

Service for my dad...

By Lisa Lehman Trager

About five years ago I began to work on a website for my dad. At the time, I had recently been laid off from Channel Thirteen where I had worked for close to fifteen years and was looking to begin a new career in the wonderful new world of the Internet... I was taking courses at New Jersey Institute of Technology to learn website production and management. Although I didn't know much, I knew that the most important thing to have when building a website was content...It was obvious that the one person I knew who not only had content, but a story to tell, was my father.

This was not the first creative venture in which I had approached my dad to participate. Back when I was in grad school majoring in Media Studies at the New School I wanted to do a documentary telling the story about the cruel destruction of a vast amount of "controversial" art in America that constitutes one of the great tragedies in American history. As part of the WPA that took place in the 1930's under Roosevelt's Federal Art Program, my dad created one of the most beautiful murals that ever existed. Unbeknownst to him or anyone who might have cared, sometime in the late 60's the warden of the Riker's Island Penitentiary decided that the images of hard working people trying to live the American dream had lived long enough on the walls in the cafeteria over the heads of the prisoners who came to eat three times a day. It was unceremoniously torn down and utterly destroyed.

My father happened to learn of this in the early '70's when he went back to the prison to see what state his mural might be in... I'm sure he never imagined that it would no longer exist, nor that there would be no one there who could explain what actually happened or take responsibility for making the decision. Seeing the photograph of the mural and the pain in his face, as he would tell this story hurt me as well. I wanted to tell this story. So together with a small crew of students, with our Beta camera, light kit, and microphone off we set to Leonia to get the man to tell his story. We would begin by going to the Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport where he suggested that shoot one of the only remaining murals in the area called, "Flight" by James Brooks. From there we headed uptown to the Bronx to shoot the mural that Ben Shahn did for Post Office on the Grand Concourse.

Hours later, we finally got back to Leonia to shoot my dad telling his story as well as all of his photographs and paintings. It must have been after 3:00pm. He was tired, we were tired, but he was still into it. About 20 minutes into finally getting the camera rolling and getting some footage shot, all of a sudden the key light went out. No replacement bulb – nothing in that kit that we could use to go on. Dad said, "Hold on." As he went down to the basement he called to us, "I'll be right back." Five minutes later he came upstairs with not only a sungun – a professional light for photography or filming, but also a half dozen different colored lighting jells. Only my father could get a production back in motion like

that! We managed to finish shooting the documentary and I got an A on the project...

So here I was again almost twenty years later, wanting to merge my new found creative talents as a website producer and developer with my dad to tell his story. I loved the moments when I sat there with him, going through portfolios and clippings, hearing him recount his experiences.

Dad first left New York at the age of 16 to live with his father in Los Angeles and had to live on his own. His dad had a new wife and life and didn't want people to know about Rae, his first wife who he had left in New York to raise five kids all on her own. Since she couldn't afford to support two sets of twins and another daughter on her meager seamstress wages, she would put her children in and out of orphanages.

My dad was lucky in a sense that the orphanage that he and his brothers were sent to was run by a rich Jewish philanthropic organization. They believed in giving their youngsters a well-rounded education, including the arts. That is where my dad was first exposed to art and given lessons.

Arriving in Los Angeles in the early 30's, he was enrolled in Manual Arts High School. That is where he befriended a guy named Jackson Pollack. It was through Pollack's girlfriend that my dad got his first apartment in the building in

which she lived. Between going to school together and hanging out with the girlfriend who lived close by, Pollack and my dad became good friends.

In 1931, upon graduating from Manual Arts High School, my dad won a citywide competition for a sculpture he did of Abram Lincoln. This earned him a scholarship to Otis Art Institute. At the end of that year, he won another Sculpture Award at the Los Angeles Museum for his sculpture, *The Prophet Jeremiah*, which you can see on that table in this room.

The following year, he switched to painting and started working with the Mexican muralist, D.A. Siqueiros. Together with another chum from Manual Arts, Phil Goldstein, now known as Philip Guston, they joined Siqueiros as original members of the Bloc of Painters. The Bloc of Painters chose two prominent themes of the 1930's to represent in their murals; the harsh treatment of the Negro in America and the exploitation of labor by capital. The murals were scheduled to be exhibited in the John Reed Club in Hollywood in December 1932. The evening before the show was to open, the Los Angeles "Red Squad" a division of the LAPD, attacked and destroyed every panel to insure that the controversial images would never reach the light of day.

In 1933, at the age of 20, my dad won 2nd prize at the Los Angeles Museum's, 14th Annual exhibit for the painting, "The Landlady"— yes the same woman who rented him the apartment... He began attending Otis Art Institute where he met

teacher, Lorser Feitelson. My dad, together with Feitelson and a few other artists from the school including Helen Lundeberg and Reuben Kadish, founded the only indigenous American school of surrealism.

Later that same year, he and Guston had a critically acclaimed two-man show at the Stanley Rose Gallery in Hollywood. Referring to my dad's 1933 Self Portrait, Arthur Millier, the leading art critic of the L.A. Times wrote:

"(Lehman's) drawings show (him) to be a sensitive artist, reverencing and understanding the drawing of the masters...[He also shows] a self portrait which, in its simplicity and honesty, might stand as a portrait of the young artists of this generation."

My dad's greatest influences came from Michaelangelo, El Greco, Piero dello Francesca, Rembrandt, and Chinese and African sculpture. Among the modern surrealists, he admired the work of Pablo Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico. Total abstraction did not appeal to him.

When he got back to New York in the mid 1930's he invited Siqueiros to join him and together they formed the Siqueros Experimental Workshop. My dad recruited many American artists, including Jackson Pollock, while Siqueiros brought in artists from Mexico and South America. Their purpose was to do experimental large-scale work using modern technology and materials.

It was during this workshop that the drip technique was conceived. Pollock, who did become a member of this group, would popularize the technique thirteen years later with his own abstract drip paintings. My dad recalled:

As the thinner began to flow it would form rivulets through the layers of color, creating "the most fantastic, weird patterns. Many of Siqueiros' images started with automatic dissolving of paint from which he would pick out images and develop them. That wasn't just one of Siqueiros' techniques, it was *the* technique."

Soon my dad and Pollack were unable to be in the same room together, let alone be friends. Their differences were not just artistic style or technique, but living style as well. My father never imbued in alcohol or other self-destructive behavior that eventually brought Pollack to an early death.

During the late '30's while working for the Federal Art Program, my dad not only created Man's Daily Bread, the mural at Riker's Island, but also a mural for a post office in Renovo, Pennsylvania, which still exists today.

After the War, my dad returned to New York, taught art, worked as a scenic artist for the World's Fair, Expo '67, and then for CBS TV. For close to thirty years, from the 70's to the end of the 90's my father became more and more reclusive. Although he continued to paint and sculpt, I believe he felt defeated. After such an illustrious start of an artistic career, he still was not publicly recognized. The

crowning achievements of his career had been destroyed with no notice, and the art world was fawning over minimalists whose work left something to be desired.

I think my dad's story is one that is reflective of the time we live, of the devaluation of art, creativity and independent thought. His loss is our loss. I am very grateful for the opportunity I had to learn his story and get a chance to know my dad as a person – aside from being my father.

In many ways, I am who I am because of my dad – both good and bad. He was passionate in his beliefs, so am I. He was an independent minded person to whom reason mattered more than faith. In many ways he was a rebel in his time – and those who know me could certainly attest to troubles I have had by going my own way, often against the tide.

My dad was also a perfectionist – and expected more from me and most people than they knew they could do. He loved to spar on an intellectual level – and if you couldn't defend yourself, his tongue could lash you like a sword.

But more than anything, my dad was an ethical man, who lived with conviction and honesty. He supported his family, loved us as best as he could and inspired me to be the best I could be. When I was growing up, there was no talk of being a doctor, or teacher, or worker – it was to follow my bliss as a dancer, as an

actress, as a director and more recently as a writer... There was no question that my dad in many ways was my mentor and continued to be till the end...

Don't get me wrong - there were times when he would become quite controlling and not let me even handle a photograph – or if I did I had to wear white gloves and use a fine bristle brush to wipe the glass before scanning into my computer. Yes there were many afternoons when I either stormed out yelling, that's it, if you want a website you better find someone else. Or times when I would cry and feel injured that he was treating me more as his secretary than with the respect that I felt I, as his biographer and producer deserved...

But slowly, over a year's time, the website came together. Soon email started coming to me as webproducer@haroldlehman.com with wonderful praise, questions, and responses to the artwork from people not only in this country, but also from abroad.

Dad loved reading these emails and responding to most every inquiry.

Researchers, gallery owners, curators, collectors, and just regular people who had an appreciation of art have contacted us. Just last week I received an email from a photographer who just completed doing a photo essay on all of the existing murals and sculpture from the WPA in Pennsylvania. He wrote:

The Renovo mural was cleaned within the last ten years and looks stunning. The people there are extremely proud of it.

The man later sent me a copy of the journal, which you can look at on the table. You should have seen the look in my father's face when two weeks ago I showed it to him along with the note. At the time, he was in Dunroven, a nursing home where he was recuperating from his last two-week hospital stay. He showed the printout to everyone who would come by. I think the reason he got such pleasure was the fact that people still enjoy the work today – some forty years later.

Through his artwork, my dad will live on... Art travels through time and with it the story of the people who have lived before. The greatest gift my dad left was his artwork, which expressed the state of the world at various points during one of the most turbulent and dynamic centuries of all time.

May you all enjoy the gifts that he has left through his artwork and spread the word that there was once a man of humble origins, who cared about people and tried to make a difference in this world with a paintbrush.