

James E. Brewton biography

Born Nov. 4, 1930, in Toledo, Ohio, Jim Brewton died by his own hand in Philadelphia, May 11, 1967. At the time of his death at 36, Jim was beginning to distinguish himself as one of Philadelphia's premier painters and printmakers.

Known for portraits, prints and highly original abstract, graffiti-inspired paintings, Jim attended traditional schools. He studied at the Ruskin School at Oxford in 1954-55 and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) from 1955 through 1958. At PAFA, Jim was a protégé of Franklin Watkins and Hobson Pittman. Pittman owned a self-portrait by Jim, which was exhibited in "Paintings, Drawings, Prints, and Sculpture Collected and Owned by Fourteen Philadelphia Artists."

Jim Brewton was influenced by Marcel Duchamp, André Breton and Alfred Jarry. In the late 1950s he met Danish artist Erik Nyholm and, through Nyholm, Asger Jorn. Jim lived in Denmark for months at a time, enthralled by the CoBrA group's expressive work, helping Jorn with his Comparative Vandalism project and riffing off of the Situationists. These avant-garde European connections were extremely unusual for a Philadelphia-based artist at the time.

Jim's work won awards and prizes, and he was championed by critics while he was still a student. "Mr. Brewton's career was launched dramatically," ran his obituary in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1967, "when his canvas 'The Suicide of Judas' won the prestigious \$1000 Schiedt prize the tall ex-marine sergeant, a veteran of the Korean war, thus captured—at the very early age of 28—the same award William Glackens, Stuart Davis, Hans Hoffman, Ivan Albright and Charles Burchfield had earned in their maturity."

From his base in Philadelphia, Jim traveled whenever he could, to Spain, France, England and Denmark. In early 1964, Jim lent several works he owned to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Asger Jorn exhibition.

Rather than teaching, Jim took part-time manual jobs and concentrated on painting and printmaking. One former employer remembers ordering a sumptuous display of paint samples for his bookstore so Jim could take the paints home. "In return, he gave me a copy of 'The Pataphysics Times,' one of his prints."

In the last years of his life, Jim was represented by Harry Kulkowitz's Kenmore Galleries on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia.

His prints were selling well, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art has a half-dozen in its permanent collection. From his colorful, CoBrA-inspired phase, Jim had progressed by 1965 to muted, wall-like dream pieces. His works had evolved into a synthesis of graffiti ("anonymous and therefore for all mankind") and Alfred Jarry's philosophy of Pataphysics. Jim called this method of artistic exploration "Graffiti Pataphysic."

By the time he died in 1967, Jim had "had several one-man shows, and museum curators were beginning to exhibit interest," as Nessa Forman wrote in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. "There was an artist," Forman continued, "who was ahead of his time, who was brilliant, sensitive and nonviolent, who loved his art and just wanted to paint. And he committed suicide...."

Four days after his death, Jim's work was shown at the Socrates Perakis gallery in Philadelphia, along with that of Jim McWilliams, Thomas Chimes and sculptor Paul Anthony Greenwood. "Artist's Suicide Gives Tragic Overtone to Exhibit" was the headline for Dorothy Grafly's review.

A year later, a memorial show was held at the Peale Galleries at PAFA. Hobson Pittman wrote for the catalogue, “A truly gifted artist. ... Jim Brewton, from his earliest work, gave evidence of a peculiar and constant search for the nebulous and metaphysical symbol.... His standard of judgement was ... innate, as it is with genuinely endowed artists. His deep understanding of aesthetics was evident in everything he did.”

In 1971, Harry Kulkowitz held a memorial show, co-curated by Mrs. Ronald Weingrad, at his Kenmore Galleries. Proceeds funded a scholarship at PAFA.

The James E. Brewton Foundation was formed in 2008 by Jim’s daughter Emily and friends; it is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charity. Since 2008, Emily has located more than 150 works by Jim. In 2012, Jim's portrait of Edgar Allan Poe was shown at The Woodmere Museum in Chestnut Hill, Pa.; two years later, Jim’s first solo exhibition since 1971 was held at Slought, Philadelphia.

Website: <https://www.jebrewton.org/>