

It's good to have a plan.

Up until then, I had not made many decisions of consequence. I was like a cork, bobbing in the ocean.

On my way up to 63rd St. and the Wildenstein Gallery, I reflected on my life thus far. Almost 22 years old, I was only too self aware of my naivete. Why, just recently, when I began driving a cab, and after picking up a passenger on East 73rd St., I balked when I heard the Upper West Side destination. A surprised look came on the man's face when I turned round to look at him and said with astonishment, "How'm I supposed to do that, with the whole of Central Park in the way"?

... But now, just entering my fifth year in art school, and 8 months after my father asked me to leave the house, I felt stranded and at a kind of a crossroads.

After three years, and a certificate from SVA, I'd just completed my second year on a full scholarship at the NY Studio School, awarded initially by the Skowhegan school in Maine.

I had also gotten a scholarship to Skowhegan which was supposed to be given via SVA, but SVA sent someone the year before that they weren't very happy about so I had to apply at large. My teacher, John Button, who was on the board of governors said "not to worry" and gave me a phone number to call on a certain night at a certain time and ask for him. This was during the selection of the six available 'at large' scholarships.

Calling from the kitchen wall phone at my parents house, someone summoned John. He put his hand over the speaker and shouted out, “He wants to know if he’s getting in”.

A distant disgruntled voice with a Bronx accent shouted, “ Awh, tell ‘im he’s gettin in”.

I found out later that was Alex Katz.

I remembered, how, still in high school, walking down Eighth St. toward Fifth Ave., one of my friends I grew up with in Brooklyn, coerced me into inquiring about the Studio School as a group of us passed it. Entering, we saw a young woman atop the swirling duel staircases that once graced the original Whitney museum. There was paint all over her clothes. When my friend pointed at me and told her “This guy’s a good artist”, she looked down at all of us sternly and said, “This is a SERIOUS Art School”.

We left with our tails between our legs.

As it turned out, I didn’t get into any of the five art schools I applied to after high school. At my interview at Pratt, I barely walked into the administrator’s office when I was told, “Oh yeah, you, with the poor grades, I’m sorry, but you’ll flunk out of here before the year’s over”.

“But where will I go ?” I asked him.

“Try the school of Visual Arts”

I’d never heard of it.

I recall at my SVA interview, a good looking young woman with her red hair up in a bouffant style and wearing a low cut, sexy white silk blouse, and who I thought at first was the receptionist, merely asked me, “Do you really want to go here?”

Fast-forward 3 years: the New York Studio School *was* a serious art school. Maybe *too* serious. A far cry from SVA, with the pot smoke on its stairs, the laissez faire attitude of many of its instructors, its focus on Minimalism, and with whatever had just surfaced in the glossy art mags. So I loved the loose-knit communal quality at the Studio School, with its devoted, almost archaic compulsion that focused doggedly on abstracting perception.

The only problem was, it was not what I wanted to do. I was more inclined to make a thing look like what it looked like - or more importantly, why the thing looked at was significant, had some emotional resonance for me, perhaps even contributed to my survival.

As I approached the Wildenstein Gallery, a light snow had begun to fall. I looked forward to seeing the much heralded show of Old Master paintings there.

When I entered the tall doors of its imposing vestibule, I felt completely at home - as if immersed in a giant fish tank where several centuries of aesthetic pleasure was impeccably arranged in opulent rooms.

A small Corot landscape and another by Van Ruisdael flanked a gilded mirror. Several Canalettos in the next room faced two marvelous Chardin still-lives.. and then up the grand staircase, where

the high ceilinged rooms gave a pair of ten foot high Fragonard's plenty of room to espouse on the labors of love.

The clarity that Art brought to me was like an infusion of oxygen, and the heightened consciousness that these pictures were made from had somehow awakened, stirred, and became instilled within me.

I left the exhibit, senses sharpened, yet entranced. I was not even aware of the direction I was going. I was stopped abruptly by the rusticated stone wall encircling Central Park, entered a nearby gateway, and was soon interrupted by an official looking building and a sign pointing to the park's zoo ahead.

As the snow continued to fall, and the cool winter light began to dim, the warm light of the windows ahead beckoned me on. It was the zoo's cafeteria.

The enchantment was wearing off. I was hungry. It was cold. I had maybe four dollars and some loose change in my pockets. I literally lived day to day and from hand to mouth. The weekend, when I drove a cab, was still two days away. What the hell was I going to do with my life? How would I ever survive?

The cafeteria was closing soon and almost empty. A small, black felt sign board, with interchangeable white plastic letters, sat on the glass shelf above a steam table. It announced: Beef Stew - \$2.75. It looked and smelled amazing!

The large black woman behind the counter studied me.

“I’ll have the stew” I said.

“You want rice with that?”

“Sure”.

She began heaping an incredibly large portion of stew onto a plate with a sly smile.

I sat by a window, watching the snow as it fell in the early dusk, and considered the large portion of food as a good omen - manna from heaven - encouraging and directing me to proceed to follow my heart.

Ensuring me that the universe had my back.

I woke late the next morning to hear the buzzing of voices below my window. I looked down at the entrance to my building and was surprised to see a familiar face, yet someone I was not yet acquainted with, who was instructing a young man holding a camera. Why, it was Rudy Burckhardt, the guest artist who showed his films at the Skowhegan School in Maine. I quickly dressed, and hurried down the flight of stairs only to nonchalantly pretend that I was only a curious onlooker, who had no prior knowledge of the artist.

Rudy leaned against the doorway with a near empty pint bottle, assuming the stupor and lost gaze of a drunken Bowery bum as his son Jacob filmed him.

The setting seemed right. My apartment on Third Ave. near 11th St. was next to what I considered the last skid row bar on the Bowery, situated next to the sheetmetal shop and the gypsy fortune teller, whose family sometimes asked me to read to them a turn-off notice from the gas or electric company when it came in the mail.

I stood at a distance, looking with the benign and partial interest of someone who had more important places to go. In other words, I didn't dare interrupt the creative process and crassly introduce myself. As a matter of fact, I was too shy to approach them even as they were wrapping it up.

I came back to the apartment with a quart of milk. The DC electricity made finding a fridge seemingly impossible. A vintage milk box served in its stead outside my window on the fire escape. The bathroom was in the hall but what do you expect for \$60 dollars a month. At least there was a sink, hot water and a gas heater.

As I looked around the room, unhappily surrounded by what looked like half finished paintings, I was only too aware of my confusion. They were attempts to fit in with the Studio School's modus operandi of abstracting figures drawn from life, but were in fact, complete failures. A nearly life size self-portrait, shirtless and sitting, stared down at me with a confused, angry look, as if to say, "give it up"!

I hadn't contacted my parents for some time now. I didn't have a phone, and they didn't really know where I was. Thanksgiving came and went. I was only a subway ride away but didn't dare

go home in this state and appear that I was looking for a hand-out. That would prove that my father was right, in throwing me out.

From the pay phone on 4th Avenue, I called my friend Richard who said to come on over. A few weeks ago, Richard wanted to give me a jar full of pennies which I declined. At Prince St. near Lafayette, I called up to Richard's window and he threw down the key. Upon hearing the reason for my visit, Richard practically threw the jar of pennies at me and screamed, "Go Home To Your Parents".

Dejectedly, I walked back up Lafayette till it turned into 4th Avenue, stopped at the A&P near 11th St. and bought a box of Matzos and a can of applesauce at the A&P with the pennies. The Matzos were on sale.

At the apartment, I opened the can of applesauce, added it to some broken up Matzo in a large bowl, and poured over the milk from the window box.

That would continue to get me through till the weekend when I'd could pick up my check at the cab company for the week before, and live on the tips before I cashed it on Monday.

Driving a cab for two 12 hour shifts every Saturday and Sunday usually left me with enough to get by, but exhausted for school Monday morning,

All in all I considered it a privilege to be going to the Studio School for free, to have teachers I respected, in what was generally, a safe environment.

Several more months went by before I called my parents. I was probably just as angry at them as they were with me. But now, besides the weekend cab driving, I began working for Eduardo, twice a week, as a night attendant. Eduardo had been a student at the Studio School before the diving accident. He had broken his neck and was now in a wheel chair. He was back at the school and had arranged with SSI that fellow students could assist him as a night attendant, getting him into bed at night and up and out in the morning .

The \$60 a night was a third more than I made driving a cab, but sometimes some of that would go back to Eduardo when his welfare check ran out by the end of the month. Occasionally I would accompany Eduardo to his graduate classes at NYU and sit in on the class with him. Often, I would even help out Sal Scarpitta, one of my teachers from SVA, as his only studio assistant.

I even found an old refrigerator at a junk shop on second avenue that ran on DC electricity, and hauled it up to the apartment with an equally antique hand truck that I found and brought home while driving my cab.

So, I decided to call my folks to let them know I was doing alright.

Mom answered, happy and relieved to hear from me. I agreed to come over for dinner that next Friday eve.

Seeing that I was resolute in my plans, my parents began to persuade me to look into getting a degree. SVA had just been granted undergraduate degree status and it was close to my apartment.

When, in the curriculum, I saw that Fairfield Porter was teaching a painting class there, that

clinched it. It would be my only studio course because, given my two years at the Studio School and a three year certificate, I would need only a few elective credits to graduate; so they told me.

When the semester began however, two things happened, that in retrospect should have altered my course to continue there. I showed up for Porter's class, but Fairfield had decided against teaching there. I had never met Porter, but would see him at a party at the loft of the painter Paul Georges six months later. Going up to him, I said "Hi, I tried to take your course at SVA, but you were not there". He looked down at me gravely and said "Too conceptual", and walked away.

I ended up taking a life drawing class with a former teacher, Herbert Katzman instead. Well into the semester, Herbert, who had always been supportive, leaned over behind me, and said quietly into my ear, "that fucking school ruined you".

The other thing was, after my first week of classes, I came down with an acute case of appendicitis. It was sparked, I thought, after eating some bad Chinese food while out with Eduardo the night before. I was not working for Eduardo that night but was staying in a two story carriage house in an alley behind Main Street in Hoboken, tending to the cats and plants for the month for Angela and Jeremy, some Studio School students. Up all night and in excruciating pain, the next morning I managed to crawl to a storefront clinic I once saw close by on Main Street. Holding my gut, I walked into a crowded waiting room, where, lined up and around the three walls, Hispanic mothers sat alternately, each next to their pregnant daughters, as

surprised to see me as I to see them. The mother/daughter, next in line, taking one look at me, summoned me ahead to enter the doctors office.

With a quick diagnosis, a note, and a waiting cab, I was scurried off to St. Mary's Hospital where my appendix was removed.

While I was recovering in the Hospital, I called my parents, partly because I needed someone to look in on the cats. My Uncle Angelo, who worked on the docks in Hoboken, also visited. He brought me a magazine targeting an adolescent readership, concerning the search and discovery of buried treasure. As touched as I was by the gift and his visit, I was mildly perplexed and amused.

My father also came to the hospital with his friend Charlie. They went to the carriage house, which was a mess, and reported that the cats could not be found. After my father left the room, Charlie took me aside and said, " You have a lot of talent Bobby, don't blow it!"

When I returned to the apartment several days later, no cats. Some of the plants were not looking well. I recalled that my father did not especially like cats.

Then, I got an unexpected call from Muriel, someone I'd met around three months before.

I met her through the friend of a friend actually. Tony, the friend of a friend from the Studio School, was going to a party in Brooklyn and asked if I would like to come along. It was a birthday party for the youngest of three sisters, Lupe, who had just turned 12 at her family's home near Utica and Church Avenues in Brooklyn. They were a Mexican family, economically

middle class, but very lively, interesting and sophisticated. I became instantly infatuated with the oldest sister Maria, an artist, who would not even look at me. We had fun, me and Tony, teasing the adolescent Lupe with adolescent behavior and wolf howls.

So, I was surprised when the middle sister, Muriel, called me and said,

“ Would you like to come over”?

“Sure”.

Her apartment on Sullivan St. was dominated by a Buddhist shrine.

I began to realize this wasn't a date, but an opportunity to convert me.

She went on and on about the benefits of repetitive chanting.

I asked if the oranges and other food on the shrine could be eaten, and got a complicated response that I took for a 'yes, but'. I asked if I could stay over and got a similar reply. I did like her and I did stay over and we shared an awkward intimacy that night. She said she was surprised because she thought I was gay, because Tony who brought me to the party in Brooklyn was gay. The next morning, the intimacy was much improved and I left, thinking that Buddhism is so bereft of the complicated restrictions around sex that Catholicism imposed upon me.

I saw Muriel maybe a year later on the subway, seated on the uptown local with her mother, who scrutinized me sternly as we were hesitantly introduced.

Word must have gotten out about my operation because the following evening, a former girlfriend Alina, also called me as I was cleaning the accumulated pans and dishes in the sink.

She asked me to come over. I said “Sure”.

I dropped everything and ran, thinking, ‘perhaps I could ride this wave of sympathy a while longer’. Problem was, in my haste, I left the faucet dripping, not noticing that the drain had somehow locked close.

When I returned the following morning I faced the disaster I had wrought.

The cats were still gone, the plants were dying, and water dripping through the gaps in the rough floor boards from the overflowing sink had saturated the stacks of Angela and Jeremy’s drawings stored on the ground floor directly below. They were due back the following day.

It was difficult to separate the soggy leaves carefully. Most were on newsprint. I attempted to grade, sort and assess them by their relative aesthetic merits. What I thought were the better ones, I pinned to dry on the limited space of the studio walls.

They were still hanging there when they rang the bell, and Jeremy’s first words to me, with a wry tone before entering were, “Well, I’m just happy the place hasn’t burned down”.

The cats were never found. I ran into a friend a few weeks later who asked me what happened - he told me what Angela and Jeremy had told him: “Franca went berserk in Hoboken.”

I also returned for a follow-up appointment with the doctor, at his office in Jersey City to remove the stitches. He was not happy with what he saw. Reprimanding me, he said, “You were supposed to be resting after the operation. There are stitches inside, beneath the stitches I’m removing, have all shifted”

Back in my apartment, I only had to walk 10 blocks up Third Avenue to reach my classes at SVA, but now that I was 2 1/2 weeks behind, I was lost.. My electives were: English Composition, American History, 20th century Art History, and Introduction to Philosophy. Subsequently, I only passed the history classes, but the appendectomy was only part of the reason my schoolwork suffered.

I was also struggling in my studio with my painting as I had struggled in my classes. I was still torn between the conflicting ideologies of the two schools. The self portrait still looked down at me with a confused and angry look.

Then, one day, just as I was leaving the apartment on my way to school, I saw Rudy Burckhardt again, walking my way. This time, I approached him, introduced myself and told him how much I enjoyed his films while at Skowhegan.

Rudy seemed pleased and inquired about my work.

“Why, my studio is just upstairs” as I pointed to my window and brought up that I had seen him filming in front of my doorway some time ago.

“Would you like to stop up and see the work”? I asked.

I only then realized, as we walked the stairs, how unkempt the apartment was, how the large sad self portrait would face us prominently as we entered the apartment, how too many unfinished paintings were strewn about, and how still life set-ups sat abandoned on tables with rotting fruit.

Rudy stood there for a long while. It did not look like he was searching for something to say; It looked like he didn't understand something.

Finally, he looked at me as if he just discovered the answer, and exclaimed decisively, in a clear, authoritative voice:

“It has to be a labor of love”!

His words struck a nerve, like a gong sounding to an inner emotional core. ***I had forgotten all about Love - that it existed at all.***

“Oh”, I said

Somewhat overwhelmed by the effect the meeting had had on me, I did not think to thank Rudy Burckhardt for the visit. I continued on my walk to school, transfixed by a newfound awareness of my blindness - this bubble I'd been living in that had just burst. Everything looked different to me now and it was difficult to pay attention that day at school.

I returned home that afternoon, dedicated to cleaning the apartment and reducing the sense of clutter. I moved the bed to along and under the left window, washed the floor and carefully arranged some art reproductions on the wall. The rough wooden crate, once a still life table, now became a nightstand - the window ledge, a bookshelf.

From mid-room, I stood back and surveyed the new order. Night had fallen. I was struck by the eerie pink light of the street lamp coming through the venetian blinds and realized that the 75

watt lightbulb above me at the center of the room would be more than sufficient light to paint by as it filled corner to corner, with a soft but even, mood defining light.

What being a labor of love meant to me was in the activity of looking.

It was in the study of form, the determination of nuance, the relationships in space, the experience of light.

I would paint an interior, I thought. I would take my time. There were so many details in the room to define, so many textures to dwell upon, to caress with a brush, and lovingly describe, with this new-found heightened consciousness.

So many of the objects appeared to warrant relationships. The lone green apple on the crate next to the neatly made bed seemed to speak to the single sneaker, half in shadow next to the cardboard box that I kept my clothes in and that peeked out from beneath the burgundy blanket.

The new found organization gave me a clean slate; and that eerie pink light of the street lamp, encroaching with its mysterious spell upon the warmly lit interior, asked to be conveyed in all the clarity I could muster.

I was resolute in completing my task. - of expressing my love - of recording it all.