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Devoted to Art and Truth Jerry Bleem

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”¹

However the artistic production of Jesse Howard and Roger Brown is described, “lukewarm” has no place. This Scriptural text points to their Christian heritage—shaped by apocalyptic Biblical literature such as the Book of Revelation; and their use of religious texts, concerns and imagery as source material. Like the “Amen, the faithful and true witness,”² who would “spue” out the lukewarm, Jesse Howard and Roger Brown had little tolerance for the half-hearted.

Jesse Howard’s life began in 1885 when he was born “into a true Christian home.” He described his parents as “true loyal Christians, not the half hammered kind of today.”³ The pointed tone of that last phrase is classic Howard whose cut-and-dried world had been nurtured by the fundamental Christianity in which he was raised. Whether he was speaking about his relationships with family and neighbors, or moral issues, or politics, every situation seems to have had two options in Howard’s mind. One was right and everything else was wrong. In such “a binary world constituted by up or down choices, considerations of context or gradations of value simply did not enter the picture.”⁴

The early religious life of Roger Brown varied little from Howard’s. He too was raised in a fundamental denomination, the Church of Christ, whose focus is the Bible as “the only possible common denominator upon which most, if not all, of the God-fearing people of the land can unite.”⁵ Howard accepted a similar Biblical framework and it gave him confidence. But Brown needed more shades of gray than this stark creed allowed. Certainly trying to reconcile his sexual orientation with religious teachings that presumed a wife and family should have been his goals was one of those shades. But there were others. In the end, his brother Greg writes, “...neither Roger nor I stayed in that church once we were able to decide for ourselves what we wanted to do with our lives.”⁶

Influenced by his early religious training and his own evolving religious understanding, Roger Brown drew upon Biblical stories and imagery in his work.

None is more revealing than *The Devil's Surprise*.⁷ The division of the good and the evil, of divine reward and punishment, is depicted with a twist. Cavorting, dancing and sexual license occupies those in heaven's stylized-clouds realm. Hell's flames surround those sitting in church pews while they listen to a preacher in mid-sermon. Hardly a simple skewering of religion, or even the rejection of his childhood spiritual training, this painting questions our ability to know truth and the value of rigid adherence to religious dogmas. Indeed, what if we do have it all wrong? "Surprise, surprise to all of you self-righteous church members, for eternity could have some unexpected punishment for you."⁸

Brown critically considered religious tenets and denominational conformations. He remembered his co-religious in the Church of Christ with fondness calling them "among the best people on earth."⁹ But he had no patience for the judgmental: "The most fundamentalists [sic] of Churches profess to believe that only God can judge, but all their evangelists run around pointing their fingers, judging everyone and proclaiming various people as candidates for Hell."¹⁰ Out of this scrutiny came canvases like *Beast Rising from the Sea*, an image of one of the beasts described in the Book of Revelation.¹¹ Though startling because of its seven heads, this beast has little "power" or "authority"—no teeth. Rather than being dangerous or cunning, this is a harmless beast, an illustration for an odd stuffed animal. More than an admission of how his religious consciousness had shifted, Brown's *Beast* tranquilizes horrifying end-time exhortations by showing itself as freakish but benign.

Jesse Howard began his principal artistic production in the 1950's at an age when most people are thinking about retiring.¹² In his works one encounters a mature man who has a settled view of the world and his relationship to the Other. Above all else, the Christianity Howard practiced gave him the Bible, the King James version to be precise. Howard turns to that Bible for words and for a cosmos by which he understood his world. His voice is so sure, his interpretation of the world so confident, because he trusted in the "plenary accuracy"¹³ of the Bible. Aghast that others have been unable arrive at the clarity and direction that the Bible gave him, he painted a sign to express his amazement:

"YES, THE MOST SHOKING TRUTH" OF MY WHOLE LIFE IS,
THE GREAT MULTITUDE' OF PEOPLE,' THAT DON'T KNOW
A HOLY BIBLE' FROM A FUNNY PAPER, OR AN ALMANAC.' I
HAVE TALKED TO A GREAT MANY PEOPLE AND JUST AS
SOON AS MENTION THE BIBLE THEY GET GOING. 'I SAY.'
SHAME ON YOU, YES, GO HANG YOUR HEAD IN SHAME."¹⁴

A Biblical authority suffuses the observations and commentary Howard recorded on his signs and his works on paper. When his visual homilies were not well received, when the installation of signs on Howard's property was damaged and some of the signs stolen, Howard's sermonizing continued undeterred. The incidents were incorporated into the words Howard was driven to give the world.

YES SERE.' SOME THIEF, OR THIEVES, STOLE THE _TEN
COMMANDMENTS RIGHT OFF THIS FENCE.' I JUST WONDER WHO
WOULD STOOP SO LOW AS TO PULL A STUNT LIKE THAT.'¹⁵ Invariably,
people failed to measure up to his godly standards. Howard who has taken on
the mission of converting the world also grows weary of its prolonged
transformation.

Jesse Howard's works fashion a picture of a man whose inflexible religiosity
determined all aspects of his life including his familial relationships. In fact, any
"opposition equaled blasphemy, pure and simple."¹⁶ The lens through which
Howard saw the world came from his distinctive fundamentalist perspective, a
personal as well as a denominational credo. One of Howard's signs begins with
"THIS IS A LIST OF THINGS • STOLEN & ATTEMPT STOLEN." A litany of
complaints follows but what is most telling is Howard's assignation of blame:

THIS IS ALL BECAUSE OF THE CHURCH THAT THE WOMAN
GOES TO. JUST LET ME MENTION THAT PREACHERS NAME
& HELL IS A POPPIN ALL OVER THTHIS HILL. THIS MAN HAS
CONTROLL OVER MY WIFES MIND¹⁷

Howard makes a similar observation in one of his works on paper: "THE HOLY
ROOLERS SNATCHED MRS HOWARD, AND SHE IS GOING WITH THEM.
AND OLD JUDGE JOHN YATES ORDERED ME TO STAY AWAY FROM THAT
CHURCH. AND I HAVE NOT BEEN IN IT SINCE."¹⁸ Howard's tenacious
mindset introduced a degree of alienation in his family. Though the evidence
appears irregularly as he comments upon whatever catches his eye, at the heart
of his appraisal is a vision of how things should be. This Biblical "new heaven
and new earth," birthed an estrangement between Howard, and his wife and
children. When recounting his marriage and listing the names of his offspring,
what begins with "TRUE LOVE NEVER FAIL'S" concludes with "I SEE NO
FUTURE FOR THESE CHILDREN."¹⁹

Religion provided Roger Brown with a symbol, rather than a belief, system. His
numerous cruciform canvases, for example, demonstrate not so much the shape
of his faith as the facility of an accomplished artist. On the cross-shaped *Dr.
Imperial's Tree of Knowledge*,²⁰ instead of the expected likeness of Jesus, a
snake climbs upon a triple-branched tree. The background is Brown's archetypal
sky, patterned clouds with haloed light, which is ominous until the neon glow of
the painting's name suggests mercantile advertising and sideshow
entertainment. Has Brown replaced Christ with an antichrist, the tempting
serpent of Genesis? Hardly, but Brown does give us plenty to consider: the
"subtil...serpent" and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one "ye
shall not eat of it"; the tree of life²¹ in the humble guise of the weedy ailanthus or
the shrubby sumac; the brass serpent "upon a pole" from the Book of Numbers²²
which healed those who recognized their sinfulness; and a carnival mood
updated with neon.

Dr. Imperial lays out life's complexities and contradictions, our need for both humor and seeing past facades. Wonder has its place in this cosmology, yet that amazement is tinged with fright. The two small figures at the bottom of the painting (everyman/everywoman, Adam/Eve), at the foot of the cross, suggest both emotions. Brown's Other has become not Howard's source of order, but the unknowable that is both alluring and frightening. Less focused on the past and the future, i.e., on sin and judgment, Brown's religiosity turns his attention to where mature believers have always looked for God, the present.

If there is a God and a hereafter then I believe it is the ultimate mystery and no one here can tell you what it is and no book can tell you what it is. We spend our lives searching for the solutions to mysteries. Maybe we should just spend our lives enjoying some of those mysteries for their own merit. Then perhaps we can enjoy the final mystery when it comes.²³

Brown found religious surety, to a certain degree, unattainable and unimportant, but valued his Christian heritage for the wealth it offered his artistic production. *Arrangement in Blue and Gray, The Artist and his Friend Fishing*²⁴ utilizes the artistic tradition in which the grandeur of nature signifies something larger than itself. The canvas is almost all sky highlighted by dramatic sunshine; the human beings by contrast are insignificant. What is the appropriate response to the sublime? In *Arrangement*, Brown suggests enjoying the small pleasures of life, not changing one's life as much as locating one's self in a larger context, in the Mystery.

The other answer Brown gives us is his oeuvre: its power, its variety, its depth and Brown's clear dedication to his craft. In effect, Brown's adult religion was Art. "I feel the answer to life's questions are to be found in the aesthetic pursuit in art... Religion is another way, but only for the ordinary. Art is for the extraordinary."²⁵ Jesse Howard's artmaking is as moving as Brown's—passionate, insistent, imaginative and, most important to Howard, rooted in a God understood as the source of ultimate truth. ALL of my WRITING IS TRUTH²⁶ Howard inscribed in one instance and "truth" underscored all his pursuits. Though fundamentalism steered Brown and Howard in different ways, their distinctive fidelity to religious systems served them as both fodder and dross.

¹ Revelation 3: 15-16. Biblical quotations are taken from the King James version of the Bible, the translation used by Jesse Howard.

² Revelation 3:14. These titles refer to Christ; thus, being "spued" or spewed out would be a divine judgment.

³ Jesse Howard, 30 November 1965 Letter to Richard L. Rhodes, Jesse Howard Archives of the Kansas City Art Institute (JHA), p. 2.

⁴ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 25.

⁵ Batsell Barrett Baxter, "Who are the churches of Christ and what do they believe in?," <http://church-of-christ.org>

⁶ Greg Brown, 11 January 2005 e-mail message to author.

⁷ R. Brown, *The Devil's Surprise*, 1980, oil on canvas, 72" x 48"

⁸ G. Brown, op. cit.

⁹ R. Brown, *Autobiography in the shape of Alabama II*, Roger Brown Study Collection of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (RBSC), p. 16.

¹⁰ R. Brown, 20 March 1993 Letter to family and friends, RBSC, p. 17.

¹¹ R. Brown, *Beast Rising from the Sea*, 1983, oil on canvas, 72" x 54". The scriptural reference is Revelation 13: 1-8.

¹² Richard Rhodes, *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Middle West*, Atheneum, 1970, pp. 44-45.

¹³ Often referred to as interpreting the Bible literally. Cf. Wacker, op. cit., pp. 72-76.

¹⁴ Howard, Untitled (Fulton, Mo. February First, 1974), 1974, paint on wood, 11.5" x 116", JH-005.

¹⁵ Howard, Untitled (Yes Sere'), ca. 1960, paint on metal, 23.25" x 27", JH-069.

¹⁶ Wacker, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁷ Howard, Untitled (This is a list), undated, collection of the Howard family.

¹⁸ Howard, JHA, box 2, item 14.

¹⁹ Howard, Untitled (Our Family Record), 1952, paint on wood headboard, 57.5" x 62.5", JH-015.

²⁰ R. Brown, *Dr. Imperial's Tree of Knowledge*, 1985, oil on canvas with neon, 106" x 73" X 3.5".

²¹ Genesis verse 2:9 and chapter 3.

²² Numbers 21: 4-9.

²³ R. Brown, Letter to family and friends, op. cit., p.18.

²⁴ R. Brown, *Arrangement in Blue and Gray, The Artist and his Friend Fishing*, 1985, oil on canvas, 72" x 48".

²⁵ R. Brown, Unpublished and unpaginated typescript, ca. 1994, RBSC.

²⁶ Howard, JHA, box 2, item 10.

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