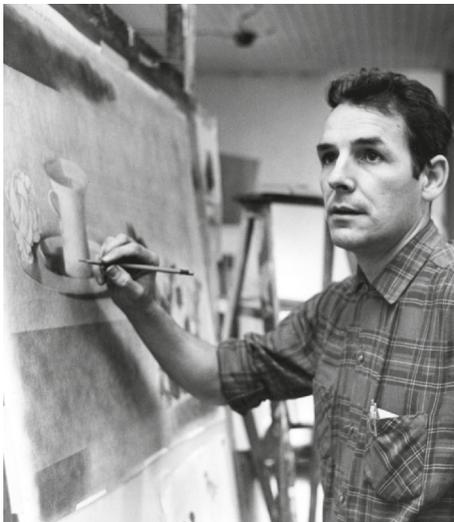


To Jack Chambers

MÓNICA SAVIRÓN

I love you, Jack.

Like the one who defies chaos by admitting it, here are my words to you, dearest Jack. We have never met, but I wish we had. I know you are not deaf to human sorrows or blind to our cruelty. You seem to be a quiet, thoughtful person, interested in seeing underneath the surface; someone with atavistic charisma, something like the Spanish *duende*. Those who knew you confirm that you were highly contemplative and aware of the consequences of your actions. How rare. I would say that everything that flourished in your cinematic work was already a seed in your paintings. Your films bring forth a truth that is not more relative, but larger—they show the philosophical and existential tension between creating and destroying, and the circular connection of a life built amidst waste, loss, injustice, oppression, beauty and horror. I can feel a pain in your images, similar to one I also perceive in Chaim Soutine's paintings of life slaughtered. In Soutine's own words: "Once I saw the village butcher slice the neck of a bird and drain the blood out of it. I wanted to cry out, but his joyful expression caught the sound in my throat. ... This cry, I always feel it there. As a I drew a crude portrait of my professor, I tried to rid myself of this cry, but in vain. When I painted the beef carcass it was still this cry that I wanted to liberate. I have still not succeeded".



In Canada, you were lost and left your home. I can relate. You went to Spain, where I am from, without knowing the language or anybody there, and stayed nearly eight years. You first arrived in Mallorca, a beautiful island surrounded by the warm Mediterranean Sea. You weren't adjusting, but you persisted. You experienced the pain of birth and being reborn not only in the popular customs of the small villages, but also confronting a different culture, dimension, and understanding, pushing into



your life and questioning your beliefs. As Nietzsche reflects in *The Birth of Tragedy*, pain is intrinsic to the very nature of the universe, and therefore we tend to ask if life is worth living and how to deal with ourselves. Jack, there is a strength in your critical thinking that shows remarkable determinism, even if you know that human culture is always fragmentary and indirect. You went to Madrid, where I was born, and stayed to receive XIX century classical training at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. I imagine you at the nearby Prado Museum, where you surely contemplated Francisco de Zurbarán's *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), an oil painting on canvas of the animal sacrificed, a metaphor for Christ's death to save humanity. I also see you walking around the Retiro Park at dusk, filled with a melancholia soon impregnated by the peculiarities of the landscape and the surrealism so endemic of the Iberian Peninsula. You mixed the realistic style of Spanish painter Antonio López (who also studied at the Real Academia and later became your friend) with the perceptivity of printed photography, which redefined your idea of vision. You said once that you are like the dog in your paintings, looking dissatisfied—possibly with the state of living and of the arts. I guess it could be something in between the dog of Francisco de Goya's paintings—overwhelmed by the vastness around it—and the dignity of the canines of Diego Velázquez—domestic, but not domesticated.

You weren't happy in Spain, but there you fell in love with Olga. You had two children with her, John and Diego. They were like long, sustained musical notes to you,

something transcendent to believe in that gave you the clarity of a catharsis, a sublimation of sorts. They were the destination of a voyage to the other—one of both fear and turgid enthusiasm. After the death of your mother in 1962, you returned to Canada to stay and, without abandoning painting, started making films.

I love how each of your films tells us how we have to look at them. The first, *Mosaic*, is in itself a collage of the different ages and stages of a person's life. *Hybrid* fuses photographic archival footage of damaged Vietnamese children during the war intercut with time-lapse photography of flowers blooming and shots of a man taking off petals to isolate and get the pistils of roses. After making *Little Red Riding Hood* with poet James Reaney, you shot your friend, artist Greg Curnoe, for the film *R34* in a way that resembles his colorful and vivid compositions, and also his way of working—with rhythmic panache and searing sensuality. I think I fell in love with you when I watched this film.

In *Circle* you repeatedly shot your backyard on Lombardo Avenue for over a year, day after day, with different light exposures, focused and unfocused cycling of the seasons. Even if the images are captured almost from the same angle, only a few things persist—change is continuous and unstoppable. The film becomes a register of the absences, of the emptiness within the frame, until in the last shot, a bird, as soon as it realizes that it is not trapped by human hands anymore, flies away as if performing Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. It is not the cinema that has changed, but the world.

There was an explosion of expressionistic treatment of color, with no contrast, in your paintings, that later on was translated into the hazy images of *The Hart of London*, whose title card you yourself hand wrote. In this film, bleached overshadows and emerging ghost-like contours build in, as if belonging to the very nature of the celluloid. I can perceive the illusion of an image, ephemeral but cumulative, that overlaps complex experiences and transforms time into plasticity. Like those diluted, overexposed, low contrast paintings you made during the cold winters at Southern Madrid, in Chinchón, without heat, with your vision clouded by the aridity of the exterior and interior conditions and emotions. There you shot the agonizing white sheep of *The Hart of London*, a farewell to innocence by means of brutality. The heart that you put in the place where you were born, London, Ontario, was the main character of your major film, understanding filmmaking as a continuous transition—more than a sense of being, a sense of becoming, with its chameleonic and revelatory properties. Driving back towards London, you were perplexed, as I have been, by the quality of the light in the sky and the flatness around the horizon, a landscape that looks so much like the Castilian plateau. To me, this film and its rapid montage create an idea

of identity based on rupture of directions and mobility, a rhythm not exempted of political overtones.

Watching *The Hart of London*, I can notice how your time in Spain marked you. What you saw, how you felt, how you are trying to make peace with your past experiences and the time in front of you. You had visited, and painted, the landscape of Segovia, where the killing of pigs and lambs still follow an ancestral ritual that lets the animal bleed through its neck. Immolating its body on the altar stone, the sacrifice is consummated—sepulchers of death in the name of survival to engulf and savor the relics of the disposable martyr with sacred red wine. The animal struggles to breathe, only to surrender with something I would call dignity and beauty, crying out its soul in silence. Significantly, you had converted to Roman Catholicism in the late 50s. It is inevitable to recognize light at the heart of your pictures and its spiritual resonance.

The killing of the lamb feels like the Spanish counterpart of the Canadian hunting of the deer. The hart runs with no direction, out of confusion and exhaustion, like most of what you show with the news footage from TV archives, and the historical footage of the city in positive and negative exposures. You were coming to terms with your past in London (a place for healing) and in Madrid (where death is acknowledged in everyday gestures and where you never went back), now all mixed with the same fragile patina. In your film, the offering sequence follows the birth of a baby, and the saturated carmine of the blood in both images mists up the frames. Red flares come from left, right and bottom, burning up with film spasms. I remember that sequence of a fire at night in London: people are watching the attraction, and the camera observes the spectacle this world seems to be. You show dead human embryos, moving insides, in this time of industrialization, civilization, and the absurdity of it all. In the meantime, your wife teaches your son how to swim in bright blue waters. Your family was an oasis of happiness, mysterious, pure and fragile; an affirmation of freedom, otherwise unavailable. Portraits upside down and dou-



ble exposures work like memories under shunned light. You preferred not to give us a bombastic conclusion to escape annihilation, but granted reasons for strife and development. By choosing the sound of increasingly turbulent ocean waves as heartbeats of the Earth, and by undercutting images in all their fogginess, life is restored. Effortless transitions from one way of presenting images to another, from one subject matter to another, make me see the myriad of interconnections in your mind: European and American, classic and contemporary, devastated, but hopeful. Your scream is like the shots in your film of running water on a closed eyelid, followed by branches of a tree reflected on the open eye; or like the image of you cutting the grass, over and over again, in front of your house—but there is no grass ...

You worked on *The Hart of London* while fighting against leukemia, and passed away at 47, after ten years of medical treatment. I can only hope I will see one day your last, unfinished films, *C.C.C.I.* and *Life-Still*. Just learning about this title, which points out the contradiction between acceptance of death and inner-courage, I fall in love with you, again. Fly, Jack, fly, from Lake Huron and Thames River to the sky, and back again. Thank you for including me in your larger than life, illuminating, journey. Like the voice at the end of *The Hart of London* recites, “She says you have to be very careful”. We might have come full circle here¹.

Mónica Savirón

¹ Special thanks to the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center (CFMDC) for allowing me to watch their beautiful prints of *Mosaic*, *Hybrid*, *R34*, *Circle*, and *The Hart of London*.