

## JACK BROWN: *I'll Be Your Mirror, 1977-1983.*

### 1.

I met Jack Brown in my first year of attending what was then called the Ontario College of Art, sometime in the late fall of 1977. I had just turned 17 and had come straight from attending high school in the desolate and depressing inner-city suburb I had spent the first part of my teenage years in.

The decision to apply to art school was taken solely on the basis of having made the acquaintance of someone who was planning to go, and having no other options I decided that I too would apply. I had never considered art college before, or really any college, and my grades in high school bore out my lack of interest in higher education. However, I had no other prospects and I suppose in its own way the idea of making art did appeal to me. I knew nothing whatsoever about art, but I did know a great deal about rock and roll, as this was the medium that owned my heart, and because I had always experienced rock and roll as art, I thought then that making art might be similar to making rock and roll.

The first time I set foot in OCA was to see Talking Heads in January 1977 when they performed in the auditorium, so when I entered the school that fall as a student I was fully expecting to see and meet a lot of punk minded people, unfortunately the school served to be a profound disappointment in this regard. Outside of maybe 10 or 12 people (at least 8 of whom were in a couple of OCA-based punk bands like the Diodes) the school was a sea of high waisted flares, frye boots and peasant blouses, painter's pants and plaid shirts, corduroy blazers and patterned sweaters, Stevie Nicks gypsy hair and ponytails.

It was in the context of this disappointing turn of events that I encountered Jack in one of the first Foundation Year classes. He stood out from other students in subtle ways, even though he was still wearing his hair long, it was scruffy in a Keith Richards tousled kind of way, his jeans weren't flared but standard issue boot cut Levi's. He was undeniably cool and he had a tougher mien than the other students, and I suppose in part it might be the case that he seemed older than most of us. I was definitely on the young side, but I reckon most of the first-year class was mainly made up of kids between the ages of 19 and 21. Jack being 25 gave him a kind of status and gravitas that the rest of us lacked. He was also, in the scheme of things, much further along on his journey as an artist. He already knew what he liked, and to some extent I think he already knew what he wanted to do with his art.

Tellingly my first strong memory of Jack is being in the basement apartment he shared with his friend Barry at Broadview and Gerrard. We had struck up a conversation at school one day and I suppose within a short time he invited me to visit him at his apartment. I remember kneeling on the floor of his small living room, the late afternoon sun flooding the room from above, smoking a joint with him, him perched on the couch above me while I rifled through the thick columns of vinyl records leaning against the wall.

About half way through I saw *White Light/White Heat*, the second, and most demanding and difficult Velvet Underground album. I remember the feeling of being stunned to see it in someone else's record collection. Its strange, perverse, dissonant and subversive majesty had been a staple of my life

for the previous two years, and it was a record so uncompromising and aberrant that it would never even have occurred to me to share it with anyone. Until I saw it in Jack's collection, I had never given a moment's thought to the idea that I would ever meet someone who also had this album. I commented with a simple 'wow' and conveyed the fact that I also owned a copy and that the VU were my favourite band. Over the course of a few minutes, it became clear that the Velvets were as important to him as they were to me.

It was a strange and unexpected feeling back then to meet another human being who loved this then still obscure art band the way that you did. To understand and love the Velvets in those days was to say: I am this kind of person, these are the things I am drawn to, these are the things I find beauty in, these are the things that fascinate, trouble and transfix me.

To discern and discover oneself in the Velvets, to have one's identity come into being through the things they sung about, by the way they sounded, and the image world they brought forth was to say, once and forever, that one's heart and one's desires lay elsewhere and otherwise from a customary and conventional life. In every case, the things one found in the Velvets were profoundly, perversely and determinedly heretical to the prosaic, mainstream sensibilities of art, music, aesthetics and culture itself, and so singular was their affect that it sufficed to simply meet someone else who loved them for that person to be received as a soulmate or at least a fellow traveller.

The thing that defined the Velvets and the thing that defined the bond Velvets fans had back then was that they were unboundedly dark and ineffably beautiful in a way few other things were, certainly they were peerless in that regard in the realm of music. Where one did see the combination of darkness and beauty of this intensity and magnitude was in certain artists, and certain works of art. Back then, I knew this fact through a single reproduced image: Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, an image whose visceral and deranging madness had haunted me from the moment I first came across it in an old library book at the age of 10 or 11. But Jack knew this and much more about that combination of darkness and beauty, and it was through the prism of our initial bonding around the Velvets that Jack introduced me to the world of art and artists he was using to develop an artistic practice revolving around that then very rare sensibility.

## 2.

By the time foundation year ended and second year began, we were fast friends, and began painting together in what was then called the Experimental Arts Building on McCaul St, just south of the main campus. It was an old Brinks Security building, built like a battleship and characterized by a sprawling open plan painting area where all the students worked collectively. Jack and I weren't keen on working in this open area *tout ensemble*, and when we were scoping out possible options in the sprawling building, we came across a largish old vault in the office area off the main part of the space. It was perfect, and it became our first studio. It was a hot, narrow and windowless concrete room, but there was more than enough space for the two of us to work.

As we began working in our little studio we felt invigorated by our separation from the rest of the students, and certainly the work we were making bore no relationship whatsoever to what was happening out there in the big brightly lit main space. Because everyone else's work was freely arrayed over several thousand square feet, people were constantly wandering around and gathering to comment on and critique the work of their colleagues. Teachers and visiting artists, some quite prominent, would hold forth, the avid young artists gathered around them, everyone surrounded

mainly by the large abstract, post-painterly and colour field paintings that were still the coin of the realm at the school in the late 1970s.

We really had nothing whatsoever to do with any of that. We had very few people dropping by our space, and when they did it was often an encounter of awkward pauses and nervous laughter. No one really knew what to say about what we were up to, and many wrote it off either as a kind of deliberate dadaesque affront to the sacrosanct verities of modernist art on the one hand, or a kind of ignorant folkish madness on the other, as if we were unbalanced and unlearned Rip Van Winkle-like bumpkins who had somehow missed the point of the entire postwar period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For our part, both Jack and I were zealously outspoken about inadequacies of late modern art, we took the calculating emptiness of the abstract painting that dominated at that time to be both an arid and infecund endeavour. We called it ‘bank art’, which only meant that it was art that was anodyne and inconsequential enough to hang in one unnoticed. I don’t think that either one of us really identified as ‘figurative painters’, it was always just that we wanted to create images, because the creation of images in the late 1970s was the necessary precondition for creating works that meant something to us. Abstract art, conceptual art, installation art, all of these things may have been fine on their own terms but they could never fulfill what it was we were looking for art to do.

### 3.

There is no question that from the moment we started working together in that space, and I started to understand the sensibility he was developing, I was his avid student. The world we inhabited was populated by the artists that guided Jack at that time, and that he introduced to me: Francis Bacon, Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Giotto, Max Beckmann and George Grosz, Goya’s *Black Paintings*, Rouault’s *Miserere*, Van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*, Masaccio’s *Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, Sidney Nolan’s *Ned Kelly* paintings.

Since our relationship had begun in a shared obsession with rock and roll, it became clear as we worked that rock and roll was kind of the urtext for the art we wanted to make. In other words, the goal was to create art that aspired to the condition of rock and roll. Art that had what rock and roll had—sex, anger, intensity, inchoate confusion, art that was messed up, the way great rock and roll was messed up. The ultimate thing was to create an emotional experience for the viewer. Each painting or drawing was the equivalent of a three-minute rock and roll song. They were fast, dirty and to the point. Nothing needed to be laboured over.

We rarely talked about art without talking about music and vice versa, and the thing we always came back to was the idea of emotional intensity. The art historical works we obsessed over, those work we transmuted, were those whose paintings we deemed to be as “heavy as rock and roll”. That was the ultimate benediction, and our ultimate aspiration as artists trying to tap into that energy.

As our practices developed, we had that kind of healthy competition that painters can get when they paint in the same style, at the same scale, under the same influences. One of us would do a painting and couldn’t wait to show it to the other, who would nod and offer comment, but you knew that they were going to try to do something to top it. We had lots of periods like that.

#### 4.

Over time the work started to grow, its ambitions enlarged, the work became more worked over. Not every painting had to be done in a single day. Although I was working hard at painting, I had a harder time with focusing. I dropped out of OCA, went back, dropped out again, bounced around, went back and finished. Throughout my peregrinations Jack and I remained close and we saw each other all the time. We lived near each other, shared certain bad habits, and saw dozens of bands at the Horseshoe, the Cabana room, the Turning Point, The Edge, David's etc.

Sometime in 1980 things started to change. I remember one of our instructors who had taken rather a bemused interest in our efforts to embody the qualities of artists like Bacon in our work coming into our little airless room and triumphantly announcing: *"I've just gotten back from New York and they have a name for the kind of painting you two are doing. They call it psycho-sexualism!"*. This news sailed right over our indifferent heads, but it was the first time we were made aware of the fact that something was happening, although neither of us at that time had any idea just how determinative it would be.

Up to that point I remained completely oblivious to the "art world" and very rarely went to galleries. Jack cultivated a bit more of an interest, as I think he had always visited galleries when he visited Toronto as a young man coming down from Garson; as well, he also had a few friends who were a bit more involved in the Toronto art scene such as it was at the time. But as for our own work, for the whole of the time we spent up to that point we had been in isolation. It was just Jack and I, and our painting influences were entirely art historical.

Soon the insistent rumblings of artistic revolution were impossible to ignore, as missives from Art In America, Artforum and October magazine were hungrily gobbled up. The word on the street was that "the figure had returned". The show *A New Spirit in Painting*, which opened at the Royal Academy of Arts in London on January 15, 1981 heralded the regime change. It was followed by the sudden fame of a whole battery of new painters creating mostly monumentally scaled works. One quickly learned their names: Schnabel, Salle, Clemente, Baselitz, Cucchi, Polke, Kiefer.

Within months, the buzz around "Neo-Expressionism" descended on OCA, and it was no longer just Jack and I doing our weird figurative thing in that strange little room. A few ambitious others began adopting the style of the new painting as it was coming to be defined by the art magazines from New York and the breathless dispatches of prominent curators like Germano Celant, Achille Bonito Oliva and Donald Kuspit. A few painters became prominent within the OCA ecosystem by copping some of the same sexual energy that our work had.

For the first time, I started to look at art magazines, flipping through them with a mix of excitement and anxiety. It felt like whatever it was that Jack and I had been doing on our own was now blowing up all over the art world. I felt alternately energized and immobilized by it.

As I recall, Jack took it more in stride, possibly due to his having been already slightly more aware of the vicissitudes of the art world, but more likely having to do with the fact that he was already quite settled in what he was doing, and whatever was happening in New York or Berlin wasn't anything that was going to get factored into his thinking in any substantive way. For my part I was severely disoriented by it, and knocked off the delicate axis I had created for myself by working entirely

under the tutelage of Jack. Once the world rushed in, it created a disequilibrium in my thinking that would prove fatal to my art in the end.

Soon the spread of figurative and representational work, loosely assembled under the banner of Neo-Expressionism, was so advanced that the directors of YYZ, one of the most prominent artist-run centres in Toronto at that time decided to mount Toronto's answer to this new movement in painting. Dubbed Monumenta, a staggering 75 artists were included, spread across several galleries. Many of those included had only just pimped out their paintings in order to reflect the new representational trend, swapping out modernist and post-painterly tropes for historicist gestures and vaguely defined and in the main quite tepid figurative elements.

Both Jack and I were included in this sprawling opus and it was to have a profound effect on both of our lives, because sometime towards the end of the exhibition we were both contacted by Carmen Lamanna, then the most prominent gallerist in Toronto, and possibly the most powerful gallery in the country at that time. He wanted to arrange a studio visit. Within a few months, both Jack and I had been picked up by the gallery, with a group show scheduled for December 1982.

5.