



Photograph by Michael Ondaatje

SUSAN CREAM

There is a sequence in John Walker and Chris Lowry's 1982 film *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures* of the artist in his kitchen shoving fat organic carrots through a silver juicer. Those carrots were a major element in his life during the remission years, part of the regimen that seemed to be keeping him alive. Well I remember one mad search for a supply of them in Edmonton in February. Still, spending time with Jack going to meetings, organizing conferences and discussing copyright reform was a very long way from a death watch. It was more like trailing an athlete-in-training, for he was superbly disciplined, fit and effective. And that went for politics as much as his health.

The politics began with a letter from the National Gallery in 1967 asking for permission to make slides of Chambers's work in the exhibition *300 Years of Canadian Art*. These were to be part of a slide library offered to schools and universities. No mention was made of a royalty, the letter implying that the educational purpose of the enterprise obviated any need for one. Jack wrote back, copying his letter to 130 artists across Canada, pointing out that his painting (*Antonio and Miguel in the U.S.A.*) was the "primary product" in a process from which a long list of people stood to derive revenue, "beginning with the attendant who gasses the photographer's car."* Yet the artists on whom the project depended were excluded from the scheme.

To Jack, the equation was simple: artists were providing a service and not being paid for it. What irked was the failure of the Gallery to approach them as professionals, or to recognize their right, by law, to remuneration when their work is reproduced. Jack was already an experienced, practising artist with a rigorous classical training when he returned to Canada. He found London exploding with energy, and a new generation of artists busy creating a milieu for themselves. Many of them shared his unsentimental approach to business.

* All quotations are from a taped conversation between Jack Chambers, Peter Wilson and Susan Cream on October 10, 1976.

“I’d something to offer that was worth paying for. As you can’t eat your work, you sell it; and you sell it so you can go on to make more.” Yet there were huge barriers to doing this, the Gallery’s letter being a case in point. But it convinced Chambers that it was time artists took control of their own affairs and created an organization to represent their interests.

From the beginning, Jack had insisted on negotiating the terms of his own relationships with galleries and dealers—an initiative that typically met with flat rejection. “Their reaction was that I should do it their way. My reaction was that it bloody well was not going to be their way; it was going to be my way or it wasn’t going to happen.” He was adamant; there’d be no compromising the basics. The Gallery’s letter was the opportunity “to challenge the guy to put up or shut up.” And this was how Jack would talk privately, when his scrappy, wild side emerged. His shrewdness as an activist was in always finding the words to describe a situation that even his opponents could recognize and own.

Within a year, Canadian Artists’ Representation (CAR) was established with locals across the country, the artists Kim Ondaatje and Tony Urquhart on the national executive along with Jack. The first order of business was the exhibition fee; a fee schedule was drawn up, and the meetings and demonstrations began. Eventually the fee became standard practice in public galleries for contemporary work borrowed for exhibition, and an Exhibition Right was enshrined in the Copyright Act. The campaign had side effects, inspiring writers to press for a Public Lending Right on the same grounds. Created in

1986, the PLR Commission pays out almost \$10 million annually to authors with books in public libraries across Canada. This, too, is part of Chambers’s legacy.

As a politician Jack was fearless and eloquent. His speech, softened by his fluent Spanish, was still marked by his working-class roots, so he clipped his words and punctuated his thoughts with a “you know” reduced to a single, inimitable syllable. He spoke rapidly but with such precision and calm assurance that he seemed to be spinning a yarn rather than scoring an argument. And it was his peculiar mix of old-world politesse and new-world brashness that got him places. He did not waste time, and, as I learned, he preferred starting at the top.

Summoned to Ottawa, to a meeting Jack had arranged with André Fortier, then director of the Canada Council, I came expecting thirty minutes in the man’s office but instead found myself lunching at the National Arts Centre restaurant. Over the lobster bisque, I heard Jack serenely informing Fortier that he was unhappy with the service CAR was getting from the Council and was considering taking his business elsewhere. (The Council’s arch-rival, the department of the Secretary of State, was mentioned.) Visibly taken aback, Fortier listened studiously, asked for details, and—miraculously, I thought—asked for time. Before we got to the sorbet, Jack had the subject of research on artists’ incomes and industry standards on the table. Within weeks the Council’s director of research was at his house in London, and Jack was supplying him with an outline for a study, which eventually became an ongoing program at Statistics Canada.

Victories were rarely so easy. Even rarer are examples

of hardball politics going down in the midst of utterly genial conversation. I observed something else that day about Jack. It was that the force in his presence came not from the power of the numbers, or even the power of his words, which were persuasive enough, but from an unspoken core conviction that was the source of his charisma.

We once talked about his leukemia, I wanting to understand his idiosyncratic and upbeat response to it that seemingly sprang from the same place as his art. He spoke of the challenge of making a life without the unlimited scope and freedom you’d otherwise have. “Unlimited scope and freedom not necessarily being either of those things,” he reasoned. The reduction of choice he didn’t think unusual, but a universal dilemma that had its advantages. “To have all the seats in the theatre to choose from provides you with a problem, eh? But

if one seat is left, you jump into it and watch.” If the constraints permitted focus, then the illness brought an edge to reality and altered his sense of time. He talked about his appetite for time, about always being up for the instant. Not the duration of an instant, but each instant. And it was this extraordinary appetite—for time, for clarity, for action—that grounded him even while it drew people to him.

SUSAN CREAN is a Toronto writer of literary non-fiction whose book *The Laughing One: A Journey to Emily Carr* (2001) received national acclaim. She served CAR in a number of executive roles in its early years, and has been a critical force in copyright reform on behalf of Canadian creators.