

ROBERT MCGOWAN

AN ACCOUNT INTENDED TO ESTABLISH FOR THE PAINTER BRADEN NESS HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE IN HISTORY

LOOKING AT THIS OLD photo, it's easy to see these guys were close. It's in their faces. Their placid smiles. And their relaxed postures, the way they're standing there next to each other, so much at ease. This is a natural, happy relationship. Like brothers, a person might think.

1950, it says in pencil on the back. We don't know in whose hand. They would have been twenty-two, both of them, when the picture was taken. They barely missed the war, only thirteen years old when it started, still not quite old enough when it ended.

I look at them, these two young guys. Future greats they might be imagining themselves to be. Contemplating what they'll do in their lives and what will come to them. Glory.

And, in the mid-century American art world, glory was certainly afoot. Kline, de Kooning, Pollock, Motherwell, Rothko ... The Abstract Expressionists, they and their like were already being called. Inventors of a vital new cosmos.

Braden and Sawyer are art students in this picture. At the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art, one of America's most important graduate programs for young artists. Talented boys they were. I suppose I was myself not wholly without talent, but I'm certain my being there at Cranbrook with them at that time had as much to do with luck as with promise. My talent was never of their caliber. I think I knew so even then. I'm fortunate, and actually quite content in this, honored even, to have spent my professional life afterward as I did, there at our beloved Cranbrook as exhibitions designer at the Cranbrook Art Museum, on the grounds immediately adjacent to the studios we occupied as brave, spirited young painters in the middle of the last century. An incomparable place, our Cranbrook, then and now.

Looking back, I believe I was in love with Braden, though I never confessed it to him, or to anyone. The matter anyway is moot. He chose Sawyer, or was chosen by him. I'm embarrassed even now to recall how naive I was, how schoolgirlish, that I hadn't discerned his leaning. Braden and Sawyer were together from about midway through the first of their two years at Cranbrook and remained so afterward and, then, confounding statistical improbability, throughout their entire lives. An inspiring romance, a lasting commitment, practically mythic.

I remember being keenly aware even then that they were of fundamentally different temperaments. Braden was quiet, wholly unassertive, appeared always to be hanging back, absorbing everything, assessing. You could almost sense his mind at work behind his gaze. Sawyer, on the other hand, was, it would not go too far to say, flamboyant. He was talkative, invariably at the centre of any social situation, however small and impromptu, was without exception cheery, laughing, joking, holding forth theatrically. Sawyer, though certainly a smart one, an eloquent one, was in essence an entertainer.

And these vast differences in their dispositions were, not surprisingly, apparent in their painting as well. Braden's work was, even then, in my opinion, the weightier, the more genuinely personal, unquestionably the more serious. Reserved, somber, probing. Sawyer's paintings were huge. And they were ornate. Resplendently colourful. Sawyer was an astute, highly skilled artist, unerringly instinctive, but his work seemed clearly to derive not of anything he'd discovered in himself, or even in the world around him, but finally of only a relatively uncomplicated, unreflective, frenetic energy. It rather hurts me to put it this way because of my great fondness of him personally—Sawyer's flamboyance notwithstanding, he was a sensitive, caring man—but his work, though superficially brilliant, was, compared to Braden's ... it was shallow, really.

However unlike Braden and Sawyer were as artists, their personality differences, which registered so strikingly in their work, brought balance to their lives in general, each functioning in counterpoint to the other so that both seemed subtly improved, amended, it might be said, made more capable and more effective, perhaps even in a sense more mature, as human beings. It would be an exaggeration to say that their basic natures were dramatically altered by their relationship, but Braden did become at least somewhat more participatory, less unconfident and withdrawn, and Sawyer a bit more restrained, as though relieved, not a very great deal but in some small measure, of his former compulsion to impress. This mutually beneficial

dynamic between them was observable all those years ago when they were newly together, and remains vividly fresh in my memory yet today. I suspect their balancing each other out as they did, and their positive influence on each other, was a major agent of their lifelong success as a couple.

After Cranbrook, Braden and Sawyer went to New York together. New York had not yet overtaken Paris as the art centre of the Western world, but the elements that would soon help propel its ascendance were either already present or coming into being: many of the artists who were to become revered mid-century luminaries had come to live and work in or near New York in the period following World War II, and the gallery system that would foster them was coalescing.

Among the very first artists to enter the area in search of studio/living space, Braden and Sawyer set themselves up more or less illegally—the district’s zoning did not at the time permit residential use—on the rough fourth floor of an ancient cast-iron industrial building south of Houston Street, the building having once upon a time housed a clothing manufacturer, its ground floor still occupied by the remnants of that firm, though functioning now only as importers. Their fourth-floor ensconcement was severely lacking in customary amenities, with only a small sink and a toilet in one corner and barely any heat, but it was cheap and it was spacious, and these were the features that mattered to them. They camped out in a makeshift sleeping area near the toilet and divided the rest of the cavernous space between them so that each was garrisoned in a luxuriously expansive studio flooded with natural light entering through equally expansive windows. A young artist’s castle in the air.

We’d become something of a trio at Cranbrook, Braden and Sawyer and I, a friendship that would last all the years of our lives. In 1951, when they moved into their spartan fourth-floor seventh heaven, it could not have occurred to any of us that their conspicuously grungy and partially abandoned neighbourhood would before long transform into the famous and now much romanticized SoHo arts district, which would later transform yet again into post-arts-district tacky vulgarity, by which time Braden and Sawyer had wisely bought their loft, saving themselves from eviction in consequence of increased property values and rents. Many of the earliest SoHo artists were displaced by the gentrification, the invasion of the yuppies, that their very presence there initiated.

They had arrived in New York in urgent need of employment, having brought with them barely any money, neither of them ever having had much

of it. Sawyer had worked part-time as a waiter while at Cranbrook and right away found work doing the same thing in a classy eatery within long walking distance of their building. No doubt due in large measure to his outgoing nature, Sawyer would make good money in that job and so keep at it for some years. He did, however, work only irregularly as prompted by his need of cash, but was so popular with the restaurant's customers that his employer permitted him that flexibility. Braden found a thirty-two-hours-a-week job as night janitor at midtown's St. Clare's Hospital, a job that suited him, working alone, contemplatively, in the quiet after midnight. They painted in every free hour, Sawyer's work ever more jazzy. Garish even, was how it appeared to me when I visited them in the city. And I had the sense that Sawyer was actually bored with it, or nearly so, that he dashed off paintings now and then as though only to persuade himself that he still cared to do it. But Braden's work continued to develop. Increased depth, always greater refinement in colour and composition, and all clearly in support of a direction he was intently refining. Braden's sense of purpose was unmistakable. Sawyer's, I always felt, was in doubt.

Throughout the early 1950s I drove several times, usually twice a year, to New York to visit Braden and Sawyer and just as often thought of moving there myself, of course not to live with them, but near them, so to make my own claim on the brave way of life they'd established there and to enter into my own artist's struggle. To pursue my own aspirations. Except that my own aspirations never seemed sufficiently insistent. I readily admit that as an artist I was never as driven as many others, certainly not as committed as Braden and Sawyer, or as Braden anyway, whose painting seemed over the years to occupy more and more firmly the very center of his life, while Sawyer seemed increasingly casual about what place his own work occupied in his, entering his studio as irregularly as he entered the restaurant where he made his money. Part of me wanted to live in New York near Braden and Sawyer if only to participate vicariously in their adventures there, and especially to observe Braden's development artistically, yet I could never make the decision to move. However, even though my ardour as a producing artist, never very powerful even as a student, did wane further after Cranbrook, my commitment to the art world and my wish to live always within it had not. I'd been working as manager of the museum store at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, in Ann Arbor, very near Cranbrook. I'd never wanted to be a teacher, the museum store job was actually very pleasant, and I relished having daily access to the Museum's exhibitions and collections. Without any

particular career objective really, but simply as a matter of interest, I'd in the mid-fifties taken some coursework in the University's Museum Studies Department. And by way of a fortunate turn of events I was in, I think, July of 1957, offered the exhibitions designer job at the Cranbrook Museum, where for thirty-seven years I worked quite contentedly until my retirement back in 1994 at the age of sixty-seven. I still live near the school and volunteer three days a week in the administrative offices. Cranbrook is my home and the object of my devotion. It's been my life, really.

So I've never actually left Cranbrook. And I would have to say that in never moving to New York to live the artist's life with Braden and Sawyer I took the far easier course. I had a steady and mostly pretty painless job at the Museum, a regular ample income, followed by a comfortable retirement. Braden and Sawyer had no such safe harbour. Artists fully committed to their work at the expense of financial security and the other benefits of mainstream life are embarked on an uncertain and gravely dangerous journey.

Each of them experienced the occasional modest success in town: a short list of gallery affiliations throughout their first decade in the city—none of them important, none of them lasting—inclusion in group shows a couple of times a year, a favourable mention once or twice in exhibition reviews, although Braden, always disinclined to seek attention or even receive it unsought, typically declined to attend his own openings and did not engage in the usual practice of schmoozing his dealers and the critics, while at the same time Sawyer, true to form, seemed to relish doing all of that more than art-making itself. Braden's work had grown steadily more powerful during this period, Sawyer's no less flashy.

By the mid-1960s, Sawyer had all but entirely lost interest in his painting. He approached a canvas only sporadically and with, according to Braden and my own observations during my frequent visits, a fairly obvious indifference. He'd of course, in my opinion, never been passionately tied to his painting, not remotely to the extent that Braden had been bound to his and continued steadfastly to be, no matter how little success he'd at that point experienced in the world beyond his studio. But Sawyer, I'm sure because it had never been very important to him to begin with, did not mourn his loss of involvement with his work. Which pleased me. I had anticipated its happening and had feared Sawyer would be troubled by it. But it appeared to me that, on the contrary, he enjoyed a feeling of relief on stepping away from the studio, as though he'd cast off a burden, some pesky obligation. In about 1967 or 1968, Sawyer emptied out his studio, passed along to Braden

his paints and brushes and what other materials Braden thought he might make use of, and they converted Sawyer's former work space into what I found to be a really very impressive living room. Nothing expensive, but with a good music system, comfortably arranged seating, light for reading, bookshelves, some friends' paintings and sculptures well placed and lighted. A rather shockingly civilized scene, given how sparsely they'd lived for so long. Yet it is of course true that as one begins to grow away from youth a desire for certain comforts does tend to come forward. Braden was, however, never derailed from his work by the pull of any such comforts.

Sawyer having left his painter's life behind him, Braden remained as dedicated as ever to his, even though he made practically no effort, its being contrary to his nature to do so, to make his work visible in the art world and thereby to advance his reputation. Yet his work was now more mature and more deeply affecting than ever before. More worthy. Abundantly worthy of any serious attention that might come to it. I'm proud to say—forgive me if I've touched on this before; I don't mean to gloat—that from my very first acquaintance with Braden's work back at Cranbrook I'd detected in him a talent far surpassing what even the best of the others brought with them to that hallowed institution. I remember expressing this judgment to various acquaintances there many years earlier. I daresay I knew, even then.

Poor Braden, even after more than fifteen years in New York, was still in his nighttime janitor job, continuing devotedly to paint in his three days each week away from work and nearly every afternoon before leaving for the hospital. He'd kept his life simple, these its essential features: 1) his monotonous job, which demanded none of his creative energy but, in fact, as routinely recurring little vacations from the studio, only helped to refresh it, or so Braden claimed, though I believe he was trying to view the matter in a positive light; 2) his painting; and 3) Sawyer, who, ardently devoted to Braden, never to my knowledge faltered in his love and support of him, despite their being in significant ways such different people, Braden so introverted and so private, such a homebody, and Sawyer so gregarious and fun-loving.

Sawyer, now that he was no longer painting and apparently pleased to be done with it, turned his attention to seeking greater success for Braden, who still had not much found in himself the motivation to do so on his own behalf. Sawyer became in effect an agent for Braden, entering into that function almost as though taking on a second job. He was still waiting tables, though he'd now moved up several notches to a truly swank restaurant

where, as always, he worked a good deal less than forty hours per week but made a surprising income nonetheless. In his considerable time off, Sawyer put together a fine slide portfolio of Braden's best recent work, each slide labeled with title, date, medium, and dimensions, helped him compose a brief but elucidating artist's statement to accompany them, as well as an exhibition list, such as it was at the time, composed of group shows only and very few even of those, none at all of late. While Braden was at home sleeping in the mornings after work or painting in the afternoons before his next shift, Sawyer would sometimes gather several of his promotional packets about Braden's work and make the rounds of the better Manhattan galleries, which by now, around 1970, had grown more numerous than in the previous two decades, several of them newly opened in SoHo itself. The odds against an artist finding worthwhile gallery representation had grown greater over the years as New York had become home to more and more aspiring artists of all stripes, more even than the increasing number of galleries could accommodate. But Sawyer one morning received a call from a gallery on East 57th Street, a relatively new but promising gallery showing the work of a number of emerging painters and sculptors.

And it was indeed Sawyer the gallery called, because Sawyer and Braden both knew that Sawyer would be the better spokesman, the more effective salesman of Braden's work. So Sawyer had written his own name and contact information on the 9x12 manila envelopes he was taking around to the galleries.

But the gallery had assumed, understandably, that the slides—which Sawyer had neglected to identify by artist's name, but by only title and medium and so forth—represented the work not of Braden but of Sawyer himself, whose name after all appeared on the envelope. Although the slides of Braden's work were of excellent quality—Sawyer had always done his own and also Braden's photography—the slide sheet and other materials within the envelope had in truth been thrown together rather carelessly, only because it was, alas, Sawyer's habit to approach his projects with a generally lower level of meticulousness than he really should have. But the artist's statement he'd helped Braden compose in order to provide an initial insight into his expressive concerns definitely did show Braden's name at the end of it, so Sawyer could only surmise that the gallery had simply overlooked that detail. To the end of his life, Sawyer would tell me this story from time to time, and on each retelling would remark on how extraordinarily fortuitous an oversight this had been.

In consequence of these oversights by first Sawyer and then the gallery, The Seth Wexler Gallery at 38 East 57th Street in midtown Manhattan, a gallery that initially in this location and later in others would grow increasingly important in the art world, that day invited not Braden but Sawyer to bring two or three of his paintings to them for further consideration, this the first step toward offering Sawyer representation.

But before finally making the offer, Seth Wexler and someone else from the gallery visited Braden and Sawyer's loft to see more of Sawyer's work. This occasion—in 1970, I'm fairly certain, and I think in the late spring of that year—was when their great deception was first intentionally perpetrated.

They'd talked about it, Braden and Sawyer, before the visit and had decided what to do. Braden cared only to paint and was by temperament disinclined to the social interactions incidental to the promotion of his work. He hated openings and had never cared to talk about his painting with anyone. Sawyer, I needn't elaborate further, was entirely at home in all that from which Braden recoiled. Again, an extraordinary dynamic. And an extraordinarily advantageous one. They determined that Sawyer would accommodate the gallery's misunderstanding, that he would assume the identity of the artist whose work they'd responded to, that Sawyer would show Wexler around in Braden's studio as though it were his and as though Braden's paintings were his own. Braden would be introduced as Sawyer's partner and nothing more, a homemaker primarily and not an artist.

The deception would in the main be ridiculously easy to pull off. Braden was known by barely anyone outside his work at the hospital, and none of those few acquaintances were involved at all in the art world. The Wexler Gallery was far from SoHo and from the merest handful of people there who might recognize him, midtown Manhattan really quite another world altogether. And Braden had never signed his paintings, only scribbled his initials on the backs of them, as was common practice among artists of his generation and later. He needed only to scratch out those initials on his recent paintings and add Sawyer's instead and then put Sawyer's on the backs of the paintings yet to come. The two of them correctly supposed that their ruse would work for them, which it did for the remainder of their lives, and with little danger of being uncovered, thus allowing Braden to pursue his work in peace and yet, by the efforts of the promotional-minded, socially adept Sawyer, experience the satisfaction of seeing his painting find its deserved place in the world. Braden would paint, which was all he'd ever cared to do, and Sawyer would become him outwardly in the art world, basking

in the notice that came to him, even in these circumstances, delighting in perpetuating the deceit they'd contrived together, and rejoicing in bringing attention to Braden's work.

And they would by this stratagem make money, quite a lot of it by comparison to their former lean straits, as Braden's paintings grew increasingly admired and collected, entering over the years into important collections both private and public, as the work of a lately discovered first-generation Abstract Expressionist, the intense and lively Sawyer Thomas.

Neither Braden nor Sawyer ever felt any compunction whatsoever concerning this deception. And why should they have? It's not as though they were foisting off on the art world a valueless body of work, something fake. The work itself was, and is, powerful and wholly genuine. Wholly. Of what matter is it whose initials are on the backs of these magnificent paintings?—which, after all, are alive in this world independent of such tangential, irrelevant details. The work and all that went into the work was always, and will forever be, real and true.

To my knowledge, no one in the whole world, no one but the three of us, ever knew the truth about whose paintings were becoming so revered. And if anything comparable to this trickery has ever before occurred in all of art history, I'm not aware of it. Though I think surely it must have, and perhaps for comparable reasons. Their arrangement worked gloriously for them, and for Braden's painting, for the rest of their lives.

Until dear good Sawyer quite unexpectedly died in 2002 at the age of seventy-four, about three decades into their incredible pretense, of a sudden arterial blockage, a heart attack, I think. Braden was devastated, fell into something of a depression that rendered him unable to paint anyway, even had he wished somehow to continue doing so after the death of the man who everyone thought the real creator of his work. Braden told me that his ceasing to paint felt as though in honour of his beloved Sawyer, that his painting had for so long been accomplished within the understanding they'd had between them that to go on with it would no longer have made sense to him. Sawyer had not become one of the major, major figures in Abstract Expressionism, but his work was certainly widely known and respected in the art world and he was mourned at the highest levels of it, a lengthy obituary appearing in 2002's April issue of *Art in America*. And one never knows whether history might yet elevate Sawyer to even higher status.

When Braden himself died three years later, in 2005, as much of a broken heart as anything else, no notice was taken beyond a handful of

acquaintances who'd known him as Sawyer's lifelong partner, the devoted but timid and reclusive at-home supporter of Sawyer in the creation of his important work.

I am grateful that I was able to spend Braden's last days with him in hospital, the one, as it happens, where he'd worked for so many years until his—Sawyer's—paintings began to sell reliably through the Wexler Gallery. Braden never expressed to me any regret concerning the life he'd led in Sawyer's shadow, and I never discerned any. He emphasized that he knew Sawyer's great satisfaction was in helping to put his—Braden's—painting forward in the world. And he told me he was deeply grateful for what Sawyer had done for him in that regard. Braden was as at ease in his death as I'd ever known him in his life since our student days so long ago at Cranbrook. I know Braden felt that his had been a life well spent, and so did I.

Although I'd been retired from the Cranbrook Art Museum since 1994, I had, as I've indicated, maintained my involvement with the school and close ties with the Museum particularly. Early in 2006, a year after Braden's death and a full twelve years since I'd vacated my position at the Museum, I proposed to the director, the same man I'd happily worked with in my last years there, that I curate a retrospective exhibition of the work of Cranbrook's notable alumnus Sawyer Thomas. The director knew that Sawyer's work had in fact been the focus of increased attention since his death and that a respectable little niche, possibly a much greater one, was probably now secured for him in art history. I was granted permission to bring together a range of Sawyer's work for a show we scheduled for the late fall of 2008. I would turn eighty-one that year. No longer young certainly, but I'd retained my vigour and enthusiasm and was appreciative I'd be permitted to compose what would almost surely be my last major project for Cranbrook. And this in remembrance of my two beloved friends. My personal tribute to them, to their lives together, to the important work that, by their separate but interdependent efforts, they created and showed to the world.

I'd wondered whether in preparation for the show I would at some point succumb to a temptation I don't deny I've felt, to reveal the truth. As a feature of the exhibition. But in the end I determined to honour Braden and Sawyer's pact, which after all I'd honoured in all the years it had served them.

But this document. Its purpose, obviously, is to tell what I know, my thought having been to leave it to be opened at my death, which cannot now be very far distant. Or could what I've said here ever be believed? And why should I betray these boys even at the end?

The exhibition was magnificent. SAWYER THOMAS: A LIFE IN PAINTING. Braden's work drawn from numerous prestigious collections. Powerful, and yet gentle, as always it had been.

And this old photograph. I would love to have included it in the show, on an introductory panel at the entrance to the exhibition. Doing so would of course have made perfect sense to me, but to me only and would have confused others, its being after all but the record of a merely incidental youthful relationship, one of no real relevance to Sawyer's work. I look at this picture of the two of them from so long ago, a lifetime now. I always wish I were in it with them. It seems to me I should be. The three of us at the start of things, imagining our glory yet to come. Though never the secret we would keep.

I've decided. And how possibly could I have decided otherwise? I will pass this photo along to the archives. But this document, these words I've written here, all of this I will destroy.