REE BROWN

Ree Brown was born in Kanab, Utah in 1927. He worked in the petroleum industry traveling between San Mateo, California, and Seattle.  In the late 60's Ree moved to Seattle to retire and bought a little house in the Greenlake area. He and Jay Steensma settled in and became life partners.

In the mid-1970‘s Ree began to draw, and then paint and sculpt, making mostly small portraits of birds, cats, and people – pictures of “no one in particular.” Ree painted his delicate paintings onto scraps of paper, cardboard, bits of matting, brown paper bags, and just about anything else that would hold paint.  “I was always interested in art,” said Ree.

Jay and Ree were fixtures in the art scene in Seattle. I knew Ree less well than I knew Jay. I remember him being a quiet, modest, thoughtful man who looked out for Jay and was developing his own style of painting in tempera and watercolor.  He, unlike Jay, was not schooled in the arts but always enjoyed being around artists. Ree was referred to as an "outsider" artist when he began to exhibit at Mia Gallery in the late 80's. His paintings were simple small paintings with silhouettes, or people with colorful clothing, a cat face close up, a sweet bouquet in tempera or watercolor. He and Jay often collaborated on a painting or a print. Ree was encouraged by Jay in his endeavors.

Ree's drawings and paintings were done on a small table in his home. But he often accompanied Jay and Wes Wehr when they would go to draw from life in the cafes and markets around Seattle.  They would frequent Continental Bakery on the Ave, Lee's Restaurant, or Grand Illusion Cafe, meeting friends and sketching. It was a golden time for Seattle artists when rents were cheap and food was cheaper. And sometimes a meal could be swapped for a sketch.

In the late 1980s, Ree started to show in Seattle with MIA Gallery. He is represented in several galleries across the country. He is included in “20th Century American Folk, Self-Taught, and Outsider Art” by Betty-Carol Sellen and also featured in several documentaries about outsider art. One of my favorites is linked below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtlVox3BFXM>

Ree Brown died in 2014. He was 87. He continued to live in the small house he lived in with Jay and continued to paint and enjoy his friends after Jay's death 20 years earlier.