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GUESTWORDS: By Gail Levin

## Remembering David Slivka

(04/15/2010) The sculptor David Slivka told me about going to an artists' picnic at Barnes Landing in 1953. He arrived driving his '32 DeSoto, a car he bought used from the printmaker [Louis Schanker](#).



By then, Schanker had purchased a hundred-year-old [farmhouse on Madison Street in Sag Harbor](#), and David rented his former place in Maidstone Park for the summer. Two artist couples were neighbors: Paul Brach and Mimi Schapiro as well as Joan Mitchell and Mike Goldberg. David remembered watching Joan paint outdoors between two trees.

At the cookout on the beach were Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Jim and Charlotte Brooks, Bill and Elaine de Kooning, who that summer were staying at Leo Castelli's on Georgica Pond. Of course, David's wife Rose, later The Star's art critic, was also present. There was plenty of food, alcohol, and a giant bonfire. The swimming was nude, followed by some dancing around the fire. David loved to dance.

Suddenly Bill became distressed because Elaine had disappeared and he feared she might have drowned. Since Bill couldn't swim, it was left to David to go into the water to search for Elaine. He found her enjoying her nude swim in the dark.

When the time came to return home, Bill and Jackson both wanted to ride in David's DeSoto, which they called his "Surrealist car," since its upholstery was falling apart in a fantastic fashion.

David died at the age of 95 on March 28. I know that he lived a long and full life, yet as a biographer and an art historian, I am filled with regret, wishing that I had found time to interview him at greater length. More than once I have wanted to pay attention to an artist and to record that person at length only to have to keep my focus on some book project with an impending deadline.

David had a fine sense of humor and a self-deprecating wit. His recall was amazing, not just for names and events, but for detail and nuance. He represented so well an entire cultural moment that has now almost disappeared.

David made vivid the history of Abstract Expressionism as it evolved in the city and on eastern Long Island. When I recorded him for my forthcoming biography of Lee Krasner, he talked about both her and Jackson, as well as about many others. He also spoke about himself. On another occasion, when David had come to talk to my students at Baruch College, which now owns one of his major wood sculptures, I had a video made.

David had extraordinary energy and enthusiasm for making art and talking about it. He was born in Chicago, and his family moved around as his Russian immigrant parents searched for work. His ambition to sculpt began when he was just 10. The catalyst was left-over wallpaper cleaner that he managed to shape into the form of a horse in bas-relief, which received such acclaim at school that he embraced his calling.

By the time he was 13, he won a scholarship to the Junior School at the Art Institute of Chicago, which held classes for children on Saturday afternoons. Walt Disney had preceded him there and Judy Chicago is among those who followed.

David never forgot his high school field trip to the studio of Loreda Taft, whose monumental sculpture of Chief Black Hawk is an Illinois landmark. By the time he was 16, David's family had relocated to San Francisco, where in 1931 he finished his senior year of high school and won a scholarship to the California School of Fine Arts. He studied with the figurative sculptor and printmaker Robert Stackpole.

David left school to begin work as a stone carver, decorating buildings for government art projects. One Works Progress Administration project, installed in 1937, was a limestone bas-relief for the facade of the now-landmarked Post Office in Berkeley, California. He also worked on figurative sculpture for San Francisco World's Fair of 1939.

It was in San Francisco that David, just 18, joined the John Reed Club,

founded in October 1929 to support leftist and Marxist artists and writers and named after the journalist and Communist activist. He recalled that he “had to pass on” potential members; among those who impressed him most was Paul Radin, the distinguished American cultural anthropologist and folklorist.

In World War II, the promising sculptor became a ship’s carpenter in the merchant marine. After that, he got a job in New York: political action director of the Port of New York for the National Maritime Union. He organized speakers and protests. He was engaged by the conflict felt by Indonesian sailors working on Dutch ships, while the Dutch, who had occupied Indonesia, sought to return after the Japanese occupation ended. He recalled setting up protest marches at Rockefeller Center, where the Dutch had their offices.

Once in the city, David ran into friends from the West Coast. Helen Phillips, with whom he had gone to art school, had met and married the British printmaker Stanley William Hayter in Paris. Reuben Kadish had worked with David in the W.P.A. Both were summering on eastern Long Island during 1945.

David brought his bicycle out with him on the train and saw both sets of friends, cycling back and forth between the Kadish cottage on Louse Point and the Hayters’ in Amagansett. Visiting Reuben and Barbara Kadish were Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, who would that fall decide to make Springs their year-round home. David got to know them and later visited them in the old farmhouse on Fireplace Road.

David’s passion for making art was such that even while recovering from heart surgery in 2008, he took his health aide and went to look for studio space in Queens, going afterwards to visit museums. According to his longtime younger friends, the painters Joan Semmel and John Hardy, “David always wanted to be where the action was.”