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AT HOME WITH
PAT PASSLOF



JAMES BURKE/COURTESY OF CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK

His And Hers Synagogues

By PENELOPE GREEN

IN Milton Resnick's living quarters, a spare cube built over a soaring, two-story studio space in a former synagogue on Eldridge Street in Manhattan, the monastic iron bed, as narrow as a child's cot, is unmade, a tangle of sheets at the headboard. But on a garment rack in a closet, worn tweed jackets hang expectantly. There's a cane next to the bed, and in the paint-flecked mini-studio, the walls are covered with bright, kinetic paintings, pencil sketches on lined Manila paper and photographs.

You could imagine that Mr. Resnick, the irascible "painter's painter" Roberta Smith described as "the last Abstract Expressionist" in the obituary she wrote for *The New York Times* when the artist died almost eight years ago, had just wandered out for coffee. A calendar propped open on a chair declares it to be February 2004, the month before Mr. Resnick took his life at 87. On a bookshelf, above the collected works of Edgar Allan Poe, is a fairly recent photograph of Mr. Resnick and his wife, the artist Pat Passlof. They are grinning like conspirators, two pairs of expressive eyebrows aloft.

Ms. Passlof, 83, lives and works around the corner on Forsyth Street in her own former synagogue. She has left his place intact, she said, because it is her hope that the building would one day become a foundation and study center, with Mr. Resnick's things — not just his enormous, densely worked paintings, which are lined up like grim soldiers in the big studio, but also those tweed jackets or his electronic

chess game — kept as touchstones to the man and his art, in much the same way the studios of artists like Rodin and Cézanne are. But she'll need an angel to finance it. Despite having a long-term tenant on the top floor, Ms. Passlof said it is a struggle to pay the taxes, nearly \$20,000, almost triple what she pays for her place.

It was a week after a show of her husband's paintings opened at Cheim & Read, the Chelsea gallery that has been representing Mr. Resnick's estate since 2006. Ms. Passlof, who is impish in manner and presents a game face despite ill health that keeps her mostly bedridden, arched those exquisite eyebrows at a reporter and shared some war stories about the art world. She conjured up the rolling, riotous art camp that was East 10th Street in the 1950s, her home before this one; the leaky, cold-water lofts that she, Mr. Resnick, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and other members of the New York School colonized; the endless coffee fueling the endless, passionate debates; the feuds and factions; and the constant, hilarious presence of the F.B.I., trawling for the operators of the Mafia gambling dens the artists unwittingly shared space with.

In 1963, Ms. Passlof and Mr. Resnick bought the Forsyth synagogue for \$20,000, she said, with a little help from her parents. They were horrified, she said, by the condemned building, its floors collapsing, its windows gone, sold to them by a man who was storing bar equipment there.

"They called it a rat hole, but I couldn't deny that," she said, describing the sleek, fat rodents living in its basement. There was no foundation, she said, just a sort of



HIS SANCTUARY . . . Milton Resnick lived and painted in a former synagogue on Eldridge Street, above, until his death in 2004; his wife, the painter Pat Passlof, below, lives around the corner in her own former synagogue. Above left, the two artists in the 1950s.

been made from dirt and building debris.

Interestingly, when her mother died years later, Ms. Passlof discovered her grandmother's papers, and learned that she had immigrated from Russia in the 1890s and landed at 78 Forsyth Street, the building next door.

"That means she worshipped here, which means we've come full circle," said Ms. Passlof, who grew up in Georgia. "Of course, that added to my parents' horror."

The synagogues that peppered the Lower East Side followed the waves of immigration in the 19th century: the German Jews beginning in the 1850s, and the Eastern European Jews in the 1880s, said Joyce Mendelsohn, author of "The Lower East Side Remembered and Revisited."

The immigrants worshipped in the row houses along East Broadway and, if they had the financial wherewithal, built structures like these synagogues on the foundations of the houses that once stood there. Or sometimes they built new facades on a tenement building, said Andrew Dolkart, director of the historic preservation program at the graduate school of architecture, planning and preservation at Columbia University.

"By the 1930s, the Lower East Side was losing its population, and the restricted immigration laws of 1924 halted large-scale immigration," Mr. Dolkart said. "The Lower East Side was a place of settlement. Once people improved their financial lot, they moved out. As the Jewish community on the Lower East Side ebbed, the synagogues were abandoned and sold."

Now, some are Buddhist temples and others artists' spaces. In Ms. Passlof's telling, it was she alone, her skills gleaned from a book on masonry, who excavated the basement, hauling the dirt up bucket by bucket, pouring a cement slab and, with bricks and fieldstone picked out of the debris, building an interior retaining wall to create a living space. Last week, the wall's heft and intricacy stunned a visitor. On the ledge above it marched Ms. Passlof's collection of jugs and bottles, fine examples of American stoneware. A single square canvas, dark and primitive, hung above the bed she was hunkered down in.

"When the National Academy inducted Milton, he came in waving a letter; they needed a self-portrait or representation of their work," she said. "I was working on this, so I said to Milton, 'I think I see a nose in there.' He loved that. We let it dry, put some trim around it and sent it in. Then we got another letter, 'We are returning your donation as not being representational.' I was very happy to get it back."

Converting the synagogue was "Milton's nerviness," she said, pointing out that during the war he was a reconnaissance man. Yet by her account, he was largely absent while she labored.

When the work was done, a tax bill came due, the byproduct of a windfall from sales of Mr. Resnick's paintings. Ms. Passlof went to work at the welfare office uptown, a job she excelled at, but which also caused her so much stress, she said, that she became

allergic to her own clothes. By 1972, she had begun teaching art at Richmond College on Staten Island, now known as the College of Staten Island, where she is still a professor.

Mr. Resnick also taught, but reluctantly, and episodically, though his students adored him. ("His lectures were like punk performances with extreme attitude," wrote David Reed in a recent *Art in America* essay. "But also like a meeting with a worried, kindly grandfather.")

He bought his synagogue in the mid-1970s, after a period of time when they were living large-

of reminiscences she put together on the occasion of Mr. Resnick's memorial, held a year after his death at the St. Marks in the Bowery Church. "Even a newspaper prognosticator would have known better than to put a Leo and a Capricorn together; but there are other links, some virtually irresistible" that "held these two unlikes together for 52 years."

"They lived a life that was self-invented in a lot of ways," said Geoffrey Dorfman, the author of "Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School," an oral history mostly drawn from Mr. Resnick's lectures at the Studio School. "Pat and Milton were completely dedicated to art, and they were each other's fiercest critics. Even though they were living separately for most of their marriage, they would meet at the end of the day and see what each other had done."

By all accounts elusive, confounding, charming, explosive and inspirational, Mr. Resnick was devoted, as his wife is, to the singular ideal that painting is a verb, to paraphrase Elaine de Kooning. Yet Mr. Resnick never accrued the acclaim his cohorts did, in large part because of his prickly iconoclasm.

Mr. Resnick saw his studio as a dark place of retreat, Mr. Dorfman said. "And if you look at his, and at Pat's, you can see these are places of work. The chairs are hard. You're not a serious artist if you've got the comfy chairs and the TV you can doze in front of."

In his last years, Mr. Resnick returned to the figure. It crept into the smaller canvases he had

been working on, despite the protestations of his dealer, Robert Miller, who cautioned that he was tinkering with his legacy, Mr. Dorfman recalled. But Abstract Expressionism — working over those massive canvases — is a young person's work. Before his death, Mr. Resnick walked with two canes.

"His spine was shot, and his pain was terrible," Mr. Dorfman said. "It wasn't going to get better. I think he had his old service revolver. He just took charge. He wasn't going to end up tended by people in a nursing home, and be a liability to Pat."

Next month, the Elizabeth Harris Gallery will present a show of Ms. Passlof's recent work. It's her first show in seven years, and it is clear that she will have to make a heroic physical struggle to finish the energetic and lovely canvases you can see in her studio, one floor up from her living quarters. "I'm sweating that out something awful," she said.

She couldn't recall the last time she had been in her husband's space. "It's too upsetting," she said, and impractical, given the stairs. "It's also an emotional thing. The paintings are talking to us, and we know very few can hear."

Mr. Dorfman summed up their half-century collaboration. "This kind of project that they were both engaged in, was ultimately more important than the marriage," he said. "It was really three in the marriage: diet, dim and art. There was a life journey; but they weren't in the same boat, even though they were heading in the same direction."

'Two of the least domestic people in the world.'

ly apart, Mr. Resnick in an old stone house and studio in Ulster County, which he was restoring with the help of a young sculptor named John Sanders, who also helped him make the synagogue habitable.

How did it work, this back-and-forth between husband and wife? Where did they eat dinner? Who slept where?

"Why are you interested in two of the least domestic people in the world?" Ms. Passlof teased. She has written, however, about their volatile, enduring partnership. "We were incompatible, but couldn't manage without each other," she wrote in a book



ALICE SEBRELL



. . . AND HERS You can see Ms. Passlof's studio windows from the back of her husband's living quarters. There was no hollering across the alley, however. "The phone worked just fine," she said. Above, Ms. Passlof's collection of tools, which she bought at flea markets; her front door, left, is papered with photos.

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