



# Muse of the *Whimsical*

Light blue and white, the walls of the room sustain buoyancy, simultaneously revealing the actions and emotions of wayward creatures at a party amongst the colorful paint strokes, resembling confetti. In the center a bright yellow table, amorphous yet defined, supporting an elaborate plume of ribbons in blue and pink, paired with a vibrant expression of flowers in the corner of the room.

Text Nare Garibyan



Russell Aharonian, who is a mainstay in the Portsmouth, New Hampshire art scene, calls this piece "The Pie Party", which was featured in the 2012 film *Being Flynn*, starring Robert De Niro, in portrayal of the dynamic and complicated Jonathan Flynn, a self-proclaimed writer. The film documents how Jonathan reunites with his son Nick Flynn, a writer and poet, by chance after years of estrangement, when he utilizes the services at a homeless shelter where Nick is employed. Russell Aharonian and Jonathan Flynn became friends unloading boats on the Portsmouth pier. When Nick began to collect materials for the film, he approached Aharonian to feature his art on screen. "The Pie Party" and "The Goddess and the Joker" were chosen to adorn the walls of Jonathan Flynn's various residences in the film, which is based on Nick's memoir, *Another ...Night in Suck City*. Russell recalls how Nick took Robert De Niro to meet Jonathan Flynn because he was going to portray him in the film. Jonathan asked De Niro, "Do you think you can handle it?" In "The Goddess and the Joker," Aharonian creates an imaginative union between two unlikely figures: a magnificent golden goddess and an energetic and quirky creature in a



"I think working on paintings all the time, there is a certain process to it which is kind of parallel to life; you make mistakes, you correct them and then you keep going," he says.



←  
"Who's In the Basket",  
2012,  
acrylic on wood  
38x31 inches

↑  
"Who Knows Where  
or When", 2012,  
acrylic and epoxy on  
canvas, 9x12 inches

ritualistic setting, guided by the light of a torch with a red handle. Both these pieces seem to reflect, to a certain degree, the essence of Jonathan Flynn, his life, and his efforts to reconstruct his relationship with his son.

In the late 1950s, Russell Aharonian graduated from North Andover High School in Massachusetts where a counselor asked him, "Are you interested in art?" Russell was not interested in pursuing art because he was unaware of the opportunities in the art world. Instead, he joined the United States Naval Air Command stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. When in port, Russell immersed himself in art, visiting the great art galleries in Spain and Italy, falling in love with Barcelona and Rome. He explored Gaudi and Joan Miro in Spain. Russell



↓  
"The Goddess and the Joker", 2010,  
acrylic on canvas  
12x16 inches



→  
1963 Chrysler 300,  
embellished by  
Aharonian from  
1976-1983



↑  
Aharonian and his  
"To Life" car, 1976,  
Portsmouth,  
New Hampshire

→  
"The Pie Party", 2011,  
acrylic on canvas  
12x16 inches





## What is Erotic Art?

Erotic art is difficult to define, but in general it refers to various art forms, such as paintings, engravings and sculptures that portray sexually-oriented depictions and scenes, along with the corresponding emotions. From the beginning of time, different cultures from prehistoric tribes

to Egyptian society, the Roman and Greek empires, and Asian and European groups have expressed numerous interpretations of erotic art. For example, in the Eastern world such as Japan, China, and India, the ability of humans to love and express that love was celebrated through erotic art.

Russell Aharonian shares his thoughts about erotic art: "I think it's mostly the explicit imagery that upsets people, but it has been around since the beginning of time. I usually pay attention to the beauty of how much love was put into a work more than the content or the imagery or the color.

I imagine what makes something erotic to some people is something in themselves that they see in the art, and that could be good or bad. I think it is the culture that makes the distinction, not the individual. Most people, if they identify something as they look at it, they usually see what they want to see."

→  
"Mellow Yellow",  
2012, acrylic and  
epoxy on canvas  
16x20 inches

"My painting style is organic, humorous; I am random with the choice of color. It is a process; lately I start with just a drawing and let it develop. I am intuitive," says Aharonian.

states, "I like Miro because he is happy. I like his images. I like his color." In some way, art and creativity have always been a part of Aharonian's life beginning in childhood when he used to dig clay in the backyard to make shapes and spray paint in the garage. He reminisces, "I was just really creative; I used to go to the library when I was like five, six, and seven and look at all the art books."

After two years of service in the Navy, Russell Aharonian returned to America and attended the Art Institute of Boston on the G.I. Bill, where he received a BFA. "In art school, I had some excellent teachers and most of my best teachers didn't teach technique; they taught me how to find myself." He studied the work of the abstract expressionists such as Arshile Gorky, who was Russell's connection to his roots, finding his Armenian-ness within Gorky's work and his own. In this spirit, he never stopped looking at the world around him and dared to experiment with humor, sexuality, color, whimsy and erotic art within his paintings. Aharonian is inspired by female energy. "I love their energy, the excitement, the shape and form, the whole thing, the exchange, the dialogue." He describes his painting style as "organic, humorous; I am random with the choice of color. It is a process. Lately, I start with just a drawing and let it develop; I am intuitive."

In 1974, Aharonian's experimentation led to his arrest for displaying "obscene" art during an art show, within a mural in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire mall. Russell recounts the events, "I was living in Kittery Point, which is right outside of Portsmouth in Maine. I had a barn over there, where I had a studio. One day, Vesta Brue, the coordinator of the art show,



came over. She saw what I was doing and invited me to be the feature in the art show. She gave me a 17-foot wall to do whatever I wanted to do. So I did. I covered it with paintings. I had things spinning and moving with paintings mixed in, and I had cut outs from collage. There were Margaret Mead and Henry Miller, you know, kind of inspiring things. A lot of it was collage. I used Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Tibetan elements, some of which were erotica, and some were X-rated photographs, all mixed together. It was big." Soon thereafter, the coordinator asked Russell to streamline his mural, and he refused. As a consequence, Russell's mural was covered with a white sheet, and from behind the white sheet police removed the pieces that were considered obscene. Eventually, the mural was taken down and Aharonian was called to the police station to pick up his materials. Once at the station, he was arrested for his expression. On October 30, 1974, Aharonian, accompanied





←  
"Miraculous Blossoming of the Winter Cherry Tree with Friends", 2012, acrylic on wood 21x41 inches



↑  
"Midnight", 1991, oil on canvas 37x73 inches

↓  
"Dancing Fools", 2011, acrylic and epoxy and canvas 12x9 inches



↑  
"Boomerang", 2012, acrylic on wood 38x31 inches







←  
"The Carousel",  
2009, mixed media  
on canvas  
25x37 inches

↓  
"A Mayan Princess  
Trip to Chichen Itza",  
2010,  
acrylic on canvas  
20x27 inches

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by a local lawyer and a civil liberties lawyer wearing a Superman T-shirt, went to court. The case was dismissed and in the *Boston Globe*, it was written that the police got an art lesson, remembers Russell.

In response to this restriction of expression, Aharonian purchased a 1963 Chrysler 300 and decorated the car with art, including collage, erotic elements, and multi-dimensional aspects, with a license plate entitled, "To Life." Coincidentally, all the elements that Russell used on the car were censored within the mural. His car was presented in a book, *Wild Wheels*, featuring outrageous cars across America. This is a testament to Aharonian's philosophy, "I always lived out loud and as bad as I was sometimes, I was honest about it." The element of honesty comes across in Aharonian's paintings and the way he conducts his life, always painting, and with enough zeal to pursue multiple interests. "I was a massage therapist for 20 years. I did construction for 20 years. I had a business, a spa with three massage rooms." His fiancé, Merrill Black, whom he first met in the '70s, shared that "massage was a natural extension of his art." His massage therapy business, Tactora, grew out of the work-based wellness program Russell developed with Penny



Morrow while working in construction for Maine Post and Beam. Tactora also had a gallery where he showed the work of local artists.

Russell's work is on exhibit at the New Hampshire Art Association's Levy Art Gallery, The Barn Gallery and the Ogunquit Art Gallery, both in Ogunquit, Maine. Aharonian explains that he works on paintings all the time. "There is a certain process to it which is parallel to life; you make mistakes, you correct them and then you keep going." At age 74, Russell Aharonian continues to work. In April, his paintings were exhibited at Plymouth State University at the Karl Drerup Art Gallery. He says he does not have any regrets. "I just need to live until I am 100." ■