

Interview date: Saturday, July 12, 2008  
Voices on recording: Jon Lidolt, Alex Liros  
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Transcribed by: Greg Beneteau

*Synopsis: The first half of an interview by Jon Lidolt of Alex Liros, a Toronto-based artist and former member of the JAC art collective (1980-1988). Liros worked alongside fellow artists John Grube and Clarence Barnes during the to produce large-scale group paintings that each member worked on simultaneously (the name JAC is an acronym of the artists' first names). Their works, which Liros discusses, details a wide range of themes around Toronto's gay community, including the struggle of for acceptance and equal rights in the post "bathhouse raid era," early pride celebrations, popular gay hangouts, celebrity and the sex and sexuality. Further information can be found at [www.darylvoocat.com/xtra-JAC.htm](http://www.darylvoocat.com/xtra-JAC.htm)*

*Pictures referenced in the interview can be found on a printout document of JAC Collection Photographs available from Gilberto Prioste Photography. Lidolt notes he and Liros were "viewing paintings on a computer screen – or at least we were going to"; judging from the sound of ruffling papers in the background, it's apparent they were following a similar document*

Works referenced: 302, 304, 305, 307, 309, 310, 314, 317, 323, 324, 325, 330, 331, 332, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341 342, 343, 344, 345, 351, 352, 353, 354, 357, 369, 370, 373, 374,, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 401, 404, 405, 406, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 417, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426.

[START TAPE]

**Jon Lidolt:** Okay, today is Saturday, June the 12<sup>th</sup> and we are about to hear from Alex Liros, who will be talking to us about selected works from the JAC collection of paintings.

Alex and I are viewing the paintings on a computer screen – or we were going to – each of which has a long-winded label under it. In order to simplify things, we're only going to use the last three numbers to identify the work we're discussing at the moment.

**Alex Liros:** Okay, I'm Alex Liros, the third member of JAC, the last remaining member of JAC, and I am now looking at the \*\*\*\*\* collection of images. We'll start, I guess, chronologically in terms of the earlier pieces and what I'm seeing is that the early pieces like 390, 392 and maybe 370 and 369 – these were done in the studio, in early days.

JAC actually originated from a workshop situation. We would hire gay models and paint them, draw or paint them. This went on in my studio and in Clarence's studio and it

started out in Andy Fabo's studio<sup>1</sup>. This is kind of the beginnings [sic] of a group of gay men, artists, working from a gay model, usually.

John, Clarence and I at one point – and I can't tell you what the magic point was – decided one day that maybe we could try working together, the three of us. So we tried this and the result, like 390, was the way we would work traditionally, alone, but all of sudden be working together. So you'd have a model – and it looks like we might have had two models in this case – were doing basically a life drawing. The difference was we were gay men and we were hiring gay models and in this particular number, 390, there was some kind of idea of a gay context here, where, y'know, the guy lying down, touching himself and another guy standing up and looking down with interest. But it's still basically life drawing. Let's see whether we have other examples...

**Jon Lidolt:** Is that piece done with the three of you, as well?

**Alex Liros:** Excuse me?

**John Lidolt:** It really looks much more like a really unified piece.

**Alex Liros:** It did look like a unified piece, actually. But I can see areas where I worked on it and John worked on it a bit more. Yeah, it is a bit unified. Let me see whether I can get a piece that's less so...

Well, find 369. That's not exactly the beginning but not too far, probably. We had different styles, y'know: the lower part of the body is actually more distorted. You have an extra foot coming out, a very large extra foot, but we did manage to get a line figure. There are all these extraneous activities going around the figure and you don't know what that is, because every artist had his own idea as to how to fill in the background, so the background is chaotic, the context of the body was chaotic.

But I think we were very careful at first to keep the male body intact. We weren't going to somehow distort the male body too much because we thought that, as gay men, we had to kind of keep the figure intact and recognizable. Let me see now... a little later on we got into things like 374.

**Jon Lidolt:** 374?

**Alex Liros:** And there... This funny scene looks like it was done without a model. It was done from various types of male figures. One looks like it's leather and one little guy at the bottom here, obviously, a little midget who goes by...

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Fabo (b. 1953) is a Calgary-born painter, artist and writer who lives and works in Toronto. At the time of JAC, Fabo was also heavily involved in the queer art scene, working throughout the 70s and 80s to bring more acceptance towards art showcasing "gay desire and the body" and drawing attention to the AIDS crisis. In 1981, Fabo also co-founded along with Sybil Goldstein, Oliver Girling, Rae Johnson and Tim Jocelyn the short-lived ChromaZone gallery, which specialized in figurative art.

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** But they all have big cocks, or they all have erect cocks. So, obviously there was an intention. We were determined to tell people, “This is a cock and balls kind of situation.”

**Jon Lidolt:** Right, right.

**Alex Liros:** It’s not just any three guys, y’know, with sunglasses, y’know, somewhere. We were very careful about that. Later we changed ideas, but early on we were careful to use the male nude and to show it was a gay context.

**Jon Lidolt:** Right, right.

**Alex Liros:** And so that was our idea.

**Jon Lidolt:** In a piece like this, you said you didn’t think you used models. Did you have references for each of the pictures?

**Alex Liros:** No, no, I don’t think so, actually. I can recognize the people a bit, actually. We used models so frequently that after a while, I kind of lost track of who we used. But I don’t think so, because the top left, the guy’s ruddy arms, I can’t imagine that we worked from a model there.

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** That’s so distorted to me, and the midget – I can’t imagine working from a model from that little guy.

**Jon Lidolt:** No, no.

**Alex Liros:** But let me think, now... probably the picture next to it, 373...

**Jon Lidolt:** Right.

**Alex Liros:** ...might come from a model. And you see what we’ve done here. We’re getting into colour – there aren’t too many examples of the very early pieces, which are mostly black and white. Here, we’re getting into colour and we’re doing various imitations or reiterations of the same piece. There’s one figure with sunglasses, the main in the centre, then there’s another echo of the person’s head further up and then an echo of the arm on the right.

This looks actually fairly integrated. I feel hard-pressed to say what part I did and what part John did and what part Clarence did.

**Jon Lidolt:** But once you would start on a piece like this – who would actually start the painting, or was it always a different one?

**Alex Liros:** Well, this is a large piece of paper, and we were all used to working with the models. So somebody would start and, in this case, it looks like we started in much different directions, different places. Somebody would start perhaps in the centre and this probably might have started in the corner, I'm not quite sure.

**Jon Lidolt:** So however the mood hit you.

**Alex Liros:** Then after a while you got the idea that, "Okay, we are working together, so I'm going to stop working in the middle and move to another part."

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, that's interesting.

**Alex Liros:** And then somebody else would move in. Now, I'm kind of guessing at how it worked because I can't imagine putting yellow colour on the face and putting pink next to it. I wouldn't do that, basically. But I would put in the sunglasses and some of the hair and then move on to something on the left. But it looks fairly clean, actually.

**Jon Lidolt:** it does, it does.

**Alex Liros:** The previous one looks a bit messier. Things are little, y'know, out of control, there. Things are floating around and...

**Jon Lidolt:** Sort of stylish?

**Alex Liros:** Yeah, it's a little out of control, but that's okay. That's what early art is all about. It's a collection of stuff, basically.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah. Well, that's interesting because I sort of wondered if, like in 373, let's say you started on the main figure. If in fact you completed it, it may as well be the work of one person.

**Alex Liros:** No, I never would've completed on figure on my own. The only time this happened was sometimes, I can tell you, later on in the gay pride things or in the Hanlon's Point pictures – I can actually tell where the individual artist worked on separate pieces.

For instance, this is in the gay pride, 389. This is on page eight. I can tell where my part of the drawing is. Because this is in a different situation – this is not in the studio, this is not, y'know, just picking out one or two figures as they're cruising or whatever. This is a whole big scene – all of a sudden we had lots more to do. The head in the top left with the brown hair – that looks like my drawing. That looks like my style, actually. It has more of the classic over wave working, and part of the middle looks like John's work.

**Jon Lidolt:** [laughs]

**Alex Liros:** He's very loose.

**Jon Lidolt:** True, yes.

**Alex Liros:** He's very loose and he has a kind of, y'know, a kind of vigour about his work that I didn't have at that point. And I also have this little umbrella, I think, is mine. Clarence's would be maybe the right figure, then part of his head. What else would Clarence have done? I can see part of the architecture would be mine too, because that's the repetition stuff I used to do a bit. So I can see there that there are different hands at work. Let me see what other ones...

**Jon Lidolt:** One thing I actually didn't know – was everything done in watercolour or did you use various mediums?

**Alex Liros:** No actually, we didn't use watercolour. It was actually chalk pastel. It was an easy material to use outside: easy to carry, you don't have to have any water or brushes. You just put it on.

**Jon Lidolt:** What you see is what you get.

**Alex Liros:** What you see is what you get. You just have to be careful in handling it later. The piece next to it is actually quite fun. It's 388, and that is one of our wilder paintings, but that's because... I should preface this by saying that after we worked in the studio for a while, y'know, we invented various subjects like gay men doing various things and going to various places and meeting each other, that kind of thing.

Later, the bath raids happened, and that activated us in the whole gay community<sup>2</sup>. After the bath raids, we made it our mission to go out into the gay community to document and do things like that. I'll look for the actual... there's a bath raid painting we did, to commemorate the bath raids. But this 388 comes after the bath raids and we realized we should be out in the community and working out in the community and out of the studio. Later we came back into the studio because things actually settled down in the gay community and we felt we'd kind of done a lot of documentation. But 388 is interesting because it's at a dance and it looks like at the Masonic... what's it called, the Masonic Temple, the one on Yonge and Dupont. There's a big dancehall there<sup>3</sup>.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Alex Liros:** And we went there. We were fairly motivated, let's say, a little crazy. We went to the dance not to have fun like everybody else did, but we brought our easel, we brought our chinks and we brought our sheets of paper. We put our easel in semi-

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<sup>2</sup> The largest of which occurred on February 5, 1981. For more information see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981\\_Toronto\\_bathhouse\\_raids](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_Toronto_bathhouse_raids)

<sup>3</sup> Actually located at Yonge and Davenport, now the MTV building. According to AIDS activist Robert Bebout, the dances were organized by the Gay Community Dance Committee (GCDC), which ran from 1981 until 1989. [www.rbebout.com/bar/1981.htm](http://www.rbebout.com/bar/1981.htm)

darkness somewhere near the stage and started drawing. Of course, you've got this extreme rhythm and disco music blaring...

**Jon Lidolt:** Movement everywhere.

**Alex Liros:** And then every once in awhile a dancer would come by and put their mark on the paper! [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** But you can see it's something going on there...

**Jon Lidolt:** It's got a real swirl.

**Alex Liros:** It does have a real swirl of activity, and without me telling you what's going on it would be hard to figure out. It's almost abstract, but you see a lot of figures there and you see maybe lights and stuff like that.

But the one further down, 391, that relates to our mission of going...

**Jon Lidolt:** Going and documenting.

**Alex Liros:** That's Hanlon's Point. We went there quite a bit, as \*\*\*\*\*, and we did a lot very neat drawings there. That was a favourite, obviously, gay place to meet.

**Jon Lidolt:** Very scenic.

**Alex Liros:** And very scenic. I can't tell here exactly... I can sort of see who did what, a bit, actually. It looks like it's fairly evenly done, though.

The composition's very interesting. You see the guy's trunks, the stripes of the guy's trunks and the stripes on the sailboat, y'know, they're kind of an interesting echo image...

**Jon Lidolt:** Yes, definitely.

**Alex Liros:** And that kind of gives it a kind of dynamic, I think, quality to it. But there is this combination of line drawing, like the radio, and then some texture work. So, who knows – Clarence might have done the radio by himself and nobody touched it, because it looks like it's done really with one hand.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yes, yes, I would think so.

**Alex Liros:** And you figure, "Well, that's finished. That's a kind of document of part of the scene, and it doesn't need an extra working."

We didn't have to muck around too much. People would choose various things. And we'd probably make additions. "Oh yeah, this guy's on a sailboat. I should get the guy sail boarding." That's a guy sail boarding, actually, on the top.

**Jon Lidolt:** That's right.

**Alex Liros:** And then if you look carefully you know it's a gay context because there are only men on the beach.

**Jon Lidolt:** What is that strange little figure at the right, sort of in the middle? That almost looks like a merman.

**Alex Liros:** Just a minute. Is that with the green thing?

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah.

**Alex Liros:** You know, looking at that, it looks like a shovel of some sort.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, it's a shovel. I had a quick glance and thought, "Ah, it's a mermaid."

**Alex Liros:** I don't know why there would be a shovel, though.

Then of course you have the boats. One of the activities that went on at Hanlon's Point was that you had some rich gay men and yachts, larger sailboats that would be anchored there, and young men would splash around from the beach and be invited onboard. Whoever.

There are other ones that are quite interesting in that same genre. Let me see if I can dig them up a bit... 356, for instance. That's also Hanlon's Point, and there's that bloody radio, but it's a big radio this time. [Laughs] What's interesting there is that we actually caught the moment when a yellow police cruiser was patrolling the beach, and this was a very intimidating thing to experience. If you're lying on the beach, on your towel or whatever, and this bloody big machine comes by.

**Jon Lidolt:** I remember that.

**Alex Liros:** So anyway, we got that down there. We documented that. It's all kind of there. Part of it is a joke, you see, I'm not sure if there's... somebody lying down, saying something, something's coming out of his mouth but I'm not sure what it is.

We were also trying to put enjoyment into the picture, that people were really enjoying themselves and they were having a lot of fun.

**Jon Lidolt:** It comes across.

**Alex Liros:** It was a fun place to go, an active place, but every once in a while you got into trouble with the police.

**Jon Lidolt:** Even now, if you go to the so-called clothing optional beach, if you stray off it, they do come and check. Happened to me the other day.

**Alex Liros:** Oh really? Okay.

**Jon Lidolt:** With something like this, how long would that have taken, do you think?

**Alex Liros:** Let me think, actually. It would take a bit of time, actually. It would take, I don't know, maybe an hour and a half or two hours to do a painting like this. It took awhile. I'm not sure how many paintings we'd do on one day, in an outing. It was pretty exhausting, I would think. I think maybe we'd do two or three, maximum. These are large pieces of paper and we had a lot to fill, and I'm not sure if we took any sitting breaks or not, but I think we would consider ourselves like fighters for a cause, with no rest in sight.

**Jon Lidolt:** But to me, now that you're describing it, that scene almost seems like a motion picture because things are added as they happen. So it's not like a static scene with something that's posed.

**Alex Liros:** Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it? That's right actually. This is what happens when you have the perspective... The perspective is generally okay but then you have the size differences and the big radio and the guy lying down on the right, you have the smaller figure on the left. The change of scale actually does animate it.

**Jon Lidolt:** It has a real dynamic to it.

**Alex Liros:** It has a real dynamic to it, y'know, so you kind of have to figure it out a little bit, basically. Although they can see it's a beach scene with a cop car and water, you have to do a bit of figuring out as to how things are connected. That's part of the fun of doing it, of working on it.

**Jon Lidolt:** Funnily enough, some of the pieces, this one especially so far, does remind me of Chagall's work.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, Okay.

**Jon Lidolt:** The sizes of figures and things just being placed seemingly at random.

**Alex Liros:** Yes, yes, I know, that's interesting, yeah. We were just a little cruder.  
[Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** [indecipherable] And the one next to it, 355, is another dance piece. I can't make it out too well, but you see these stroblights, these lights are coming out from somewhere, you can see these rays of lights and a couple of dance, there's one figure on the right somewhere. Another chaotic...

But as I said, the bath raids were very disturbing, and we a kind of...see which pieces are... 351, on the same page, 351, 352 and 353. This is where we decided, in the studio, to do a political piece and to see if we couldn't capture somehow visually the kind of what's going on – what happened and how to move ahead. And I'm trying to figure out what the meaning of these three pictures are [sic].

Of course, the one on the left [351] is, y'know, the fight between the gay activists, the gay community, basically, and the police. There's the traditional way of wording them: the dark, evil police on the left with dark masks and the dark background, and the pink triangles and the banners.

**Jon Lidolt:** You can definitely see that.

**Alec Liros:** Yeah, and we used a different technique, I see. We used, what's it called... hard-edge painting here. These lines are done with tape. We'd tape up an area and then we would paint and take the paint off and it would leave these very strong lines.

**Jon Lidolt:** So, from what you're saying, this isn't just people doing things at random. It sounds like it's much more thought out.

**Alex Liros:** It was much more thought out, exactly. I can't tell, really... I don't know who did what actually here. I can see a little bit... We worked pretty much together on this work. It's hard for me to describe where I worked and where John or Clarence worked. We just had this idea.

Let's see, 352, what is that? [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs] I was wondering that, too.

**Alex Liros:** It looks like a \*\*\*\*\* or something. The middle looks like City Hall – it must be the middle of City Hall – and there must be something going on politically, I imagine. Some kind of political decision is being made; I'm not sure between whom, though. But something is going on, y'know; there's two people talking, there's outstretched hands and there's a city hall in the middle, so there's something going on in terms of an agreement of some sort.

On the right, I think, 353, I think it looked like the community just... a general idea of the dispersed community. I'm not sure this is in the right order, actually. Maybe this one belongs earlier, but this looks like it's just... this guy coming out of the closet, and there's a guy lying down. It doesn't look like it's really going in any particular direction,

actually. So maybe this one should've been first actually, rather than last. I'm not sure, I can't tell.

The one further down, 354, is in a similar vein. It's something to do with some trial of some sort, and I really can't remember... y'know, here's a judge with the Criminal Code, and there's the defense attorney with a boa. [Laughs] Something very strict. The combination of a wig and a boa – oh, here's the policeman on the far left – even though we working on some serious ideas, humour isn't that far off. Someone always had to do something silly. Sometimes, y'know, this caused some friction. Sometimes you felt you had this serious painting, with no doodling around, but here are little doodles and little funny faces in the bottom.

**Jon Lidolt:** It's definitely got humour in it.

**Alex Liros:** It has humour in it, but the gist of it is there, actually.

I think, actually, 357, maybe belongs more to the top series. It looks like, there, people are coming together. That circle and the balloons... looks like it belongs to the protest scene, that people are now in a circle and they've formed a kind of community. There is a little Klu Klux Klan guy on the left, but he's out of the picture – I mean out of the wall, so to speak. Even though they might be trying to get in, we're kind of all... It's a symbol of solidarity, I think. And then there's "RTPC" written there, The Right to Privacy Committee<sup>4</sup>.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh yes, yes.

**Alex Liros:** So the community is coming is coming together and reacting in a positive way, and that's what we were trying to express. One of things we were trying to do was not just express the anger but what the consequences were afterwards, how the community responded in terms of activating members and motivating members and doing concrete things. The RTPC was a great organization that helped a lot of gay men who were, y'know, charged. It helped their defense.

Let me see where we are now and let's see whether there's any other... We did do a lot of... I see some portraits. Some of these are a little strange, like page 8, 401. This looks like Gerald Hannon, actually<sup>5</sup>. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** It does, doesn't it?

**Alex Liros:** With a little \*\*\*\* kind of joke. We painted that together, but it's a little strange. The right eyeballs, there are two of them, there, but it's a strong piece of work, actually. There's a lot of feeling in it, I think.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see <http://www.clga.ca/Material/Records/docs/remrtpc.htm>

<sup>5</sup> For more information see <http://www.clga.ca/Material/Records/docs/hannon/ghint.htm>

This must've been our middle period, when we just beginning to... Well, we made a decision; say. "We'll work with one person and we're going to portrait," so there you have to focus. You have to focus on working on the head, on a particular head, or a particular, y'know...

**Jon Lidolt:** But, like, you're working on the picture, a portrait of one person – that has to be really difficult when three of you are working on it. Don't you sometimes feel that "Oh God, they'll just wreck the whole thing, they've lost it"?

**Alex Liros:** We do, we do. And sometime we'd do several pieces because the first one wouldn't work out very well. But you're right, actually – charcoal is not that forgiving. You'll just make a mess of it if you overwork it too much. I'm not sure whether other works were thrown out or not, but that was the game or the challenge – trying to get focus.

There's one, too, at 408. I'm not sure who it is, though. That looks like a portrait of somebody. We had asked people to come by, actually, and sit for us. Next to it is 409, and that was my ex-boyfriend, who loved to model and was a very pretty guy, so we used him. This picture is actually quite well together. He'd come so many times, we knew him quite well, so it was real easy to do in a way. Again, I can't remember, but there's something come down from his left side hair that's looks odd... He's sitting on something and his hands are quite long [Laughs]. The same man, the model, is in 411. This is when he'd get dressed up, you see, in one of these radical drag things, where you kept your beard on and just put a wig and wore some skimpy women's clothes, and I think maybe heels, actually.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yes, you're right.

**Alex Liros:** That's a nice little painting. We did use particular models over and over again...

**Jon Lidolt:** I remember James and I posed for the three of you.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, really?

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah.

**Alex Liros:** Okay, okay.

**Jon Lidolt:** I don't remember ever seeing the finished piece.

**Alex Liros:** But for instance, the pieces next to them, like 412 and 410 and 406 – now, these pieces are out of our imaginations. I don't know, we decided to do a series of torsos for some reason, and I'm not quite sure why. Who knows? This happened every once in a while; we would think, "Now, what are we going to do?" We did the beach scene, maybe

it's the wintertime, we have to work something out and so we'd think of little themes to do. So here's the torso theme for some reason. And so we developed that.

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, 406 to me really looks like it was mostly one person, for some reason.

**Alex Liros:** Well, y'know, I was thinking of that too, actually. I was always good at doing the body, actually. It looks a bit more like my work.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah, I really like that one. It's got a real...

**Alex Liros:** It has a real dimensionality to it. 412 is interesting – there's a little ribbon around the neck, and 414 is in a similar vein, but it looks like it's charcoal. It's kind of a delicate... It's kind of a sweet drawing actually of a young man with something tender, a tender bush or something, that he's holding or he's near.

These were moments where we kind of did more gentle things. The thing is in art you can't keep up the same level of activity; you have to kind of slow down every once in a while and do just different things.

Some are inexpressible, like 413. I don't think I can tell you where she came from.  
[Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs] It looks like Meryl Streep.

**Alex Liros:** It does look like Meryl Streep, it does look like Meryl Streep. I don't know where they came from. It was interesting because John had a good influence... actually, you know what? I think it's a bicycle. Is that a bicycle where her...

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh my gosh, you're right. Yes, yes.

**Alex Liros:** I'm not sure, I think it might be a bicycle.

**Jon Lidolt:** I can see the spokes and the wheels and the seat, everything. You're right.

**Alex Liros:** I just couldn't tell you the context. But what was interesting was that we all came from different places. Clarence was interested in male models and nudity, that kind of stuff, and John kind of pushed us in a different direction. I'd have never started a painting with a woman's face, unless I thought well, it was a drag or something I would think about. This is completely unfamiliar to me. So I think John was trying to push us into areas where it wasn't just nudity, but into something broader.

**Jon Lidolt:** this makes me wonder something, for instance. Maybe this question doesn't belong in this discussion; however I will ask it anyway. What would you say is gay art? I mean, in this case...

**Alex Liros:** Well, there are different ways of answering that question. The one simple way is if it's done by a gay artist – a self-described gay artist – then it's gay art. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs] That's one definition.

**Alex Liros:** It's like the French saying, "Well, I'm French. Therefore I'm a French painter."

**Jon Lidolt:** I remember that seemed to think that unless it's got a male body, preferably nude...

**Alex Liros:** What we decided to do was broaden our definition and be inclusive rather than exclusive. So we were trying to bring in what we would call the "gay folk culture." In all the previous activity of nude drawing in the physique magazines and the focus on the beautiful male body, we were bringing that tradition in and then we decided "That's part of it, but that's really the old tradition" – the tradition that was part of the underground to a large extent, because male nudity was not really you'd see contained in public shows. But once we got politicized after the bath raids, y'know, we did what we thought was documenting the community. If push comes to shove, any straight person could be coming out at this point and painting a gay beach.

**Jon Lidolt:** I'm sure they have been.

**Alex Liros:** I don't think that... the likelihood of having that done is minimal, I think. If you look at the work together – all the baseball games we went to or the Hanlon's Point scenes, the dancing scenes – these were all gay venues, basically, and then all the gay pride ones of course, too. Collectively, you see that we're documenting a community, and the community is gay and we're members of it. So I think that's the context...

Some of it, like 405, I really have no idea what this is. We were just playing around, I think. This was just the time when we didn't know what we were doing. We were just fooling around with colour and figures and, so, we were trying to experiment and things like that, too. My next bit, 404, I have no explanation for that either, actually. It's something that just happened, and we just went with the flow. I can't even figure out what it is, actually. It looks kind of like a worm with a head or something. [Laughs]

**Jon Linolt:** It looks like a Slinky with a head on it. [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** This is part of the fun things of... but then in 417, you see we have something that looks like it's taken from Degas, the famous Degas painting with the children, the boys and the girls<sup>6</sup>.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh yeah, it does.

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<sup>6</sup> The painting in question is likely Edgar Degas' *Spartan Girls Challenging Boys*, also known as *Young Spartans Exercising* (c. 1860-62)

**Alex Liros:** Anyway, it's an interesting painting. There's one guy with a rock and we're not sure if he's... and some guys on the right who are pointing at him. It's kind of interesting, he's holding up a rock...

But otherwise, things like 415 – this was something which we felt we had to do, something, y'know, do something very simple, a gay couple's life, basically. So we did this interior scene, but I'm not quite sure all the little things that are going on. There's a guy holding up a pink triangle on the bottom right, so here we got kind of foolish, I think, too. We did all sorts of things, we put in various things. But it was a home gay life, and who does that? Something which a straight artist wouldn't do, really. And also 277 is another kind of an idea of a gay domestic scene.

**Jon Lidolt:** Which one's 277?

**Alex Liros:** It's on the first page. It's just a simple thing of a gay man. Now, y'know, we call him gay because he's nude and because we defined it that way. He's in his kitchen: he's cooking up a storm. I like that little painting, actually.

Here's some more portraits, you see. Like say 284 is another portrait of... he was the guy – as you can see, there's something written on him, Marx, maybe Freud or something like that – he was a guy that worked at York University, and he was a film critic<sup>7</sup>. So we had him down to pose for us, so that was kind of a commission. Who else was there? I think 281, on the same page, that was somebody who came from ACT. Okay, it looks like somebody from ACT posed for us and we decided that he'd bring his jacket with his symbol of it and sit down with his phone. That's actually a nice little painting here.

**Jon Linolt:** It is, it really is.

**Alex Liros:** It's a very simple thing, y'know, somebody sitting by the phone.

**Jon Lidolt:** It has a nice feeling to it.

**Alex Liros:** And this is part of the gay community, somebody sitting by the phone, doing his job. But then right next to it you have 282... [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** And this is where all the fun comes in again, where the gaudiness and the god-knows-what-it's-called, all that fruit on somebody's head, I can't remember now. But anyway, it was a popular image in gay drag.

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<sup>7</sup> The model in question is likely gay British film critic Robin Wood (b. 1931), who worked as a professor of film at York University from 1977 until his retirement in the early 1990s and founded the CineAction! film Collection and journal. Wood was known for examining contemporary films in the context of Freudian and Marxist theory and sexual politics; the last word written on his shirt in JAC Collection number 284 appears to be “feminism” or “feminist.”

**Jon Lidolt:** From the Carmen Miranda days, I guess.

**Alex Liros:** Exactly, exactly. But you see we were trying to balance thing off basically; the familiar gay images of gay nudity and drag queen and things like that with people who are professors, people who work for ACT, people who do other things that aren't filled with... like pool halls, 304 is three guys playing pool, y'know. That actually comes from – 304, that's on page three – that actually is an interesting series, there. It's actually a little out of our mandate.

**Jon Lidolt:** It's not the usual style there.

**Alex Liros:** It's not the usual, no. It also goes together: 302, 304, I think 307, 309 and there's one on the previous page, 288 – there are more – these go together. These are what we call the Rivoli pictures<sup>8</sup>. The Rivoli was a famous café on Queen Street and we would go there quite often for coffee and drinks or whatever. They had a program where they would invite artists to do installations, mostly stuff for their walls. We were invited to put up stuff on their walls, so we sat down with this project and, y'know, it wasn't the gay venue as such. Gay people would come there and I lived nearby, but we thought “Okay, this would be fun to do.” So what we did was we searched the site and discovered at one point, a, it was a barbershop, so here's the barber [288].

**Jon Lidolt:** At the Rivoli?

**Alex Liros:** At the Rivoli. And then, at one point it must've been a pool hall, or with something else involved, I'm not sure. Then it was a bookstore at one point, and then down at 309 it looks like it's just the Rivoli.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah.

**Alex Liros:** And somebody quite humourously put somebody from the 17<sup>th</sup> century there. It looks like a Dutchman from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh my gosh. Yes, yes, yes.

**Alex Liros:** So that good put in, y'know, just for a bit of fun, and somewhere else it also used to be a burlesque hall and I don't know where that is but it's somewhere, kicking around, actually. So that was an interesting commission.

The other big commission that we had was at the Funnel. The Funnel was an interesting film experimental centre, mostly for short films, short experimental films. We were invited to do large works for their gallery space – not gallery space, maybe just a front

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<sup>8</sup> A document written for JAC Collection number 375, which seems to outline the Rivoli Collection, explains: “Our installation is an exploration of this site. It has housed in its day a tobacconist, a burlesque house, a Ukrainian barbershop and billiard hall, a radical bookstore and a jazz club.” From this description, JAC Collection number 308, featuring a burlesque stage, likely belongs in the Rivoli Collection. (Liros confirms this is the second half of the conversation).

space of their... They had a place on King Street. So we came up with a thing called *We Gaze Upon the Stars*, and this was the idea of gay men, y'know, taking Hollywood figures and making it into their own culture, and absorbing them and using them in various ways. So we have like 298, was part of that – these are very, very long actually, very large wall hangings...

**Jon Lidolt:** Like how large?

**Alex Liros:** Oh, they'd be up to the ceiling here. They'd be, like, eight, nine feet high...

**Jon Lidolt:** Wow.

**Alex Liros:** ...and across, y'know, like five feet maybe. They were large hangings, and so 289 was part of these. You see Marlene Dietrich and maybe Judy Garland and Elizabeth Taylor doing something, and I'm not sure what's at the bottom. And then... what's-his-name, Marlon Brando, is in 305 and there was another one, I think. Marilyn Monroe was somewhere... no. She's either 289 – but it doesn't look like Marilyn Monroe. It looks like a burlesque scene – okay, here it is. 296, on page 2.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh yes.

**Alex Liros:** That was part of the series of *We Gaze Upon the Stars*. That's Marilyn Monroe, you see, and then you have y'know, it looks like a drag queen behind her and all this little stuff going on. Odd little figures like the guy on the right with his finger in his ear and... That was interesting, y'know, doing something which was, again, a theme for a particular space.

Oh yes, 297 is part of the Rivoli Project. It says here, reading the text of the piece, "Ukrainian Legion was next door. He kindly said the RCMP was picking up our garbage." What's this? "CP vilified U.S [sic, us], one was Clayton Ruby's father. He published scandal [rags]..." Anyways, this was part of our installation on the Rivoli depicting this history of the site.

The one big issue that was very prevalent in the 80s was AIDS, and I'm not sure how we actually handled it. There's one at 317, page 3, and I suspect, y'know, it's one of the torsos that I talked about earlier. Oh yeah, there is the word AIDS on... I suspect these are the doctors that are kind of experimenting or tormenting this poor body and trying to do something with these odd, horrified figures on the bottom left.

But I think we saw it as a problem in terms of the medical community trying to maybe, I'm not sure, force some treatment and... Sorry, I can't remember what it was all about. I don't think we actually did much more about... I'll have to see as I walk through these pages.

There are more, like 314 on page three is the Albany. Now the Albany was a nice bar on King Street, near Sherbourne<sup>9</sup>.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh. It's one I had never heard of.

**Alex Liros:** This was, kind of our attempt to capture... We didn't do it on site though. We did it... We went there and probably took mental notes...

**Jon Lidolt:** But was it a gay establishment?

**Alex Liros:** It was a gay establishment, yeah. We took mental notes and then we went home. This was a studio painting, actually. We didn't really paint outdoors. We did drawings or pastel works outside but not actually acrylic work. This is an acrylic piece. So, you have a lot of bar things, y'know: mugs of beer and the disco ball on top, guy dancing in the middle and various things happening. "Inferno" and you can see the word "Albany" written down. Y'know, you see it was kind of... It looked like a fun place.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah, \*\*\*\*\*

**Alex Liros:** It looks like an interesting place to be. It's kind of an odd style. It's not trying to portray...

**Jon Lidolt:** It's giving you a flavour of the place

**Alex Liros:** It's giving a flavour, exactly, a flavour of the place. Then, staying on the same page, 310, well that's another portrait. I'm not sure... It's a portrait actually we did after... A guy called Pat, I can't remember his first name, came from New York<sup>10</sup>. He was a big guy in the gay community, an intellectual, and he gave a talk. So we portrayed him as Moses, kind of... We portrayed as a God... As a kind of a super-figure.

**Jon Lidolt:** I see the tablets.

**Alex Liros:** Oh yeah, the tablets.

**Jon Lidolt:** What is the face in the lower right-hand corner?

**Alex Liros:** Well, I'm trying to make that out! [Laughs]. \*\*\*\*\* But anyway, he doesn't look like he's about to be your best friend, but he's there for your intellectual benefit though.

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<sup>9</sup> Not to be mistaken for The Albany Club, a membership-only clubhouse for Conservative Party members founded by Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, that still stands at 91 King Street East. AIDS activist Robert Bebout, in his memoir *Promiscuous Affections: A Life in the Bars, 1967-2000* notes the gay-owned Albany Bar opened in 1981 "on the ground floor of a Georgian style block dating from 1850" at 158 King Street West. The building has since been demolished. [www.rbebout.com/bar/1983a.htm](http://www.rbebout.com/bar/1983a.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Identity unknown. It is possible Liros is referring to Joe La Pat (1943-2008), a longtime supporter of the Gay Games. He and his partner Dick Uyvari lived in Chicago, however.

**Jon Lidolt:** He looks really severe.

**Alex Liros:** It would be really good for you, though. I'm trying to get... Oh, here are the baseball ones. Now we're back to page 4, 323, and y'know, baseball ones were kind of fun to do, actually. That's a cute one, actually. Again, it's a little chaotic because, y'know, with three people it's a little hard to get yourself organized for a proper baseball scene. But you see you can get the gist of it. There's a guy throwing a ball, there's somebody with a bat, there's somebody standing and...

**Jon Lidolt:** I think it works. I think it works well. The games I go to – the ball game, on occasion – sometimes it is chaotic.

**Alex Liros:** Exactly. People are lounging around a bit and sitting and holding at batter up and playing. So that was... I think there are more baseball ones, but not too many.

But things like 324, right next to it. This is more like John's work, you see. This is more John's way of working. So how involved the rest of us got I can't be certain. It's an unusual scene. It's in the men's room, it's the urinals there, and there are two guys with their shirts off and their cocks hanging over their pants and, y'know, who knows? It's part of the cruising scene, I guess.

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** And down below it, 328, was that famous Casa Loma dance. It was a big gay dance. Here, we were there, too, documenting a gay dance.

**Jon Lidolt:** Was it a big charity event or...?

**Alex Liros:** I don't know... I think it was, actually. [Reading inscription on painting] "Mama Quilla<sup>11</sup> ... GCA<sup>12</sup>." Gay Community Appeal, that's a charity, yeah.

And then the other ones here, down here, at the bottom [of page 4] are also of gay pride days: 330, 331 and 332. Y'know, pride day locations changed. The first used to be at the Grange and it was really more like a picnic. This is one actually at the Grange, as a matter of fact, 330. You can see part of the top, that little part of the building is really part of the Grange<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The full inscription reads: "Mama Quilla II loves rock and roll." Mama Quilla II was a seven-member, all-female Canadian band that played in the Toronto music scene from 1977 to 1982 and was known for its pro-feminist, pro-lesbian political lyrics. In 1983, some of the original members turned the group into a mixed band now known as the Parachute Club.

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1980, the organization is now known as the Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> According to Toronto Pride's website, the events were held at Grange Park in June 28, 1981 and June 26, 1982. [www.pridetoronto.com/about\\_history.php](http://www.pridetoronto.com/about_history.php)

This was kind of a mixed up style. I can tell I did the bearded guy in the centre left and John did the figure more in the front and his funny head and I did the very black face, I think. And then there's this great bicycle sitting in the middle, [Laughs] this funny guy with glasses sitting there.

**Jon Lidolt:** It's got a nice feeling to it, a feeling that we don't get at the pride days now.

**Alex Liros:** Well, you see, I think our last gay pride picture was 332, when it moved to Church Street<sup>14</sup>. You can see the 519 – the building the 519 – and that was actually more difficult for us to work because it was so crowded and it was all the street. It didn't have the kind of picnic quality of the old gay pride at the Grange or at the University Common, where it was one year. I think 331 is the University Commons, the University of Toronto<sup>15</sup>. I can see the arches at the middle might have been part of the University-College...

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, the pride at the Grange, I can't really remember how long ago that was. This was in, what...?

**Alex Liros:** Well, it must've been around 83, 84.

**Jon Lidolt:** I thought it was sort of earlier...

**Alex Liros:** Maybe it was earlier. Maybe it was 82. We started work in 1980 and I can't quite say when we started going out and doing these prides. It must have been quite soon afterwards. Yeah, so I'm not sure actually, maybe it was earlier than... 1981 or so.

The other big project that we undertook – If I can find the pages – we did a big installation. I was also involved in the running of the Sparks Gallery<sup>16</sup>, and that was a lesbian-run gallery and I was on their board. There were two women who were running the gallery and they were called the Flying Femmes<sup>17</sup>. The Flying Femmes and Jack got together a collective piece... I'm trying to piece it all together, but I'll start with.... If you go on page 5, there's a little picture: 336, 337, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345. These were actually... Am I getting it right, here? I think these were cutouts, actually. These were cutouts and we hung them from the ceiling and therefore we had this chandelier that we hung from the ceiling and it imitated kind of a gay party, a gay-lesbian party. These were full, life-sized figures. [Inaudible] Anyway, they were part of an installation of a gay party.

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<sup>14</sup> This likely refers to the first time Church Street was closed to traffic to allow pride celebrations, which took place on July 1, 1984. (The official event actually took place in Crawtha Park).

<sup>15</sup> Also known as King's College Circle. Pride events were held there June 26, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Unknown spelling.

<sup>17</sup> Identities unknown. However, a reference is made to the Flying Femme in a headline of the February 1981 issue of *Body Politic*, a popular gay magazine in Toronto: "For Mr. Mapplethorpe: Lesbian Porn by Toronto's Flying Femmes." [www.uwo.ca/pridelib/bodypolitic/bpindex/1986index.htm](http://www.uwo.ca/pridelib/bodypolitic/bpindex/1986index.htm)

What I'm looking for now is the political part, which was in the front room, and I'm not sure if it's here. There was a big statement about the criminal code and various things we were fighting to, y'know, to clear from the criminal code... I don't actually see it, but that was another big installation that we did with another group of collaborative artists on Queen Street. That was our one collaboration with another collaborative group, actually, but I don't see it. It's in Ivan and my files, but I don't see it here, actually.

One of the curious things of gay pride day, this was the later gay pride day, now. We were kind of, fairly... How can I say this, populist artists. We wanted as many people as possible to come to our openings. We were advertised everywhere. We wanted everybody to come and weren't that interested in just having, y'know, a select art crowd. We were interested in having a lot of people show up. One of our populist activities was, in one of the gay pride days we had a car and we set drawing boards on the car – I'm not sure if it was both sides or not- but we had a drawing board on the side of the car and we also had a little ledge for charcoal and we had paper. So, anybody could put their mark on the paper as the car moving. This was now – 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426 – this was all done in that manner, all done on the move. Of course, we would be working and we would be encouraging other people to put in their work. I can't see the detail... well here's something on 421: "Muzeek by Dole." Who knows? That was something somebody put there, and then right next to it is: "Hi Now," somebody had joined in.

**Jon Lidolt:** "Hi Mom," I think.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, it's "Hi Mom." Yeah... He just put it in. I'm not even sure what I did there, if anything. I might have done these little weird things on top, and we might have done some filling in with the balloons or who knows. And the same thing for the other ones: people would write little letters to themselves or to other people. It wasn't great work, but it was our kind of idea of connection JAC to a bigger audience, and in that sense trying to make us known that and say, "We're part of the gay community. We're not isolated from the gay community, we're part of it."

I need a bit of a break, actually.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, of course. We've been going on for quite a while.

[END TAPE]

Interview date: Saturday, July 12, 2008  
Voices on recording: Jon Lidolt, Alex Liros  
Interview time: 1:05:00

Transcription date: Monday, August 18, 2008  
Transcribed by: Greg Beneteau

*Synopsis: Second half of an interview conducted by Jon Lidolt of Alex Liros, part of three-member art group that included John Grube and Clarence Barnes, known as the JAC Collective. Liros discusses some of the groups' gallery exhibits, spirituality and the breakup of JAC after eight years.*

*Pictures referenced in the interview can be found on a printout document of JAC Collection Photographs available from Gilberto Prioste Photography.*

Works referenced: 320, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 273, 278, 283, 285, 289, 294, 295, 307, 208, 313, 315, 318, 319, 322, 329, 333, 334, 350, 359, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 376, 378, 380, 381, 382

[START OF RECORDING]

**Jon Lidolt:** No, we're okay. We'll just continue.

**Alex Liros:** I'm just now... number 320. This is an early piece, and we were still quite concerned about, y'know, the gay image or the gay way of life. It was an odd piece call fist fuckers. Now, I can't say I was all that happy about the subject matter myself. I though, "Oh my God, where are we going with this?" It's hard to even say where the painting is going really. It has a combination of this hoodlum, really, with this cigar and this fist coming out of his nose, [Laughs] and these rather odd eyeballs. There's the word "fist fucker" and there's a fist doing something and a guy doing something... We weren't graphic artists. We didn't need to graphically portray the word fist fucking. We were trying to portray some kind of idea of it; that this is kind of a bar setting and people are just all over the place and maybe having fun and maybe when you fist fuck your eyes, your eyeballs to pop out. I don't know. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs] Mine would, I could tell you that.

**Alex Liros:** I never experienced that, but y'know, maybe it does happen. We had the gall – we had the guts, I should say – to take this painting to Chicago. I rolled up some paintings... We were invited to a show in Chicago – this was the early 80s. One I should mention is that the 80s was culturally very gay, and there are all kinds of things going on: all kinds of group shows and charity shows, feminist shows and lesbian shows. All kinds of things are going on in North America. In America, the United States, there was something called the Gay Annual Arts Festival and we were invited to participate in one in Chicago. So we decided which paintings we should bring along, take along, and I rolled them up and flew to Chicago. I had a boyfriend there, by the way, so it wasn't...

No actually, I met my boyfriend there, I should say, I met my boyfriend there, the one I'm living with now. So, we took fist fuckers to Chicago and God knows where it hung. It hung either in some kind of bar or an AIDS clinic or something like that, [Laughs] perhaps, quite inappropriately.

The thing about working together, the three of us together, is that the energy... it's really ten-fold compared to working alone. We had so much energy: we were wanting to do so many things, exhibit in so many different places and we also wanted to, y'know, have other people experience what we did. We held workshops. I don't think I have an example of this, but we got a Canada Council Grant to go to Ottawa. We hung our work in a nice gallery called Gallery 101 on Bank Street and then we also conducted workshops organized by the local gay community<sup>18</sup>.

But I must say, it was actually... A very interesting thing happened there, and that was that... We saw ourselves as populist artists: that we were here for the people and we didn't have any hang-ups about stuff. We did everything basically... And we got to this Ottawa meeting, and there was just pure hostility towards us because we were from Toronto and that we had come from Toronto to tell them what gay art was. It took us quite a while to kind of calm the hall down, calm the people down and to... We just wanted demonstrate how we work, basically. We didn't say this was a magic \*\*\*\*\* to making gay art. It was just how we had evolved in making gay art.

**Jon Lidolt:** So they just felt like you were big city type.

**Alex Liros:** Exactly. It was a problem, actually, trying to calm them day and say, "We're not here to tell you what to do. We're just here to demonstrate our technique, which we think is quite interesting and perhaps unique. Other artists worked together, but we have a certain way of working which is perhaps unique, and we thought we would share this." And then, y'know, talk about the way we work, talk about the gay themes that we were working on, talk about ourselves as gay activists and as attempting to document the gay cultural community, the gay political community and what was going on in Toronto.

**Jon Lidolt:** And did people finally come around?

**Alex Liros:** They did, actually. They did, I think. I was tense though. On the road, you were kind of like the circus, after a while. You're kind of like a monkey, trying to put your marks on a piece of paper, all three of us at one time. The show in Ottawa was well covered, not very favourably, by the Ottawa Citizen, I should say [Laughs]. But we got covered by the university radio journalists, so we thought that was worth doing.

I'm looking at some work now that I've left a little because they're so ambiguous. I have a bit of a hard time myself trying to figure it out. There was one theme one that I can see now that we did, and that starts on the first page at 263, 264... It goes on to 270. This was

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<sup>18</sup> For more information visit [www.gallery101.org](http://www.gallery101.org)

called a raridose screen<sup>19</sup>. It was actually a screen that held... Each rectangular screen held two of our paintings. They were painted on board, and so both sides were covered. I guess there were four parts to the screen, so there would be eight panels in the work.

We exhibited this at the First Unitarian Church on St. Clair. What's missing in here is, we also did a very big banner, y'know, a huge banner, that was put up in front of the church or the temple or whatever it is – just a simple banner with gay symbols and friendship and love and gay stuff, y'know, just to make ourselves part of a wider community.

You can see in these paintings we have different religious things going on. Not exactly, though. In the first one the person's playing a piano or an organ, I'm not sure, and in the next one there's religious Alpha-Omega and I'm not sure exactly what all this little chain is doing there. We were kind of working with some kind of religious theme without being specifically Christian. We were working with some kind of idea of spirituality of some sort. As artists, you pick up all kinds of stuff from looking and seeing and... I'm trying to see know, 265, I can't really make too much of that, what's happening there, it looks like a city scene with a lot of things going on... But then 266, it looks like it's a dance of death of some sort, which is popular in some art, and then 267 is something of a congregation, a very simple panel of a congregation, y'know, together doing, singing or whatever. Then 268... [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** The Christ child? [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** John was quite big on masks, so here's one of our masks coming in. I'm not sure, y'know, how this works but, y'know, masks have a spiritual quality to them, and John was not going to let them bother him and he figured, well, y'know, this is part of the spiritual world, that the Indians and other peoples have a certain spirituality that's different and they were expressed by masks and so it goes. 269 is some kind of blessing of some sort, with a cross and I can't quite make out 270, whether it's actually... maybe it's a phoenix, I'm not sure what that is...

**Jon Lidolt:** Two figures it looks like: this figure on the lower left and then a figure... almost looks like...

**Alex Liros:** Oh, it looks like something's ascending or something. Something's going on, that's right.

So anyways we tried our best to... we were not in a gay venue but they welcomed us, so we were happy about that and we tried to do something in the flavour of their temple somehow. I can't see any specific gay things going on here, actually, but maybe we had more work on the walls. On our big banner we had the pink triangle, I know, we had lesbian-gay welcomes. We had things of that sort there.

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<sup>19</sup> Also known as a rood screen – a symbolic, decorative fence that separates the altar of a church from the rest of the congregation.

The spiritual thing did actually evolve in our work, so-called spiritual. The first one, 259, this looks like a mythological theme here and it actually looks like quite a strong painting, actually. It must be something to do with some figure of bird of the death of some sort. There's some myth about Thanatos, it was a figure of death, and I'm not really quite sure what's happening here. There's part of the figure lying down on the bottom right and there's a figure, a face, on the top left. There's some kind of conflict going on here, but I really couldn't tell you what actually is going on, what kind of battle is being fought here<sup>20</sup>. The one on the right is a bit of a mixture of things. We call it "nature," but I don't quite see... There's somebody holding a snake, maybe it's a snake charmer. There's somebody with an odd uniform on the right with a yellow face, somebody in the middle holding a mask and maybe some drapes, I think. Here, I think, we were trying to collect different myths and then just put them on paper and see what would work, basically.

These are probably later paintings, and also done in the winter. We were kind of experimenting on, not necessarily specifically gay themes, but just themes that we thought needed to be worked on. At the bottom of on the same page, 278 – this was a series painting too. There's somebody here at the stake, it looks like. He has his balls out, so we know he's a male, so this could be symbolic of the persecution of gays in some places. You have these military guys in the bottom and then these birds on top, so it's a mixture of fantasy...

**Jon Lidolt:** With birds, the horse...?

**Alex Liros:** Oh right, there's a horse there.

**Jon Lidolt:** It looks like a creature of some sort in the lower right hand, as well.

**Alex Liros:** It has some strong qualities to it, actually, in term of colour and some kind of threat. They're all facing this one poor guy, actually, who's tied up to a stake of some sort.

This was kind of experimental work and, y'know, the colour was experimental. Working though was fairly even – we seemed to be fairly evenly distributed in our style. It's similar to 273. You see, that's another bird – that looks like it's a little more frantic there. There another bird coming out of somewhere this guy is being chased by a bird, it looks like. I couldn't tell you what's going on there, except that it doesn't look very pleasant. It certainly has a lot of drama in it.

These were inventions, now, of our imagination. With the three of us trying to invent things, you can work forever trying, basically, trying to figure out what things are. I couldn't even tell you what 283 is anymore. It looks like two figure or two heads... It's becoming very abstract, basically, It's becoming very abstract. You still have the figures

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<sup>20</sup> Thanatos was a death deity in ancient Greek mythology that was sometimes portrayed as a circling crow. The "battle" opponent Liros refers to may be Heracles, who in story is said to have been the only mortal powerful enough to defeat Thanatos in combat.

there and there's some kind of menace, I suppose, in that yellow eye but I'm not sure, it also seems a bit friendly. So here we're working out of our heads and I don't think we have one theme... 285 is another one of these mythological themes. Here's the enunciation and here's the angel bringing the pink triangle to the sleeping gay man.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh yes.

**Alex Liros:** And this is for the awakening, that he sort of knows what he is, so to speak, I suppose. That was a large painting. It was partly John's interesting idea of doing some spiritual work, actually, but giving it a gay connection.

**Jon Lidolt:** But at 285 there's something which is sort of interesting; the figure that's coming down with the pink triangle, it's almost like there are two faces: there's one almost like a mask.

**Alex Liros:** Well, that's probably me correcting somebody's work, actually. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** That face is not strong enough, to me. It needs a red outline. I'm not sure, but that's what it looks like. It looks like somebody sort of needed a little more clarification...

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, that would have added a real crunch, actually

**Alex Liros:** ...And now it does it look... the figure looks like it's in a bubble, almost. That, in a way makes sit more ethereal, as a matter of fact. The guy himself, lying down looks very earthy while the angel looks like he's got a completely different body and he almost looks like he's got a partly see-through body, which makes him quite ethereal.

**Jon Lidolt:** Almost like he's materializing.

**Alex Liros:** Yeah, that sort of thing. So that's part of the... It looks like my ex-boyfriend lying there on the grass, again. We can't get him out of my minds, actually.

The figure in 289 must have been part of the Rivoli. It looks like it's a burlesque and I can't imagine why... It was part of the Rivoli project. So, there was a burlesque house in the Rivoli some time ago, so it wasn't a gay theme. Oh yeah, that's right, the bottom one here, 294 is also part of the Rivoli because it was as one point – am I getting this right? – it was at one point a communist bookstore, a radical bookstore.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, I see that.

**Alex Liros:** And here you have people doing stuff, it's hard to make out...

**Jon Lidolt:** Is that the hammer and sickle?

**Alex Liros:** ...Hammer and sickle, and people with a fist, it's hard to read. And the people next to it, 295 [Laughs], they look like they might be visitors to the burlesque, I'm not sure exactly. [Laughs] They do have this very interesting twenties look to them – that bowler hat and that look of the guy and the women next to him, it's really quite something. It doesn't look like it's a drag or anything but part of it, part of, I guess, the interest is that the burlesque is also a bit of an underworld. The gay world was obviously very underground for a very long time...

**Jon Lidolt:** The colours and the figure in 295... did you ever see John Houston's film *Moulin Rouge*? It was made in the early fifties.

**Alex Liros:** I'm not sure if I did, actually.

**Jon Lidolt:** They experimented with colour, really, truly for the first time and the results really make me think of this.

**Alex Liros:** Well, it's a high, kind of fulvous colour here and it's the kind of thing, you see, which only a group of people – I mean, if you're a true fulvous artist, you would've worked it out but with us it was impossible – but with three of us, y'know, somebody could put a green \*\*\*\*\* and a green cheek in, which individual nobody would do, and the one on her face is just quite stunning, I think. She's eyeing the actual observer very critically with her red hair and... His eyes are a little lopsided, so he's a little, y'know, looking in different places, but she's looking at us with rather critical eyes.

**Jon Lidolt:** Almost disdain, I think

**Alex Liros:** Almost disdain, yeah, maybe. And I think 307, on the next page, is also part of it, it looks like it's also part of the Rivoli. It looks like it's part of... There's some kind of band playing or orchestra playing, there's a saxophone, there's somebody else doing something and it says something, I'm not sure: "SOHO..."

**Jon Lidolt:** SOHO Club.

**Alex Liros:** Yeah, Club. So, that's another historical thing that we did for the Rivoli installation.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, 308 looks like it may... Yes, that's part of it, too. It says right there...

**Alex Liros:** Oh, yes, yes, yes, 308. That's right, that's right. 308 is part of it too, of course.

We really had fun with these things. We had to imagine what it would be like and, y'know, now we had experience of seeing gay pride day and seeing bars, y'know, so we

just invented stuff. Here are all these gloating straight men looking at... [Laughs] at the girls behind here. It's quite funny.

**Jon Lidolt:** It's funny, yes. It's great... Are those balloons I see?

**Alex Liros:** There are balloons, yeah.

**Jon Lidolt:** I love balloons. They haven't had balloons at the gay pride events now for three years.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, they haven't? Well, they're all there.

**Jon Lidolt:** You know the big arches they used to have?

**Alex Liros:** Yeah. Now, there are some series of paintings that are a little bit mysterious, like 313...

**Jon Lidolt:** 313 ...

**Alex Liros:** It's hard for me to see exactly what's going on. It looks like it's some gay man, or young gay man, in a room and either something's happening... It looked like an existential situation. The figure on the right – the left, actually - is quite spectacular, with its open mouth, but I don't know quite what the problem is, or whether there is a problem, but something is afoot there.

**Jon Lidolt:** I think the figure sitting down doesn't look terribly happy.

**Alex Liros:** Not terribly happy, no. The colours are interesting, y'know. We were just pushing our experimental pallet, I think, a little bit further. Our work wasn't very sharp in our minds as to what we were doing, I don't think. The same thing with 315 – God knows what that's all about. There's this bizarre figure of a youth, really, with all his teeth intact and there's some kind of cock coming into him from somewhere, I don't see where it's coming from – I'm thinking it's a tree or something – and I can't make out the background. It's all kind of chaotic background, but it looks very hellish. It's part of the, I think, the glitter, glamour and the gore of gay life, I think...

**Jon Lidolt:** Actually, that almost looks like a reveler at a Mardi Gras or something.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, I see, maybe. That's true...

**Jon Lidolt:** I can see the mask and, like the costume...

**Alex Liros:** That's true, it could be Mardi Gras. [Inaudible]

**Jon Lidolt:** Or something like that.

**Alex Liros:** I think other things are a little obscure, like 319... There are two, 318 and 319. They're obscure, but 318 was actually meant to be a picture of two older gay men kissing. Now, it's a very obscure image, basically, because we were kind of lost, rather, in the whole colour and all this business of going on. I'm not sure when the theme came up but you can see, they're like torsos. I'm not sure how successful that is, but it's certainly a strange painting. I'm not sure what this thing on the left is. [Laughs] It looks something like testicles, almost. I can't tell.

The one on the right, 319, is another vague picture. It looks like an older man on the right with this very colourful face and it looks like a younger body lying down, and then something else, some kind of mask head on the left that's mysterious.

Those were not easy to do, I think. We had some trouble. It's one thing to do a gay pride day like 322, where things are all kind of in front of you and you're just marking things down, and then another thing to do something big.

333 is interesting, because we had a nice guy called Denny and he would sit for us a lot. We did this beautifully colourful portrait, 333, at the bottom of page four. He was a kind of a radical fairy guy, very sweet disposition, and I think we tried to depict that he's really kind of a nature boy, by bringing the outside colours around him into him, as well and absorbing the colours.

329, above, is an early work, I can tell. It's an early idea of, y'know, mocking gay machismo or guy physio-activity. It's really all over the map. It's just kind of all over the place. I can see various people working there now. Let's see if I can go onto something more... At the bottom on page, you see again, we're into fairly abstract territory here. We had a very sweet, in the same picture at 334, he's called Étienne. He was this very sweet guy from the West Indies, very sweet black guy from the West Indies and we had him model for him several times. He was a very sweet fellow; I think he unfortunately died of AIDS some years later. So we used him as a model.

Then the figure at 350. Now you see we're getting back to your Mardi Gras idea. There, you don't know... This is some kind of a monster that has many sides to it and many transformations. I think it's part of the idea of the gay world being inventive, the inventiveness of the gay world, to be able to transform itself into all kinds of stuff for all kinds of situations: You can be drag, you can be macho, you can be a fairy, you can be this and that...

**Jon Lidolt:** You're not limited.

**Alex Liros:** You're not limited, no, and that's kind of the... I think that was partly what we were looking at...

**Jon Lidolt:** That's true, because straight culture really tries to shoehorn you into certain... which is really restricting. It makes everything bland and boring.

**Alex Liros:** Well, it's hard, you see. That's the thing – individually, it's hard to resist the pressure, but when you're... While we were working together, y'know, we just kind of, the three of us would just think of these funny things. I myself wouldn't think of, basically, but with John and Clarence working with me, these funny things come out, which wouldn't have come out, of I think, one person's head.

There is an installation we did, down on page 6. It's so hard to read this: "La Beau et la Bête." We were commissioned by a Halifax gallery. That had an annual gay man's show and we were invited to do something, so we did a book, kind of a very big book [359-367]. We had text and drawings in the book. and it was on the Beauty and the Beast theme, basically. I can't quite... but you can see how in one image like 361, there's a funny picture of a guy looking up at his closet... [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** ... And what comes out of it, all this gay paraphernalia. My God, you'd want to shut the door really quickly on that. And that other stuff is kind of a sweet thing fairy tale. I can't make out stuff very well. The idea was that some older ugly man, y'know, falls in love with some man and it really all works well in the end. That's the dream. It was an interesting book.

I don't have much more... I can't quite see. There are too many details here and a storyline, but it's an image and text book. We worked quite hard at this and composed the storyline and did the illustrations and sent it off to Halifax, this big book.

**Jon Lidolt:** So, as a book, was this a one-off thing or was this...?

**Alex Liros:** A one-off thing. Yeah, it was a one-off, thing. Pink Triangle Press has the whole thing. It's a one-off thing. We didn't go to Halifax but it was bound as you can see maybe, and people could flip the pages. They're wood, paper glued on wood...

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, I see.

**Alex Liros:** ... and you could flip the pages, but it was a rather big book. It had to be put on a table to be looked at.

**Jon Lidolt:** So the pages must've been very large.

**Alex Liros:** They were fairly large, you're right. They were about, y'know, like two feet or two-and-a-half feet by... It was a fairly large undertaking.

Let me see what else... There's more of the fanciful like 372. I don't really know... There's where we kind of were just, who knows, the woman's face and somebody's head on a stick, [Laughs] a mask of some sort and... I think at one point... we explored some of the issues but I think at one point we got tired of exploring specific issues and we just did anything...

**Jon Lidolt:** Just had fun.

**Alex Liros:** Just had fun, yeah. So out of that came a variety of things. There is a series I see on page 7 of... I guess these are martial arts maybe, some kind of martial arts activities like 380 and 381. I don't quite know how we got there, but they're kind of very strong drawings.

**Jon Lidolt:** I really like those. Now those figures, though, all three of them look like they've been done by the same person.

**Alex Liros:** No, no the weren't, though, they weren't. Definitely weren't actually.

**Jon Lidolt:** I guess because all three of you had worked on them...

**Alex Liros:** Well, we'd been working for so long together and they look pretty clean, y'know, they're not very messed up.

**Jon Lidolt:** No, they're really clean.

**Alex Liros:** But this part, it's hard for me to know what I did and what I didn't do. Clarence and I both worked more in the anatomy in a sense, to getting the anatomy right and how the figure actually stood, y'know, in space, and John was always interested also in texture, so he'd be busy texturing things, [Laughs] working of the flesh of the body, which is great and we'd be busy trying to get the arm right and see how the arm would probably go and in what position. So that combination actually was interesting.

And there's another quasi-funny martial artist in 382, there's a guy with a broom it looks like [Laughs] but taking on a martial arts pose. Goodness...

**Jon Lidolt:** Curling in Beijing? [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** Goodness, yes. [Laughs] This is what we were... we had our fun. The one above it, actually, is much earlier, 378. This one we call it, I think, glad day, and we had that exhibited at the Idea Gallery on Queen Street<sup>21</sup>. It was sitting in the window. That was our first... it was based a bit on Denny, the guy that would dress up as a fairy. It had a bit of this lightness to it and joyfulness to it. There wasn't a drag idea, it was just kind of a fairy idea, of being free and easy with yourself and things around you and you can do things and not be imitating... 376 is definitely a drag out of our imagination. That's more of a drag figure, but 378 is not. It's just a guy, kind of a joyful young male.

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<sup>21</sup> Identity unknown. Liros may be referring to a gallery that featured works from General Idea, a Toronto-based art collection that operated from 1967 to 1995. The group, comprised of members AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal produced video, performance, publishing, painting, sculpture and installation work and is famous for its AIDS-themed sculptures and paintings.

**Jon Lidolt:** 382 really strikes me as being a really stunning thing. How did the three of you work out that and get such... this incredible... it's so different from all of the other things.

**Alex Liros:** I don't know. It's become mystery to me, as well. Those are very strong feet. I always. Clarence was good on strong feet, actually, so was probably his. I might've been more of a brooming [sic] man. [Laughs] John probably did a lot of the colouring and I might've worked more on the face and the arm. But we must've had a clear idea It might be that we had a model posing for us, actually, for that. It looks almost like a model is posing for us. It probably is somebody posing for us and we decided to just dress him up somehow. It looks like there's something in his mouth, too, actually. What is that...? Looks like he might have a cigarette in mouth or something. But it's a very strong... those yellow paths and orange paths are just spectacular.

**Jon Lidolt:** Wow. It's my favourite.

**Alex Liros:** It [Inaudible], and then the broom has this beautiful blue colour at the end of it, just the winging, just a dazzling piece of colour there.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah, no, really, truly. It's outstanding. I guess, y'know, we all have certain things which strike us and we really like, and that one...

**Alex Liros:** I think maybe the Chinese symbols might not be very well done [Laughs].

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah, but they still work. It still works.

**Alex Liros:** I think we defaulted and...

**Jon Lidolt:** I guess really what strikes me about them is it's so different from everything else. Don't you think so?

**Alex Liros:** I guess so. I guess... I was looking at the one on top. The one on top is different because it... I guess the positioning. We'd done positions like that before in previous ones, where the legs spread apart and he's tensed up for something, but to have these baggy pants put on him, the suspenders, I suspect, with a broom is quite inventive I think.

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah. Really, truly.

**Alex Liros:** I don't think... it just shows how much fun we were having and how cooperative, if there was a model, how cooperative these people were to playing around, basically, and having a good time with us.

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, also the fact that there's not a background. It's very, very clean and well drawn and striking...

**Alex Liros:** Yup, yup. Well it's interesting how that works, actually. It's really a drawing, basically, although there's colour in it, it's really a drawing.

**Jon Lidolt:** That three people came together and did that, I think, is absolutely stunning.

**Alex Liros:** We probably get tired of... Well, there's another figure on page 6, 368, which is a very odd figure. Here you can tell, I think, we're working three together, actually. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** Which one's that? 368?

**Alex Liros:** 368/ Here you can tell something's not right, here. [Laughs] It has a certain charm by itself, but who knows. It's not the traditional... got its cock and ball, but who knows what this person is. It certainly looks eccentric. That's part of what I think we were trying to do, is to bring out all these eccentricities.

**Jon Lidolt:** It's certainly a happy-go-lucky figure.

**Alex Liros:** We were not shy of bringing out things which were just amusing and perhaps didn't make too much sense, really.

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, something I like about them – I went to a school in Chicago called the American Academy of Art and, especially at the beginning everybody was so bloody uptight, they just couldn't loosen up when they were doing things. You'd find in life class, you'd find somebody doing feet and little toenails and everything, and then it would have nothing to do with the rest of the figure. I myself had a horrible problem; I just couldn't let it flow, y'know?

**Alex Liros:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, each of us had his own little hang-ups when we started working together. Certainly we all loosened up, but it wasn't an easy thing to do. We used to describe areas that people became so fond of that they would fight for the area. We would call them sacred spaces. [Laughs] Somebody would work really hard and carefully on some area, but then they had to defend the area from attacks from the other two. [Laughs]

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, I can see that. I can see that...

**Alex Liros:** There is this jealousy, or there is kind of love that you put into a piece of work and you don't want to destroy it immediately, basically. You want to take care of it for a while, and we called this sacred area. We knew that that sacred areas basically had to go in the end [Laughs] so once we get this idea that, y'know, we had to be careful about sacred areas we loosened up a bit more. Then we didn't just draw in one little corner, we didn't create this sacred space that's mine; we worked more together, and therefore the sacred space was more confused. It was a contribution by all three of us.

But one day, I must admit, there was trouble when John and Clarence and I were doing a large work and John decided to take a big white brush and start painting the whole thing with white. Clarence and I had to physically stop him. [Laughs] We said, "John, you can't do this. It's one thing to be free and spontaneous, but you're destroying all the work we've done." So, spontaneity, all of a sudden, we decided had its limits. Here we had spontaneous painters, doing anything we wanted to, and all of a sudden we had to put a rule in place. We first said, "No big brushes." We disallowed big brushes, and if somebody wanted to clean up a whole big area, he had to first consult the other two, what he was up to and what he wanted to do. We had to start... We had to put chains on people a bit, otherwise it would get a little too chaotic and then bad feelings could develop, you see. That's the problem; bad feelings did develop, y'know, because you do think what you're doing is good. And somebody wipes it out, all of a sudden it's gone, and you do feel something about it. You do feel a sense of loss.

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, I can understand that.

**Alex Liros:** There are lots of opportunities for hostility, not hostility exactly, but hurt feelings.

**Jon Lidolt:** I'm almost surprised nobody punched anybody else. [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** Well, y'know, it got a little tight at the end, but don't forget these sessions that we had were also social sessions. We were politically active; we followed the political news. Individually, we went to the courts to record trials, and I have my own work in that and John has his work and then Clarence does too. So, we were politically involved and we would meet maybe, I'm not sure, twice a week and we would discuss the politics of the day and whatever, whatever and then start saying, "'What'll we do today?" and if there had a model we'd think of a scene or if we had a theme going we would continue it, or in the summer we would take it easy and start going in good weather and take our bicycles and go to specific locations carrying our easels.

The problem I found in the end, after eight years of doing this, I said to myself "I'm missing all my gay pride days by working. I have to work every gay pride day." It's like being a waiter at a big event that you can't participate in. You always have to work, and I actually got tired of it.

**Jon Lidolt:** You ended up being a spectator.

**Alex Liros:** I got tired of just working all my summer long at these gay events. You can see how it kind of... but y'know, this is what we were doing. Other groups were working differently like there's a general idea that worked very conceptually, they worked in a different manner, but the way we were working, y'know, we hustled a lot and we did a lot of on-site activity and it was tiring. It was tiring in the end.

**Jon Lidolt:** Did you finally come to a point where you felt that maybe you'd gone as far as you could go as a threesome, exploring...?

**Alex Liros:** I think so. It was difficult because each one wanted a different thing. I had two things going for me: besides JAC, I was working with my boyfriend at that time and we were doing collaborative art, as well.

**Jon Lidolt:** [Inaudible] Oh my gosh.

**Alex Liros:** I had shows with him. It was very different work. It was not JAC work, it was... I'll show you a sculpture outdoors, actually, that I did. We would say we worked with metal; he would generally do the metal formation and I would paint it. It was more defined. It wasn't, y'know, very spontaneous. It was more controlled. We did some landscapes, again, it was more controlled and I did a lot of work on my own. I did sculpture at the time and I did stuff, so I was a little jealous of the time I was spending with JAC in a sense. I did want to work out on my own for awhile and I thought JAC had fulfilled its mission, in a way...

**Jon Lidolt:** Yeah, yeah.

**Alex Liros:** ...That we did a lot of work. The early work was very... how can I say this... innovative, I thought, and we did explore a very new way of working. We put a lot of energy into it and we put a lot of energy into promoting it. We had a fair amount of hostility from some place. We had to fight that all the time. So, we were very active, I mean, it was a very active time and we did all the documentation and all the rallies and all that kind of stuff. After a while I thought, by the end of the 80s things had quieted down, basically: the community itself is more relaxed, the confrontation is lessened and I wanted to work on my own. I'm not what Clarence wanted to do but John at this point... John had a rather grandiose image to set up a gay museum of some sort and we would continue into... we would solidify this into a structure, into a legal structure of sort or a political structure. I just didn't have the energy to get involved in such a big project. I really wanted to quiet down in my studio and just work for a while. It took a lot of energy: discussing politics and discussing how to work how to get and how to put on shows...

**Jon Lidolt:** It must have started to feel like a job where absolutely you had to do it...

**Alex Liros:** It did, it did.

**Jon Lidolt:** ...whereas it started out obviously being really fun, spontaneous...

**Alex Liros:** It did, actually. It did. Personally, for me it was very helpful because I was a young artist and I kind of vaguely knew what I was doing – I had some schooling in Ottawa, but not very thorough – and working with John and Clarence was an education for me. I could see how one can work openly and I could see John's way and I could see Clarence's way and how.... and I knew had some problems of my own. I got into very bad habits in drawing and I knew had to clear them up somehow and JA, really was a catalyst for a lot of my later work, when I kind of cleared up the problems I used to have.

And then I had a boyfriend who was jealous of JAC. That was the other problem. We would work in my studio for a while and my boyfriend would come home and I'd be there with John and Clarence, working upstairs. [Laughs] And guess what? He was not happy. But these are things that I think happen in all collectives, [they] have these problems. But, y'know, we lasted for eight years. I thought that was...

**Jon Lidolt:** That's remarkable. That really is remarkable.

**Alex Liros:** I thought it as remarkable, actually. We lasted for so long, we did a big body of work and a lot of people saw our work, we sold a lot of work and we got reviewed a lot.

We were just swept up in the gay cultural revolution at the time and it wasn't only gay, it was also straight; figurative painting had made its comeback in the early 80s, late 70s, and we were just part of the swelling of this new wave of figuration painting. A lot of it was very loose and easy. We got along with a lot of different artists, straight or gay. It was a very interesting time to live in. It was a very rich time. There were all kinds of things going on: feminist art was going on, lesbian was going on, "what is gay art? What isn't gay art?" was going on, and then the whole gay culture in Toronto stabilizing and forming a community, forming legal entities and forming structures just so that they can solidify and fight the good battle, basically. JAC, I think, just got tired in the end, of doing it. We did our bit and thought basically "That's enough." Then other people could carry on.

**Jon Lidolt:** I think JAC certainly accomplished its mission and, y'know, everything does finally come to an end. Plus. You obviously, y'know used it as a jumping off point to go on to other things.

**Alex Liros:** I did. It didn't need to happen, but it did happen that way. I'm not sure how Clarence felt about... after a while it's like a marriage, basically. There are tensions, tensions develop in the collective over the little things. That does happen and then you figure "Well, it's not worth staying together," but it's worth keeping your collection together because, we did a lot of good work.

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, absolutely. I think after you'd gone to a certain point, surely the creative spark goes and it starts to become work. I think to be creative you have to feel free. I know that people now doing graphics and things like that, or advertising work, it's just become the rat, and I don't think you can be creative under those conditions.

**Alex Liros:** Oh, that's interesting, yeah. Well, it's true. It's funny. JAC was criticized quite a lot for being amateurish and using too bold colours and this and that. At first I was kind of torn between all this kind of stuff and I thought, "Maybe this is true, y'know. We're not doing it right," or whatever, but later I realized how strong a lot of the work was. Not all of it, but I realized how strong the work was and how it kind of held up over the years. Hopefully, other people will find the same thing.

**Jon Lidolt:** Well, I did. When, y’know, the show at the O’Connor Gallery? I have seen a lot of the JAC stuff before that, and to be quite honest, at one point I didn’t like it.

**Alex Liros:** I know, yeah.

**Jon Lidolt:** And after a number of years of seeing everything together – of course, I’d changed as well – but it suddenly struck me that this is really interesting. And again the colours, the use of colours I thought it’s... A lot of people are afraid to use colour.

**Alex Liros:** Well, I was one of them, actually. [Laughs] When I first joined JAC, I was horrified when John would buy these magenta crayons. I don’t think I’d ever used magenta, but there it was and there it went. It was like an anything goes kind of an experiment. You really had to hustle to market the work, which was interesting, because there was kind of resistance to this kind of work, although it was in the air. People like Ray Johnson<sup>22</sup> and Andy Fabo were around, but they were doing it a little more calmly than we were. We were just a little too screaming in our work and I guess we were a little pushy because we were so open about ourselves and our work.

**Jon Lidolt:** People just weren’t ready for it at that point. [Laughs]

**Alex Liros:** It’s one thing to be gay political, but to be openly gay as an artist was just a whole different thing, actually. There is a bit of a difference, actually, going to a gallery and seeing a lot of gay work can be a little disturbing for some people.

**Jon Lidolt:** At this stage in time, I don’t think people would have as much of a problem, so I can understand that when you first started, a lot of people would have been truly shocked or put off by it.

**Alex Liros:** It was quite shocking, actually, to see, y’know, a blue erection here and there or a purple coming out at somebody in the piece of work. It was quite disturbing. I hadn’t that kind of work before. The work that I did before was more toward gentle, y’know, it was just life drawing work where you have the nude male and that was it. It wasn’t in any activity, basically. Clarence did more of that, actually. He did calendars... from our workshops, the life drawing workshops, Clarence would do calendars every year and he would do the drawing via computer, an old Macintosh. Do you remember those old Macintoshes?

**Jon Lidolt:** Oh, I remember that. He was one of the first.

**Alex Liros:** He had a good sense of how do... kind of a gay men together kind of idea, y’know. There was a whole tradition of doing underground gay art before JAC, obviously. You had people like Tom of Finland, of course and all these other artists who are serving the gay market.

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<sup>22</sup> For more information see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray\\_Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Johnson)

**Jon Lidolt:** You'd have to include Andy Warhol I think, surely.

**Alex Liros:** Maybe, yeah.

**Jon Lidolt:** I mean, I'm not sure I consider what he did art, I need to say.

**Alex Liros:** The thing is, we kind of wanted to be inclusive. We started out as... We thought of ourselves, "What is gay art?" you see. We gave a talk at OCA<sup>23</sup> once and we said, "What is gay art?" Our first picture was some kind of a picture of Tom of Finland, actually. [Laughs] It was quite startling to see this in the institution of art. And then we said, "Well, this is part of our culture. We don't do this. That's not our way but it's part of our culture." And we kind of appropriated Tom of Finland as part of our own, as well as others, basically. Obviously we had a very full list, so we drew on other mainstream artists that had come into the fold. And then we went beyond that and did all kinds of other gay activities. It was a big step to move from working from a model, which a very traditional way of doing it, or a model scene or a gay scene, to documenting something, to looking at the culture and visualize how the culture did look.

**Jon Lidolt:** I think that's a huge step.

**Alex Liros:** That was a big step for us.

**Jon Lidolt:** I think for everybody because, y'know, I mean gay art definitely was a nude man or semi-clothed or something.

**Alex Liros:** Exactly, exactly. That was the art. But this whole 80s was so vibrant that it all came up, y'know, with photography, a lot of photography going on at the time and other artists were working and the feminists were working of course, in their way. Everything was fermenting at that time, so we were lucky to be working on very fertile ground, basically, when things are popping up all the time and things were very loose and easy.

**Jon Lidolt:** It was interesting because I ran a movie theatre from the mid 70s to the mid 80s...

**Alex Liros:** Oh, you did?

**Jon Lidolt:** ...and it was great fun because we were basically the Canadian home of the Rocky Horror Picture Show<sup>24</sup>. The costumes and the excitement; it was all part of the whole thing, I think.

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<sup>23</sup> Ontario College of Art, now known as the Ontario College of Art and Design.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the Bloor Cinema – it still plays the Rocky Horror Picture Show the last Friday of every month, and on Halloween. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloor\_Cinema)

**Alex Liros:** Well, those were good days and we were younger in those days and I could stay up half the night and do three times as much work as we do now. [Laughs] I could, anyway.

I can't say enough about the energy that a group produces. For one person, it can be a big slough to be an artist: you have to do the work, you got to promote the work, you got to do the grant applications, you gotta do all this stuff, you have to hang your show. It's a lot of work for one person to do it all himself. So JAC actually eased the burden of each individual artist in that way. Clarence would specialize in getting stuff organized in terms of frames and I would do promotion or something and John would do something. It was easier getting things organized and a lot more fun, actually. And you were brave enough to get out in various places and work and go out in the middle of the dance and do paintings.

**Jon Lidolt** So, working together really freed you.

**Alex Liros:** It did, it did, it did, yeah but as long as that was together. [Laugh] We needed the protection of each other, basically. It wouldn't last with one person. You'd have to have a lot of ego and a lot of tough skin to be able to do it on your own, I think, and maybe some people do it. There are people, maybe, that do it on their own like this, but we decided this was the way we could do it, using our individual energies, combining them and seeing what would happen.

Well, it's been a long day...

**Jon Lidolt:** It's been very long. Actually, I guess we can turn this off at this stage.

**Alex Liros:** Okay.

[END OF RECORDING]