

MICHEL PELLUS

"I shut my eyes in order to see."
 – Paul Henri Gauguin



"Across 343" 40"x 60", finished: 1999

by Jan Engoren

A child of the 1960's, Michel Pellus grew up in Montréal, Canada. He was the descendant of artists and artisans on both sides of his family. His grandfather, Guillaume Pellus, worked in France as a restorer of stained glass during the First World War. His father, Raymond Pellus, was one of the first students at the École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, and a professor of art for thirty-five years. His mother, Tina Roy, also a graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts, is an artist in her own right, living and painting in South Florida.

A product of his generation, Pellus' style was influenced by the transcendental themes of the counterculture and pop artists of the time, an influence that manifests itself in his early work. He displays his whimsical side by appearing in his paintings with long hair and a mustache. He calls this early style, "subjective realism." Pellus explains, "Everything is subjective. Reality is subjective. Are you seeing the same thing as I am? We all see differently through different eyes." Placing realistic figures in a fantasy landscape of castles in the sky, brightly colored trees, cotton-ball clouds, and ribboned roads on a magical mystery tour – Pellus' early work is filled with cosmic imagery, and is lighthearted, humorous, and optimistic. The combination of the realistic with the

fantastical elements gives a sense of duality to the paintings. "I'm trying to paint a visual poem," says Pellus. "I seek to capture a moment in time, that particular moment. Not the moment before, nor the moment after."

Pellus works in a large, three-room studio into which he drives his car near the old railroad tracks in Ft. Lauderdale. The studio is in a nondescript building in a nondescript locale next to a vacant lot. However, inside the studio, where Pellus spends most of his time, the nondescript gives way to the remarkable. Scattered about are an assortment of canvases in various stages of completion, an old Vegas-style slot machine, an expensive Italian Pavoni espresso maker, and an old wooden tennis racket hanging on the wall. Pellus' subtle sense of humor and inside jokes infuse much of his work. He inserts himself, and sometimes his work, into many of his paintings and early lithographs. For example, in a lithograph he did for Levine & Levine Graphics in 1979 in honor of Einstein's 100th birthday, he placed his painting, titled "La Scene," above Einstein's desk although the painting was created long after Einstein died.

In the late 1970's, Pellus lived in New York's Soho District, and with the help of his mother, who was acting as his agent, started selling his paintings on the streets of New York City, in art fairs around town, and at the Washington, D.C. Art Fair at the Armory. He created a series of lithographs entitled, "Homage to the Masters," paying tribute to Dali, Picasso, and Chagall that was published by Eleanor Ettinger. Her atelier was the publisher for many of Norman Rockwell's prints.

Searching for the complete freedom and liberation found by another famous French artist, Paul Gauguin, Pellus, now in his mid-thirties, pulled up his roots and decamped to a remote island key, Elizabeth Island, one of the "out-islands" of the Bahamas. His girlfriend, who later became his wife, joined him there. He relinquished all of his material possessions, left his contacts and work behind, and decided he wanted to be free and unencumbered to concentrate exclusively on his paintings. As Gauguin said, "I sailed to the tropics to escape civilization and everything that is artificial and conventional." The same could be said for Michel Pellus. The island experience proved to be a highlight and turning point in Pellus' personal life and career. He married his girlfriend (paying for the wedding with one of his paintings), started a family, and indulged in newfound creativity. Paradoxically, while on the remote,

nearly-deserted island, living on "fish and fruit" (as Gauguin said), and painting *au naturel*, Pellus created some of his most striking cityscapes filled with skyscrapers, New York City street scenes, and their residents.

During this period, Pellus' signature style emerged and he began integrating elements that the popular New York artist, Alex Katz, was renowned for, including, among other things, his large, oversized paintings of skyscrapers and the female form. Hilton Kramer stated in the *New York Observer*, "He [Katz] paints tall, vertical, larger-than-life portraits of women in which female subjects are cropped at the top above their hairline and at the bottom edge of the canvas at the chest." Pellus took this view of the world to heart and made it his own. Taking Katz' flat dimensionalities, he moved them into contemporary times with the highly glossed, highly lacquered, and finished surfaces that are popular today. His three different color portraits of the same pose in "Posh in Red," "Emerald," and "Black" reflect this modern style. The model in the portrait is high fashion, stylishly dressed in high-heels and a belted dress, and moving toward the viewer as if on a catwalk. Pellus shows her from her chest to her feet, leaving the sides of her form and the top of her figure to our imagination. His larger than life figures of women are captivating. The sheer size of the canvas makes a statement, and the stylized figures painted in a hyper-realistic mode tower over the viewer and



"The Shoe 2" 56"x 40", finished: 2005



"Bing Cherries in Crystal" 60"x 50", finished: 2006



"Chez Mon Ami" 48"x 48", finished: 2003



"CityScape" 60"x 96", finished: 2006

dominate any room in which they are placed. Many interior designers decorate rooms using his paintings as a focal point. There is no denying the presence of the women in Pellus' paintings. They are the modern day Greek goddesses – the Minerva's and Nike's of today. They impose an internal debate on the viewer: Does the large scale of the work invite intimacy, or keep us at a distance? It's an age-old paradox: the ancient Greeks offering sacrifices in the temple while stone goddesses look down from on high. Does the sheer size of the woman's face or figure beckon us in, or intimidate us with its imperious presence?

Says Armand Bolling, director of the Karen Lynne Gallery in Boca Raton, Florida, which represents Pellus' works, "Pellus' style is photo-realistic. His portraits are stylized and hip. He looks to popular culture, and even to billboards, for inspiration, and this brings a lot of energy to his work. Pellus' paintings are like the pictures in *Vanity Fair* or *Town and Country* magazine; they represent the best of our world without any flaws - like the idealized Greek sculptures."

His street scenes, such as "Cityscape," "Power of the City," and "Wooster," all painted during the late 80's, 90's and 2000's are imbued with an urban sensibility and a sense of a drama unfolding before our eyes. His use of perspective and oversized figures that loom over and dominate the landscape transmit an ominous or foreboding feeling. The technique of using the paintbrush as a photographer would use the zoom lens on his camera creates a sense of mystery and leaves us wondering as to what transpired before and after this moment.

In addition to his portraits of city scenes and the people that inhabit those spaces, Pellus has perfected the art of the "statement still life," a still life that makes a strong visual pronouncement. These are oversized still lifes that jump off the easel onto the large walls of mansions, institutions, and galleries. Says Pellus, "The presence of these paintings is as important as the theme itself. It's not just a still life; it's an entity unto itself. These still lifes are represented in realism, but they are abstract in the sense of looking for the story." Some of his most delicious still lifes are of bowls of mouth-watering, high intensity, richly chromatic, shiny, glossy, ready-to-eat, bright, red cherries. Pellus has perfected the art of painting these cherries in

different bowls that he selects himself. In his large canvas, "Painting Cherries," 1991, Pellus shows himself standing on a scaffold putting the finishing touches on cherries that are larger than he is.

Karen Lynne, owner of the gallery bearing her name, has worked with Pellus for the past 16 years. Says Lynne, "The first time I saw Michel's work, I loved it. His style is sophisticated and unique. Every painting is different." Her gallery, the Karen Lynne Gallery, was selected by the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts, Blue Morning to be part of an exhibition featuring nine painters and three sculptors from the United States who were invited to travel to France and go on display at the Louvre Museum in Paris from December 13 – 16, 2007. Michel Pellus and his painting, "Chez Mon Ami," were chosen by the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts for inclusion in this show. "Chez Mon Ami," reveals a man and a woman seated tête-a-tête at the window of the brasserie, "Mon Ami," in Boca Raton,

Florida. The woman, wearing a large red hat and a slight smile, leans in towards the man, listening attentively. The man, dressed in a suit and tie, bends forward to meet her. They are sharing an intimate moment, alone in their world, and captured in an exact snapshot of time by Michel Pellus.

There is a wonderful element of synchronicity that a painting of French citizen Michel Pellus, who now lives and works in South Florida, has made its way back home to France, the land of his ancestors. ♦

The Karen Lynne Gallery will host a one-man show featuring Michel Pellus and his latest works of Southern California-inspired paintings in January 2008. For more information, call the Karen Lynne Gallery at 561-995-0985

The Karen Lynne Galleries are located at the Gallery Center on Banyan Trail in Boca Raton and at 216 N. Canon Drive in Beverly Hills, California. www.karenlynnegallery.com



"Painting Cherries" 60"x 72", finished: 1998