



***Alex Brown: Presence Chamber***

February 3 - March 19, 2023

There are those who knew Alex Brown much better than I. We last saw each other in November, 2018 on the sidewalk in front of Fergus McCaffrey gallery during an opening. Since Hudson's death and the closing of Feature Inc. in 2014, Alex had not had gallery representation in NYC, although he was showing regularly in Europe. I run Cathouse Proper, hence our conversation turned to possibilities, and I gave him my business card. I do not remember giving him my business card, but as I was researching this show, it turned up again in a stack of papers in his mother's basement next to an NYC MetroCard dated 11/20/18. *Alex Brown: Presence Chamber*, in a sense, is that show that was briefly intimated there on the sidewalk.

I am writing this press release from Des Moines, Iowa, Alex Brown's hometown, where he spent most of his life. We met as undergraduates at Parsons in the early 1990s. Alex did not follow by going to graduate school, preferring to return to Des Moines, which he did in 1996, and paint. After Alex died suddenly from an aneurysm at the age of 52 in 2019, his family very efficiently put together a foundation in his name and began a residency program in his former studio. I applied to the residency program with this exhibition/studio exchange in mind, hoping to better understand a friend whom I only knew slightly, and to reflect on the nature of the art object in relation to the absence of its maker.

The first step in understanding this show, for me, was an ink on paper piece by Alex depicting himself as a child wearing a clown mask. In the image Alex is being held up by his father who is partially obscured and in shadow. Alex's mother, Sibylla, pointed this picture out to me while she and I toured around her home in Leon, Iowa. In passing, she said that Alex liked to wear masks. She meant *as a child*, but following up the next day on the phone with Alex's brother, Christopher, I asked, did Alex wear many masks?—thinking more generally about psychology. And he answered, in his opinion, not anymore than anyone else.

Nevertheless, this got me thinking about the relevance of masks in relation to Alex's work. The technique that he used almost exclusively during his mature years as a painter was one of laying printed, line-patterned transparencies over select found photographs, then scaling up and painstakingly reproducing the image seen through the pattern, approximating in paint the color and tone for each unit within the gridded pattern. His transparency grids are elaborate and diverse, each painting getting its own specifically considered pattern. Consequently, looking at this patterning on the painted surface of his canvases causes the paintings to look abstract at first, or more abstract than they do after looking longer. Importantly, too, there is a very curious, almost magical, effect when Alex's paintings are reproduced. The compressed image in reproduction seems to *add* visual information that the original painting does not have. So that, seen in your phone or reproduced on the page, the paintings appear more realistic than they do in person. At a removed distance one seems to see more.

Depending on your inclination, masks either reveal something about what is hidden, or hide something that cannot be revealed. However, in Alex's painting the mask is interwoven with the reality depicted. The mask and reality, once realized, are one and the same.

At this point it began to occur to me that the choice to stage the first posthumous exhibition of this artist friend of mine was not arbitrary, that there is something inherent in Alex's work that confronts death. His work, considering these masks, is deliberately both present and absent, obfuscating and difficult to locate. In this context, one might even go so far as to say that his painting has always been that of the death mask. The painting I remember most from his days at Parsons is of the lower Manhattan AT&T building, a concrete skyscraper that has no windows.

The title for this exhibition is taken from a painting of Alex's from 1998, *Presence Chamber*. Suffice it to say that the chamber depicted in *Presence Chamber* is absent of any clear representation of a presence. But, again, some magic is involved, because the painting is clearly haunted by something, or someone, that is there, possibly hidden in the patterning, but that one cannot see. Relevant for us, the painting, *Presence Chamber*, is absent from our exhibition, but one will find it represented there in surprising ways, along with several characters, possibly masks of some sort for the artist, *The Captain*, the Jackal, an angel...

Also, we have what we believe to be Alex's final painting, *Tapestry*, dated 2018. A new direction for the artist in that it is a representation of a thing (a worn carpet) that is already abstract in its patterning (horizontal stripes). So, he is overlaying an abstract pattern on an already abstract pattern that is also a representation of a real thing. Due mostly to the worn imperfections in the carpet, and especially when seen compressed or reproduced, the painting allows a real presence of the carpet to seep through the abstraction. A magic carpet that weaves a reality that seems to come from very far away.

David Dixon  
director, Cathouse Proper

**Note:** Due to my working in Des Moines until February 12 as the Alex Brown Artist Resident, and the show opening in Brooklyn on February 3, there will not be an opening reception, but there will be a closing event and events throughout. For example, we have enlisted a select group of Alex's friends to sit in the gallery with his work while I am away in Des Moines. Conversations and exchanges will no doubt ensue. For an updated schedule of who is going to be in the gallery when, follow us on Instagram @cathouse\_proper

**Bio:** The painter Alex Brown (1966-2019) was known for work in several media that engages the viewer with abstracted interpretations of everyday images and found photos. Reviewing one of his early shows, The New York Times described him as "an inventive young New York painter [who] combines photorealism and Vasarely-style abstraction," achieving "a tension between abstraction and illusion in his pictures that is most arresting." Curator Bob Nickas called him "an artist for whom the acts of perception and painting are completely intertwined," producing work that was "less representation than apparition." Brown showed primarily at Feature, Inc. in New York, as well as internationally, with solo shows in Paris, Geneva, Tokyo, Brussels and elsewhere. He was a recipient of the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He returned to Des Moines in the mid-1990s, where he also produced several notable works of public art. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy; and various other institutions.



Cathouse Proper at 524 Projects  
524 Court Street, 2nd floor  
(enter Huntington St.)  
Brooklyn, NY 11231

Fridays-Sundays, 12-6pm  
F/G to Smith & 9th St.

The gallery is situated on unceded indigenous Lenape land.

The gallery is located on the second floor accessible by stairs only; should you need assistance gaining entry, please contact the gallery before or upon arrival.

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