

# Fanny Brice's son is an artist's artist

*UCLA painting professor in solo show in Venice*

By Hunter Drohojowska

**P**ainting is a lot like a conversation," said William Brice while sipping tequila with grapefruit juice at his Sherman Way studio. "You start like you're going to talk to somebody. But then they say something to you that changes the whole context of the conversation."

Brice, 62, is an artist's artist, hailing from an earlier generation. His perception of "art as a way of life" is a romantic view promoted by artists of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the years before Andy Warhol, before fame and funding became the acceptable goals for the contemporary artist. "I'm marked by my time. It's inescapable," he said.

But still today in Los Angeles, the very mention of his name brings accolades from several generations of artists:

"fantastic" . . . "generous" . . . "inspiring."

A professor of painting at UCLA since 1953, Brice's influence has been considerable. The roster of graduate students who studied with him includes Tony Berlant, Peter Shelton, Don Suggs, Martha Alf, Caron Colvin and Gwynn Murrill. His stylized, iconographic pastel paintings — of erotic female forms, rocks and flowers — are being given their first solo show in Los Angeles in six years at the L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice.

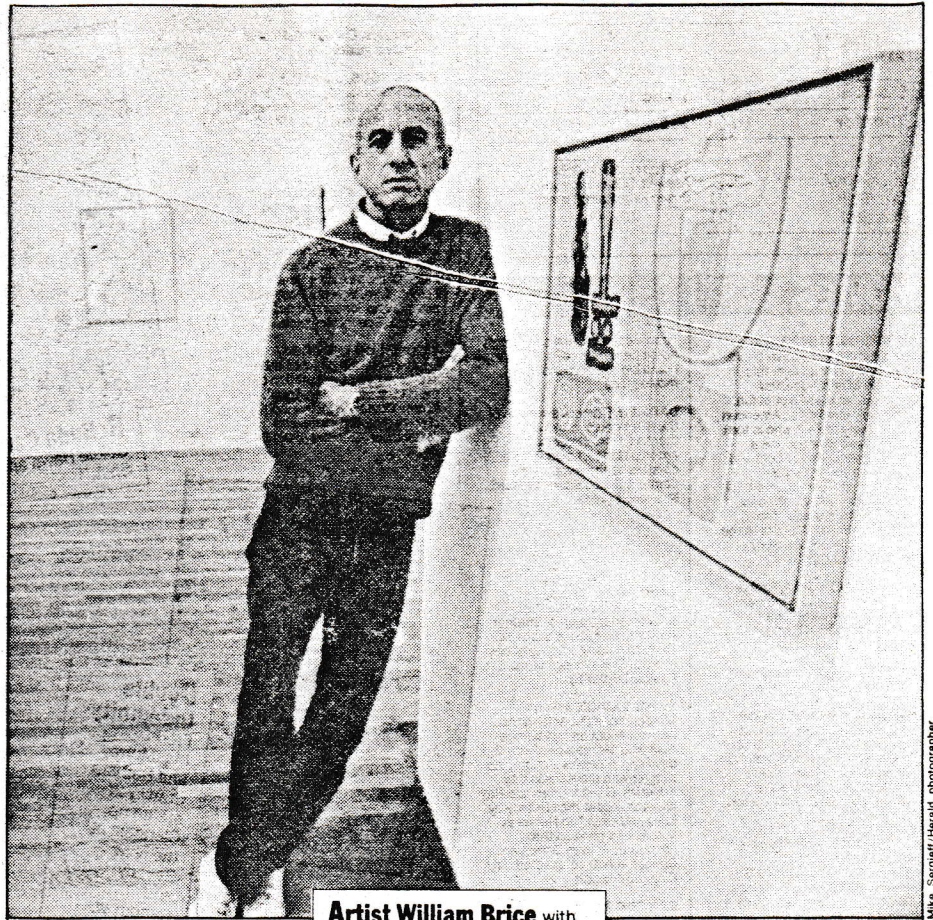
Brice has committed his life to art since the age of 15, despite the strong theatrical influences of his famous parents, Fanny Brice and Nick Arnstein, whose lives were dramatized in the movie "Funny Girl."

"I knew art was the only bird on my horizon, and in moments that are difficult, I still have the good feeling of knowing this is what I was meant to do," he said.

Brice is a modest personality. "Perhaps to a fault," he admits. He seems an aristocrat: tall and slender, with high cheekbones, an arched nose. Intelligent blue eyes and close-cropped gray hair lend to the appearance of easy elegance. One feels that Brice is simply too distinguished for some of the self-promotional tactics of the hustling young artists today.

"One could specialize in all that goes with the moment, but by the time a young artist attains that, the moment will have moved anyway," said Brice. "That's why I think the writings of Matisse are so special to me. I can identify with the analogy he makes between the creative process and the natural process. Maybe it seems a little out of sync with the values we have now, but he says a young artist should cultivate a rich body of soil from which one can grow. In some instances today, a young artist will have a breakthrough, and the tendency is to step on the gas, so to speak. Matisse seems to have a requirement for the truth of the creative process, the actual evolution, that it be a living actuality all the time. So an artist will have the power of an extended period of invention. I really respect that. It goes hand in hand with art as a way of life." He continued, "The ideas of fashion, the waxing and waning of directions, reactions — well, that exists. It's funny, but one artist can enjoy complete visibility, and another artist of a different nature but equal quality can be nearly ignored. Those are the circumstances that artists have to face, and if they have convictions, and fortitude, they do their work."

He pointed out that the figurative artist Richard Lindner was respected by other artists throughout the abstract expressionist period. "But it was almost impossible to look at a work where there was a predetermination of subject matter or imagery, which Lindner had. Pop art followed, and Lindner is not a Pop artist, but the circumstance of Pop permitted Lindner to be seen. So before he died, he enjoyed considerable success. I could almost say, through no fault of his own." He added, "So you do



Artist William Brice with one of his paintings.

Mike Sergi/Herald photographer

what you believe in, and it may or may not be the moment. Of course, we all feel better if we're affirmed." Brice laughs wryly, knowing this comment applies to him.

Until the 1970s and the critical embrace of pluralism in contemporary art, Brice's personal, iconographic, figurative paintings were fighting against the prevailing artistic fashion. He stopped exhibiting his work from 1972 to 1975, while he worked through his stylistic changes. "My work has changed, but the one constant is, I've always been involved in associative values. I've never been non-objective and I've not tended toward realist or naturalist painting either." He has had a solo exhibition every year since, with his work receiving increasing acknowledgement and acclaim.

Brice was introduced to art by artist Harry Botkin, a cousin of the brothers Gershwin and a friend of Brice's family. "He was the first man I studied with. He took me to the galleries of New York in 1935 — there were Picassos and Matisse's which had been *done* in 1935. He was not analytic or that verbal, but he had a real immersion in what he was doing. I was fortunate at 15 to get some insight into an artist's life through Botkin. It was an unadorned reality even though he exhibited every year in New York and was collected by museums."

Brice studied at the Art Students' League in New York, then at Chouinard Art Institute (now merged into CalArts) when his mother moved here in 1937. He returned to Los Angeles permanently after serving in the Air Force during World War II.

As a teacher for some three decades, he's witnessed a change in the attitude of artists toward their art. "I think artists used to find their philosophical views in the process of working, and maybe that's inverted now. They were long on practice before. One can wonder about the direction

towards conceptual art and didactic and critical values in painting, as opposed to the kind of extended involvement in the hand-made thing or the mark." But Brice emphasizes that artists must express their own time. "I don't believe in the good old days, either. I believe all the tomorrows become the good old days, anyway. The changing values establish a changing context. I have definite biases in my work, but I don't need to project them."

Brice clarified the differences. "Bohemianism was an overt symbolic gesture of separation from the bourgeoisie. The lines were drawn. Today, there is a greater awareness of the audience. This generation really sees the relationship between art and consumership and the professional practices of the marketplace. I see even beginning artists have their slide files and biographies ready to go. It's appropriate to the time. It's OK. But it's not a major influence on my work."

Brice looks around his studio, at the calming presence of the enormous paintings of abstracted nudes. "I'm aware that the way I see art may not be close to the practice of a great deal of art today, but that doesn't change my belief in it. I would give any artist the rationale they require to produce their work. There have been all these conversations about art for art, the viability of art, the death of painting and its resurrection. I started to think, perhaps simple-mindedly, I don't think flowers bloom for us. I think they bloom because they are flowers. So I don't think that it's art for art, I think artists do what they do because that's what they do."

Brice concluded the conversation, "The idea about art as a way of life, it's really a way of not dying before you do. Not being jaded. I have felt in my life that the area of my nourishment, my learning, my enlightenment, all these things were in my art. Maybe that's romantic — but it's true."