

## JAY STEENSMA

John Jay Steensma was born December 8, 1941, in Moscow, Idaho and raised in nearby Belmont, Washington. He moved to Seattle in 1959 to attend the University of Washington School of Art, where influential teachers included Walter F. Isaacs, Spencer Moseley, Bob Jones, and Wendell Brazeau. After receiving his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1962 he studied with Morris Graves, became friends with Mark Tobey, Guy Anderson, and other artists of the original Northwest School. He briefly worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, then in 1965 returned to Seattle, where he taught for a few years at the Cornish College of the Arts.

Jay suffered from manic-depressive illness, and by the mid-70s his erratic behavior had largely alienated him from the arts community, including his dealers. He was at times institutionalized, and wasn't able to exhibit regularly until 1985.

In the late 1980's I was hired to manage MIA Gallery in Seattle. The owner, Mia McEldowney, was a large hearted collector and dealer with a great eye, and she was also an early advocate for "outsider art" or sometimes simply uncategorical art. As it was said then, "If Vincent Van Gogh was still alive, MIA would be the only gallery in town who would show him."

My main role at MIA was to review art submissions and make studio visits with our artists and select work for exhibits. Jay Steensma was considered a sometimes difficult artist due to his illness but was at that time being treated with lithium. He could stay stable for periods of time when he stayed on his medication, with the help of his friend and partner, Ree Brown. Through many visits to Jay's home in the Greenlake area of Seattle I became friends with him and Ree. I came to know Jay's varied styles and moods and his way of plunging head first into whatever vision he was pursuing at the time. His home was filled with junk store finds to re sell and his own work. He painted in the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen. The walls were swiped with brushes in a frenzy to clean them and get on with it. He used paper bags, scraps of canvas, old cardboard - and occasionally larger stretched canvas when he could afford it.

The larger paintings were at times moody, drippy oil washes with a house or perhaps a chalice; a lake would become a palette and become part of the sky; his hatted figures appeared in his landscapes as witnesses, or something more nefarious, as did his easels. His more frenetic large oils were exuberantly painted with energetic, thick strokes, attacked with collage and words - sometimes becoming political responses to the craziness in the world around him or commentary on the fickleness of the art world. They carried the energy of his mood and more than a few were done out of his mania when he was off his medication. When he said, "The purpose of my art is to confound the enemy," I think of these paintings.

Often making a tip of the hat to Graves, Anderson, or Tobey, Jay knew how to borrow the best from the best. But his "eco" series, his "Northwest Extinction" series, and his "relics" were all his own. In 1994 he wrote:

## Relics

Shabby little house:  
Eco, placed on old  
Earth of the Palouse,  
and the Skagit,  
no resting until the  
Moon becomes bright.  
the Salmon of the  
past, seem to be gone  
in an Eco dream -  
The houses remain  
Resting on old earth.

Jay died in 1994 at the age of 53 of heart disease. He enjoyed a prolific final 8 years in his art. He re-established himself in the local art scene with the help of Mia and had many good friends that would stop by to visit him and Ree at their Greenlake home.