

A Conversation with James Lechay

— *Wellfleet, Massachusetts: Spring 1994*

A YEAR after my husband and I moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1989, we had an unexpected visit from David Hamilton. We'd worked with David on *TIR* while I was a student in the Writers' Workshop, and his appearance at our door inspired the following conversations. One of David's first inquiries concerned an artist named James Lechay, whom David had never met, though he'd used a number of his paintings on the covers of *TIR*. In 1975 Lechay had moved with his wife, Rose, to Wellfleet (two towns from Provincetown) after a 30-year teaching career at The University of Iowa. I'd seen him in the galleries and on the street: an eccentric, handsome fellow of advanced years and impressive height, with a youthful stride and attire, long snowy hair and dishevelled eyebrows. He was often accompanied by a small woman with distinctive eyes—eyes that I would come to recognize in the artist's portraits as Rose's.

The images on the covers of *TIR* were of poignant simplicity. They were sketchy abstractions of the representational and expressed a striking affirmation of color. There was a haiku-spare still life; a darkly limned portrait of a woman with a blue forehead like a mask over those narrow white eyes; and a chalky blue view out a shuttered window.

James Lechay's spare, individualistic style is consistently recognizable. Today, at age 87, he still paints rough minimalist still lifes and portraits, asserting an almost stubborn serenity of vision. The artist's vision began evolving on the streets of New York during the Depression. Early successes put him side by side with contemporary New York School painters such as Rothko, Cornell, and Motherwell, and during the 40s he was exhibiting in New York, Chicago, and in the famous "Iowa Summer Shows" at The University of Iowa. His distinguished credits include exhibits at the Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, and his paintings are in many of

Sara London was the interviewer.

the country's major collections. Recent one-man shows have been mounted in New York, Montreal, at Dartmouth College, at The University of Iowa, and in Provincetown.

This interview consists of two springtime talks at the artist's modest house in Wellfleet overlooking Wellfleet Bay. As he spoke, his voice chafed like a breeze over pebbles, his tone one of wistful sobriety. He was particularly reticent on the subject of his peers, and seemed plagued by the recurring question, should he have remained in New York. Still sharp, he is hard of hearing and memory-teased. Rose, who for many years worked as a librarian at the Iowa City Public Library, was quick to fill in the blanks.

SL: In 1941, when you were 34, your painting "Pier on Sunday" was awarded third prize at the Chicago Art Institute's Annual American Painting Competition. You've credited the event with resulting in a teaching invitation from the University. Can you tell me about the competition and about a New York City boy's move to the midwest?

JL: In 1941 we were just coming out of a Depression and the beginning of a war, and I started my own school. I had students in my own studio. A lot of painters did that, that's the only way they were able to get on. I was with the Artists Gallery at that time showing work, and I'd submitted work to various national exhibitions, and one of my paintings was accepted at the Chicago Art Institute exhibition. I received third prize, and the painting was bought by the Art Institute. Max Weber got the silver medal, and it was Ivan Albright who got the first prize. As a result of that there was much national publicity in all the art magazines, and before long I received an invitation to Iowa. This must have been by 1943 or 4. But I was very busy, very much involved in my work; I was showing all over and at the Carnegie, a big international show. And so I got an invitation to come to Iowa to teach. I think they offered me \$2,500 for the year, which back then was a lot of money, and for me it was certainly, because I wasn't making that much. But I didn't want to leave New York, I wanted to keep on working, and so I refused it, and Stuart Edie took the job. He was a very good painter, a painter from Woodstock. And the next year again I received a telegram: would I come, same invitation, and this time the salary was \$3,500. This was very tempting. By that time we had another child, and our apartment in New York was tiny. So we said, let's try it for a year, let's see

what it's like. Philip Guston, who was already teaching at Iowa, came down to the house to tell us what the place was like. So we went out there, and we gave our apartment to Bernard and Ann Malamud. When we went to Iowa this was a great new experience. We found the quiet of Iowa very noisy, much more than New York. This quiet was very difficult for us, but we got used to it. We thought we'd stay for a year and try it. Instead we stayed for thirty!

SL: The Abstract Expressionist movement was building in the east, with Pollock, De Kooning, Kline and others. Did you feel isolated in Iowa as an artist?

JL: No, I didn't feel isolated at all. Humbert Albrizio was there, Edie was there. Mauricio Lasansky came one hour after we arrived. Originally from Argentina, he was working in New York, and then came to Iowa. Also, students came back on the GI bill and they were wonderful, they were so motivated. I think it was the best time in terms of work.

SL: What was the atmosphere of the Iowa campus like at that time—just after the war?

JL: Well, first of all, when we came there we lived in the army barracks. The place was just loaded with army barracks, Quonset huts. There were only 6,000 students on the whole campus. Along about '45, the GIs started coming in, and that's when the school was fantastic! It was a great time to teach because we had people who were so involved, who'd had enough of the war. I don't think there's been any time ever when there's been that kind of spirit all the way through. People working and creating and getting things done, and anxious. They were a little older than the average student. I know there was a quality when the GIs came back that I have never felt was repeated. Artists were invited to come and talk, and many came. Ben Shahn came, Kuniyoshi came. So many people, Max Weber came. Jacques Lipshitz came. Philip Evergood. Everybody. Later on there wasn't that excitement. It was a very very important art department. And I must say it was Lester Longman, who was head of the department at that time, who really must be given credit for the work he did in starting a whole new idea in the University art department. That idea was to hire people who were

artists, whether they had degrees or not, they were *artists*, and professionals. Humbert Albrizio was a sculptor. He had worked as an assistant to José de Creeft for years. I'm not quite sure he finished grade school, but he was a great sculptor. Lasansky had different training.

SL: Did you ever meet Grant Wood when you were first in Iowa?

JL: Grant Wood had died a few years before I came, so I never met him. I had his studio.

SL: Can you tell me about your relationship with Philip Guston?

JL: I took Philip Guston's place. I was never any close friend of his. When he was in Iowa he did all those Halloween paintings, kids in costumes. He was awfully good. Philip Guston was at Washington University in St. Louis, and he came to Iowa and did a painting called "Sentimental Moment." Mimi [Miriam] Shapiro, who was one of my students there, and one of his students, posed for it. He got the first prize in the Carnegie International that year, and he quit the University and went to New York, and he became an abstract *impressionist*, not *expressionist*, *impressionist*, and he did very well after that. He was no longer figurative. I took Phil's place. He was very nice. He came down to New York to explain to me what Iowa was like, what the campus was like, and so we decided to try it.

SL: Can you tell me about Ben Shahn?

JL: He was a wonderful man. I thought he was extremely bright. He had humor, intelligence; he was a fine person. I saw his powerful show of the Sacco and Vanzetti paintings at the Downtown Gallery—and this was moving! He was very important in the Depression period when people were very much concerned with justice.

SL: Wasn't Iowa one of the first graduate painting programs in the country?

JL: I don't know if it was the first one, it probably was. But I do know that it was the first university art department that hired professional artists. Grant Wood was in the art department of Iowa. Thomas Hart Benton was

at the Kansas City, Missouri, Art Institute, and John Stuart Curry was at the Agricultural College of the University of Wisconsin. They were regionalists in the Middle West, and very important painters.

SL: Apart from the University, was there an active artistic community in Iowa City?

JL: I don't think there were too many artists in Iowa City, except that it was a very active art department. When I went to Iowa, we couldn't get any paint there. I think it was Vanderhoff who had a book store with some very inadequate artists' materials. I went to him and I said, You don't have any paints here, can I get some paints from New York—I know someone who manufactures paints. Would you be interested in getting paints from him, because the students are in need of paint? He said he was very much interested in that, and he said, I can send the manufacturer \$3,000. So I said I'd call my friend Lenny and ask him whether he's interested in doing this. So I called him, and I said, Lenny, this guy Vanderhoff doesn't have any paints, what do you say about doing some paints for the school here? He thought that was a wonderful idea, because he was doing hand-ground colors, and they were very expensive. So he said sure, he'd make up a student color, and he said, Let's call it Bellini. Bellini colors are now famous colors. I said that's wonderful, and he got the check, and he sent out \$3,000 worth of Bellini paints. And they all dried up in the tubes!

SL: So the tubes arrived and they were hard?!

JL: They were solid! So I called him, but he said don't worry, there was something wrong with the tubes. So he got everything back, renewed everything, and finally everything went well. He was a very honest man, and that was the beginning of Bellini paints, in 1945.

SL: Lenny Bocour traded paints for paintings with many artists in New York, including you.

JL: Oh my goodness sake, I'll show you the list!

SL: I recall your telling me that you used to get together with other artists

in Iowa to draw from models.

JL: Humbert Albrizio was a sculptor; George Perret, who's Dr. George Perret, he was head of the neurosurgery in the University; Carl Fracassini, who came to Iowa City from Mount Pleasant. We for many years met in my studio, where every Sunday we'd have models. And this we did for thirty years, all the time. We did a lot of work like that.

SL: In 1966 you were commissioned to paint a portrait of J.W. Maucker, who was president of the State University in Cedar Falls, Iowa [University of Northern Iowa]. But when the unveiling came, it aroused some anger. Can you explain what happened?

JL: When they asked me to do Maucker's portrait, I wanted to be very careful about it, and to explain that I don't like doing these commission portraits, because I feel that the portrait would finally have to look like me, in spite of the fact that I'd be painting Maucker. I wanted to explain very carefully that Maucker will be there, and there will be some resemblance, but basically it's going to be my painting, it's going to be my way. I didn't want to add anything to the mausoleum they've got, all these presidents' portraits. I said I want to assure you that it's going to look like me and there's going to be a lot of protest. And I said I want to make sure also that you're committed. I didn't say this to Maucker, I said this to the committee: I want to have one third down, one third half way through, and one third at the end, and if you don't like it I'll give it back to you. You can have it all back if I feel that it's not a good painting, and not worthy of museum showing. In other words, if it's a failure I will not be able to defend it to myself. I've destroyed many paintings that I feel were okay but not good enough. They agreed to it. I did the portrait, and I think it was a good portrait, but other people said burn it!

SL: In your scrap book I found a news clipping to that effect. Dr. Josef Fox, a professor of humanities at the State College of Iowa, writes in a letter to the editor of the *Cedar Falls Daily Record*: "I have an idea: if every student were to contribute fifteen cents and every faculty member one dollar, we could buy the damn thing and burn it."

JL: There was an outcry in the press and on the radio. I was asked to come up to defend this portrait, so I came up to the university then, and the auditorium was loaded, people were standing outside, and I asked them questions and answered questions, with the result that everybody was very happy. They thought I had wonderful explanations. They felt very excited about the whole thing, and finally hung the portrait, and they love it. They've learned to love it.

SL: Maucker's response was quite impressive. He was quoted in the *College Eye*, in an article headed "Dr. Maucker Gives Reactions to 'It.'" He said: ". . . I am sorry a good many of the staff and students are disappointed. But I think it will grow on all of us if given half a chance. I do wonder what impression it will convey to future generations of students and faculty who will have had no contact whatsoever with the genuine, puritanical original article—but my guess is that something more valid will get across than comes from the usual presidential portrait—and we can use photographs to show that I didn't have a mangled hand, a third shoulder and feel sad or sinister about the shaving cream on my cheeks. I like it and am enjoying the debate. . . ."

JL: Maucker was a very nice man, and that whole experience with the portrait and Maucker in Cedar Falls was very good for the students there, and for the community—they learned a lot. I've been invited many many times to come up to Waterloo and Cedar Falls.

SL: Did you find that your teaching career interfered at all with your professional career?

JL: You know, I've always debated that kind of thing. The fact is they were very good in Iowa about scheduling. So, actually, I taught two days a week. I had a studio. I must say that when I was involved in a canvas, and I couldn't let go of it, I would miss class and they were very tolerant. But I did that on a minimal basis because I also felt a responsibility, and I think I did a good job, at least I hope so. I liked teaching, and when I had good students it was wonderful. I always felt that everybody could learn something, but many people reach their optimum level very quickly, and when I couldn't help them I'd suggest other people who might help them.

A number of my students went on to be quite well known. After all, the president of the National Academy is Jane Wilson—she was a student of mine; she was a wonderful woman, very bright and very talented, and she'd done very well. Mimi Shapiro was also a student of mine, and she certainly did very well. Paul Brach . . . these were very good people to work with.

SL: You had an exhibit of your work last fall at the University shortly after the flood. What was it like to return to Iowa City?

JL: Well, we'd been back to Iowa once or twice—our son is there, you know, and it was exciting going back to Iowa. It's beautiful. I must say there was a long hiatus there where we didn't go back. I've always debated with myself—you know, you asked the question, has teaching interfered—and it's something I can't answer because I always debated the question, should I not ever have accepted the offer to come to Iowa. Should I have stayed in New York, because things were very exciting in New York. Pollock was certainly coming up, Rothko—these were people I knew, you know, and we were all on the Project together, on the WPA. Adolph Gottlieb, we were all together there. Well, they went places. They stayed in New York and worked very hard and they did very well obviously. I went to Iowa and I always wondered whether I should have stayed in New York. How could I have answered that? I don't know. I don't know whether it matters at all or not. All I know is that Iowa was an invigorating, wonderful place to be. I did a lot of work there. I was not interfered with. It was really progressive. But you always have the feeling somehow that other fields are greener. It's a problem I could never resolve. But I loved Iowa.

SL: You've had an impressively long painting career and have been touched by several significant developments in art: Expressionism, Social Realism, Abstract Expressionism. You paint portraits, still lifes, buildings, landscapes—in a minimalist, almost abstract manner. Color seems to be your main tool. Which movement gave you your greatest inspiration? Which artists mattered to you most?

JL: You know, this is an interesting question because I was influenced by everything. I'm sort of a thief actually, I took from everybody, but I insisted that the work had to be me. I think, if I may say so, Picasso was a

thief, too, he took from everything, but he was always Picasso, that's what's wonderful about Picasso. I think that's wonderful about anybody who works and discovers wonderful things in other people's work, uses it to help him be himself. If he's not himself, this is no good. . . . And I've always said, I'd much rather be a first-rate Lechay than a second-rate Picasso. You understand? It's always got to be me.

SL: I have a quote here that I'd like to read to you, from Max Beckmann, that I think might relate to your work. "It is not the subject that matters but the translation of the subject into the abstraction of the surface by means of painting. Therefore, I hardly need to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal that I can only make it real by means of painting."

JL: He was one of my very strong influences. He was very important to me. As a matter of fact, the Iowa art department bought Beckmann's "Carnival," a triptych—that was a problem in itself, the department getting that triptych bought, because we had to convince the president of the University that this was a wonderful painting. As a matter of fact, Lasansky and I wanted to know how Beckmann was able to put the triptych together, to have three autonomous paintings work as one painting. That's what a triptych is. So I stretched three canvases the same size as the Beckmann triptych, and the triptych I painted was shown in many places around the country. It was shown at the Walker Art Center. It was shown in New York. It was shown in Des Moines. And when it finally came here I gave it to the Davenport Art Center. But I learned a great deal from Beckmann due to that triptych. He was an expressionist. He was recognizable, but always he was abstract. To me he was an abstract expressionist.

SL: Can you talk about what you've referred to as "unfinished finished paintings"?

JL: For me a painting is never finished, and it's finished all the time. I think, in a sense, once you put down an idea it's finished immediately. But it's not finished because you keep on working on it. You always keep enhancing it, you touch it and touch it. So I say they're finished but they're unfinished.

SL: You reach a point when you feel it's finished enough to present.

JL: I think sometimes you are finished enough at almost any stage—I've done that. I'd present things, and they were in a museum and so they were perfectly okay. When I got them back, I'd say, oh. . . . There's always something more you want to work on.

SL: Can you tell me about your older brother Myron's influence on you? I believe you used to go out on the streets of New York together to paint?

JL: First of all he had a studio, and I'd work in his studio. He was painting, and I was painting. Also we'd go out and do things outside. Many people did. Why, he would have his easel set right up on the street. See, we did a lot of work down in what we called "the canyons" in New York, you know, down along the Wall Street section, and on a Sunday there was nobody there, and this was perfect. We were fascinated by the streets and the buildings.

SL: Didn't you work on the Easel Project for the Works Progress Administration?

JL: Of course you know that the WPA was a relief project, and this whole thing started with Roosevelt. Before anybody had done anything on the project they had to go on Home Relief to prove their level of poverty. And the WPA had many projects. You had the Theater Project. You had the Mural Project. I was on the Easel Project. We had to turn in a painting every three months. We were given brushes, canvases. All these paintings went to Washington where they were distributed to various institutions and places all over the country. I was asked to go to New Mexico, which I did, Las Vegas, New Mexico, to receive the paintings that were sent from Washington from all the various art projects, and to organize exhibitions. And many places, which were started as little centers, became museums. The Des Moines Art Center started that way; and Roswell, New Mexico, started that way; Greensboro, North Carolina; Butte, Montana. All over the country, Phoenix, Arizona. These little centers developed into wonderful art centers. And of course the Des Moines Art Center is a really beautiful museum. I think the one in Davenport is also a museum; it's not as

prestigious but very good. When the war started these projects folded, and there was work in the shipyards, and work in the radio factories. There were all kinds of jobs pertaining to the war effort. I started my school in New York.

SL: During the Depression weren't you involved in exhibitions dedicated to unemployed workers and longshoremen?

JL: Yes. I was a member of An American Group. Yasuo Kuniyoshi was the president. We had exhibitions. One was called "Roofs for Forty Million"—because there were a lot of people sleeping all over, on streets, park benches, and many people sleeping on roofs. In the exhibition we had to show this problem of the unemployed, no housing for the unemployed. And we had another show about the longshoremen. There were great strikes and demonstrations by the longshoremen, seamen, and the unemployed, which were devastating. People were simply in terrible shape, they were really broke. We called that one "On the Waterfront," and we began showing paintings exposing this problem, and it was a social realist approach—certainly "Roofs for Forty Million" and "The Waterfront" shows were. We had another exhibition based on the treachery in the south, lynching in the south. Later on the group folded—An American Group—every painter you could think of was in that.

SL: Do you look at much painting by young artists today? What do you think of it?

JL: I see a lot of work, you know. And all I can say is I don't talk in terms of good or bad. I think everybody has to do what he has to do. I've become very tolerant, I must say, lately. A serious painter is what I like. Whether I like his work or not has nothing to do with it, but I like the fact that he's serious and struggling and trying to find something. A carefully done, precise, boring rendition copy, that shows no search, I'm not interested in that, and I don't think that goes anywhere. But the person who has all the wonderful mistakes of a human being, his work is wonderful because it has wonderful errors in it, it's full of life. I mean that a cadaver is perfect, it doesn't make any mistakes, but it's also dead. So much of the stuff I see, I feel is done off the top of the head, doesn't come out of real search and

struggle and looking for something. That stuff is sort of trashy, it doesn't mean anything.

SL: In terms of the future, do you see any particular direction emerging among the younger artists? Do you feel hopeful about their direction?

JL: The future is a great big open territory. And people are being influenced by the present, and they're going to be influenced by the future, and they've been influenced by the past, and work will come out of that. You can't help being influenced by what you see. Things that are done now could not have been done three hundred years ago. There will be good things, and there will be a lot of crap, too.