

Jack 'n Me

I have wanted to write this piece for over 25 years. Yes, there has been the odd curator or researcher who has come along desiring to get my thoughts on the subject, but it always ends the same way. After the initial looks of fascination, the fixated nodding of intrigue, the mumbling grunts of assent, and the heartfelt promises to definitely be in touch for further discussion, they have all vaporized. Every one of them. I know why, the story I have to tell is ultimately not the one they want to hear, and certainly not the one ripe to be forged into the grist of earnest canon.

This is my story of Jack Goldstein, not the oft-told tale of CalArts Mafias and intrepid theoretical encampments on the blank spots of the map. Mine is a mad moment of searing white light and bottomless black darkness, all set to the ever-present wailing of a scratchy old Patsy Cline box set. Some don't like the narrative to stray into this quadrant, the personal, the messy, the bloated and the profane. I cannot separate one from the other, to draw clear the image of where this artist wanted to go with his work; one has to see it in context of the mind, the heart and the conditions that drove it.

I have never met anybody like Jack Goldstein. The first time I laid eyes on him was when he came to lecture at CalArts in early 1982. We had had them all come through, the luminaries of a generation, flaming art stars, magicians and theoretical acrobats, we'd sat before Frank Gehry, Richard Prince and the wonder boys of October Magazine, and always we reacted the same way, as jaundiced and unimpressed little shits who had seen it all.

Goldstein would change that. That callous club self regarding student twits sat in dumb struck awe before Jack standing there in all his coiled malevolence, cigarette one third ash, one third twisted anger, and one third chewed to wet slush. He did not dress like an artist at all, or at least any I had ever dreamed of. He looked more like a down on his luck B grade horror movie huckster in his collarless waist length cream leather jacket and matching cream snakeskin cowboy boots, this balanced by ball hugging vacuum sucked designer jeans and two tone shades perched atop his well sprayed coif of long black 'Shampoo' era hair. In spite of all theses built in incongruities, to say he was menacing would have been an understatement.

He just stood there chain smoking and snorting while recordings of women crying and dogs barking played loud over and over. Behind him images of exploding landscapes flashed one after another with no explanation offered, relentless and seamless. When it did finally conclude and the lights came on, there was an audible exhalation across the room. Next up, student questions; a part that usually takes the form of a gleeful onslaught of chomping grad students attempting to tear their new toy out of it's shiny stratosphere. Not this day. The first question came in low and serious. A great long winded something or other, to which Goldstein said simply, "Next question." This went

on for about ten more questions, each eliciting the same answer. I was in love. This was perfect impenetrable opacity, the pure theatre of spectacle, and utterly unaccountable.

Immediately after the event, I went straight up to him and said, "I want to paint your paintings for you, and I can paint them better than whoever is painting them now!" Jack looked amused at my blurted audacity and asked if I was planning to be around New York anytime. I answered in the affirmative and he mumbled something vague about looking him up if I were ever to move there. I am sure he had probably forgotten all about it by the time he got done with the dinner afterward, but for me, I had the next move of my life clearly mapped out and absolutely nothing was going to change that.

Upon arrival in New York some months later I called him immediately to see if we were on. Happily he seemed to have a vague memory of our meeting and more to the point, a curiosity to meet and see my small hastily assembled portfolio of works that leaned hard toward technical proficiency.

I sat facing him in the Empire Diner. He was a brooding and handsome bastard in a somewhat unnerving way; 'intense' would be the word that would flash across most minds. He seemed to take a genuine interest, which coming from one I regarded as an anointed dark deity in that slouching downtown Valhalla, was an absolute thrill. I can't remember much of the conversation, but I vividly remember leaving with a sense of elation. He told me he had to do some fiddling to get his then assistant out of there for a few days and when that could be arranged he would call me up to give me try out. It all had a heady but tainted air of conspiracy and destiny.

As a Hawaii island boy, my first impression of early 80's D.U.M.B.O. was one of unambiguous horror. Great burned out husks of buildings, ominous territorial graffiti warnings scrawled on every wall, crack vials littered everywhere, and the odd shadowy hooded figure lurching into the shadows at the margins of ones vision, all this scored by the ever present roar of the Manhattan Bridge overpass.

Jack's building, large and industrial, looked like all the others except for the fact that the glass in its all windows was intact. Apparently one of the few then colonized by artists in all of Brooklyn at the time. After walking up 5 flights of dark echoing staircase, I nervously tapped on a large metal door with what seemed like an absurd amount of locks. It felt far too long before Jack threw open the door with a crooked smile and hurriedly ushered me in. He introduced me to his dog, a grizzly and unfriendly old monster as black as his master's hair, and also named 'Jack'. He mentioned that he had a bird 'somewhere', and a fish that had just died, both of them named 'Jack' too.

And there they were, straight out of the stuff of my dreams, everywhere around me huge phosphorescent white explosions across giant light sucking black canvases stacked against every bit of available wall. I could not believe this inner sanctum of the only religion I ever knew could be so readily accessible to such a green-eared neophyte. Somewhat incongruously Patsy Cline's 'I Fall to Pieces' was echoing around the loft at full decibel, and on every table, amongst the litter of paint, brushes and airbrush equipment, were little mirrors covered with chopped white lines.

Jack said right there and then he would give me the job, to which I mumbled jokingly that if that were the case then I supposed I would be entering my "coke period!" Jack's terse response: "It ain't coke man, it's speed!" ...Oh double shit!

After rechecking a couple of times that he had indeed really just offered me the job, I meekly blathered something about it possibly being a bit premature, and shouldn't he give me a tryout first. "Nah, I trust my instincts." He replied with his dark eyes fixed hard on mine.

I enquired when did he want to start, he replied, "What's wrong with right now?" Holy crap, this was deep fast. I asked what I should work on, thinking of some little test performed on paper to showcase my technique for his approval. Instead he pointed to a huge eight-foot by twelve-foot empty black canvas and handed me a small four by five inch grainy photo and said, "Paint this on that!" I said, "You gotta be kidding? I can't just walk in and do that. Couldn't we at least start on something smaller?" "No man, I trust you!" And with that began one of the strangest chapters of my life.

He showed me how they used auto pin-liners to make the white lines of the explosion trails. This was very naked work that necessitated a 'one shot, one kill' degree of calm accuracy, I wasn't sure I was capable of such extreme control. It turned out I wasn't. Nevertheless I threw myself into that canvas with all the lust of youth, fearlessly, or maybe recklessly, wheeling out great arcing white lines across those matt black fields.

We got in arguments as to procedure almost immediately. Because I did not like the vulnerability and nakedness of those lines and other overly airbrushed looking applications to show all their mistakes and footsteps, I preferred to work in a back and forth manner, pushing and pulling between black and white to create the full spectrum of greys. Jack was dead set against this, he hated "push and pull", considering it overly 'artistic' and unnecessarily 'painterly.' He said he wanted the image just "plain laid on", only white acrylic paint applied on top of set black. 'That' he said was the point of his work, direct, impersonal, like a single color silkscreen, just the found image represented coldly, but at the scale of monument. My retort invariably was that with such a naked paint application, the individual craft-person's hand was much more visible, thus undermining his intent of an impersonal, generic image. Furthering this reasoning, I argued that a seamlessly and technically perfectly painted image would lend itself best to the overarching desire of the work to act as pure spectacle.

This debate was to play itself out over and over again, sometimes with humor; sometimes with passion, and sometimes with deadly stubborn seriousness in the four years I worked for him as a hired illustrator. He was never completely comfortable with my approach, and I never capitulated fully to his. It is true that if one work painted the way he wanted happened to land faultlessly, it would be the perfect Goldstein, but only a tiny percentage can ever land that way, the rest will invariably show human foible and 'personality', a kiss of death to one who employed 'faceless' technicians to create his work.

Shortly after I began working for him, Jack moved to a new studio very deep into the backside of Williamsburg. The neighborhood was thankfully far more forgiving and neutral than the last. The new studio was spacious with a commanding if distant view of the entire Manhattan skyline from the Chrysler building all the way down to the World Trade Center. Jack, as was his customary monastic mien, had once again set up his sleeping area right in the middle of everything, with no thought for personal privacy.

Here the days took on a distinct routine. Understanding that I was an aspiring artist myself, Jack allowed me to load up my 40-hour week into three long days. The Patsy Cline wailing rarely abated, and the volume was rarely below deafening. The lines of crystal methamphetamine were snorted down and mad bursts of work were punctuated by intense and theoretical discussions.

This was a period that I referred to privately as "The cult of two". That probably was the best way to describe it, Jack taking the role of the messianic Svengali, and I the young acolyte filled with the unwavering belief of a true believer. As in all cults, the threat that bound us came from the outside. In this case it was an ever-looming art world populated by lightweights, vulgarians and false prophets that would lead the true cultural heart of America down any number of doomed aesthetic cul-de-sacs. "There's nothing out there Ash!" was Jack's incessant mantra. He saw it all as a wasteland that produced only poisonous fruit. Only he and I in the world could see the true light, and only he and I could save this world from itself. I would often stare in wonder at Jack's trashcans where he had torn up all his art invitations into no less than 32 parts per card, thinking that such overkill was akin only to murders of extreme passion.

And there was always that gruesome old brute, the dog Jack, who over those four years never stopped growling every time anyone but his human namesake came near, and who Jack loved with a devotion bordering on illness and commensurate only with the loathing of his own kind. This disintegrating and mangy beast with its hideous distended anus would lurk on the squalid bed in the middle of everything, a perpetual dark force casting a malevolent pall over all.

Ours was definitely a world governed by a hell-bent rudder mad unreality, and even though I could see this clearly, it was for the moment far too thrilling to let go of. It was a 'mission' to which we were answering the 'calling', and ultimately we would be responsible for the 'great rescue'.

At some point Jack picked up another painter to help meet a growing demand. This soft-spoken fellow, a very different temperament from either Jack or myself, nevertheless threw himself into a level of methamphetamine consumption equal to Jack's own. I was amused by to watch their movements get slower and slower over time, till at some point it seemed they were both moving in a cartoon slow motion. This bizarre decomposition of time was broken every now and then by bursts of heavy nostril flared breathing and sharp jittery staccato movements. I got to know this as the rhythm of the snorts.

A very odd outcome of Jack's Warholian method of production was that he ended up taking on the role traditionally occupied by the artist's assistant. He made the Pearl Paint runs, he bought the canvas, stretched and primed it and painted the base coat ready for his 'painters'. He even swept and tidied the studio, as these 'assistant's' time was too valuable to waste on menial chores. I often wondered with some irony what the purpose to it all was?

Later, and I must add, after the fact that such ideas had been applied to the interpretation of his work by opportunistic others, Jack took up reading the dense tomes of Continental theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. About this time things had also begun to tip out of control and our eccentric but always curious rhythm had taken a decidedly sinister turn. He was also now mixing his drug use with an unpredictable cornucopia of ups and downs. I used to start every workweek with frantic rifling through his drawers in an attempt to ascertain what drugs he might be on so I could better prepare for the extreme mood swings that were inevitable. This also marked the time Vivaldi replaced Patsy Cline as the only staple allowed to issue forth from the old studio stereo.

One had to pass his bed every time one made a trip to the bathroom. If it wasn't running the gauntlet of that singularly unpleasant canine, then it was Jack lying there intensely lost in his new hobby of devouring some grand labyrinthine text or other. I quickly learned this flagged 'downers' and played it accordingly. Slip Vivaldi on, set the dial low, and as sure as the cycles of the moon, 15 minutes later and he would be snoring like a baby. This guaranteed at least a couple of hours of unmolested reprieve in the studio. Invariably this idyll would at some point be invaded by the sound of deep hyperventilated breathing behind, and turning I would confront the bulging red eyes and flared nostrils as he feverishly sucked a lung-full off his tortured cigarette. "Is that all you done man?" Obviously white knuckle jacked on a few fat rails of Meth and a nuisance to his own production, the only logical thing seemed to be to hand him a

broom and off he'd go, maniacally sweeping the studio like some crazed Tourette's addled vagrant.

I realize I paint a rather disastrous, and possibly cruel image of an individual apparently breaking apart. Let me put this plain: Jack was, in a very real way, more of an artist than any other I have ever known, and I have known a few. Obviously a complicated and challenging personality, yet there was an absurd amount of yearning and idealism there, and an unadulterated artistic ambition commensurate in scale with the cinematic expanses of his great flaming skies. As is often the case with those that need to soar at such reckless altitudes, there was also terrible human frailty and vulnerability, with a great horned coat of monstrosity as sentinel to this raw internal tangle. Our relationship was often profound and always mercurially intense, probably even something akin to love in the early days, but years later, by the end, we were riding a path centimeters from earnestly wanting to murder one another several times over on any given work day.

Because of all this, after the day I was finally able to break away and support myself with my own work, we rarely spoke again, doubtless each of us mutually relieved to be rid of the other forever. Over the subsequent years I heard strange and often confusing stories of what he was up to, nothing seemed linear or predictable, and none of it seemed good. Then sometime in March of 2003 while in Bali I received a strange email from Anthony Haden-Guest stating only, "Really sorry about Jack Goldstein." I knew right away what had happened and immediately guessed the cause. The method of course I could not know, but the general darkness and extremities that defined his life always seemed to indicate an explosive and dramatic conclusion. This was not a man who could accept a 'normal' life or anonymity in any form. After systematically closing off or losing all other routes, he took the only path he felt left available to get to that perfect place, that pristine state and crystal moment where he thought art should exist. I cannot even begin to fathom the utter loneliness of those last days in that empty desert.