

Capturing



the Light

DON BACHARDY BRUSHES UP AGAINST A&U'S DANN DULIN TO DISCUSS HIS ICONIC PORTRAITS AND THE PROCESS OF RECORDING THE INEVITABLE FADING OF LIFE

PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR A&U BY JORDAN ANCEL

Sorry, Don doesn't live here," booms a robust female voice from the intercom at the entrance of this Santa Monica canyon home. Over the past thirty years, I have been here twice before—how can this *not* be Don Bachardy's residence? "Who is this 'Don'?!," she continues quizzically. "We get people asking for him a lot." Her plea is genuine and so I explain that he's the famed portrait artist who was partnered with Christopher Isherwood for over thirty years. "Oh, yes, I know Isherwood. He wrote those...*The Berlin Stories* that turned into *Cabaret*, right?" "Indeed, he did," I reply. She then informs us that we were one street off.

Feeling like a fool, I gather my crew, Jordan Ancel, the A&U photographer, and Jill Roberts, my associate, and plod up the steep incline. We're on the edge of the Santa Monica Canyon, which hugs the Pacific Ocean. Once at the top, we make a sharp U-ie and familiarity sets in. In 1980, I lunched here with Chris and had a brief introduction to Don, who was clad in swim trunks and on his way to the beach. In 1993, I interviewed Don and his then-partner, Tim Hilton, for a book I was working on.

We near the nearly invisible house, which is nestled in the lush sprawling canyon just below street level. Entering the waist-high clapboard ash-gray gate, we walk down worn cement steps, passing Don's studio. We're embraced by a variety of potted plants, brightly hued wandering bougainvilleas, and short-trimmed shrubs. We brush aside a large palm frond that partly blocks the walkway. I knock on the large, bulky wooden front door that could have easily been imported from an Italian monastery. Don answers, glowing in his delightful, effervescent manner. "Come in. It's nice to see you," he says in his trademark speech, a mixture of Katharine Hepburn's New England lilt and Chris's British accent. Each word is spoken in precise, crystalline clarity, but even Henry Higgins, Shaw's master linguist of *Pygmalion* fame, would be surprised to discover that Don actually hails from Glendale, California.

Don appears to have burst straight out of a Ralph Lauren ad, with his khaki dress slacks and long-sleeved, starched mellow-yellow shirt. Fit and vibrant, he'll soon turn seventy-five. Tough to believe, as he still possesses that boyish charm that must have been a magnet for Chris when he met the nineteen-year-old Don at Santa Monica Beach on Valentine's Day, 1952. He graciously offers us coffee and tea, then scurries into the kitchen to fetch the drinks. A pleasing scent captivates us as we settle in.





Portrait of Natasha Richardson (May 1, 1978), black ink and pen on paper, 22 by 30 inches

It's a rich zesty aroma that transports our senses to another era. This habitat, which is more like a rambling cottage, is where Don has lived for nearly fifty years and is just as much a unique character as Don. Its rooms are bustling with art, with works by Billy Al Bengston, David Hockney, Peter Alexander, Phyllis Green, and Ed Roche. The inspirational sun-drenched rooms are sleek, spruce, spacious, and above all, airy. For a time, Don invited the Venice Artwalk to

tour his home to raise money for the Children's Hospital.

"Because I was taking care of Chris when he got sick in 1981, I was determined to keep him at home, if I could, and look after him myself," stresses Don of Chris's battle with prostate cancer. Don is now snuggled comfortably in a contemporary alabaster sofa in the square-shaped living room that opens onto an elevated dining room. He sits up against a small funny

cutout pillow shaped like a fish. "I've always cited this as the reason that I didn't get AIDS. I wasn't out and about. I turned into a homebody. So I suppose that was one of the many, many favors that Chris did for me both consciously and unconsciously."

Chris's illness coincided with the dawn of the AIDS epidemic and he died in 1986 in the thick of it. Don has lost numerous friends to the disease, overcoming the tragedy with his innate determination to



just plunge in and do what he does best—create art. AIDS-stricken young men who sat for Don when they were healthy, later commissioned him to sketch their portraits after they became ill. “As each man was getting sicker and sicker he wanted an after-version of himself before he died,” Don explains, taking a sip of coffee from his vivid, blue Pop Art-decorated mug. One of those men was Peter Evans, a TV and Broadway actor, who died in 1989 at the age of thirty-eight. “I did a sitting with him years before and then when he was mortally sick he asked me to do another sitting so he could leave something of current significance to his friend.”

As Chris lay on his deathbed, Don started his first end-of-life portraits. These moving and disturbing sketches were later released as a book, *Last Drawings of Christopher Isherwood*. Over a four-year period, Don faithfully sketched his partner’s daily decline. “I’ve always thought that it was lucky for me to have that kind of preparation,” he says of Chris’s death, “so I had time to get used to the idea. No matter how

ready you think you are for that kind of loss, it’s always different, it’s always catastrophic. Until that loss actually occurs you really can’t imagine it.” Don lowers his head toward the floor. There’s silence. “To just return to this house once I knew Chris wasn’t going to be in it...was...very...memorable,” reflects Don, his voice breaking. He softly puts his fist to his mouth as if to cover the sadness. “When either of us would return to the house, we would make a little sound to acknowledge our return.” There’s a pause and just as I’m wondering if Don is going to share that sound, he does. “WHOO!” he shouts in a high-pitched tone, tilting his head upward like a wolf howling in the night. He laughs uproariously, stops for a split second and then laughs again.

One of Don’s techniques is to portray his subjects with extreme *truthfulness*. Some of his subjects did not appreciate this. After Kate Hepburn saw her portrait she commented, “Fair. Only fair.” Montgomery Clift, who sat for Don after his tragic car accident and a year before he died, had hoped that Don would recapture his lost beauty. “Well,

I was the wrong portrait artist for *that* job,” he joshes empathetically. Many back-stories of his sittings can be found in his 2000 book, *Stars in My Eyes*.

“As a portrait painter I am looking for the truth of my visual experience when I’m working with a sitter. I’m not trying to achieve a flattering portrait,” he explains. Don works with only live subjects, never with photographs. “I no longer know really what a flattering portrait is. I mean, I know what people consider flattering, but that kind of superficiality is of no interest to me.”

He puts his hand atop his head thinking for a moment. “I couldn’t fudge my sketches of Chris. I couldn’t be kind or flattering. I had drawn and painted him so often that I was always looking for some new aspect of him. And since he was dying, there were many of those new aspects. I recorded every one of them I could see,” says Don. “And I knew that he himself would have wanted this.”

When Don looks back at these sketches, he’s not only moved by what he’s captured, but he questions what he’s captured. “I ask myself how could I stand up as an artist and



Portrait of Bea Arthur (December 28, 1994) (II), acrylic on paper, 22 by 30 inches

at the same time record this dear man slipping away? And yet, that was my responsibility as an artist. I would have *never* taken it on without understanding that I had to absolutely be truthful and that there couldn't be any restrictions." Near the end, it was a shock to Don that his firmest supporter couldn't review his work. In the early days

of their relationship, when Don would come home from school or from a sitting, Chris would be there asking in an eager voice, "Let me see what you did." Chris was the first person Don would show his work to. "In those last six months when he was my only sitter and he was lying there comatose, suddenly, I had to rouse all of my

reserves of drive to handle the absence of his encouragement."

I mention to Don that it must have been therapeutic for him to draw Chris because it protected him from the pain. "No, it was the reverse," says Don, correcting me. "It was my way of getting into the experience. I didn't want to protect myself. I wanted to



Portrait of Teri Garr (May 11, 1987), acrylic on paper, 22 by 30 inches

share it with him and what better way of sharing it than by concentrating on him, visually, in the way that I do only when I'm working." His hands are calmly lying on top of one another, lightly crossing his chest. "My process as a portrait artist is an identification with my sitter, so that I'm feeling like my sitter looks, getting inside of them. This

was unconscious for years," he divulges. "I only realized it in relatively recent times that that was part of the process."

We rise and head to Don's studio. We pass one of the many bookshelves scattered about in his home. On it rests an award plaque inscribed, "Out Auction, Honored Artist, June 23, 2007, Gay and Lesbian

Center." A longtime supporter of AIDS charities, Don has donated many commissions throughout the years. We walk out the front door and head up the stairs to his studio. "AIDS is rampant, but its significance in our particular culture has subsided considerably," he notes, unlocking the door

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Don Bachardy

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and in his genteel manner, letting us enter first. “Having been through the early stages of the epidemic it brings back a period much more distant, I suppose, than it should. It doesn’t seem to be our problem anymore. I know it is, but its world significance has taken over to such an extent that, well, people still remember that they blamed gays for it. That has kind of receded, I believe.”

I marvel at the magnificence of the light that is cast throughout his studio. The space is white, spotless, and orderly. His art covers the walls. Don’s portraits also hang in the permanent collections of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, London’s National Portrait Gallery, Princeton University, and the Smithsonian Institute. Leaning up against a file cabinet is a framed poster from last summer’s release of Guido Santi and Tina Mascara’s masterpiece film, *Chris & Don, A Love Story*. The documentary, however, was not nominated for an Academy Award. Don explains that Guido and Tina tried to get it nominated, even paying thousands of dollars to make a special film print to meet the demands of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences for consideration. It was not accepted. “It was a major, major process for Guido and Tina, and seven of the films that were among the [final] fifteen that were being considered, got far fewer positive reviews across the country than *Chris & Don* did,” comments an irritated Don. He sums up, “It’s political. It’s a popularity contest. The Academy has a very bad record, you know, of not nominating great performances. Look at *Citizen Kane*....” Jordan snaps a couple of pictures of Don standing next to the movie poster of *Chris & Don*.

Near Don’s paintbrushes hangs a portrait of Natasha Richardson, which he recently discovered in his closet. He painted it twenty years ago. We talk of her untimely death and about the recent death of Bea Arthur [*A&U*, September 1998]. Don mentions that she sat for him about ten years ago. “She was the only sitter that I can remember who arrived barefoot and was barefoot throughout our sitting,” he reveals, smiling. I share with him that I interviewed Bea in the summer of 1998 and she was barefoot then, as well.

The conversation leads from a discussion of recent celebrity deaths to the



Portrait of Christopher Isherwood (December 23, 1982), acrylic paint on paper, 26 by 42 inches

issue of AIDS and the increasing mortality rates among young people. I ask him what he thinks we can do to reach out to them. “How do older people reach younger people? There are so many problems in that communication. Even I rejected Chris’s advice on a few occasions. From the very earliest times he gave me advice, and it was *always* good advice, he was really one of the wisest people I’ve known.” He states this tenderly and with reverence. “I almost invariably followed his advice, but two or three times I thought I

would really find out what it would be like to cross him—and I always regretted it.” As we return to the living room, Don concludes compassionately, “It’s all part of being young—and it is necessary. Unfortunately, sometimes you can only learn by hurting yourself...”

Thanks to Lion and Poop for their continual creativity.

Read the full interview at www.aumag.org and www.DannDulin.com.

Dann Dulin is Senior Editor of *A&U*.