

I Met Roy
by Michel Balasis
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So here I was, strolling in New York on a seasonably perfect day, early June 1997. I had ditched my overzealous friends at the rim of their most recent alcoholic beverage and headed out on my own quest for culture. With a small planner in hand and a nervous stride I entered the Leo Castelli Gallery-SoHo, knowing full well that this was the guy who discovered my highest source of inspiration, Roy Lichtenstein.

As I walked up the long staircase to the gallery space (this location is now closed), my first thought was to have my small page of slides ready to pop out of the planner at a moments notice. I had rarely shown the slides of my paintings to anyone of note in the art world. Previously they had been used as some kind of fodder to impress the occasional friendly tourist while on vacation, to which the response was usually a "wow, your like a real artist". This time I was optimistic that a representative of Castelli would at least take a peak at them.

On entering the main gallery space, I was struck with an uncomfortable amount of disgust upon viewing the latest work of a photographer who's subject matter was clearly the human anal passage and it's many uses, at extremely large scale. I found the urge to leave tugging at my willingness to try and understand the expression and context of the exhibit. I could at least stand here at the center of the room and turn my head. I noticed another person over in the group exhibit of more permanent selections, and headed that way mostly in relief. The guy was thin and his body language seemed more like he was waiting to speak with the gallery rep, who was on the phone in the back.

He turned my way and said, "that stuff is a little much isn't it?" To which my response was, "I guess I've never seen one that big". When he mentioned, "New York is full of them", I realized that it was Roy Lichtenstein. He was asking me a question and being funny. Can I possibly come up with a response that will keep the conversation going and not come off like an annoying fan. So I decided to go with, "I prefer the work on this wall", and we both glanced at the collection of small graphic paintings.

Trying to play the casual conversation, I asked, "what brings you here?" His response was, "time calls". I quickly tried to deduce the comment and assumed that he might have been visiting for the first time in a while. Luckily he broke the pattern with a question, "are you familiar with any of this work?" Nervously I said, "actually I'm here to see if anyone will take a look at my slides". Here I was, standing next to Roy Lichtenstein and gathering the courage to show him slides of Pop Art paintings that were clearly inspired by his work of the early 60's.

"These will look very familiar to you aesthetically", I said. His first response seemed

exactly like the gallery owner who had already seen hundreds of slides that day. Yet something caught his eye, and he glanced up to me with a rye smile and pointed to my recently finished painting, "Babysitter" saying, "now this is clever". I quickly tried to explain that my refined comic book imagery was just a vehicle for the contextual message, as it relates to current society.

"Makes sense to me", he said, as he glanced at a few more slides before closing the planner and handing it back to me. I was dying to find out if he considered my work a knock off of his previous efforts from nearly 40 years ago. "I've always been concerned about my work being original" I mentioned. Without a pause he replied, "you seem to have found something there, I'd go with it". He turned and walked behind a curtain that served as a room divider, and that was it. Meeting adjourned. I stood in that spot for what seemed like 5 minutes, but in reality may have been a few seconds.

I bounded down the stairs. When the door closed behind me I took my first breath since the verdict had come in, and wiped the sweat off of my forehead. I had gotten the green light from Roy Lichtenstein. Maybe it was appropriate that the chance meeting lasted just a couple of minutes. Sure, I would have liked to share more of his valuable time and really pick his brain, but I'm guessing he wouldn't have enjoyed that. My urge to have a cold beer had returned. I had a sense that I could celebrate the moment. Should I have asked Roy if he wanted to grab a beer?

Roy Lichtenstein passed away 3 months after I met him.

I will never forget the look he gave me when commenting on that clever slide. Much like his career as an artist, his legacy will live on as an inspiration.