

Obituaries

BRIAN JONES, 57 » PAINTER

Artist who specialized in the everyday enjoyed success that was extraordinary

Originally a photo realist, he returned again and again to the well of inspiration that was his childhood. His work is an exploration of memory and an affectionate record of a vanished life

BY KATE TAYLOR

Ontario artist Brian Jones wore a suit only twice in his life: the day he was married and the day he met the Queen. From boyhood, he knew that his mind full of shapes and colours and his love of popular culture could never be contained within a 9-to-5 job. By the time he was a teenager, he had picked the visual arts as a career.

Mr. Jones was a figurative painter who specialized in distinctive scenes of small-town Ontario life in a signature style featuring bright colours, flattened spaces and curiously inflated human figures.

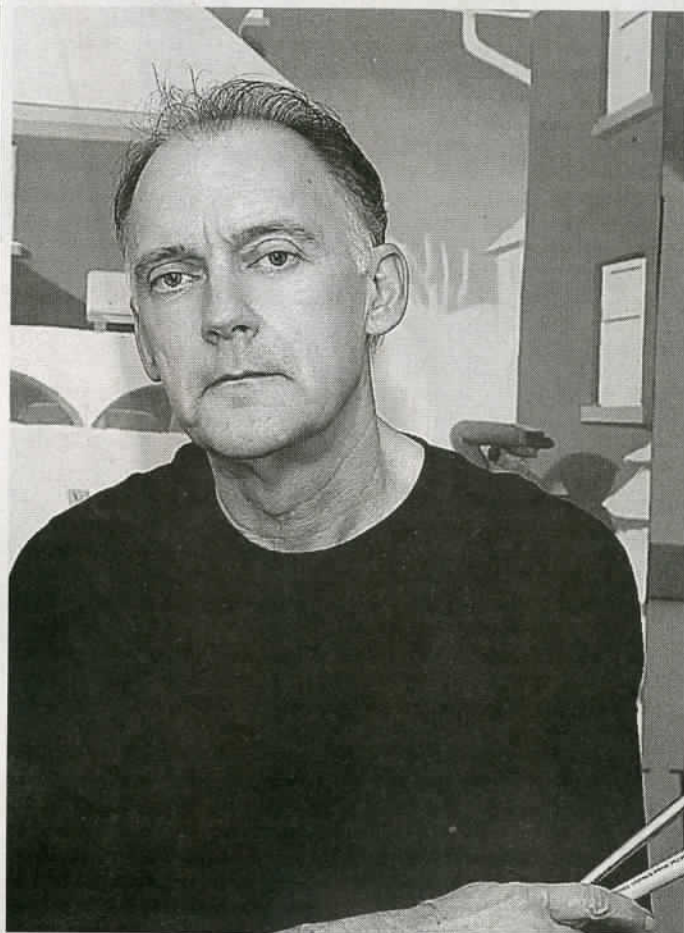
Influenced by the haunting village scenes of 20th-century British realist Stanley Spencer, he achieved an odd mix of nostalgia, humour and the occasional hint of menace with his slightly off-kilter images of neighbours shovelling snow or walking dogs, lurching office workers fending off a bee or children dwarfed by looming parents.

Returning again and again to the well of inspiration that was his own childhood in Chatham, Ont., he set many of his paintings in the 1950s and 1960s, including men in homburg hats and cars with fins in paintings that often used a low perspective point as though recorded from a child's point of view. At their most arresting, his paintings read as much as an exploration of visual memory as they do an affectionate record of daily life in a simpler era.

"I always described his works as too much line, too much colour: you either love it or you hate it. But if you love it, boy, you love it," said his Toronto dealer, Alan Loch. "The paintings made you smile."

Mr. Jones spent his boyhood in Chatham, where his father worked as an appliance salesman at Eaton's while his mother, who had worked for Union Gas before her children were born, cared for the family. He showed talent with a pencil from as early as age 5. As a teenager devoted to both playing guitar and drawing pictures, he left home to study art at H. B. Beal Secondary School in nearby London.

Beal was famous as the technical high school that had nurtured a previous generation of London artists, most notably Greg Curnoe, Murray Favro and Jack Chambers, with



Brian Jones in front of *The Car in Winter*. Both that painting and *The Big Remco Whirlybird in the House*, below, are in private collections in Toronto.



BRIAN JONES

whom Mr. Jones apprenticed briefly after graduation.

He helped out in Mr. Chambers's studio during the period that the renowned realist was painting *Sunday Morning No. 2*, an image of the artists' young sons watching cartoons on the living-room television. When he left the studio, Mr. Chambers offered him his choice of payment — either money or

art. Mr. Jones picked a water-colour of a papaya that later showed up in the background of one of his own paintings, *Cold Front*.

Mr. Jones positioned himself as an heir to Mr. Chambers's and Mr. Curnoe's legacy of a determinedly local and unapologetically representational art that offered a vigorous re- tort to international abstrac-

tion. Initially a photo realist himself, he gradually developed an expressive approach he referred to as his "neighbour style," with its bright colours and rounded figures.

While his subject matter was always local, he was an avid student of the modern masters, including Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon, and admired both Mr. Chambers and the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer for their ability to paint light. "He devoured art books like they were going out of style," Mr. Loch said. "He absorbed everything."

Mr. Spencer remained perhaps his greatest artistic influence. The idiosyncratic British painter was, like Mr. Jones, deeply rooted in a small place and used the local to capture the universal. Mr. Spencer spent most of his life in the village of Cookham in Berkshire, using it as the backdrop both for everyday scenes and for his biblical paintings, such as *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta*. Both Mr. Spencer's affectionate view of human foible and his rounded figures are echoed in Mr. Jones's neighbour paintings, which include an image of children in winter warming their hands on the dryer vent at the side of a house.

These were always paintings that people liked. From the start of his career, Mr. Jones met with commercial success, declining to apply for government grants and paying the rent on his London apartment by selling the paintings he placed in the window of the art shop downstairs. He began showing at the Nancy Poole Studio (now merged with the Loch Gallery) in Toronto in 1975, and mounted an exhibition there about every 18 months afterward, including what was to be his last show in November, 2007, just two months before his diagnosis with cancer.

"People realized really early how good he was," said Michael Gibson, a London art dealer who also sells his work. "A lot of it was about regionalism, a movement that came out of London. Brian was one of the sparks."

In 1982, Mr. Jones was introduced to the Queen as a young Canadian achiever, and in 1984 he left London to make the move to Toronto, where he painted in a McCaul Street apartment overlooking the Art Gallery of Ontario and Ontario

College of Art and Design.

"I do like to paint simple, unpretentious things," he wrote in an artist's statement in 1990. "Small houses, kitchens with breakfast nooks, garages and backyards, with people going about their daily activities. Things that I know and remember. The familiar scenes may look mundane on the surface, but I think they say a lot about our lives. Sometimes, the quiet neighbourhoods that I paint are pierced by a threatening undercurrent and a vaguely sinister quality. Sometimes it is all sunshine and light, with happiness as the key emotion. I never know which feeling will overtake me [when I begin.]"

His eye was always looking for images he wanted to paint, but he could never be given commissions. Mr. Loch remembers one client who particularly wanted him to paint a picture of a panting dog hanging out a car window. It struck her as a typically Brian Jones image and while the dealer agreed with that judgment, he did not pass on the request. "You could never influence him to paint something."

Mr. Jones continued to paint in his neighbours style throughout his Toronto years and returned to small-town life itself when he and his wife, journalist Susanne Tausig Jones, moved to Collingwood, Ont., in 2000.

He remained a great fan of the music of the 1950s and 1960s, and an enthusiastic guitarist. He was also an avid collector of popular art forms, including guitars, old TV sets and radios, and, most of all, toys. The McCaul Street apartment was overrun by the couple's huge collection of antique mechanical toys; their Collingwood garage houses two cars from the 1950s.

"You get a sense of who he is by looking at his paintings," Mr. Gibson said. "He had this great talent, but he really did not have a big ego ... People think artists are different, but they are not: He was a normal guy who liked to play darts and listen to the Beatles."

BRIAN JONES

Brian Rendel Jones was born June 1, 1950, in Chatham, Ont. He died of pancreatic cancer in Collingwood, Ont., on Feb. 27, 2008. He was 57. He is survived by wife, Susanne Tausig Jones, and by his brother Bradley.