

“Sometimes I paint something and I think it’s the best thing I’ve ever done. Then I take another look and it’s a just a piece of goddam shit.” Jim Bohary shoves his fists into his paint-smear pockets and stares out the window, towards the dirty brick wall across the alley. I am standing in his studio, five floors above Great Jones Street in Manhattan. Actually it is not his studio at all. It is rented by Ken Leveson, an Australian artist who has kindly allowed me to stay there while I am in New York. I’ve never met the man. He lives in Melbourne and I phoned him from Geelong. On the strength of a conversation, he sends me the keys to his New York studio and here I am, sharing the space with Jim, a New York artist who has a show coming up in SoHo.

It is 1980. And this morning Jim tells me sometimes he can’t stand to look at his work. Tonight he has two very important collectors coming to dinner, so he is arranging his huge abstract canvases along a wall to show them. But I’m a figurative Realist – capital R. That is the way I’ve been trained and it suits me perfectly. I need the subject in front of me so that I can scrutinise every texture, every pore, every play of light reflected back into the penumbral shadows. I cannot relate to Jim’s raw and reckless expressionism. Yet he is teaching me a great deal.

“What green is that Jim?”

“No idea,” he says. “I never pick up the same tube twice intentionally.” On the floor in his workspace he has a large crate of random paint tubes, twisted and smudged to the point where no brand or colour is recognisable. I am bemused.

“How do you work this way – I need to know what I’m doing, otherwise it’s chaos?”

“I never look at a tube of paint,” he says. “It’s not important. I just grab something out of the box and squeeze it on. If it’s red or green or black that’s OK with me.” He is acting contrary, but I also think he is quite repelled by my tight-arsed methods. Where I use a double 0 sable, he shoves his pounds of pigment with a straw broom. Where I vacillate over a prussian or a cobalt, or feather the oil for a nuance of tone or the colour of skin, he squirts on anything that comes to hand and disowns the whole process of “doing”.

The collectors duly arrive for dinner and clearly they are an influential duo indeed. They are both Jewish. We all sit down at the long table and I am right opposite one of them, a sophisticated lady whose face over the years has collapsed into a series of soft folds that are liberally overlaid with face powder and rouge. She looks across the table at me, directing her gaze of temporary tolerance, a look that demands some sign that she is not wasting her time. Clement Greenberg is a friend of hers she tells me. She says he agrees with her that much of what Picasso made was rubbish. She says Clement hates being a Jew.

Later, they ask to look at Jim’s work and I watch carefully for their reactions. They scan the big abstracts with the intensity of a gaze out the window, and they volunteer a few vague comments. A few minutes later they are back to conversation and do not glance at the work again. I thought I would feel vindicated for my own indifference to Jim’s big reckless canvases. But as I watch him I begin to realise he is entirely sincere about what he is doing – and totally committed to some ideal that I know nothing about. He has one big painting called *My Grandfather’s Studio*. There is no studio in it as far as I can see. But the lyrical pinks, violets and greens, all shoved around with a hearth brush and sticking out like botched stucco suggest something rather more. This is 1980 and De Kooning in New York has just entered his last great phase of painterly abstraction. Jim is in good company.

But I come from Geelong and I am looking through spectacles made in the factory of conservative representation. My interest is in New Realism. It’s there if you look for it, occupying one corner of the art scene,

jostling with abstraction, neon installations, holograms and performance. In September, I cut an article from the *New York Times* by Hilton Kramer under the heading, *Art: Five-Gallery Realist Show*. "*The vigorous production of figurative or representational art – the kind of art that is often...described as Realism – is now firmly established as a significant factor on the contemporary art scene in New York. Art of this persuasion seems to attract more and more talented recruits with each passing season, and it now accounts for some of our liveliest exhibitions...*" And I'm here to see them and to exhibit my own take on the movement.

I catch the subway to 57th Street to set up my show: sixteen paintings and one sculpture, all portraits or figures of one sort or another – and a series of my new "Human Field Paintings". On Friday the gallery has organised a Salon Talk and I'm to discuss the work, Australian Art and anything else I can think of. I have been exhibiting professionally just one year. I won't mention that.

I expect my career as an artist to spiral upwards – and why shouldn't it? My show is well-received, especially my "Human Field Paintings" which depict, many times enlarged, a tiny aspect of the human body and then extrapolate the surrounding flesh into a big undulating terrain. I sell some work and then there are reviews in *Artspeak* and the *Eastside Weekly*. My 'salon talk' gives everyone a thorough briefing on my work and articulates a clear model for great art in the future. Fortunately the entire monologue floats off unrecorded into the theatrical Manhattan atmosphere.

But the gallery is going through another transition. With the name-change to Keane-Mason, it is introducing a new structure and exhibition charges that I'm not prepared to pay. I take my slides all over Manhattan looking for a new dealer, an absurd concept considering there are forty thousand artists and most of them are looking for shows.

I go to the famous OK Harris Gallery on West Broadway in SoHo which shows many of the internationally-known figurative painters and sculptors. Ivan Karp is a short, shrewd man that walks with a crooked cane. He tells me he sees one hundred and fifty artists a week. He patiently takes my slides and without a word he walks off to another room. It suddenly occurs to me that perhaps I'm supposed to follow him. As I walk to the office door I overhear him tell an assistant that he might have found something. He sees that I am behind him and he points to a chair while he ponders my slides on a light-table.

"I'm interested", he says, and then we start into a good conversation; where I've been, what I've seen, how I feel about Manhattan, what am I doing now. Then he cuts the chat like turning a page.

"How big?" he says.

"Half a metre square," I tell him. His face takes on the look of the wearied; this is clearly not what the old man wants to hear.

"How much?" I double the price on the spot.

"One thousand," I say. He explains patiently that he spends that much patching the walls between shows and if I could go away and multiply the size by five and produce fifteen or so he might be able to do something with me. As I am leaving, he surprises me again.

"Anyway," he says, "I'm not going to do Realism much more; I want to try something else."

I soon learn that a good reason for being in Manhattan is to preview a little bit of the world's future. New Yorkers are at least a decade ahead of us. It's 1980 and they have ATMs, push button instant dial telephones with call-waiting, Cable TV, dial-a-joke and horoscopes-by-phone. Outside I see plastic pebbles around plastic grass sprouting plastic shrubbery. It will be decades before Australians begin to notice the role of the synthetic in ordinary life. But America already has it well in hand. You can purchase an object wrapped in plastic called a *Duraflame*, a three hour fire log that "flames in colours". Made of wax, sawdust and a copper-based colouring agent it has a heat output of 85,000 BTUs and comes individually shrink-wrapped with instructions on lighting and how to extinguish it in case of emergency.

In New York they are peddling designer drugs to pedestrians: Quaaludes, Preluden, amphetamines, LSD, cocaine, heroine; they call out the name of their wares as people pass like a fellow selling the *Big Issue*. In Geelong you might know someone who knows someone who may be able to get you an ounce of pot – but only if you move in the right circles – and then you hide it behind a brick in the fireplace. On the Upper East Side I meet a girl whose brother is a dealer. She takes me to his apartment and shows me his set-up. Just like the movies, he has a revolving cocktail cabinet that conceals the most sophisticated arrangement for storage, weighing and packaging.

I see many celebrities – for me it's a game, like trying to catch lightning in the process of striking. I pass Lou Reed on the pavement many times – he has an apartment just up the street from me – and one night I dine with Woody Allen, although he is on the other side of the restaurant. I go to see *Elephant Man* starring David Bowie on West Broadway. Yoko has *HAPPY BIRTHDAY JOHN* written in the sky over Manhattan. A month later this former Beatle is shot dead.

I pay no rent in Manhattan; the people there are very generous to homeless Australians. When things become rather strained living with Jim Bohary on Great Jones Street, I stay with the middle-aged assistant of the gallery I'm showing with. Harriet Nesbitt puts me up in her tiny over-heated flat on the Upper East Side. In the early hours of the morning I look down from my mezzanine bed in the lounge and see her in a pale-coloured nightdress sitting on the carpet, a whole turkey on a plate in front of her. Illuminated by the grey light of the TV, each night she tears off the meat until there's nothing but matt-coloured bones.

She also has a long-term gay border who takes me all over the city, to bars and clubs where people do exactly what they feel like and *reservation* is not a word in their vocabulary. I stand talking to one young woman in a crowded bar when she steps forward, unzips my fly and puts her hand into my trousers. In Geelong, a touch on the arm would be a little presumptuous. Before I leave Harriet's, her border's parting lament is that he will miss my pubic hairs in the shower, and Harriet checks every compartment to see that I haven't stolen anything.

Robert Hollingworth – Extract from *Nature Boy* 2004