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ART

## Don Bachardy, the Artful Impersonator

*The renowned portraitist, whose observant eye is being honored in San Francisco and London, instinctively identifies with his subjects.*

September 22, 1996 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

From the covered deck of his Santa Monica Canyon home, Don Bachardy can see where it all began in the early 1950s--the beach he and his brother Ted used to visit on weekends from their home in Atwater, the same beach frequented by renowned English author Christopher Isherwood. Although Isherwood thought Ted had the most beautiful legs, it was Don who became his lifelong companion. Don Bachardy and Isherwood were a famous couple for 33 years, most of them in that Santa Monica home, where Bachardy still resides.

Isherwood died of cancer in 1986, but their house is still full of memories. Near the kitchen sink hang two photographs: young Bachardy with Marilyn Monroe--before she was famous. Isherwood with Joan Crawford--after she was famous. Works of art are hung floor to ceiling, many of them done by their close friend David Hockney, including a study for his large oil painting of the pair seated in their living room. And there are pictures of artists and others by Bachardy, who is an artist of some repute himself.

Bachardy, his hair turned white, but still trim and handsome at 62, has been painting and drawing portraits since adolescence. His studio is packed with watercolor likenesses of a jaw-dropping array of movie stars and directors, authors and artists, socialites and models. He recently completed portraits of author Gore Vidal, director James Ivory and producer Julie Corman.

A retrospective, "Observant Eye: Portrait Drawings by Don Bachardy," is on view at San Francisco's M.H. de Young Museum through Dec. 1. The show, organized by graphics curator Robert Flynn Johnson, documents Bachardy's evolution from tight realism in the 1960s to the loose watercolor washes of the last decade. Portraits of fellow artists Hockney, Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Mapplethorpe, Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon are joined by the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Linda Ronstadt, Laurence Olivier, Bette Davis, Susan Sontag and former California Gov. Jerry Brown, of whom Bachardy did a portrait for the Capitol in Sacramento. And, of course, Isherwood.

Bachardy began his portraits of Isherwood, his most convenient model, after they began living together in 1953. Soon, he was recruiting Isherwood's friends, an impressive parade of English writers that included W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, E.M. Forster, Aldous Huxley and Thom Gunn. Those images are among 30 drawings to be shown in "Isherwood and His Circle: Portraits by Donald Bachardy" at the National Portrait Gallery in London from Oct. 8 to Feb. 7. They record with insight and wit many of the individuals mentioned in the forthcoming book of Isherwood's recollections, "The Emigre: American Diaries 1939-60," to be published next month by HarperCollins.

The National Portrait Gallery also commissioned Bachardy to do portraits of director Ivory, producer Ismail Merchant and screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala to be unveiled in March, when there will be a celebration of the 35th anniversary of Merchant Ivory Productions in London.

Bachardy's relationship with Isherwood began as something of a scandal. Isherwood, then 48, was an established and celebrated figure among Hollywood's literati, author of "The Berlin Stories," which later was adapted for stage and screen as "Cabaret," as well as many brilliant novels and screenplays. Bachardy, by contrast, was just 18 at the time.

Isherwood became mentor, father figure and life partner for the young artist. He encouraged Bachardy's talents, sending him for four years to Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts). Among his classmates were Edward Ruscha and Joe Goode, two of the formative L.A. Pop artists who are still among the area's best-known painters. Bachardy, however, remains a traditionalist; his interest has always been in portraiture.

"At art school, I was a kind of outsider, a misfit," he recalls.

Bachardy's talents were tested soon after he finished his studies. In 1960, the late English director Tony Richardson asked him to do portraits of Angela Lansbury and Joan Plowright as props for his L.A. staging of "A Taste of Honey." The director was so pleased with the results that he asked for portraits of the rest of the cast and then posted them outside the theater when the show opened on Broadway. Bachardy considers that his first exhibition.

As a young boy, he had drawn from film stills, so he felt prepared to take on movie stars as sitters.

"I felt I knew them from their movies," says Bachardy, who remains an avid film buff, as was Isherwood.

Bachardy maintains that everything is in the face: "It is better for me not to talk, just to look and to concentrate."

His favorite sitter? He thinks for a long moment before answering with the unexpected: veteran actress Beatrice Lillie.

Bachardy exhibits his work in commercial galleries and takes commissions, but he says portraiture remains a personal process, a way of involving himself in the world.

"The interest in looking has taken over completely from any ideas of technique or method in my work," he says. "I feel more and more that I just love looking at people. How I express it graphically is almost immaterial. It has been this way for 10 years."

Bachardy works with watercolor on paper in part because the works are easier to store. He has tens of thousands of works in storage, thousands just of Isherwood, he says. He considers each pose a collaboration that he asks the sitter to sign and date.

"I've often thought that it's a kind of graphic diary," he says.

"I am an instinctive impersonator," he adds. "I am consciously identified with the person I'm looking at, giving an inner impersonation. I'm painting from the inside out. It's like doing a self-portrait as that person."

Bachardy did more than 400 portraits of Isherwood during the last six months of the writer's life.

"I'd never had such an intense experience with anyone," Bachardy says. "Some days, I did as many as 10 or 20 drawings of him. Drawing helped me to identify with him. So the experience of dying seemed to be something we were doing together. I didn't feel as shut out as if I'd stood by and idly watched him get sicker."

Isherwood died at their home at 2 in the afternoon. Bachardy remained by his side and completed 11 more drawings. He was about to start the 12th when the doctor arrived at 9 that evening.

"I was relieved not to have to do that 12th drawing. I was convinced that wherever Chris was, he wasn't in that corpse on the bed."

Bachardy now lives with architect Tim Hilton, who is 26 years his junior.

"For all those years with Chris, I was invariably the youngest person present," the artist says. "Now I'm usually the oldest. I quite enjoy it. Of all the gifts that Chris gave me, showing me how to grow old was one of the most valuable."

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"OBSERVANT EYE: PORTRAIT DRAWINGS BY DON BACHARDY" M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Dates: Wednesdays through Sundays, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Through Dec. 1. Price: \$6. Phone: (415) 836-3330.