

When Stewart Hitch breezed into New York City on his motorcycle, he had high hopes of making it as an artist. Fresh from Lincoln, Nebraska, Stewart arrived in Lower Manhattan in 1968. He landed in what was then the largest community of artists the world had ever seen. Bigger than Athens under Pericles and international in the diversity of its inhabitants: this was SoHo; a neighborhood bound by Houston Street to the North and Canal Street at the Southern border, and consisting of unoccupied, abandoned manufacturing buildings with no plumbing or heating. Hitch was one of thousands who claimed these huge spaces for art studios. His first loft was on Greene Street, and it was used as a location in the movie “The Panic in Needle Park” with the, then young, Al Pacino.

But Hitch looked a lot more like James Dean. He stood about 5’ 7” with dirty blond hair, low gravelly voice, killer smile, and was made of pure muscle. His tremendous upper body strength came from years of performing the Iron Cross on steady rings, which is still considered an impressive move in artistic and competitive gymnastics. It requires a certain build of muscles (wrist and arms) and technique. Hitch was strong and smart, and you could see both traits in his hands; hands that could have been a surgeon’s, built a log cabin from scratch, or, as he actually did, take apart his motorcycle and put it back together again so he could park it in his loft.

He was charismatic and a legend even before he came to New York City. His house, in Lincoln, was the go-to meeting place for artists; a rock ‘n’ roll, pot-smoking, beer-drinking, Midwestern version of Warhol’s Factory. When poet Allen Ginsberg came to talk at the University of Nebraska, he left his hotel to stay with Hitch.

This charisma lasted a lifetime, as did the incredible strength of body and character. It lasted through decades of groundbreaking paintings, fame and loss of fame, money and no money, wife and no wife. Hitch’s indomitable courage even carried him through an evening in a famed NYC artist bar when a crazy customer slit his throat with a piece of glass. Fortunately, the cut wasn’t deep enough to kill him or to sever his vocal cords. But alcohol was what got him in the end. The hard working, hard living, hard drinking cowboy painter was sideswiped.

The beginning of the end started in the 90s. After living in SoHo for over 30 years, Hitch lost his loft on Mercer Street and was kindly offered an apartment, in NYC’s Inwood area, by video artist Nam June Paik. Not too long after, doctors told him he had to stop drinking immediately or “you might as well jump off the Brooklyn Bridge.” Overnight and with no help, Hitch kicked the habit and gave up his daily occupancy at Fanelli’s bar on Prince Street. That Midwestern bulldog character was still intact.

He was broke but managed to make a new body of work that was part painting, but mostly assemblage. He stuck anything that came to mind onto his panels— including broken doll parts, pieces of furniture, newspaper, crumbling angels and saints, and glitter (glitter had always fascinated him, even in his early work). And, of all things, he became a regular on the TV show “Law and Order” taking on background work. He got an acting agent. He had hopes again.

But he was far from well; his liver had suffered too much damage. Stewart Hitch died in a hospital room uptown, far from his artist friends and even further from the cornfields of his youth whose color, shade, and rooted certitude informed his art. In his last moments, he called out for one of his oldest and truest friends, my husband, Thornton Willis. Willis ran to the hospital, but he arrived just a minute too late. Hitch was gone. Hitch’s mother and sister came to New York to claim his body. Pioneer-bred women, they made no recriminations or claims. Stoically, they took him home to Nebraska to rest among his kin.

The artists I came up with in the 70s were mostly men (including Stewart Hitch, Thornton Willis, Neil Jenney, Tom Evans, Dan Christensen, Kenny Showell, Richard Serra, James Little, and David Cummings) and none were city slickers. They were the sons of small business owners or farmers— pioneer stock—who valued honesty above all other virtues because their lives depended on it.

I thought then that people tied to the land like these artists have no reason to make abstract paintings unless they are real to them (the paintings I mean). Meeting these people confirmed for me that abstraction is real and truly American. Based on our principles of liberty and freedom, we gave birth to this way of making a statement visually, and it’s as American in origin as Jazz music.

Note from the author: Much of Stewart Hitch’s legacy has been lost. During the decades of mind-numbing drinking, he entrusted nearly all of his work (minus what had been sold) to another alcoholic who ended up stealing and possibly destroying it all, including a large sum of money that Hitch paid him to store his work in the first place.

Several of us who knew and loved Hitch got together after his death and hired a private detective to run down the guy and find the large stash of paintings and drawings. The writer Leslie Kaufman, wrote “The Lost Legacy Of Stewart Hitch” for the New York Times, Sunday edition, February 2, 2003 (The City Section, p. 12), which explains the situation in greater detail.

Despite our efforts, the work was never recovered and what remains is only a glimpse at Hitch’s incomparable facility and ability in handling paint and other mediums of expression. We hold onto

these hints and signposts to remind ourselves of his greater artistic vision. Stewart Hitch was an extremely talented and prolific painter who intuited ahead of his time the need to combine the tenets of Abstract Expressionism with what is most authentic and American of Pop Art.

Freddy would like to thank Margery Mellman, artist, longtime friend to Stewart, and Executor of the Stewart Hitch Estate, for her enthusiasm and cooperation in making this show possible.

Vered Lieb

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