

# The Death and Life of a Famous Painter

By Peter Hutchinson

Funerals were such joyous times. Louisa Emit hummed to herself as she put on her maroon hat. It went well with her old gold dress that was dotted with violet morning glories. Although 80 years old, she viewed the world as though seeing it for the first time. Happily she hurried towards the graveyard, anxious not to miss the ceremony.

Later, she kept vigil by the disinterred coffin. Confetti from the celebration still clung to her hair. What a fine funeral party it had been—festive relatives, good food, and such rock-and-roll music. She had danced and danced, knowing that Jonas Emit, her husband-to-be, would soon be home. There were years of contentment before them. No wonder Louisa felt in good spirits.

She watched Jonas' corpse carefully. He lay in the coffin dressed in black. His shirt was starched and immaculate. He wore a red velvet bow tie. His face was peaceful, but somewhat drawn looking. As she waited, full of anticipation, a look of pain appeared on his face. It was replaced by a look of joy as he revived and greeted her. She reassured him as he was helped from the coffin. "All your paint-

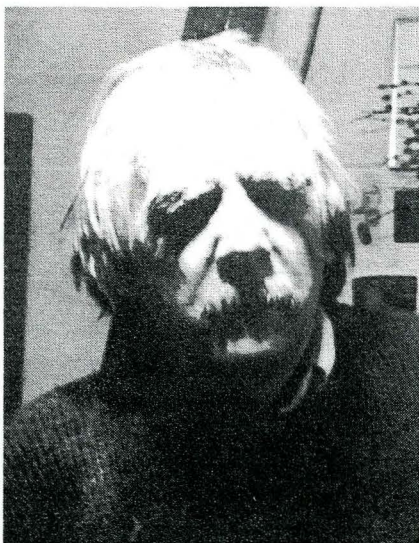
ings have arrived from museums all over the world, dear," she told him. "Your studio is waiting. Everything is ready." She kissed him. "So good to have you home." Then she asked, "How does your heart feel?"

"Oh, a little weak and fluttery," Jonas replied. "But it's getting better every minute." And so it was.

Those first happy months were spent quietly enough. Their children, Alan and Mary, aged 60 and 62, visited them often.

Jonas took things very easily in the studio at first. He sat for hours thinking over his life to come, lovingly remembering his paintings. Sometimes he fondled his paint tubes, his fine sable brushes. He felt peaceful and content. Louisa had kept the studio sparkling clean. The fine mahogany floor shone. She had carefully covered with vinyl the space in front of his enormous oak easel. He contemplated the easel with the secure knowledge of all the paintings he would soon be working on. For the moment, he would rest and recover his strength. There was plenty of time to work later. Plenty of time.

His doctor had insisted that he convalesce for one whole year. He passed many hours walking in the quiet New England countryside. These green Connecticut hills satisfied his deep love of



AGE 89



AGE 79



---

## FICTION

---

nature. How he enjoyed watching the hot summer weather turn into lush, cool spring; the vivid summer flowers, scarlet roses, and fiery zinnias give way to gentler spring colors, cool banks of tulips, and pale daffodils. Then winter came as leaves disappeared into buds. Jonas, more lyrical than original, said at the first snowfall, "When winter comes, can spring be far behind?" Long, slow days of icy stillness, punctuated by violent snowstorms and, less often, thaws of gentle rains, went by. Finally, autumn, windy and beautiful, massed the reds and yellows of oaks and elms almost too sensuous to his painter's eye.

Now the year was over and Jonas could get to work. He did feel better, though still bothered by the complaints of old age: a touch of sciatica, bad digestion, rheumatism—small things he could endure which would clear up in a few years.

The day arrived when he could start serious work. He felt hesitant at first. The paintings looked so professional and finished. He knew, though, that they were too detailed, too professional. There was missing that certain fire he remembered, the fire of his youth. These late paintings were calculated. Brilliant in their brushwork, magnificent in their glazes, intellectual in their understanding of the semi-abstract forms he used, but, as every good

artist knows, the work of genius is more than the sum of these parts.

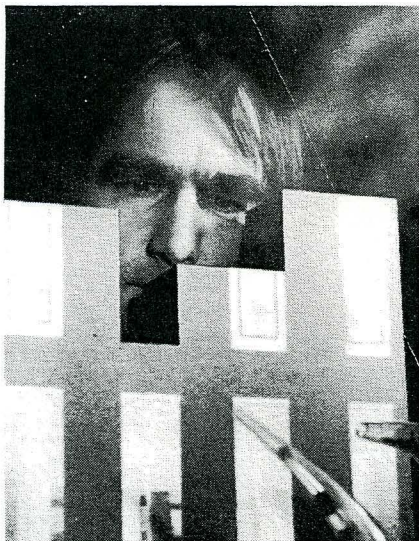
After this first hesitation, he approached the canvas. He removed the brush strokes one by one from his most recent painting. He swept off the large areas of glaze, first the alizarin glaze, then the cobalt blue glaze with a hint of white, then the tracery of black paint set in varnish. The figures and forms emerged and then disappeared until he arrived at the thin oil and varnish wash laid on the white ground. He swept this away with bold, sure strokes, using a housepainter's brush. Finally, he carefully removed the three coats of white gesso, sanding in between each coat. Then the rabbits' skin glue came off and was put back in the can. At last he unstretched the canvas, carefully taking out the tacks. He rolled it, unkeyed the stretchers, and put them away. At the end of the month, he returned these and other art supplies to the art store in return for a small sum.

He knew that reviews of his shows would soon appear. Though museums no longer had his paintings, he was enjoying the large retrospective gallery shows of his later career. He also had those halcyon days of being an up-and-coming painter to look forward to. Those were the best days, he remembered.

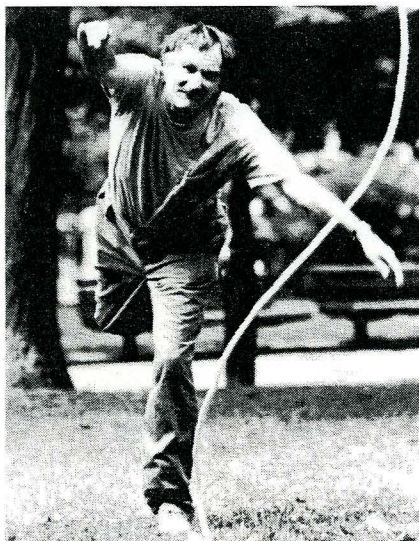
Jonas had a large bank account. So large was it, in fact, that he hardly noticed the sums of money he paid collectors when they returned his paintings, although the amounts were often thousands of dollars. He was kept busy working on the paintings, taking the paint off, putting it back in the tubes and returning it to the art store. Years went by.

Expenses, however, loomed in the future. And he was aware of them. He was startled one day when Louisa said: "We must prepare soon for your mother's funeral." He realized that his aged mother would soon come to live with them for a time. He was surprised that 20 years had passed. He looked in the mirror and noticed with regret the first signs of color at the ends of his snowy hair. No one likes to be reminded of the passing years. Later, he and Louisa would tease each other as his hair turned raven black and hers became a reddish chestnut.

He was working at the time on his most famous series of paintings. They consisted of portraits of Louisa over a period of ten years. In each one of them, he saw her become more beautiful. Her cheeks filled out, her eyes began to sparkle, her skin became softer. Her figure became larger at the bosom and neater at the waist. Her legs became long and slender and the



AGE 49



AGE 39



AGE 29



---

## FICTION

---

slight tracery of visible veins disappeared. Her skin lost every blemish. These portraits contained the signs of his mature painting in all its glory. It was this period that established him as the best known American painter. These works contained the famous yellow slash, the unified dark areas, the well-defined nose, the forehead that blended with the background of freely stroked brushwork. These were the landmarks of his fame.

The days of his dreadful quarrels with Louisa came and now were nearly over. He had dreaded each approaching argument. But it was "all water under the bridge," he reflected one day, leaning over the local river as the water flowed upstream. As soon as the arguments were over, of course, he would completely forget them. In fact, everything as it happened completely passed from his mind. So quickly did this come about that he was not aware of it. It never occurred to him to write anything down. The past did not exist for him, only his future.

The children came home to live. First Alan arrived, aged 20, just before being graduated as an accountant. He was a lean, sensitive young man with Louisa's violet eyes and Jonas' thick hair. Mary left her husband and came home a few years later at the age of 18. She was a delightful girl, perfect in every detail except for the lack of a little finger on her left hand. The newly united family was very happy. Luckily for their financial situation, the children, as they entered adolescence, grew into their clothes. Indeed, the family was entering a period of hardship, although sending the children to college brought in some money. Though fewer and fewer paintings were returned to his studio, commensurately Jonas' bank account had shrunk almost to nothing. He found it increasingly difficult to pay the collectors, even though his prices were now between \$200 and \$500, rather than the thousands he used to pay for his paintings.

Louisa was such a help. A wonderful wife and mother, she often joked to keep her spirits up as she did household chores. "A stitch in time saves nine," she would say, as she unattended the children's

socks, or "Haste makes waste," as she quickly took trash out of the wastebaskets and distributed it around the house.

A great day lay ahead for Jonas. The day of his first one-man show. How he anticipated it. All his paintings had been unpainted except this first fine group. They stood in his studio, full of promise and talent and great auguries of his coming fame. This was to be the greatest day of his life. The paintings were done in the joy of his first huge love for Louisa, in boundless energy and faultless intellect. If they were a little ambitious, a trifle naive, these were small faults that anyone could see would soon be solved by such an obvious talent. To Jonas, the works were perfect.

The day of his first one-man show came and went. All the celebration was ended. Now he was an unknown painter, but full of hope. It was about this time that Mary, now aged 5, had an accident while playing with the kitchen knife. She was very happy to get her little finger back. It had been an embarrassment all her life to be so disfigured.

Jonas now worked at the newspaper offices. The family had returned to the city and they lived in a slum tenement building on the Lower East Side. Louisa was in the hospital. Soon she would be pregnant, with the additional burden of a two-year-old child. This was the time of Jonas' first patrons, those people who believed in his work. He found it very difficult to pay them their money. His job unsetting type at the newspaper was an additional expense that he hardly knew how to meet.

Sad times lay ahead. Both Louisa and Jonas dreaded her return from her final pregnancy. Only nine months in the future was their wedding. As the day approached, their love grew more passionate. They went everywhere together, poignantly happy. Jonas' paintings dwindled quickly. At last, the sad day of their wedding arrived. Everybody wore black, of course. Soon now, one day on 34th Street, they would part, walk in opposite directions and immediately forget one another forever.

Just after he forgot Louisa, came

that wonderful experience when the heavens opened, when the earth stood still, when the shades were peeled back from his eyes. That day the earth sang, bells rang, little children wore halos, and even cockroaches seemed beautiful. In other words, on that day for no observable reason, he knew he was an artist and all the world seemed different to him. On that wonderful, dreadful, beautiful, and frightening day, he was lost to the world of business, became hopeless to his family, became miserable, happy, sorry, and glad all at the same time. And it occurred quite suddenly and unexpectedly when he was eating a hot dog and happened to look at a piece of yellow toffee paper floating in a puddle. There was no explaining such an experience, but it was certainly real to Jonas.

Now Jonas unpainted his first bad work, done before he knew what his life was going to be. He erased the hesitant drawings and ultrarealistic but badly drawn sketches. Nervously, he anticipated going to live with his parents. His father had but recently returned, having been killed in the war, and was anxious to see Jonas again.

Back home he went, and back to school, down the grades.

With increasing speed, the days of his childhood rolled by. The cradle loomed in his future. Struggling and protesting, he was swaddled and imprisoned in it, not understanding.

He examined his fingers, spoke his first and last words. He slept more and more as his consciousness dimmed and the days of his life sped by.

He was driven to the hospital in his mother's arms. Everyone was sad. People always cry at births. □□

*Peter Hutchinson, best known as a conceptual artist who did pioneer work with Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim, is also a writer, and has used words or literature persistently in his visual work. In addition, he writes occasional art criticism and fiction. He is a recent recipient of a Pollock-Krasner grant.*



# Death by a Thousand Cuts

An excerpt from Psycho-Social  
Historical Archives Section 18B  
Sol III (Aqua, formerly Terra)

BY PETER HUTCHINSON

**T**orture, like art, is in common use through the known universe. It is noticeable, however, that the types of torture change with the sophistication of the culture. More primitive cultures use more brutal methods—thumb screws, racks (where applicable), and various other tortures too well known to need elaboration. Better developed societies tend to be less brutal, and the torturer's participation becomes subtler and more enjoyable. The better-educated torturers like less the sight of blood, while being able to stand greater mental anguish on the victim's part. It remains always a principle that the torturer is trying to force either compliance in behavioral terms from the victim, or information out of him. All kinds of torture seek to terrorize the victim without rendering him physically or mentally unable to comply with the wishes of the torturer. The more brutal tortures tend to end the victim's suffering soon, often in death—the later (more evolved) tortures often end in mental collapse.

Viewing all types of torture, it seems that Earth ranks rather high in diversity and development methods. Torturing the victim to find out his greatest fears and then threatening him with them seems (as described by George Orwell in the 20th century) to approach the most efficient means of torture. A close runner-up, and an invention of a much earlier time, is the death by a thousand cuts. This is applicable only to certain species, mankind being very suitable (hence the planet of its prior use), since he has a large

vulnerable body surface and an ability to heal quickly. This unique torture, unlike more barbarous ones, enables the victim to live a length of time, dependent on his physical fitness. It introduces for the first time the most sophisticated idea of letting the patient anticipate his next cut for a whole day, thus employing an amount of mental anguish seen to such effect in the Orwellian method. Some victims have lived considerable lengths of time under this torture. None has survived it. It is interesting to speculate, if one survived the cuts for a period, whether the original cuts would heal. An old cut would heal approximately every day as a new cut was received. Eventually, of course, the body would become debilitated from loss of blood and stop the healing process.

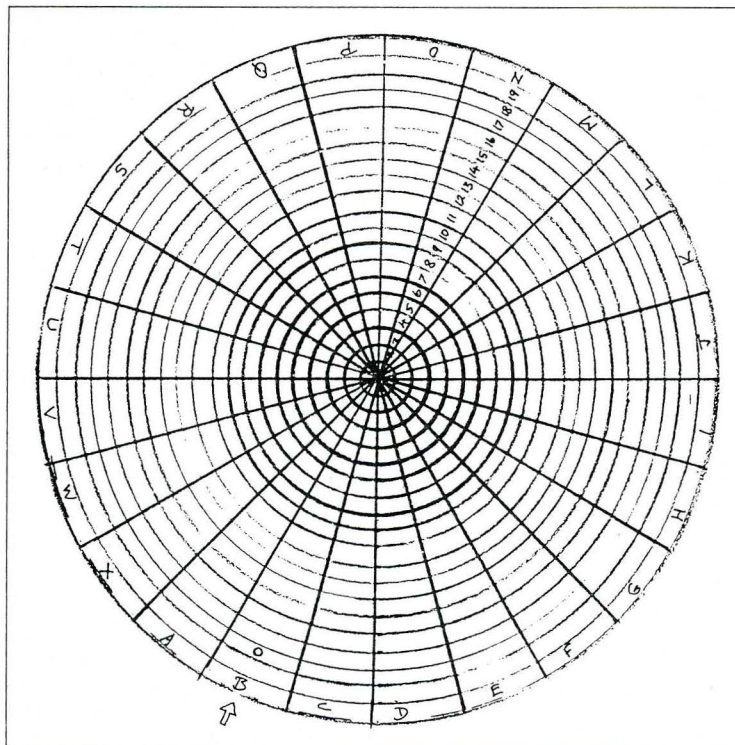
It seems, on consideration, that death by a thousand cuts is more horrible than the Orwellian torture, and with certain creatures, just as effective.

Peter Hutchinson is a well-known conceptual artist who has had more than 50 solo exhibitions in Europe and the U.S. His writings on art and aesthetics have appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and numerous small, artist-run publications. He is also an occasional writer of fiction. This is the third story he has published in *Provincetown Arts*.

MILKY WAY GALAXY



AQUA - 18B







## PETER HUTCHINSON BY DANIEL RANALLI

I FIRST MET PETER HUTCHINSON IN January, 1991, at our joint opening at the Zoe Gallery in Boston. We were paired together in an exhibition because our work shares some common ground. Both of us, seeking to define a highly personal relationship to the landscape, intervene with nature without quite controlling it. It snowed hard that Friday night, and people kind of ducked in and out quickly, fearful of another great blizzard. Three days later Bush bombed Iraq and everyone stayed in to watch the war on TV.

After two days, a steady, soaking, late September rain slows to a light sprinkle. Peter walks me around his sodden garden, on a quarter-acre in the interior region of Provincetown. Hurricane Bob passed through a month ago, costing Peter a tree or two and a few plants, but he seems just as happy with the new space and light as he discusses their replacement.

An artist, writer, and gardener, Hutchinson is also a vegetarian and Go player. His work, often framed in shadow boxes, contains elements of sculpture, photography, the ready-made, and language. It has been described variously as conceptual, environmental, and narrative. Ironically, his work is shown more regularly in Holland, Germany, Italy, Austria, or New York, than in Provincetown, where he has lived for 16 years. By any contemporary measure, Provincetown galleries remain a rather surprisingly conservative venue for exhibiting art.

His studio is tiny. A drafting table with a two-by-three-foot color photo-collage in progress fills an entire wall. Another wall is spanned by an international-style leather couch. A third is measured by the length of the bicycle leaning against it. You can stand in the center of the room and almost touch two of the walls. Although the studio is attached to his living quarters, the two areas

communicate only by way of an outdoor path. To move from my kitchen to my bedroom in my Wellfleet home, I too must go outdoors, so I feel I know some of the rhythms of Peter's place. While Peter goes around to his kitchen to make tea, I wait in the studio.

Two dominant aspects of Hutchinson's work are a fascination with language and an abiding devotion to the natural world. Virtually all his recent works include text as a vital element. Indeed, a large project completed last year utilizes the 26 letters of the alphabet as a unifying device for 26 box constructions. Each box is provided with a theme suggested by one letter: "C is for Compass" or "J is for Jackknife," for example. The text, a kind of short story accompanying a presentation of actual compasses or jackknives, uses only words beginning with a single letter. Remarkably, these witty paragraphs are written in a single sitting, dashed off, so to speak, without corrections. Hutchinson says they are "a story about a man, but not autobiography."

There are poppies and pears and petunias and penstemon and pokeweed and peris and prunella and phlox and phaseolus and physostegia along with fertile ferns, fiddlehead ferns, fennel and forsythia all growing in the garden. I walk about Peter's backyard terrarium stepping carefully, one foot ahead of the other in as direct a line as possible, on paths that only he seems able to discern. Even then, following behind in my best Indian gait, I seem always to be squashing chlorophyll molecules underfoot. Presumably they are uncultivated.

Hutchinson's collages remind me often of those unmanageable bittersweet vines so common to the Cape. The tendrils from his art seem to reach out into his garden and return circuitously back to his studio, entwining gardening, storytelling, and art into an in-

separable tangle of creative activity. An extended series of Thrown Rope pieces, comprised of meandering rows of flowers or lines of stones, are determined by a random tossing of ropes. These works are a kind of gestural *I Ching*, linking gardener, artist, and man, while reinforcing the role of the artist as nurturing the earth. With my own interests in time, order/disorder, and the use of natural materials as sculptural elements, I am most drawn to these pieces.

I am amazed at the fecundity as I walk around Peter's microscopic world—a little Alpine tableau in the western region of his lot, a tiny tropical rain forest in the central section. It is not easy to think of the land out here as fertile. My own soil is nothing but yellow sand under a peeling of a mat of grass and a scruff of roots. I do all I can to coax a few dozen tomatoes out of it each year.

Hutchinson understands how to make things grow, even out here. He works patiently, lives simply, and seems not to use up much of the planet. The color photographs he takes are spliced together in lush collages linking his tiny Provincetown garden with the forests of Nova Scotia and the mountains of Mexico, connecting his personal narrative with that of the biota.

Peter comes back with our tea, and with a chaser of homemade peach brandy. The brandy, sharply aromatic, smells of dozens of exotic ingredients from his garden, or perhaps obtained on one of his frequent travels abroad. But no, he tells me, the flavor is just peaches—and some vodka added because it didn't seem strong enough. ■

Daniel Ranalli, a seasonal resident of Wellfleet, is an artist and writer who teaches at Lesley College and Boston University. His column, "Forum," appears monthly in *Art New England*.



# Berlin

Peter Hutchinson, a recipient of a D.A.A.D. grant, a German fellowship for visiting artists, was in Berlin when the first cracks appeared in the Eastern bloc.



BERLIN  
Die "Lebende Mauer" am 13. Aug. 1961  
6/12/89. At the wall, Saturday  
A young man with bloody  
hands & red face is  
pounding away at the wall.  
I picked up some pieces,  
with his permission. A  
small crowd has gathered,  
some American. It is very  
emotional, yet good-humored.  
Of course, some wall breakers  
are selling pieces & for a  
price you can rent a chisel  
& hammer. They are returning  
me to the Brandenburg Gate.  
Nurembergerstrasse, right  
back in my room on  
Munichburgerstrasse, right



Chris Buser  
650 Commercial St.

WELTSTADT - BERLIN  
Brandenburger Tor mit Mauer  
& washing my shirts in the  
sink, I reflect on this  
experience. The pervasive  
sound of chipping, ominous  
and hopeful, the camaraderie  
of the foreign visitors, especially  
those of the U.S., the border  
guards atop the wall, torn between  
smiling and looking down;  
the bullet-pocked Reichstag, the  
Russian Memorial, complete with  
Soviet guards; the streams of  
East Berliners coming to visit.  
Next stop Paris & back to  
P-town on 24th or thereabouts  
Best, Peter



Chris Buser  
650 Commercial  
PROVINCE T  
U.S.A.



Photos by Peter Hutchinson