

ENCHANTRESS OF
ROMERO BRITTO'S LATEST PORTRAIT:

AVA ROOSEVELT

BY ROBIN JAY

World-renowned South-Beach-based artist Romero Britto surprised even his most in-the-know fans with a novel new genre: neo-pop-style portraits of European royalty and American socialites, such as Queen Elizabeth, Prince William, Duchess Kate, Dylan Lauren – and, most recently – Palm Beach socialite, philanthropist and author Ava Roosevelt, wife of the late William Donner Roosevelt, grandson of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

I had the pleasure of attending the private Palm Beach home unveiling of Britto's portrait of Ava (the public unveiling for which, I'm pleased to say, was subsequently held at *South Florida Opulence* magazine's *Evening of Opulence* event in South Beach). Ava's background is as interesting as Britto's portrait of her. Here's the short list: former fashion model, countess, wife of a steel baron, wife of actress Mia Farrow's brother, wife of a president's grandson, marketing director for an international intelligence firm, columnist for the *Palm Beach Journal* and, most recently, novelist.

Since the unveilings of Ava's portrait, we've become good friends. Following are snippets from recent conversations:

South Florida Opulence: How did you come to know Romero Britto?

Ava Roosevelt: In late 2007, at a black-tie dinner party hosted by Goldman Sachs during Art Basil, Romero was seated next to me. When he offered to paint on my car – a bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle – I politely declined, thinking we had both had too much to drink. Obviously I had no idea who he was. A few months later, Romero came to Palm Beach to see me, and during a visit at my house, he gave me his signature Enamel on Aluminum Iron sculpture, 'Just for you.'

"Oh, you have a Romero Britto," a friend remarked later, admiring the heart shaped sculpture. "Aren't you sorry now that you didn't let Romero paint on your car?"

"Actually, I am not. I love to keep my whereabouts to myself," I said, laughing, "A Romero-Britto-painted yellow bug surely would be hard to miss."



Romero's idea for my portrait emerged late last year. No one believed I didn't see the masterpiece until Romero personally unveiled it. Inspired by my novel, *The Racing Heart*, my portrait exudes warmth, optimism and love, and all the same, looks just like me. Imagine that! As Romero bestowed his genius upon me, I am deeply honored to be in such an esteemed company.

SFO: People may presume you were born with the proverbial silver spoon. But when you were growing up in Poland, your mother sent you to live in a convent. Tell us about how that impacted your life.

Ava: In retrospect, the years spent at the convent, no matter how lonely, were the best preparation for life I could have received. However, since most of the children at the convent were orphans, and the fact that both of my parents (even though getting a divorce) were well and alive, only compounded the isolation and abandonment I felt. I was 14 years old.

My parents aimed to provide me with the best 'private' boarding school education available and the Catholic convent was the only option. I resented their decision for years as it felt as if they wanted to 'get rid of me.' I ultimately overcame these feelings. Forgiving them had liberated me from feeling like a 'victim' and created a survivor out of me. To this day, I make my own bed, even when staying in Five-Star hotels!

My tenure at the convent was short-lived. At 16, when a snapshot of me was taken in front of an infamous night club and appeared on a cover of a fashion magazine, I was promptly expelled to become a muse of the late Madame Grabowska, the creator of Moda Polska. Often dubbed the Coco Chanel of Poland, she taught me how to stand, walk and feel confident wearing her creations. Her wise advice has changed my life. "Beauty fades fast," she said. "Always be on time!"

My punctuality led to a chance-meeting of Christian Dior's team scouting for a youthful beauty to represent their products at a major fashion show in Warsaw. Becoming 'Miss Dior of Poland' led me to Paris where I started working for Christian Dior, Madame Gres and Emilio Pucci, becoming Christine, a Gothic novel's heroine in a period-time-soap-opera printed in the Paris Match magazine and later joining Ford Modeling Agency in New York.

SFO: You sometimes jest about a chronic bout of matrimony. Tell us about that.

Ava: Had I not been brought up a Catholic, I would have done what most girls my age did these days – enjoy the romance and the company of their young male friends instead of catching a chronic bout of matrimony, which was my case!

Actually, my first husband, Count Michel Jacques Albanel de La Sabliere, a Parisian photographer, and I met while working on a photo shoot. As I spoke very little English, and even less French, I decided to learn this beautiful language and French Literature at La Sorbonne.

Photo left: Ava Roosevelt with David Manson Weir II's GB Ferrari 512 M-No.16 entry for David Piper auto racing at the 1971 24 Hours of Le Mans.

Right: David is pictured on the far right of the black and white photo with David Hobbs (center), who was inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame in 2009.

We subsequently moved and married in Canada. As his wife, I became a countess. All that mattered was a European sensibility and making our lives meaningful and worthwhile. Manners, good taste and religion mattered. But above all, we were expected to always be on time! Despite all these good manners, we were not meant to last as a couple. I credit so much of my good fortune to stem from this very tedious habit and won't stay long waiting for anyone who's tardy beyond a reason.

My marriage to Charles Farrow [brother of actress Mia Farrow], an aspiring young writer whom I met in LA, fell victim to our impossible work schedules and was far from glamorous, overshadowed by the tragic death of our dear friends: Sharon Tate, wife of Roman Polanski, Gibbi Folger, an heiress to the Folger Coffee fortune, Wojtek Frykowski, a close friend of Roman's from Poland and Gibbi's boyfriend, and hair stylist Jay Sebring at the hand of Charles Manson's madness. Grief stricken, I left LA for England and the South of France for a well-deserved break.

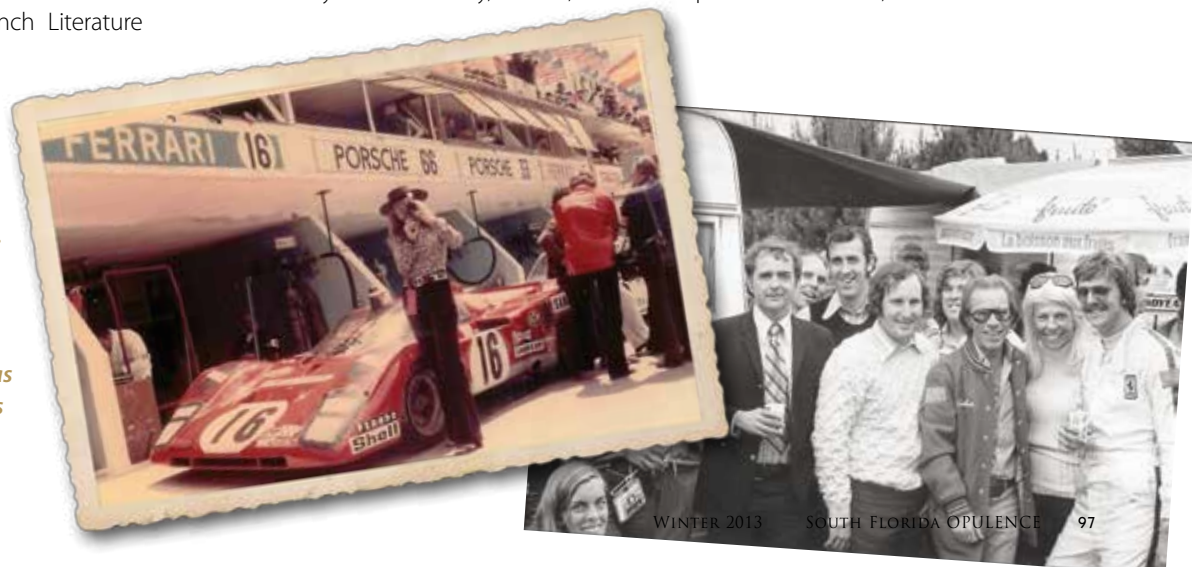
I met Bill (William Donner Roosevelt, grandson of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt) in New York when a mutual and a much-married friend wasn't able to join him for lunch because she was running late (see?) and sent me instead. Our stars aligned perfectly. That same afternoon, he invited me to a dinner. I hesitated, and Bill asked my why. I told him that given what had transpired at Yalta and how the fate of my native country, Poland, was



Ava and William Donner Roosevelt

affected, I was not too keen on his grandfather, FDR, and wasn't sure I would want to date him. "My Grandfather was very ill at the time of the Yalta agreement signing and was outwitted by Stalin," Bill said. "I'll make it up to you!"

Bill kept his promise. We were married a year later and remained true soul mates and best friends for over 20 years. During our marriage, we developed many shared interests in flying, fishing, tennis, architecture, the stock market and philanthropy (the William H. Donner Foundation, the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach, and the American Cancer Society). We never quarreled or bickered, as we knew each other's unspoken boundaries, which came from a



deep respect, profound love and mutual admiration. Having had five previous marriages between us, practice paid off this time!

Bill's cancer diagnosis was devastating. We looked for a cure even in Cuba! Alas, it was not to be found.

SFO: What do you consider your most cherished life achievement?

Ava: Completing *The Racing Heart*, my novel, was, by far, the most difficult task I've ever contemplated, as it took six years, and countless rewrites in English, which, mind you, is my third language. Writing the book gave me the strength to overcome the grief I felt after Bill's death. I found solace in creating my characters. Unlike in real life, I actually could control their destinies.



When Tom Clancy, a dear friend, heard that I was writing a book, he bet me that I would never finish, "You socialites," he said, "can't stand rejection. Everybody I know is writing a book, but only a few make it to the end." *The Racing Heart* was published on Dec. 1, 2011. The website was launched simultaneously. <http://theracingheart.com>.

SFO: What inspired the plot? Is the novel in any way autobiographical?

Ava: While shopping for a secondhand Ferrari in London, I was told an American motor racing driver and an heir to the National Steel fortune, the now late David

Manson Weir II, owned a Dino, so I contacted him. It turned out the Dino was not red, a must-have-color for a Ferrari, so I didn't buy it. But when David invited me to join him at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, where he raced the famous 512 M Ferrari, I could not resist his invitation and joined him. In the wee hours of the race, terrified for his life, I asked him to quit. He looked at me as if I had lost my mind and suddenly along with David, I was infected with the Le Mans' thrill and decided one day to weave it into a novel. We fell in love during the race and even though he finished 4th overall, when asked, some years later what was his greatest accomplishment to date, David said it was marrying me.

Here's the essence of *The Racing Heart*.

Set during the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the world's signature sports-car race, a young supermodel becomes involved in a terrorist plot that could change the course of history. She finds herself in a life-and-death struggle to save the man she loves – the son of the president of the United States – while he races in the 24-hour-long trial of endurance and stamina.

It was Tom Clancy who constantly reminded me, "Remember, fiction is based on fact." I took it to heart. My years as a 'rainmaker' for the Fairfax Group was a contributing factor in my ability to create the characters of the terrorists and deal with the complexity of the FBI, Joint Terrorist Task Forces, and Special Forces.

You asked about the young lady on the cover of *The Racing Heart*. Yes, Robin, you're right! The young woman on the cover is me, at 24, the age of my heroine, Tygre.



Ava Roosevelt with beau, Christopher M. Twardy, at the Cavallino Classic Ferrari Show at The Breakers in Palm Beach.

SFO: Let's talk more about being part of a presidential family. What did Bill tell you about FDR that isn't in history books?

Ava: Bill Roosevelt was 13 years old when FDR died. It was Eleanor Roosevelt, Bill's grandmother, who had a profound influence on his upbringing as they spent a lot of time together at Val Kill, her beloved cottage at the Hyde Park residence. "Gradmare's patience was often wearing thin," Bill told me, laughing. "She would discreetly turn off her hearing aid if a guest annoyed her by talking too much, and no one was the wiser as she nodded her head."

SFO: What advice do you have for other women on how to stay youthful?

Ava: Someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to has been my mantra. 'Doing' for others gives me joy and has been most rewarding. Both the members of the Roosevelt and the Donner side of the family have 'adopted' me after Bill's death. William Donner Roosevelt would have been 80 years old Dec. 1, 2012 had he lived, and every year we celebrate his life. I don't think about my age. I work non-stop promoting my book and attempting to make it into a movie, my next goal. I will sleep when I am old, and rest when I am dead. ●

Ava Roosevelt with late husband William Donner Roosevelt alongside their Aerostar 90440.

