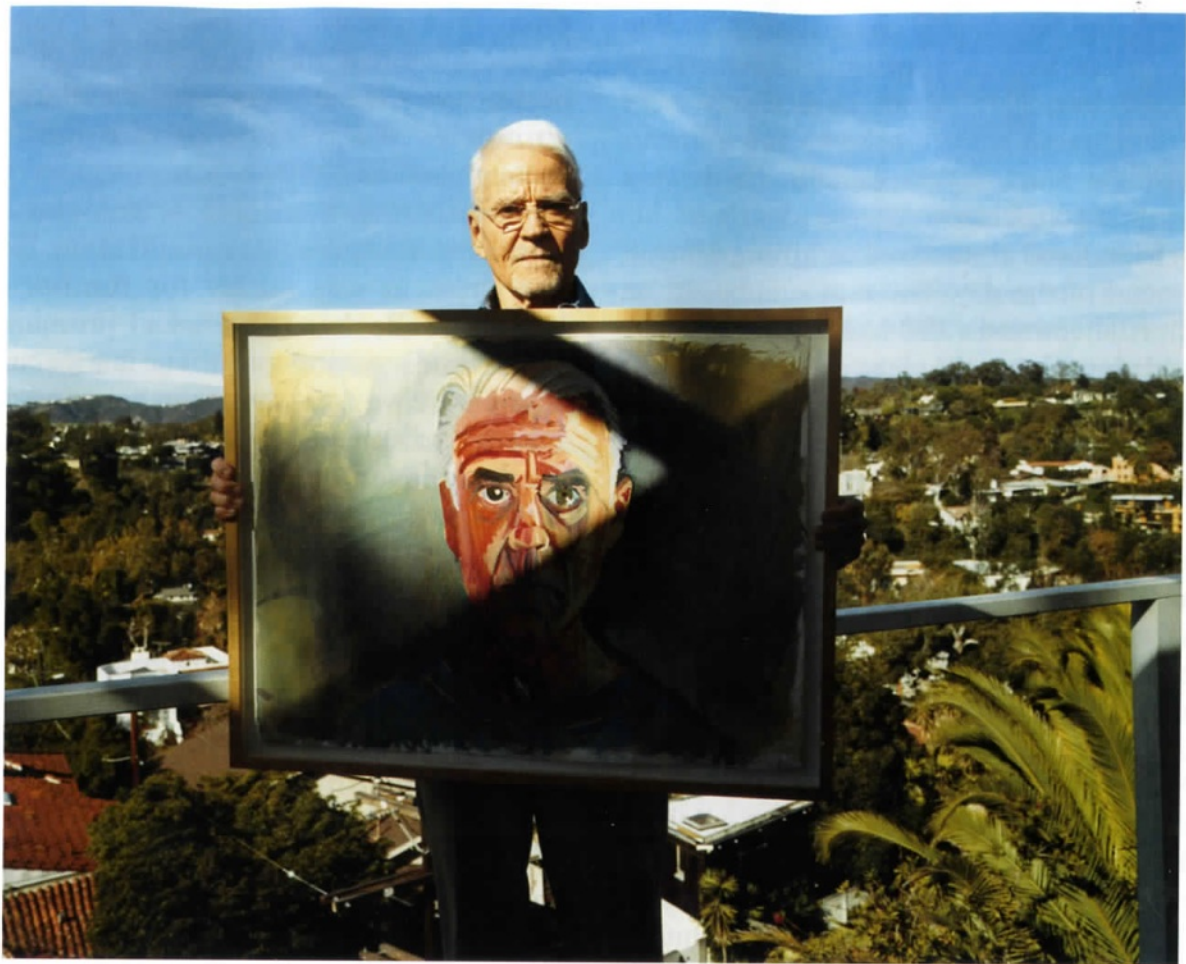


Love Remembered



Bachardy (left) and Isherwood, July 21, 1953,
by Arthur Mitchell



Bachardy holding a self-portrait at his LA home,
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Text	Photography
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Christopher Isherwood died in 1986, leaving a legacy of T I M E L E S S writing and his young artist lover Don Bachardy. To this day, their romance remains Hollywood's greatest gay love story. Bachardy invites Another Man into the home he shared with Isherwood...

“Good morning, George.” This is the single line of dialogue that Don Bachardy delivers in his Hollywood debut. The scene comes half way through designer-turned-director Tom Ford’s drama *A Single Man*, starring Colin Firth as a college professor tortured by the death of his young boyfriend and committed to killing himself before the end of the day. The movie is based on Christopher Isherwood’s 1964 novel of the same name, and it is poignantly clear why Ford chose to give the 75-year-old Los Angeles native his first cameo.

Bachardy was Isherwood’s partner for more than 30 years, their romance stretching from when they first met on the gay section of Will Rogers State Beach in Santa Monica in 1953 all the way

up to the famed writer’s death from prostate cancer in early 1986, aged 81. Isherwood was 48 years old when their love story began; Bachardy was just 18. “I dreaded seeing the movie,” laughs Bachardy. “Thank God I liked it because I liked Tom Ford very much. My advice to him was to follow Chris’s attitude towards adapting a screenplay from an already existing book and make it his own.”

Unlike the plot in the movie, it is not the older man who is left to live amid the memories of his lost companion. Bachardy continues to reside in the Spanish-style house – perched on the hillside of Santa Monica Canyon in California, overlooking the ocean – that he and Isherwood shared since 1959. It is the house where Isherwood died in his own bed, and where Bachardy watched him die by his side, drawing his portrait over and over in black paint on white paper.

It has been a busy year for Bachardy. Not only has he done all of the requisite press for the film, but he’s also coming off a resurgent demand for his paintings after a highly regarded 2009 show of his last drawings of Isherwood at New York’s Cheim & Read Gallery. Bachardy, whose lean physique and gap-toothed smile still possess a strong, sexually leonine resemblance to that handsome teenager skipping through Pacific waves in early home videos that the couple filmed, continues to paint every day in the detached two-storey studio higher up the hillside. He’s working on his self-portraits for an upcoming show and

on his more recent abstract colour paintings. He is also currently proofreading the galleys of the second volume of Isherwood’s diaries, which chronicles the writer’s private introspections throughout the 1960s.

“Chris was a natural writer,” he says. “He wrote for himself not for publication. He couldn’t not write. It was purely for the fulfillment of himself.” Bachardy works intimately with Isherwood’s estate, and there is a peculiar sense that he serves as the guardian and oracle of Isherwood’s memory. “In many ways Chris was much younger than I,” he believes. “I realised after a few years of our living together that he was much more curious, more full of youthful excitement than I was. But he was also

very wise, and I was very much in need of wisdom from somebody more worldly than myself. He was the ideal mentor. I couldn’t have wished for a better one. To be honest, he was much more of a father to me than my natural father ever was.”

In Hollywood, there are a million love stories. But, even today, in Hollywood, there is still only one homosexual love story, one model of how two men of vastly different ages and social positions managed to keep their devotion intact for 33 years. It is the story of Isherwood and writer Armistead Maupin interviewed the two men in 1985 for *The Village Voice*, the title of the intimate article was “The First Couple”. Their biographies were immortalised more recently in the 2007 documentary *Chris & Don: A Love Story*.

50 years ago, when Bachardy and Isherwood first became an openly gay couple in a town and industry built on the all-American heterosexual dream, their relationship was a shock. What’s just as shocking is that a half-century later so few gay couples in Hollywood have succeeded them. “It’s just as conservative here as it has always been,” says Bachardy. “We have many more movies about queers but it isn’t queers playing them. Look at *Brokeback Mountain* or even *A Single Man*. Rock Hudson was really the last of his kind to be a success as a gay leading man and that was because no one spoke about it. And it’s still the same.”

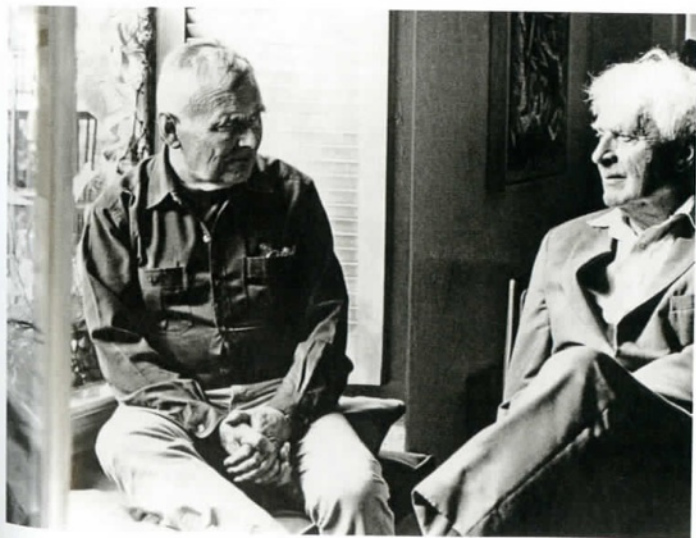
Bachardy clearly remembers the first wave of scandal surrounding his relationship with Isherwood. "We hadn't been together long and Chris took me to New York with him," he smiles. "I had never been on a plane before. A serious rumour was going around that Chris brought a 12-year-old with him from California because I looked so young."

It wasn't only in New York that the two found themselves pitted against gossiping intolerance. In fact, they never meant to be a public couple. But because there was no other explanation for their living together – a teenager taking up with a gay man one year older than his father – their relationship was a fact that the affluent Hollywood community, where Isherwood was busy writing screenplays, could not overlook. "Chris refused to tell any lies to cover himself or to take women out to parties. When he was invited to a big movie party at the Selznicks he took me with him. I had grown up on movies and was thrilled to see all these major stars in the flesh. But we were the only queer couple at the party. Imagine the courage, not on my part, but on Chris's, to do that

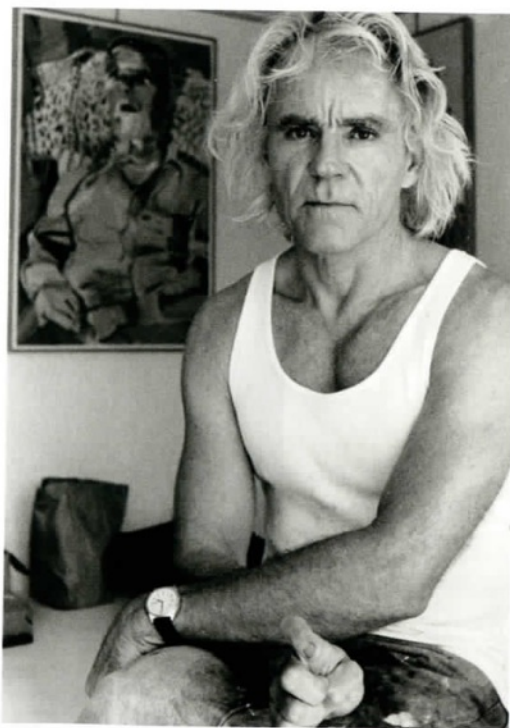
with a man years younger than himself. That was breathtakingly daring of him. I wasn't thinking of myself as a hero at that moment, I was thinking of myself as a lucky son-of-a-gun for being in the same room with all my idols."

There is a danger in mythologising Isherwood and Bachardy's relationship into an ersatz origin story – the Chris and Don inversion of Adam and Eve – because the tendency is to ignore the difficulties and the bad patches and the invidious fights for the hard focus of the enduring romance. But if Isherwood and Bachardy succeeded, it was in many ways because they found a way to live together that wasn't modelled on the screenplays of the ideal heterosexual marriage circa Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Just as they were open, so was their relationship. Although they were seldom apart, they each took lovers and even, at moments, veered toward the precipice of breaking up.

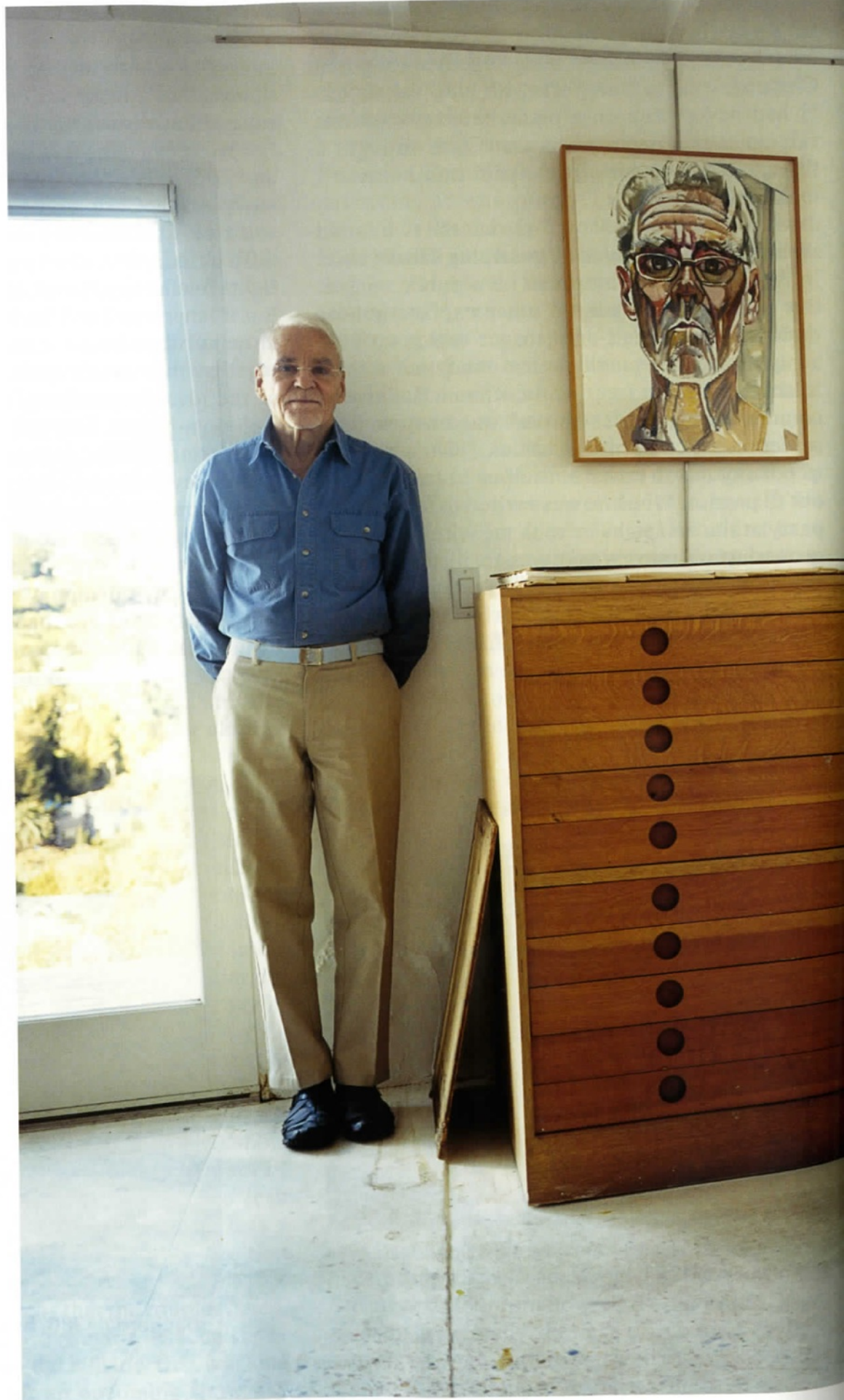
"It worked because we were both as careful with each other as we could possibly be," he explains. "My position was that he'd had so much freedom in his youth that it was unfair of him to deny me a similar freedom. It took so much care



Isherwood and poet Stephen Spender, June 6, 1984, by Wayne Shimabukuro



Bachardy, 1986, by Andy Hagara







Isherwood in Rome, 1955, by Brad Fuller

and delicacy and determination on both our parts to make the other know that he was always number one. I didn't confide my infidelities and I knew some of the people he was seeing. We wouldn't talk about it. Sometimes we'd make jokes but I was careful to tell him as little as possible."

Bachardy confesses that at a certain point – which he calls "the ten year itch" – when he was achieving success on his own as a painter, he briefly considered moving out. "It took me a year to get over it and to realise that I would never find anybody that could compare." When asked if Bachardy, in turn, ever felt jealous of the men that slept with Isherwood, he admits, "I don't think

you can really care about someone without feeling some form of jealousy. If you don't, you are indifferent. And we were never indifferent about each other."

It has been almost 25 years since Isherwood's death. In the house, collaged photos of the couple by David Hockney hang on the walls and Isherwood's writing study in the master bedroom remains largely untouched. But the ghost of Isherwood holds most sway inside Bachardy himself, who has an innate ability to talk about his partner as if he were still in the next room. Bachardy's own career as a portrait painter initially flourished on account of Isherwood's

encouragement as well as his friendship with famous, willing sitters. But it could be argued that Isherwood's legacy has unfairly overwhelmed Bachardy's own eminent talent as an artist. Nevertheless, it was Isherwood who was the first to suggest in 1956 that a 22-year-old Bachardy take drawing seriously and even attend classes, first at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles and then at Slade School in London.

"I just had to do it because I had to forge my own identity, my own life, my own art," he says. "I had nothing but encouragement from Chris. He knew I had to be an equal. I was so lacking in self-confidence but I had to succeed and I did. And that brought us closer together. I couldn't have done it

on my own. He willed me to do it. And that is part of the reason why we had to find each other. I could not have fulfilled myself without him."

With his pen and ink at the ready, Bachardy then set about drawing such luminaries as Gore Vidal, Montgomery Clift, Bette Davis, Joan Didion, Roman Polanski (Sharon Tate commissioned the portrait), Katharine Hepburn, WH Auden, Jane Fonda, Aldous Huxley and Marlene Dietrich (who he swears could "go out of focus when you looked at her"). With big league subjects like that, Bachardy had to work fast, one reason why he chose ink as his tool. "I only work from life," he explains. "Life is fleeting, so I had to get all the essentials down quickly – especially with someone famous. I took whatever time I could get."

Bachardy attributes his obsession with faces to all the movie star close-ups he saw in the cinema as a child with his mother and older brother while his father worked through the flurry of World War II aircraft manufacture at Lockheed Corporation. "We weren't religious," he says of his family, "we went to the movies instead." In 1964, with the confidence of his drawing skills, Bachardy started to develop his signature painting style: pellucid acrylic colours on canvas.

Since then, he's painted some of the most ostentatious personalities who have moved through Los Angeles, operating as something of a west coast sine qua non, much the way Andy

Warhol's society portraits in the 70s and 80s served as the east coast equivalent. One of Bachardy's most famous paintings was the 1984 commissioned portrait of California governor, Jerry Brown, which still hangs in the Capitol building in Sacramento. "Many of the council members criticised that it looked like it was painted with mustard and ketchup, meaning the bright colours," he laughs. "Little did they realise that they were giving me the best year of work because the painting got into *Time*, *Newsweek*, and all the newspapers."

But the subject Bachardy painted most often and most intently was, of course, the one he loved most of all. "It was Chris who proposed himself as my first live sitter," he says. "And that drawing turned out to be a very good likeness but I think it was also the oldest looking drawing of him I ever did. I copied everything I could see in his face – every crease lovingly recorded. He was still a beautiful man and it looked like him, just an old version. There was this pause when Chris saw it. It set him back."

For six months in 1985 and into the first days of 1986, after Isherwood was diagnosed with cancer, Bachardy exclusively drew his first live sitter to record his deteriorating condition in a dramatic and unflinching series of works, often completing as many as 12 portraits of Isherwood each day. Bachardy drew every line, sag and fading stare of his partner until he stopped breathing on January 4.

"It got so that eventually I felt that dying was something we were doing together," he says. "It became like I was dying too. On the day he died, I continued drawing. I did 11 drawings of his corpse. I started at 11.30 in the morning. It was a quarter to eight at night and I was just about to do my 12th when his doctor arrived. I said to myself, 'Thank God.' Because by that time his corpse had changed so much it had little to do with him anymore. I was spared that last drawing. I hid all the work from the doctor because I was afraid she'd find it ghoulish. But it was natural for me – for Chris and me. I had drawn him for all the years we were together." Bachardy stops and lets out a deep sigh. "We often spent hours together just looking into each other's eyes."

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