

# FRANKLIN ROSS DRAKE (1929-2001)

by an old friend and occasional accomplice

DAVID SELLIN

I.

In a career spanning the second half of the twentieth century the art and life of Franklin Drake are inseparable. They can be generally measured by decades, in bursts of activity in Philadelphia and its rural environs and Woodstock, N.Y., and Manhattan, punctuated by excursions (courtesy of the U.S. Army) to Korea and Japan, and through Europe (supported by awards won in competition), summers in Ogunquit, Maine, and on the road to Texas. His whole life was a work in progress and, like his art, subject to periodic revision and improvement, and always an adventure. For an orderly chronicle of that life see the appended curriculum vitae.

There is also a gallery of works selected from a prolific production to illustrate the character, progress, and development of his art. His student years in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the nearby Barnes Foundation provided him the tools and the imagination to use them expressively thereafter. There is an underlying discipline evident in even the most experimental of his work, a control of seeming accident, boundaries to contain random encounters. Visit the gallery as you would a retrospective exhibition selected and grouped by a curator for quality and clarity, works divided into groups according to time, place, and medium, with rationale and particulars provided in accompanying text. Examine individual works for best reward.



His projects on a broader scale often resulted in nothing concrete remaining, being purely conceptual or in the realm of the happening, temporary installation, or the victim of vandalism, demolition, accident, or bureaucratic intervention. All of this Bud took with boundless good nature as he pursued his grail, or whale, accepting the world as it is. In this he had the unwavering support of his irrepressible wife Ruth, who went along with whatever, as long as it did not impinge on her workaday turf on Wall

Street. The public life of the artist, commonly known as Bud, may seem random and undisciplined, but in New York and Woodstock nonconformity is accepted as a norm and he blended easily with the crowd.

## II.

Pansy Copeland, Bud's mother Pan, ran a gallery and deli in Woodstock and was a fixture, active in the playhouse and a founder of the original Woodstock Soundout Music Festival. With a couple of friends from the Pennsylvania Academy, Bud established the Espresso Café in the town center in 1959. The atmosphere was casual, given to levity -- Bud once awoke in the midst of a marching band and parade of Little Leaguers. A popular spot for several years, it fell victim to the general perception by clientele and proprietors alike that it was a not for profit charitable organization in support of artists. He participated as an instructor in Bob Liikala's Inter Arts Workshop on route 212 and aptly called 212 (boiling point of Water), producing a Happening on the Woodstock town dump. "Outsider" Clarence Schmidt found in him a kindred spirit, and after moving to Manhattan in 1960 Bud continued to furnish him material for his Woodstock dream castle, including the discarded inventory of a Chelsea display window mannequin factory.

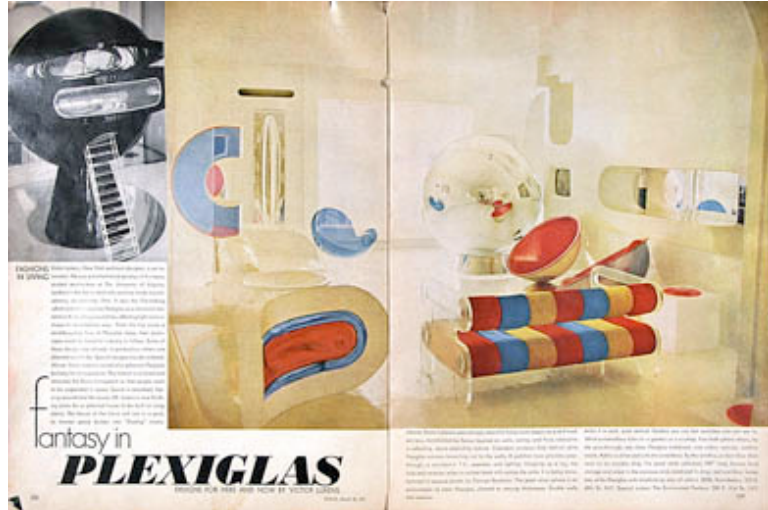
On the road, in his Caddie covered overall outside with transfer print photo collage, he fit to a T the beat generation profile. Over the driver's window he placed a life sized photo image of the flat brim and dark aviator glasses

he might expect just there after any toll booth --- "to put them at ease," he said. Ruth, in recalling events, refers back to their cars of

the moment: the Chevy Bud wrapped around a pole (in a pile worthy of Chamberlain) after their introductory blind-date in 1949; the Porsche totaled at a Pennsylvania Academy student-faculty party in a demonstration of its superior suspension; a Fiat; and the "American Dream", the decorated Cadillac that led in 1972 to a commission to decorate a Buick and a Chrysler hearse for the grand entry of the Rolling Stones, and John Lennon and Yoko, et al, to a street festival for a movie opening at the Ziegfield theater (Warhol did a balloon). But, the expected crowds grew far too vast to handle and the city revoked permits to assemble, so no parade and no pay from promoters --- "They were my best cars," Bud lamented.



Similar anti-climax followed a commission for a major part of the design and decoration of an uptown apartment, a multimedia environment subsequently featured in Vogue and Look magazines, but without any mention of his part. He arrived at his solo show on Madison Avenue one day to see Clement Greenberg walking away, locked out of the gallery by late opening. He lacked



the support of an aggressive gallery. Although Leo Castelli seemed to like his work, his associate said, “Bob (Rauschenberg) is doing that.”

### III.

In a surge of public spirit he constructed a styrofoam sculpture on 72nd and Riverside which was immediately burned down. Undaunted, he conceived a mobile stretching 125



blocks to City Hall, never achieved. But it was the purchase of a surplus Pennsylvania RR barge in 1967 that initiated a grand plan for a floating artist colony under the Brooklyn Bridge and an aquatic environment to circumnavigate the island and up the Hudson. Commodore Drake assembled a Peace Monument on the barge and reclined on the deck house with his poodles as they were towed past the United Nations. But in the face of opposition from marine

authorities his plans were thwarted, and finally scuttled when the barge sank at its moorings. That’s when he headed for Texas. Such transitory events, as ambitious as they might be, often leave little to mark their passage. Bud left behind a large quantity of videotapes, fixed-frame and time-lapse images, and a record these happenings might be found someday on others --- more than likely featuring sky and passing gulls and the underside of bridges.

For all that, the decade of the sixties were immensely productive for Drake in the variety and inventiveness of works of a conventional gallery size. He didn’t live in the Village or hang out at the Cedar Bar but lived in the Chatsworth on 72nd and Riverside,

where for a time the entire unoccupied top floor was his studio, as spacious as any Broom Street loft. For a time he worked on large high keyed monochrome abstract paintings in oils on canvas, experimented with polymer and photo-transfer collage, and developed a new method of spilling colored and whipped styrene into tubes or clear plexiglass boxes. 'The Drakes' gracious apartment was furnished with found objects and family heirlooms and Bud's art, enlivened by their poodles and, at least on one convivial occasion, by a gibbon hopping from one styrofoam filled box to another, happily plucking from the women below any ornament or wig he could spot. Life was never dull.

And in these dozen years Drake was right in the forefront of the New York art scene at its most ebullient and creative, brushing shoulders with the pack but running a parallel course. His is a subjective and sensual art, touching on a number of the major movements in their own time (Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, Pop, Op, etc.) while pushing its own envelope.



#### IV.

In 1973 the Drakes relocated to Bud's old stamping grounds, into a three story Philadelphia brick row house on the edge of the old downtown, for a period of relative tranquillity. For two decades he settled what he had explored, cultivating what he had



gained, expanding his horizons. In the process he worked over and reworked many of his earlier pieces --- "improving" them, he said. Some photo transfer collages almost disappear under new surfaces. He consolidated early compositional devices and methods of application and refined his miscellany of decorative symbols. One of these, the hand, is as universal a mark as any in human history and singularly unique to individual experience. Bud made it his own. A VW convertible took the place of the Cadillac on the narrow

street and was soon covered with photo images and prints on the exterior and hand prints and pointillist dots inside. These soon crept up the curbside phone pole as far as they could reach, and the window frames of the house, and inside continued up the stair risers to the

second floor and Bud's studio. Suitcases, camera, furniture and refrigerator were not exempt. His new studio work has a confidence and hard won maturity. But he always considered his work in progress and carried a color box in his coveralls for notes and sketches, and just in case he came across an old work in need of improvement on the spot. A dinner host might face the dilemma of restraining the artist or letting things run their course. Meanwhile, he continued to exhibit and won a banner competition for his Alma Mater.

In 1991 he attended to his mother Pan, bedridden in Woodstock. And after Ruth could complete obligations they bought a house there in sylvan surroundings. In Philadelphia they had to be content with a back-yard mouse feeder, but here deer and wild turkey abounded. Dada wire sculptures and ready-mades joined them on the grounds. Inside, anything invited elevation to the status of art, accumulated egg-shells grew into an



homage to Brancusi's Bird in Flight. But years of smoking and experimentation with polymer and solvents when there was scant awareness of their toxicity had aken a toll, and the need for oxygen now kept Bud on a short tether. His studio work now acquired a rigid discipline in compositional structure, but within those confines a great freedom for flights of fancy. Always introspective, his art grew increasingly autobiographical in celebration of himself and meaningful events and personal associations. It was still very much in progress when arrested by Bud's death in 2001. His art remains to us as testimony of a rich and fruitful life.

*David Sellin*