

UNTITLED (FOR JIMINY CRICKET)

HE was loved more after his death than he was before it, as many artists are. The newspaper obituaries overflowed with reverence and sadness and touching anecdotes.

Lew was a great painter, there is no doubt. For a while at least. In a period from his late 20s to his mid 40s there were few who could come near him. Two-inch brush in one hand and a recycled olive jar full of pigment in the other, he would swish and swirl until something magical took place on the canvas. It was like watching the opening of a flower or the formation of a galaxy.

People who know little about art often say it is easy to make abstract expressionist paintings. This is not the case. Anyone can throw paint around, but the gap between an ordinary abstract painting and a great one could be measured in light years. There is one of Lew's large works in the National Gallery that hangs in the atrium and I often visit just to see that one picture, to soak it in and wonder at its primal majesty.

I was there the day Lew painted that big aqua, persimmon, burnt umber and daffodil orgasm of paint that never fails to stir my soul. If I look at it too long, I feel faint and need to sit. Luckily, the gallery has placed a black leather settee just to the left of the picture. I sometimes imagine they put it there just for me.

Lew and I were lovers. Until I met him, I had imagined myself as an exclusively heterosexual man, not stridently or prejudicially so, but I had a wife and son and I had known many women.

Lew changed that for me. I never sought the comfort of female flesh after I met Lew and have not done so since he died.

I don't think I suddenly became homosexual, or stopped being heterosexual. It was just that I found love, the thing everyone searches for, supposedly. What shape or form it comes in, we don't get to choose. We just find it or it finds us and that's all there is to it.

Anyway, Lew and I never spent a great deal of time making love. It was a meeting of minds, I guess, rather than flesh. Oddly, I had spent much more time in carnal pursuits with my wife. I suppose that makes me sexually ambiguous, or bisexual, or maybe even asexual, I'm not sure and I don't care much. We had good times, Celia and I, and one of those good times gave us our son, Gerald, a sweet kid. I still see him occasionally, we meet for lunch or drinks and he seems to hold no animosity towards me for leaving the family so abruptly. The whole process between meeting Lew and moving out of the family home took about three weeks.

I met Lew's paintings before I met Lew. I went to some of his early shows at Praxis Gallery and once I lingered for a long time in front of a picture and tried to mentally balance my finances to figure out if I could afford to buy it.

I must have stood there for perhaps three minutes, when I noticed a large man with a beard and a wild shock of hair standing next to me.

"Like it?" he asked.

"I love it," I replied.

"It's crap," the large man said. "Come over here and I'll show you a good painting."

And he grabbed my arm and dragged me across the room and propped me in front of another picture.

“Now, that’s a painting,” he said.

That man was Lew, as you have no doubt guessed.

I was a painter too. Not in Lew’s league, more a Sunday painter. Of course, that’s just a term. I never painted on Sundays and neither did Lew. Sunday was our day of rest, our Sabbath from the act of creation. We would sleep in, have breakfast in bed, go to the movies or take a drive in the country. I had a pale blue Ford Zephyr that I kept in immaculate condition, it always shone like a pin. And we would toddle up to the hills or to the ocean if it was warm and lay out a blanket for a picnic. Lew was a marvellous cook and our hamper would be packed with quiches or frittatas, olives and exotic salads. This was in the days before Australians ate quiche and an Aussie salad was usually lettuce, tomato and white onion or a tin of beetroot upturned into a bowl.

It was also a time when homosexuality was still an unspoken thing. Lew and I never made an overt display of our relationship but, now I think back, it must have been quite plain to anyone who saw us on our tartan picnic rug, eating quiche and Greek salad (unheard of then, ubiquitous now), the Zephyr gleaming nearby. Lew usually in a cravat and off-white linen shirt and sleeveless cardigan, me in my cashmere or angora or vicuna sweaters, a pastel shirt, sometimes a bowtie even. Lew’s shoes and socks were probably a giveaway too. Few men in those days spent so much money on Italian shoes. And he was almost obsessive about socks. Delicate, sheer things, always 100 per cent cotton. His feet twinkled like my Zephyr.

We drew some comments occasionally. There were muttered threats and I can remember one man making quite a point of moving his young family's picnic blanket away from ours after I had laughed a little too loudly, or perhaps a little too gaily. Gay used to be such a lovely word, denoting high spirits and frivolity and love of life. Then it came to mean GAY and then later came to be just another label, a devalued, desiccated word.

Yes, there were threats and worse than threats. Lew came home one night with a battered eye, purple and puffed and blood-soaked. A couple of lads had seen him coming from a gallery opening (I was too ill to attend) and they had called him a faggot and taken fists to him. If only I had been there, been with him, maybe I could have done something. At least it would have been two against two. I bathed his eye with an ice-filled flannel and later laid a raw steak over it and most of the swelling was gone by lunchtime the next day. Lew kept his humour about it, as always.

"I think I'll have this steak for lunch," he said, lifting the chunk of Angus from his yellowing eye socket.

I thought it was a joke, but he cooked it on the barbecue and ate it with a side serve of potato salad and pickled artichokes. And it was hard to not laugh at him, with his eye like a cartoon black eye. Like an eye Ginger Meggs would have after a confrontation with Tiger Kelly. I kissed his eye, gently I thought, but he flinched and said "ow, rack off".

After the beating, Lew and I started toning down our appearance. He dropped the cravats and I packed away the bowties. They were small sacrifices to make for staying in one piece.

Those events seem so long ago, in time and in social context. Attitudes towards homosexuals have changed so much, so much. I no longer fear for my life when I walk the street. Not around here, at least.

During Lew's art career, his sexuality was rarely mentioned, not officially anyway. The first biography of him, by Charles Leger, made oblique references to it, simply saying Lew had never married or fathered children and how he was "renowned in art circles for his elaborate and flamboyant parties that often drew comment from prudes and wowsers." Such a wonderful word, wowser. I was referred to in the book as Lew's "constant companion". Nudge, wink.

But as I say, times have changed. Young author Timothy Wilkes is penning another biography and he is being far less coy about these matters. In fact, he seems to think Lew's sexuality is an integral and imperative part of his art and wants to explore it in depth. Young Wilkes visits me two or three times a week to discuss my relationship with Lew, to hear anecdotes, to look at Lew's studio and his belongings, to get a sense of him, a feel for who he was. Wilkes is an excellent art writer and in previous magazine articles I have read, he discusses Lew's painting with lucidity and panache. But he met Lew only a few times at gallery openings and I suppose he is relying on me for deeper insights, into what made Lew tick. More importantly, I suppose, what made him paint. I'm not sure I have an explanation for that. From where does talent come? From where does desire come, or verve or joy? What makes one man's splash of paint a cosmic mystery and another man's splash just a dribble? You may as well ask what makes the rainbow curved (I am sure there is a scientific explanation for the arch of the rainbow, but I do not wish to know it).

I can only hope to tell this young biographer, this keen, ambitious young man, a few stories. And hopefully he will glean something from it. In all the chaff, he may find the wheat he is looking for. I'm enjoying it, talking about Lew, the old times. Young Wilkes and I have become quite chummy over the course of this book and he and I attended a recent retrospective of Lew's work at the National. I wore one of my old bowties. As I tied it on, I was amused to find a small reddish-brown stain at the back. It was most likely a speck of Lew's homemade tomato chutney that we took on our picnics, so many years ago.

But once the bow was tied, no-one could see the smirch. And so we, Wilkes and I, headed off to the opening.

I am a little frail now and walking is not easy and as we entered the exhibition space, I took young Wilkes' arm to steady myself. We walked in together. I'm sure there was more than a little talk about how I had found myself a new toyboy, but that bothered me little and I'm sure Wilkes cared even less. From my knowledge of Wilkes, he seems to be as profoundly heterosexual a man as I have met. I have seen his wife, seen them together, seen the magnetic pull between them, his north to her south, his south to her north. Whatever event they are at, I always get the feeling they can't wait to leave so they can get home to bed and leap on each other's bones.

There were speeches that opening night, and I'm not one for speeches. They spoke about Lew's paintings of course, but also about his proud defence of his sexuality and how society in those far off days had tried to stifle the man he was. If Lew were alive, he would have scoffed at such hagiography.

And, so, even though my legs were weary, I took a walk to look at the painting, the one I love the most, the one that has permanent pride of place in the atrium. It's called "Untitled (For Jiminy Cricket)". Jiminy Cricket was the nickname he had given me because I was always trying to keep him in check at parties, trying to curb his worst excesses, make him behave. I may as well have tried to turn the tide like Canute or halt the sun's journey across the sky like Joshua in the Bible.

I bent my aching knees and sat on the black settee near the painting and looked at it. The aqua in it was unlike any colour I'd seen any other artist use. De Kooning used a similar shade in some of his later work, but Lew's aqua was unique. Hardware paint charts should have a colour called Lew's Aqua. As I stared at the painting for the umpteenth time, I felt a little faint, but it could have been the glass of pinot noir I'd had at the opening.

A middle-aged man, well-dressed and groomed, walked to the painting and looked at it, then sat next to me on the settee. He tried to catch my eye, but I avoided his. Eventually, he spoke.

"I could do that," he said, pointing at the picture.

"Well, you didn't," I said. And I stood slowly, turned away, not even looking at him. I walked achingly back to the main gallery and, thankfully, the speeches were over. There were some pictures I wanted to look at that I hadn't seen in a long time.