The CFR is honored to partner with POBA.org on a series of profiles of its affiliated artists. In this post, we focus on Norman Mailer — the artist, as recalled by his daughter, artist Danielle Mailer.

5 questions Danielle Mailer has never been asked — about Norman Mailer, the artist:

What's the most perceptive question anyone has asked you about your work? What's the most idiotic question anyone has asked you about your work? What's the weirdest question anyone has asked you about your work?

This is actually a challenging set of questions because this interview is not about my own artistic work, but about my father’s drawings. He was best known, and much better known, for his writing than for his drawing. His drawings were little seen during his lifetime, having been on display once or twice only at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, MA, where my own work will be shown this coming week. I’m not sure I could answer this about my own work, and I admit I am stumped to try to answer them for my father.

Since my father’s drawings are just now getting seen posthumously in a wider way through POBA, he would never have faced these questions during his lifetime. I haven’t got a clue about what he would have thought was the most perceptive, idiotic or weird question he was asked about his drawings, or even if he got any questions at all about his drawings. What I do know is that my father did not suffer foolishness gladly, and really wanted and enjoyed a smart discussion and debate. I
think he would have enjoyed being asked interesting questions about his drawings, whether they seemed probing, wacky or weird. He liked ideas, he loved words, and he had a vivid imagination. It would have been fun to know his answers to these questions or to hear him engage in conversations about his drawings.

**Why was Norman Mailer obsessed (or fascinated) with faces in his drawings and doodles? Did you ever get the sense that he was studying your face, or the faces of anybody, while he was alive? What do you think his favorite part of the face was and why?**

I believe my father’s fascination with drawing faces began with Picasso. In the bleak months following his split with my mother, I recollect many visits to museums in New York City. In fact, I would say that our church in those years was MOMA. On many a Sunday with his two little girls in hand (I was seven and my sister just five), we would visit his favorite museum.

My father took us to look at everything, but we always spent a lot of time weaving in and out of the Abstract Expressionists, the Matisses, the Cezannes, my father lecturing all the while. He liked Cubism, too.

We would finally settle on a hard bench to pay homage to his favorite Spanish painter. Like a mantra that is at first foreign and then familiar, we three incorporated “Pablo” into our psyches. My larger-than-life father would exuberantly explain that Picasso could make extraordinary faces with just a few lines. He used words like “genius,” “brilliant” and “unique” about Picasso’s works, descriptions he reserved for very few. Later when he wrote a book devoted solely to this one painter, his lifelong devotion became clear to everybody. But we knew his passion for Picasso when we were kids.

As a young adult I was surprised and pleased to discover that Norman was drawing. What began as doodles on a small pad by the phone had evolved into something more serious. The “just a few lines” approach had evidently become his method as well, and it was very effective. Dad started sketching all kinds of characters and accompanied the pictures with witticisms that partnered beautifully with his drawings. In the many faces he portrayed, his style took on its own unique flavor.

I have no special knowledge of my Dad’s interests in the subject matter for his drawings, but the drawings themselves tell volumes about what he loved to draw — full faces, profiles, and the sensual curves of a woman’s body.

While he quietly created these pictures, I am reasonably sure that Picasso was never further than his back pocket.

**Either in your memory or with your best guess, what was Norman’s relationship to the visual arts? Was there a genre he loved most? Detested most? Why?**

My father was deeply inspired by great painting. He really favored the impressionists, and in particular, Cezanne and the Fauvist, Matisse, who caught his attention as a young writer. But his greatest influence with regards to his own drawing process was most certainly Picasso, whom he considered to be the seminal artist of the 20th century.
Picasso’s ability to capture something essential and complex in a few simple lines really intrigued my father. Maybe it was the skill involved, or the metaphor of simplicity and complexity in tension. I like that POBA called Norman’s collection “Picasso Got To Me” because it is so true: He held a lifelong fascination with this artist, and he shared many qualities with Picasso, including uncommon discipline and bravery. Perhaps, too, as my father embarked on his drawing journey with his usual commitment, he may well have been motivated by Picasso’s sentiment, “When the Muse arrives, don’t be late…”

Norman detested inauthenticity in any art form and in particular work that was not courageous. He felt to live life properly it is essential to push and move forward. If his tombstone captures his final words, it says this perfectly:

_There is that law of life, so cruel and so just, that one must grow or pay more for remaining the same._