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Philip Munger

Progressive Alaska

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Sunday, January 9, 2011

James L. Acord Passes



Seattle alternative arts icon, sculptor, conceptual artist and award-winning lecturer James L. Acord, Jr. died late Saturday. He was 67. For decades, he was my best friend.

Just last Thursday, I showed Judy the inside title page of my book of sea chanties. It was signed "FV Misty Dawn - 1981" by Jim. We went back into the two decades before that.

There haven't yet been tributes since his demise. There are several good articles available on the web, though, that show what a remarkable man and artist he was.

By far, the best of the lot is Philip Schuyler's two-part series for the *New*

Yorker in 1991 . If you subscribe to their online service, the article is free.

Seattle author Fred Moody's description of his obsession with one of Acord's masterworks, *The Monstrance and Me*, is a masterpiece of art lover's mania.



The centerpiece of Acord's life work was perhaps his reaching out to the community of nuclear scientists in the engineering and technology center based around the Hanford Works in the tri-cities region of eastern Washington. He arrived in Richland at the end of the cold war. Though he didn't expect scientists there to be interested in his ideas, they were.

Acord began, with his Richland years, to reach out to both artists and scientists on nuclear issues, ecological realities, and cooperation between diverging interest groups.

I watched him address a convention of nuclear scientists in Richland in 1995, after Jim, sculptor Peter Bevis and I had come back from a two-day bird survey along the Hanford Reach of the Columbia River in late January. We were also surreptitiously taking measurements of radiation in the small, winter-time streams in the highly restricted area known as "N Reactor Springs." We were cold, famished, dirtily grizzled and exhausted.

Right off the river, Jim grabbed a white shirt out of the back of his Volvo, as Pete and I muscled Jim's boat back onto the trailer. Acord sort of stuffed the white shirt inside his Carhharts, fidgeted with cold, numb fingers, loosely tying one of his two ties, and we headed over to the convention.

When we got to the hall, full of well-dressed scientists, I felt out of place.

Jim went around the gathering, shaking many hands, laughing, patting eminent scientists on their shoulders, as they glad-handed him as some sort of messenger from a distant community of long-lost relatives. I was surprised how affable all these guys were toward him. We ate.

Near the end of dinner, Jim was introduced. His talk included a slide show and video splashed across him, and the wall above. Although Acord started out slowly, almost painstakingly, eventually his sense of humor and deeper sense of history had the audience's full attention. People began to nod affirmatively as he made trenchant points. He ended up with a three-minute standing ovation. One scientist sitting at my table told me "This never happens at our conventions." He wanted to meet Jim. Immediately.

Through the 1990s, Acord worked on projects to attempt to convince the nuclear industry of the long-term dangers posed by the ways nuclear waste is stored. The methods he used to try to do this were manifold. His boldly unique proposal to transmute technetium 99 to ruthenium 100 as part of a transformative work of art was looked upon seriously. Not in the USA, but in the UK and at CERN. Here's a description of the way Acord presented the project at a 1999 exhibit in the UK:

His exhibits in Nottingham are purely symbolic. They're housed in an old wash-house, where Acord likes the dim lighting and the church-like aura on the bare walls. "I can't help feeling," he says, "that today's nuclear industry is not unlike the Church of the 12th and 13th centuries. We have a priesthood living in remote areas, interacting only with each other. Yet these are the people who make decisions for you and me."

Using this religious analogy, he has created three wooden boxes shaped like church windows and designed to hold symbolic relics of the nuclear industry, much as medieval reliquaries contained alleged fragments of the cross or locks of Christ's hair. Each reliquary is fastened to the wall at about the same height as a pub dartboard. On the inside of the doors, though, are mathematical formulae or scientific information. Did you know that there are 17 isotopes of sodium having mass numbers from 19 to 34? Or that in the 20s and 30s, uranium was used for decoration? It bestowed a bright glaze on innocent household items like the red Fiestaware salt cellars that Acord has mounted here on a dark background.

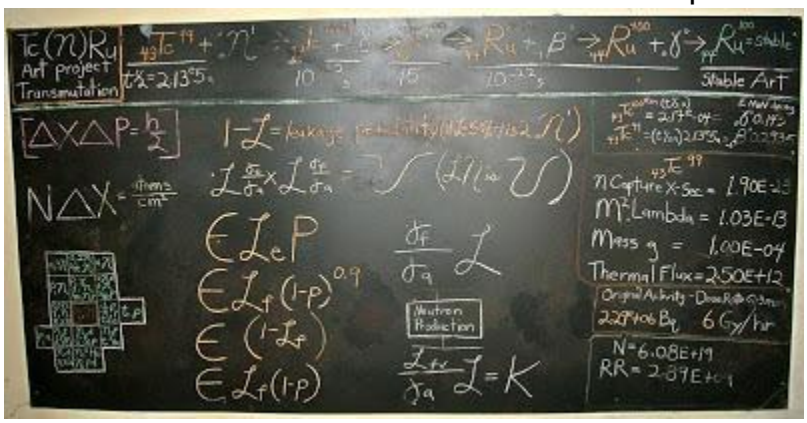
There's a message here about the dangers of radiation and the loss of innocence of the "goodies" in their battle against the "baddies" during the second world war, when all uranium was confiscated for weapons production. But I doubt I'd have seen it had the artist not been talking me through it. Explanatory panels are noticeable by their absence. Acord works

at the frontier between art and science. "Like all artists, I skipped as many maths classes as possible at school," he admits. "But when I moved to Hanford, I realised that the only way to gain respect from nuclear scientists was to learn their language. It took me three years and it was the toughest thing I've ever done. The scientists and engineers were laying bets that I wouldn't pass. In the end, I scraped through in all my grades."

What's on the blackboard is his formula for transmuting radioactive technetium 99 into safe ruthenium 100 - "eminently suitable for the creation of art," he says. "I'm not saying this is something that could be economical in the long term, but as a metaphor for our nuclear age it's perfect." Somehow he persuaded the physics department at Imperial College, London, that what it needed was a community artist.

Thanks to Imperial, Acord now has access to a small-scale reactor. But his most audacious scheme yet remains unrealised. He wants to build a nuclear Stonehenge in Hanford. "I feel the site should become a national sacrifice area. I want a sculpture park to show future generations what we've done and to warn them not to drink the water or grow crops hereabouts."

Here's a blackboard of his, including his formulae for transmuting technetium 99 to ruthenium 100. We fastened it onto the ceiling of my shop, after one of his Alaska lecture and work trips:



Here's a link to Author James Flint's richly detailed 1998 profile of James Acord, *Looking for Acord*.

Here's a link to the biographical material on Acord at the *Hanford Time Capsule*.

More on Jim coming.

Posted by Philip Munger at 10:41 PM
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19 comments:

AKjah said...

The Monstrance and me was such a gripping tale. I am truly sorry for your loss.

January 10, 2011 at 12:08 AM

Anonymous said...

you stole his blackboard? funny!

January 10, 2011 at 7:25 AM

bevissimo said...

Pete told me about this just now. I can't say I'm surprised, but it's a loss and I empathize with you.

- Pete's sister.

January 10, 2011 at 11:36 AM

Philip Munger said...

bevissimo,

Thanks.

January 10, 2011 at 11:42 AM

Virginia Sorrells and Nicholas Vroman said...

Philip, the news just came to me. Thanks for the wonderful obit. I'm at a loss for words. Jim was my best friend too. I miss him fiercely. - Nick

January 10, 2011 at 10:01 PM

Philip Munger said...

Thanks, Virginia and Nick.

A number of people in Seattle are dealing with the details and there will be more information on how to honor Jim's legacy soon.

January 10, 2011 at 10:44 PM

Jim said...

Just two weeks ago I was hanging a new drawing that Jim had sent me before Christmas - of a nuclear-powered wind-turbine (classic Jim) - on my wall.

I can't believe he's gone. He was quite possibly the most extraordinary person I have ever met; I feel honoured to have known and worked with him.

Not only one of the most fascinating artists of his time, but also the most wonderful story-teller, with a unique style and utterly original turn of phrase.

He didn't think of himself as a writer, but his emails and letters were among the most entertaining I ever received. Listening to him, transcribing the many interviews I did with him for The Book of Ash, and corresponding with him for over a decade taught me more about writing than I've learned from anyone or anything else.

He was a natural. And that's aside from the art. His reputation will long outlast him, not least because he's not around to deliberately sabotage it!

I loved you Jim - you were a true friend and a true original. You will be sorely missed.

January 11, 2011 at 1:59 AM

Anonymous said...

I'm a downwinder, raised just across the freeway from where the Kennewick Man was discovered.
My family and friends thought Jim was a whack job, I remember seeing his shop from the highway and wanting to go in there to investigate, I am so sorry now that I didnt.
Whack works well for me. I was within arms reach of true genius and too dumb to reach out and graduate from being the kennewick man.
I would have continued to think him a nut but for all the wonderful things that I am reading from his friends.
Wishing that I had met him.
Lets put our heads together and build his stonehenge in Leslie Groves' Park!
That is where it would fit best.Dont ask Leslie Groves.
Like most of the public art in the Tri Cities it will piss off the required number of head-scratching knuckle-dragging bottom feeders.
It could be a memorial (public art in the Tri Cities has to be a memorial) to those that died downwind of, or in the nuclear work. Or a memorial to those that will die, when was there ever a memorial to someone not yet dead? Nuclear science is "forward" thinking, no?
Jim, just missed you.
Jeffrey Kirk painlesspainter@yahoo

January 11, 2011 at 1:24 PM

Philip Munger said...

Thanks, Jeffrey.

I'm sure there must be more like you who wanted to know the man, but were put off by the conventional narrative projected by friends or family.

January 11, 2011 at 2:33 PM

GinKeCo said...

Jim, you were one of the good ones. We only met you once, and thank goodness. We had hoped to visit with you more in this life. We will enjoy memories of you with our friends who were your near lifelong friends. Enjoy your exploration of the universe.

January 14, 2011 at 5:45 PM

innis said...

Jim... to fond memories of buhsmilling with you and the others at the foundry . innis

January 17, 2011 at 7:41 PM

innis said...

Jim ..
fond memories of bushmilling with you at Foundry . . innis

January 17, 2011 at 7:43 PM

Anonymous said...

On Jim Acord:
It has saddened me to hear of Jim's death. It saddens me because I think of what a tragedy it was that he wasted so much talent and the good will that was bestowed on him by so many people who loved him, supported him, and took so much abuse from him. Reading all these wonderful elegies about Jim would go against much of what he himself believed in in his more lucid moments: total honesty, the kind of honesty that is so basic to true art. If he were in our shoes, he would not have stood by while people gave such tremendous homage to someone while ignoring the reality of the considerable negative side of that person. Unfortunately, that is what I am seeing. Everyone talking about how terrific he was while we all know that he could be an incredible jerk, lashing out at people in the most hostile and petty ways, hurting others, threatening others. Come on, folks! We were all guilty of enabling much of this sick behavior, myself included. Let us not continue on with the lie. Jim Acord was an exceptional guy in many ways – but he could also be an unbelievable ass-hole. And I say that with a lot of love for Jim and I know that he would appreciate this truth being acknowledged, rather then a vetted picture of him as being such a 'wonderful' person. Jim told me a long time ago that he could make the milk in the refrigerator curdle – referring to his ability to destroy relationships. That was some 40 years ago! And that is about as honnest a statement as I can think of. I think we should show our love for Jim by being honnest about him, not by turning him into someone he was not.
By the way, that formula in the picture did not reflect Jim's work, that was the scientific work that his technical team at Hanford came up with. They are the ones who informed him about the process that would limit the half live of nuclear reativity. Jim was brilliant but not that brilliant --certainly not brilliant enough to be able to turn himself into a nuclear physicist overnight. Come on guys.
I have many letters and art pieces by Jim if anyone wants to do a retrospective on him.

Other then that, I hope that all the friends are willing to forgive me for telling it like it is. I belive that Jim would appreciate it.
Love,
Mona

January 20, 2011 at 5:04 AM
Philip Munger said...

Mona,

Thanks for your wise, unsparing comment. I've forwarded it to some of our mutual friends.

Miss you!

January 20, 2011 at 6:47 AM
Anonymous said...

that too.

well said, Mona.

Willi

January 22, 2011 at 8:09 AM
Anonymous said...

after a few hours on the road today I am back and wanting to say that most of us who were close to James probably know what Mona is referring to and maybe experienced a lashing out of hurtful words followed by a terribly sorrowful note of apology. Maybe not anymore after he was was being treated for his mental illness. I don't know. I haven't seen him for several years.
What lives in me from 25 years of friendship with James is a profound appreciation and deeper understanding of art, music, literature, poetry, theater ...and nature, wilderness, the cycles of life, death and decay ... a belief that I was loved and respected, a treasured insight into a passionate, dedicated, disciplined, wonderfully funny and unique, sweet, compassionate soul ... not perfect, not easy ... but a cherished friend. I am deeply grateful for the gifts he shared.
Willi

January 22, 2011 at 9:17 PM
Philip Munger said...

Willi,

Thanks for your insights.

January 24, 2011 at 1:09 PM

A Romanian chid said...

I just found out. This is a sad moment for me.

February 22, 2011 at 4:10 AM

ppjl said...

Wow,
sorry to hear of Jim's passing. I knew him well when he live in Fall City, WA. Climbed Mt. St. Helens with him. He was several years older than I am and he had an impact on me that I still have today.

September 9, 2011 at 12:58 PM