retirement are artists. A historical look reveals that a striking number have been highly productive and turned out some of their best work late into old age, including Bellini (who died at 86), Michelangelo (d. 89), Titian (d. between 86 and 103, depending on your source), Ingres (d. 86), Monet (d. 86), Matisse (d. 84), Picasso (d. 91), O'Keeffe (d. 98), and Bourgeois (d. 98).

"All the case histories point in one direction—the extraordinary flowering of artistic genius in old age," Thomas Dormandy wrote in his book *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age*. While Dormandy rejected the attractive idea of creativity as an antidote to physical or mental decline—"it is contradicted by the facts"—he explored the powerful inner shifts in old age that propelled many artists to new heights, whether it's Monet painting his "Water Lilies" when he was almost blind after cataract surgery, or Matisse

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Betye Saar with her birdcage sculpture *The Destiny of Latitude & Longitude, 2010*.

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inventing his paper cutouts in his last years when confined to his bed and a wheelchair.

The numerous recent exhibitions of actively working artists age 80 and up would bear out this anecdotal correlation between longevity and creative production. New “Old Masters” who have enjoyed gallery and museum shows over the last year include Wayne Thiebaud (92) at Acquavella, Robert Irwin (84) at Pace, Anthony Caro (89) at the Yale Center for British Art, Malcolm Morley (81) at the Parrish Art Museum, Yayoi Kusama (84) at the Whitney Museum, Alex Katz (85) at the Yale School of Art, John Baldessari (81) at Marian Goodman, and Philip Pearlstein (turning 89 on May 24) at Betty Cunningham. Thornton Dial (85) had a retrospective that traveled to several American museums, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted a survey of Jasper Johns (who turns 83 on May 15), Betye Saar (86) filled a room of the National Academy Museum with her birdcage sculptures, and an exhibition of Claes Oldenburg’s (84) work is currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

“Being an artist is a way of life,” says 82-year-old Faith Ringgold, who has a solo show opening in June

at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and just closed one at ACA Galleries. “It’s not about ‘I’m going to major in this and get my degree, and then I’ll go to work, and then I’ll retire.’ It is something one has a passion for, does, and then becomes—and can do it literally until they pass away. It’s an old-age thing. You become better with age.” Ringgold is currently creating an online museum of her work since 1948 that will provide games for people to create their own art—an entirely new venture for her.

“I do think some young people have the mistaken notion, especially today, that they’re supposed to be successful right away,” says Ringgold, adding that many women artists don’t receive acclaim before 60, especially women of color. “There’s a great deal of racism and sexism in the art world. If you’re going to drop out early, you’re going to miss the whole thing.” Cuban-born painter Carmen Herrera, for instance, spent decades working unwaveringly on her hard-edge abstractions before selling her first canvas in 2004, at age 89, to the collector Ella Fontanals-Cisneros. Since

**Joan Semmel
working on her
multi-sequence
self-portrait
Transitions, 2012.**

then, Herrera, who turns 98 this month, has experienced a flurry of interest in her work and shows at Lisson Gallery.

"I admire long-term careers," says Duane

Michals, 81, who just had a show at DC Moore Gallery of 19th-century tintypes that he playfully embellished with various styles of modernist painting. He had painted on photographs during the 1980s but cycled back to it a couple years ago in an entirely new way. "Anyone can be the flavor of the month or the year," he says. "I really admire people who evolve. What I'm doing now I wouldn't have imagined five years ago. I'd like to think that five years from now I might be doing something I can't imagine now."

"If you've lasted this long in the game, you probably are making a living," says Michelle Stuart, who recently turned 80 and now proudly admits her age (she used to lie about it). In July, Stuart has a survey of paintings, sculpture, and photographic works from 1968 to the present going on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York. She agrees with Ringgold that experience counts. "Experience certainly gives you insights into things that you didn't have in your earlier years," Stuart says. "You've made more things, you've honed your craft, you've experienced more books, you've experienced more criticism or praise. You don't need to worry about what people think. There's that kind of freedom."

Joan Semmel, 80, feels relief in not having to hustle and put herself out there in the same way she did when she was younger. "In the work itself, you know who you are as an artist," she says. She's gratified by the current interest in her work, with an exhibition of her self-portraits from the last decade up through June 9 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and a show of her most recent nudes juxtaposed with very early figurative paintings up through May 25 at Alexander Gray in New York. "You're not struggling with finding your voice and doubting everything you do in quite the same way as

when you're younger. It's all part of self-acceptance."

"Working becomes your own little Eden," Thiebaud says, while acknowledging the challenge of overcoming the traps of what others think and say. "You make this little spot for yourself. You don't have to succeed. You don't have to be famous. You don't have to be obligated to anything except that development of the self."

Risk taking seems to be a common trait among these artists, not just in old age but throughout their lives. "Artists are like gamblers," says Stuart. "Who else would walk into life without a job, no credit? You've got to have that little extra frisson of adventure."

Morley has always eschewed working in any one predictable style. Being an artist is "a perpetual renewal, it's always for the first time," says the artist, widely credited with jump-starting both photorealism



Faith Ringgold in front of *Tar Beach 2*, 1990.

and Neo-Expressionism. "It's rather like my dog. When you throw the ball, she runs for it as if she's never run for it before, and it must be the millionth time." Over the last decade, Morley has faced several health crises but has rallied and come back, taking new directions in his painting. "I seem to be a cat with nine lives," he says, adding that it's impossible to know whether his development would have been similar if none of his mishaps had happened.

For Ellsworth Kelly, who turns 90 this month, the connection between physical and mental health has only become stronger with age. "Recently, I have had

some physical challenges related to aging, though I accept it, and it has given me an added surge for continuing to create new work," he says. Kelly has two sculptures in his current exhibition at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. "Making art has always been a necessity."

"I don't know if being an artist is making me live longer," says Semmel. "But certainly in terms of keeping me vital and interested and alive in the sense of how I live my life, being an artist is undoubtedly a very important part of that—even when I'm not well. Normally, I work standing. If I can't stand, I sit—but I still work. That engagement is very important."

For Semmel, aging has become a central subject in the work itself. Since the 1970s, she has painted pictures of her own naked body. "Early on, I was interested in a non-idealization of the body, the body as one really experiences it," she says. "Age, then, was a natural part of the way I was working. I felt it was important to focus on the changes in the way we look as a natural formation rather than something undesirable." Semmel's recent paintings, with layers of shifting views of her face and body, are much more psychologically complex than her earlier hard-edge canvases, which cropped out her face. "These new paintings are really concerned with the understanding of the self in one's total humanity rather than in one's sensuality," she says. "To be able and willing to show vulnerability is something I don't think I could have done when I was younger."



Philip Pearlstein at home with his painting *Two Models with Kiddie Car Airplane, Chariot, Whirlygig, and Michelin Man*, 2011.

Other painters find

the motivation to work every day in the legacy of painting itself. "I have to up the ante continuously," says Morley. "I have a big ambition to sit in the pantheon of the greats. Whether or not it occurs, of course, other people will have to decide." Thiebaud feels sustained by his ongoing dialogue with the history of the medium. "It's great to have the community of that long tradition of painting, which, however small a part you have in it, is a comforting kind of life," he says. Currently, he's working on paintings of mountains, synthesizing memories and characteristics of various types of mountain formations experienced in his youth. "I must say, I don't feel very successful," he says. "I'm still trying to figure the damn things out. This probably helps me to keep going—new problems, new sensibilities, new challenges."

"Whatever you feel is undone, you should do," says Stuart, a piece of advice she gives to artists and nonartists alike. For her, it meant creating an entirely photographic body of work, a medium she had previously only used for documentation. Her recent large-scale grids of images, surreal and cinematic ruminations on natural phenomena and human frailty, were shown last fall at Leslie Tonkonow in New York. "It's that book I always wanted to write, the storytelling aspect of my psyche that needed to come out," she adds.

All of these artists have maintained consistent, disciplined studio schedules. "You've got to do just like the musicians do, you've got to practice every day," Ringgold says. "I plan to do that for the rest of my life, practice every day." The luck of the gene pool as well as staying fit support the stamina and coordination required to remain at the top of one's game. Morley says he treats himself like an athlete in terms of the seriousness with which he approaches his physical therapy. Thiebaud plays tennis three to four times a week, which he finds akin to the athleticism of painting. "This



mind-body construct is a very important thing to recognize," he says. "The plumb line in the body gives us a sense of things like grace or awkwardness or tension. In tennis, after all, you're playing on a kind of surface like Mondrian where the parameters and limitations are as important as the spontaneity and freedom of the body."

The shift in one's sense of time that comes with aging also impacts the studio routine. "When you're 28, you feel like you've got infinite time in front of you, which you just don't have when you're my age," says Stuart. "You become more circumspect about how you spend it." Semmel agrees that time is an important factor in why and how she works today. "You know that your time is limited, so you don't want to waste your time doing work you don't feel is important." That means she gives herself permission to take occasional days off if she doesn't have something she really wants to do. "When I was younger, I had to work every day because I might not be an artist if I didn't," she says. "Now I'm pretty sure." ■

Carmen Herrera, who turns 98 this month, sold her first painting in 2004, at age 89.