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January 20, 2011

Postscript: James Acord, Alchemist for the Nuclear Age

Posted by *Jon Michaud*



Word reached our offices late last week that the artist James Acord had died in Seattle, on January 9th, apparently by his own hand. Over his long career, which began when he was a teen-ager, Acord, who was sixty-six, produced work using a wide variety of materials, including salt, granite, gold, silver, and steel, but he was perhaps best known for the decades he spent working with radioactive substances. An altar boy in his youth, Acord later spent time as a ranch hand in Nebraska, a stone carver in Barre, Vermont, and an artist-in-residence in London, but he always returned to the Northwest. As a draughtsman, he was drawn to death and decay, creating studies of roadkill and other found corpses. At one time he also earned his living carving headstones. He was a skilled welder and a serious student of alchemy and nuclear science. In 1993, after a long campaign, he became the only individual in the United States to receive a

Radioactive Materials License. (So pleased was Acord that he had the license number tattooed onto the back of his neck.) Prior to receiving this permission, Acord had run into regulatory difficulties for working with large quantities of another radioactive substance: Mango Red Fiesta pottery, which contained uranium in its glaze.



Acord was the subject of a forty-thousand-word Profile by Philip Schuyler, published in *The New Yorker* in two parts in 1991. The title of the article, "Moving to Richland," refers to Richland, Washington, near the Hanford nuclear site, where the plutonium for the Fat Man atomic bomb was processed. Acord relocated there from Seattle around the time of Schuyler's Profile in order to have easier access to radioactive materials produced at Hanford and in order to get to know the scientists and other workers employed on the site. Acord was inspired to create a series of reliquaries in which symbolic items from the nuclear age were housed in boxes modelled after the medieval reliquaries used to preserve sacred Christian objects. As Acord told the *Guardian*, in 1999, "I can't help feeling 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." Another project conceived by Acord (but never executed) was to replace the nuclear warheads in Cold War arsenals with "artheads."

Schuyler says of his Profile, "I started out trying to capture Jim's voice, and after working on it for a while I realized that he had captured mine." Early in the first part of "Moving to Richland," Schuyler quotes Acord at a gallery event discussing his reasons for working with such unlikely materials:

The thing is, is like it or not, we've created tons and tons—thousands of tons—of radioactive material. The waste from the Manhattan Project is still with us, out at Hanford, and, one way or another, it'll be with us for a long time. We're talking about containing radioactive materials with half-lives that exceed our written history by thousands of years—plutonium, for instance, with a half-life of about twenty-five thousand years. And now we've got to deal with it, all of us, for the very survivability of the planet….

If we look back in the other direction, though, we do have art that dates from the Ice Age, thirty thousand years ago. In fact, I've often speculated that my shadowy, forgotten colleagues from long ago created these works of art out of enduring materials specifically to span the time, to outlast the individual short life of a human being, or even of the tribe or the society that created them. Some of these sculptures and paintings still speak to us today with an eloquence that we can all respond to, I think. So art is an answer. I'm not against words and mathematics, you know, but I'm not counting on them. The language of art may be the best way we have to let people know that this is bad stuff, and they'd better keep away.

After learning of Acord's death, I wrote to Schuyler, who lives in Seattle and had been friends with the artist for forty years. He replied with some thoughts on Acord's life since the Profile was published:

An obvious question is, why now? The why is actually not so difficult. Jim had been flirting with death in one way or another for as long as I knew him. In recent years, he had been in poor health, living in an SRO in conditions more appropriate to a Joseph Mitchell piece than one by Peter Schjeldahl. And yet he had a circle of friends in Seattle whom he saw on a regular basis, and he had a wide circle of admirers around the world. Three of his reliquaries, produced within the past five years or so, are currently touring the world. He had been a featured speaker at a conference in Barcelona last spring, invited by some mid-career British art stars who had been influenced by his residency at Imperial College in London. He was gearing up to finish Reliquary for Two Hands, which he had begun in Barre 30 years ago. More important, he had designed something new and dramatically different from his earlier sculpture, and he had made arrangements with a skilled metal worker to help him with the fabrication. But fame and notoriety were not the goal. All of these efforts were in the service of a greater vision, the idea that art could not only serve humanity, it could save the world.

Schuyler pointed me to a Web site created by Janet and Edward Galore where friends of Acord's have been posting memories of him as well as photographs of his work. I spoke with the Galores and with another Seattle artist, Charles Krafft, who knew Acord, and they all pointed to a passage in Schuyler's Profile that captured the essence of the man:

Acord recognized that the idea of transmutation, central to alchemy, was equally applicable to radioactivity and also to sculpture, both of which involve the mysterious transformation of elemental materials. In addition, alchemy provided a moral underpinning for all his work. "The base man who desired only for wealth would always fail," he said. "The higher adepts, the true alchemists, knew that what they were really transforming was themselves. The real lead was in their own hearts, and only through purity of motivation could they transform that lead into gold."

The first part of "Moving to Richland" will be made available to all readers for one week. The second part—and the complete archives of *The New Yorker*, back to 1925—is available to subscribers. Non-subscribers can purchase the individual issue.

Photograph of James Acord by Arthur S. Aubry; photograph of Acord's "Monstrance for a Gray Horse" by Benjamin Benschneider.

Any favorite New Yorker articles come to mind? Send us an e-mail.

Keywords

- Hanford Nuclear Site;
- James Acord;
- Philip Schuyler;
- art;
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