





# Brush with Fate

ART HISTORY WAITS  
FOR NO MAN.

BY MICHAEL HARDY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN GOLDMAN



ONE AFTERNOON IN THE SPRING of 1973, Ronald Anderson was driving west on Highway 64, somewhere near Shiprock, New Mexico on the vast Navajo Indian reservation, when a mysterious urge prompted him to hit the brakes and bring his Chrysler station wagon to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. While checking his rearview mirror to make sure there were no approaching cars, Anderson noticed a dirt road branching off the highway that he'd never seen before. He put the Chrysler in reverse and backed up until he could see the street sign: Rattlesnake Road.

Intrigued, he followed it until he reached a hogan, a traditional Navajo home made of logs and mud. The hogan's roof had partially caved in and it looked abandoned, but it was beginning to rain, so Anderson went inside seeking shelter. There, he lit a fire for warmth, said an Indian prayer—he had been born in Oklahoma to a full-blooded Choctaw father and a half Chickasaw mother—and lay down to take a nap. Sometime in the night he had a vision in which the door to the hogan opened, letting in 12 Navajo men who arranged themselves in a circle around the fire. One of them rolled a cigarette, lit it from the fire, and passed his pouch of tobacco to the other Indians, who did the same.

Then, between drags on his cigarette, the Smoking Man began telling Anderson his future. He prophesied that the artist, a painter who was already developing a reputation for intense, politically engaged works influenced by both Abstract Expressionism and traditional Native American art, would one day teach art at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. He said that Anderson's work would be exhibited in New York museums. He said people would come along to help him when he least expected it.

But all he foretold came with a catch—the artist could not sell any of his art until the year 2000. With that, the vision ended, though not before Anderson was given a strange directive by the Smoking Man: “Go change the course of Indian art history.”

Anderson immediately stopped selling his paintings, as instructed, and one by one the predictions began to come true. First, he found himself teaching art on the Havasupai Indian reservation at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. In 2005, his paintings were included in group shows at Manhattan's Museum of Arts and Design and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian—New York. And yes, Anderson received unexpected help from strangers along every step of his journey. “My life has been just like that ever since,” he recently told me.

Still, there is one thing that hasn't come true. Despite all the paintings he's painted, all the shows he's had, and all the curators and critics who have hailed his work, Anderson has not changed the course of Indian art history. Now 76 and in the twilight of his career, he's running out of chances to meet the Smoking Man's challenge. Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that Anderson would end up in the land of the Allen Brothers and Warren Moon. After all, isn't Houston the place where—its small Native American community notwithstanding—so many Americans before him had finally found success after struggling elsewhere? Doesn't this city open its arms wide for newcomers? Didn't *The Daily Beast* name it the best town in America for restarting your career?

Unfortunately, what the Smoking Man did *not* tell Anderson is that his attempt to jumpstart his career would end in bitter legal wrangling. He didn't say that the person Anderson entrusted with selling his paintings would be accused of stealing them, or that Anderson would be left without access to his own archive. About all this the Smoking Man said nothing. Which left Anderson totally unprepared when it happened.

ON FAIRMONT PARKWAY in Pasadena is a vast warehouse called Uncle Bob's Self-Storage, its wide corridors lined with roll-up doors painted bright yellow. In one of the warehouse's hundreds of identical units, a space roughly 20 feet deep and 10 feet wide, sit 1,500 or so paintings and sculptures, the life's work of a man who may or may not change the course of art history. There is no ceiling to the space, only a canopy of chicken wire through which

you can see the roof far above. Paintings of every size and description are stacked 10 or more deep against the walls, with only a single narrow pathway down the middle. In a back corner, shelves are piled high with smaller canvases. Leaning against one wall, next to a waist-high stack of watercolors, is a door accessorized with two foxtails and a mirror. This had once been the back door of Anderson's porch before he'd taken it off its hinges and turned it into a sculpture called “Before Casinos / After Casinos.”

To understand how Anderson's paintings got here, indeed how Anderson *himself* got here, you have to meet a thin, athletic Pasadena man with long black hair named Michael Loneman. Last year, Loneman, the son of Anderson's best friend, signed a contract with the artist giving Loneman the exclusive right to sell his art. He knew people in Houston, he told Anderson, wealthy and powerful people. And, in fact, he did indeed know such people. He had served drinks to them as a bartender in the VIP sections of the Toyota Center and NRG Stadium. What he did not have was a background in art, however, or much of anything else for that matter, having dropped out of school in the fifth grade. Nevertheless, Loneman seems to have truly believed he was the man to help launch a late-career renaissance for the man he calls “Uncle Ron”—and, not incidentally, pocket a handsome 50-percent commission on every painting sold, as stipulated in a contract the men drew up.

Anderson trusted Loneman, whom he had known since he was a baby, and he knew that Houston's art



After 10 years of 24 with the original Northern route of the Trail of Tears running through the front, one would think I'd get use to it, but I haven't. Like the first night I still expect to see spirits floating down Old Hickory Blvd. I have dreamed of teaching school, making my name up and telling me to go out with you on the other instruments on these way to Indian Territory. After all I'm crying and crying that's gone on here, the thing that amazes me the most is the wonder that GOOD BYE TO ME HERE IN THE FOOTSTEP OF MY ANCESTORS" Ronald

market was booming. After signing their contract at Anderson's Tennessee farmhouse last December, Loneman returned to Houston and hit the ground running, quitting his bartending job to focus on promoting Anderson's paintings full-time. Soon, Anderson himself arrived, moving in for a time with Loneman, his wife, and three of the couple's children.

The road from bartender to art merchant can be a rocky one, Loneman quickly learned. Normally a man whose sartorial style runs toward jeans and a tank top, he donned a suit and tie and began trekking from gallery to gallery, toting a briefcase full of well-worn exhibition catalogs featuring Anderson's work. It quickly became clear that none of Houston's gallerists had ever heard of Anderson, and none were interested in showing his paintings.

Undeterred, Loneman dipped into his personal savings to hire an art conservator and an appraiser, and launched a website, nativeson.biz. Worried that Anderson's paintings were moldering away in the Oklahoma storage unit where he was keeping them, Loneman rented a U-Haul van and personally drove them to Uncle Bob's in Pasadena. The cost to store the art was \$500 a month, which turned out to be peanuts compared to his later expenditures.

"I had never dreamed storing art could be so expensive," Loneman recently told me. "There was a lot involved—I had to get flood insurance, theft insurance, climate control. That was a rude awakening."

Still, the budding impresario remained resolute. He decided that if no local gallery would give Anderson a show, he would do it himself. In May, he mounted his own exhibition of Anderson's work, renting a space in the chic 4411 Montrose complex adjacent to the well-established galleries of Anya Tish and Barbara Davis. Although it only managed to sell two paintings, and received scant coverage in the local media, the exhibition made an impression on the few visitors who did wander in. One of them was a rumpled-looking local defense attorney named Bill Cheadle. "I was so blown away by the caliber of this art, and just the ability of the art to speak to me," he said in September, taking a sip of his beer at a silent auction in Midtown in which Anderson was participating. "The guy is truly a genius. On many levels. I just fell in love with the stuff, and told them I'd like to help out any way I could."

Cheadle sprang into action, phoning up an old college friend from the University of Texas, Greg Mitchell. A research biologist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Mitchell is also a son of the late billionaire oilman George P. Mitchell, the man who founded The Woodlands and pioneered fracking. On one of his frequent trips to Houston, Greg Mitchell stopped by Uncle Bob's, purchasing a set of four brightly colored Anderson paintings entitled "Day in an Orange Grove." The works, he told me, reminded him of a night he once spent in an orange grove in Valencia in his twenties.

**THE DETAILS OF RONALD** Anderson's early life are both fantastic and unclear. He was born, he told me, in 1938 in a place he knows only as The Deep Hole, on Buffalo Creek in southeastern Oklahoma. As the story was later told to him, Anderson's parents were unable to raise him, so at two weeks of age he was taken in by a German émigré named Augusta Cursdorf and her American husband. Cursdorf came from a wealthy German family and had been a fixture in European avant-garde circles, apparently counting Kandinsky among her friends.



In Oklahoma, Augusta channeled her artistic interests into the education of her young charge. Anderson vividly recalls her pulling him in a red wagon around the neighborhood, asking him to sketch trees and houses, and schooling him in abstract art. "I've never been without art—it's always been there," he said, noting that Cursdorf herself was not as permanent a presence. When Anderson was six she was arrested on suspicion of being a German spy, according to Anderson. He spent the next nine years at Jones Academy, a boarding school for Native Americans in Oklahoma's Ouachita Mountains.

After graduating high school and serving four years in the Marines, Anderson got married, moved to Los Angeles, and got a job doing drywall construction. Although he continued painting, art took a backseat in his life for the next decade. Then, one day in the early 1970s, he saw a painting of an American Indian in a Rodeo Drive art gallery. Anderson knew instantly that the artist wasn't an Indian. After all, the painting depicted the Indian in profile, a perspective popularized by Frederic Remington's paintings.

"I said to myself, I can do better than that," Anderson remembered. He quit his construction job, left his wife and four children behind in LA, and lit out for the Indian territories, intending to "spend a year or two going around to reservations, learning their dances, then come back to Rodeo Drive and make a million bucks."



Instead, after making a tour of the reservations, he went to college, earning a degree in art history from the University of Oklahoma. (He later divorced his wife, who got custody of the children.)

Those two educations, one in Native American traditions and one in European art history, set the course for his career. He disdained the stereotypical Indian paintings filled with images of headdresses and tomahawks being sold to tourists in Santa Fe and Taos; he believed that Indian art had to engage with contemporary movements like Abstract Expressionism rather than simply ignoring them, as he saw many of his contemporaries doing. And he brought a sharp political consciousness to his art, which often addressed the long, ugly history of America's dealings with its native population.

Other Native American painters were experimenting with abstraction as well, many of them associated with the then-new Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. But Anderson never quite fit in with that group of celebrated artists, according to Joan Frederick, the author of a book about one of them, T.C. Cannon. "He was kind of always on the fringe. I think it's just because he wasn't as business savvy as the others, and he wasn't as aggressive as they were about the shows."

By then, of course, Anderson had experienced his vision in the desert forbidding him to sell his paintings. Instead, he sup-

ported himself with the drywalling skills he picked up in LA in the '60s. For decades, he moved from Indian reservation to Indian reservation, crisscrossing the Southwest, working construction for three months and then painting for three months. He kept his paintings in a self-storage unit in Verden, a small town southwest of Oklahoma City. From time to time he was invited to exhibit his work, at which point he would drive to Verden, load a few paintings in the bed of his pickup, and get them ready for exhibition. For Anderson, that sometimes involved a trip to the local carwash, a practice not recommended by most professional art conservators. "I would take them to a carwash and squirt water on them, and if the paint stays, then it's good. That was my longevity test."

**ANOTHER HOUSTONIAN** who fell in love with Anderson's work was Tom Sheffield, an eminent domain lawyer who admired the paintings so much he invited the artist to live rent-free in his guesthouse in the tony La Porte neighborhood of Morgan's Point on Galveston Bay. Sheffield ended up buying eight of Anderson's paintings, which are now prominently displayed in his century-old French Colonial mansion. One of them depicts an American flag partially covered by a black square that evokes an anti-war armband. Written in a careful script inside the square is a list of the US military expeditions that made up the Trail of Tears, next to the number of Indians who died during each. (The Tennessee farmhouse where Anderson created many of his paintings is near the historical route of Trail of Tears. He moved there, he said, to feel closer to the suffering of his ancestors.)

But Sheffield's favorite work is an eerie painting of a column of spectral, all-white figures marching through a barren forest toward the viewer (see p. 66). The painting exerted a magnetic pull on him from the first moment he saw it. "He

wouldn't be here if I hadn't seen that ghost painting," he told me. "It staggered me—I think it's frickin' genius. To me, it's a universal theme of affliction, and the dominion of force and brutality. It's heartbreaking, but it's not sentimental."

Since moving into the guesthouse in July, Anderson has become a friend and frequent dinner guest of the Sheffields. He painted a watercolor for Sheffield's wife for her birthday, and installed a buffalo skull above the front door—a traditional sign of mourning—after her father died.

Things were not going as smoothly between Anderson and Loneman, however. Their contract, which Loneman showed to me, specified that they would split the proceeds from any sales. But it also stipulated that they split the cost of storing, marketing, and selling the art. And those costs turned out to be greater than either Loneman or Anderson had imagined. Over the first nine months of the contract, Loneman said he spent at least \$30,000 promoting Anderson's work, while generating only \$20,000 in sales. The artist balked, however, when Loneman tried to withhold Anderson's half of the proceeds until expenses were paid. "I've spent \$30,000 on art supplies in my life," the artist countered. "How do I get that back?"

In the end, Loneman said, he borrowed money from friends and maxed out both his and his wife's credit cards. The couple is now separated and his wife is seeking a divorce—in large part because of the financial stress, he said.

Just when Loneman began to realize he was in over his head and his budget, Bill Cheadle, the defense attorney who'd been awed by Anderson's work at the pop-up gallery, reentered the picture. To Loneman, he seemed like a godsend,

someone with the money and connections to take his uncle to the next level. In August, Loneman agreed to sell his contract with Anderson to Cheadle for the amount, he claims, of \$15,000. (Cheadle maintains that he paid less.) Anderson himself, the man whose art was at stake, said he was not apprised of the deal, and only learned of it after the papers had been signed.

Loneman felt lucky to have escaped his dalliance in the art world with his life. He used the money to pay back some of the people he owed, began trying to repair his marriage, and decided to go back to bartending.

Then he learned that Cheadle had filed a police report accusing him of stealing Anderson's art.

**HERE'S HOW CHEADLE** tells the story: On September 5, a few weeks after buying the contract from Loneman, he stopped by Uncle Bob's to check on one of Anderson's paintings and discovered that the lock had been changed. He also learned from the manager on duty that Loneman had recently visited the unit. When Cheadle finally got inside, he said it was obvious that paintings had been moved around. His investigation into the matter led him to a man named Rob Hovis, Loneman's half-brother, who told Cheadle that Loneman had bragged about "holding back" around 40 paintings, presumably to later sell on his own. Furious, Cheadle filed a report with the Pasadena police.

Loneman has a different version of the events. "There is no art missing," he recently told me, his voice rising in indignation. His time among the swell set now clearly behind him, he was back in a tank top and jeans when we met at a Denny's off Highway 146 in La Porte, where he's been living since he and his wife separated. He wasn't sure why Cheadle would file what Loneman termed a bogus claim, but he suspected nefarious intentions. "What he's trying to do to my uncle, what he's trying to do to me...he was no good from Jump Street," he said.

On a recent afternoon, I visited Uncle Bob's with Anderson, Cheadle, and Mitchell, who had just arrived in town from California. Cheadle led us to the unit, unlocked the padlock, and rolled open the door. The three men inspected the room in silence for a moment. Mitchell expressed his displeasure at the storage conditions. "See, this is a problem," he told Cheadle. "There's all this rat shit here."

While Mitchell and Cheadle argued about how to remedy the situation, Anderson wandered slowly through the unit, taking out this or that painting. He seemed to be looking for something in particular. Finally, quietly, Anderson announced that at least one painting was indeed missing—a large one. He hadn't wanted to believe Cheadle's allegations against Loneman, the son of his best friend, he later told me, but now felt forced to admit the possibility that the man he had trusted to sell his art had instead stolen it. Perhaps that was why Loneman had never given him a key to the storage unit. (Loneman says Anderson never asked for one.)

As we walked back to the parking lot, I asked Cheadle whether he himself was planning to give Anderson a key. "Oh, sure," Cheadle said. "I don't have an extra right now, but I'll make one and give it to him." Anderson gave me a skeptical look.

Loneman doubts that will ever happen, and issued a preemptive warning to Cheadle. "I don't mind that he hustled me, but he can't take this art of my uncle's hostage. He cannot keep my uncle in the dark—not at this point in his life. My uncle is almost a medicine man. You don't mess with him. Cheadle is going to be cursed." (At press time, Anderson still didn't have a key.)

The only one who seems to be cursed at present, however, is Ronald Anderson, cursed to look on helplessly as his quest to change the course of Indian art history grows more elusive by the day, frustratingly unable to earn his second chance, not even in a city known for granting them. Meanwhile, the clock ticks.

**ANDERSON HAS BEEN** trying to keep up his regular schedule of painting, but admits that lately he's finding it difficult to concentrate. Although he enjoys Tom Sheffield's airy guesthouse on Galveston Bay—the nicest place he's ever lived, he says—he's consumed with worry about the future, and increasingly weighed down by the Smoking Man's nearly Biblical assignment.

"Here I am in paradise, and I'm a stranger," Anderson tells me, agitatedly rocking back and forth in a chair on

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his back porch in La Porte. "Don't know what's going on, don't know what's happening, don't know what to expect." He points out a hawk diving for fish in the bay. "What a mess. I ain't free—no free thoughts." It was that contract, he says. That contract "screwed up my whole life."

Just then, another hawk flies across our field of vision carrying a silver fish in its talons. Anderson seems to forget his troubles for a moment and enter a state of childish delight. "Woo-hoo! That's super. That's a good Indian sign, right there. Hmm!" What does the sign mean? I ask. "That he's going to eat," Anderson says with a laugh.

I ask him if he ever wonders about the life he might have had if he'd ignored the Smoking Man and marketed his art sooner. "I've thought about that," he says. "But I think if I had sold my stuff and became famous, I would have missed out on my Indian-ness. I think my bond with other Indians has been poverty. That has allowed me more freedom, truth, intellect, and all that stuff than if I had been buying the beer."

A moment later, though, he seems unsure.

"Van Gogh is one of my favorites, like everyone else," he says. "I love imitating his painting style. But imitating his lifestyle has been a bitch." 

