# Richard Hambleton, 'Shadowman' of the '80s Art Scene, Dies at 65



Richard Hambleton in an undated photo. His silhouette paintings earned him the nickname "the Shadowman."
Hank O'Neal

By **Richard Sandomir**

Nov. 3, 2017

In the early 1980s, when graffiti seemed to be everywhere, hundreds of startling black-painted silhouettes appeared mysteriously on buildings on the Lower East Side and in other parts of Manhattan. The spectral, life-size, menacing figures lurked and skulked and leapt. Some of their heads, with paint splattered upward, seemed to be exploding.

Richard Hambleton, the Canadian-born conceptual artist who painted them all (sometimes after fleeing the police, paint bucket in hand), was known as "the Shadowman."

"I painted the town black," Mr. Hambleton told People magazine in 1984. "They could represent watchmen or danger or the shadows of a human body after a nuclear holocaust or even my own shadow."

He became part of the downtown art scene with his contemporaries Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat at Club 57, a basement bar on St. Marks Place in the East Village that is the subject of a new exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, complete with one of Mr. Hambleton's "Shadowman" works.

He also put his "Shadowman" images on canvas and paper, and for a time they fueled a lucrative business and gave him international recognition. While in Europe for exhibitions of his work, he painted his shadow men on Venice walls and the Berlin Wall.

Richard Hambleton's mysterious figures, like this one on a Lower East Side corner, "could represent watchmen or danger or the shadows of a human body after a nuclear holocaust or even my own shadow," he said in 1984.  Hank O'Neal

But for the rest of his life he battled drug addictions, mostly to heroin, and occasional evictions from his apartments and studios. He was forgotten for a while but later rediscovered. At one point he abruptly switched to painting seascapes and colorful landscapes, before eventually returning in earnest to his shadowy figures, knowing they were his most valuable currency for survival, even as barter for a meal when he was at his most downtrodden.

Mr. Hambleton died on Sunday at 65. Kristine Woodward, co-owner of the Woodward Gallery in Manhattan, which worked with him, said he died in a downtown Manhattan apartment with a female friend. She said she did not know any other circumstances or the cause. He had skin cancer and the spinal conditions scoliosis and kyphosis.

With her husband, John Woodward, Ms. Woodward exhibited Mr. Hambleton's art, found studios and lodging for him and cooked for him. A trained nurse, she also attended to many of his medical needs.

"He was so charismatic and so manipulative, but once you were in his sphere you couldn't shake him," Ms. Woodward said in an interview. "He had *it*. He didn't care about the periphery. He would live in a bag on the street. All he wanted was paint supplies."

A prankster who liked to provoke — as the anonymous street artist Banksy has done since the 1990s — Mr. Hambleton came to public attention in the mid- to late 1970s by painting faux crime-scene outlines of bodies on pavement and adding "blood," hoping to make people believe that a serial murderer was on the loose.

Mr. Hambleton in Los Angeles in 1980 near one of his spectral, life-size figures. Ben Buchanan

He began this "Image Mass Murder" series in his hometown, Vancouver, British Columbia, and then took it down the West Coast and across North America. He carried squeeze bottles filled with white paint for the outline and red paint for the make-believe blood.

"I remember stumbling on one of them and thinking it was a real crime scene," Penny Arcade, the performance artist, says in "Shadowman," a forthcoming documentary about Mr. Hambleton, directed by Oren Jacoby. After seeing another outline, she says, she realized that "this may be something else, but I didn't have any language for it."

Shadowman - Exclusive Clip

Mr. Hambleton studied maps to determine where, in each city, he would strike next.

"I began to think I was murdering people, going back to my hotel covered in paint, blood, blood-red paint," he says in the documentary, adding, "Blood has a beautiful color."

Announcing that "Dick Trace-It," also known as Richard Hambleton, was the private detective trying to solve the "murders" in Vancouver, he posted 4,000 fake wanted posters seeking the apprehension of "Mr. Reee" for the crimes.

In 1980, soon after moving to the Lower East Side, he started another urban art project, installing full-size photographic images of himself, dressed up in a suit and tie and staring, on walls around the city and elsewhere. He called it "I Only Have Eyes for You." The images were printed on paper that stretched when moistened and faded to white shadows after three months.

Mr. Hambleton's "Fountain of Youth" (1982), an oil painting.  Woodward Gallery

His early "Shadowman" period led to shadow images of bucking horses and riders on walls and canvases. By 1984, he had turned to the Marlboro Man, the cowboy figure whose macho image promoted cigarettes for decades. Mr. Hambleton, who smoked, toyed with the image, painting shadow figures over it, sometimes mixing tobacco with black paint for what he called a "black lung" effect.

Richard Art Hambleton was born in Vancouver on June 23, 1952. His parents, Arthur and Vale Hambleton, survive him, as do two sisters and a brother.

After graduating from the Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver, he started the Pumps Center for Alternative Art, a gallery, performance and video space, in the same city.

By the mid-1980s he had begun his transition to creating enormous seascapes, among them turbulent ocean-wave paintings. "I wanted to do something that was a different sensibility," he says in the documentary. "It's about love."

Reviewing an exhibition of Mr. Hambleton's paintings at the Piezo Electric Gallery in the East Village in 1985, Michael Brenson of The New York Times wrote that the violence inherent in his early "Shadowman" work had not fully left him.
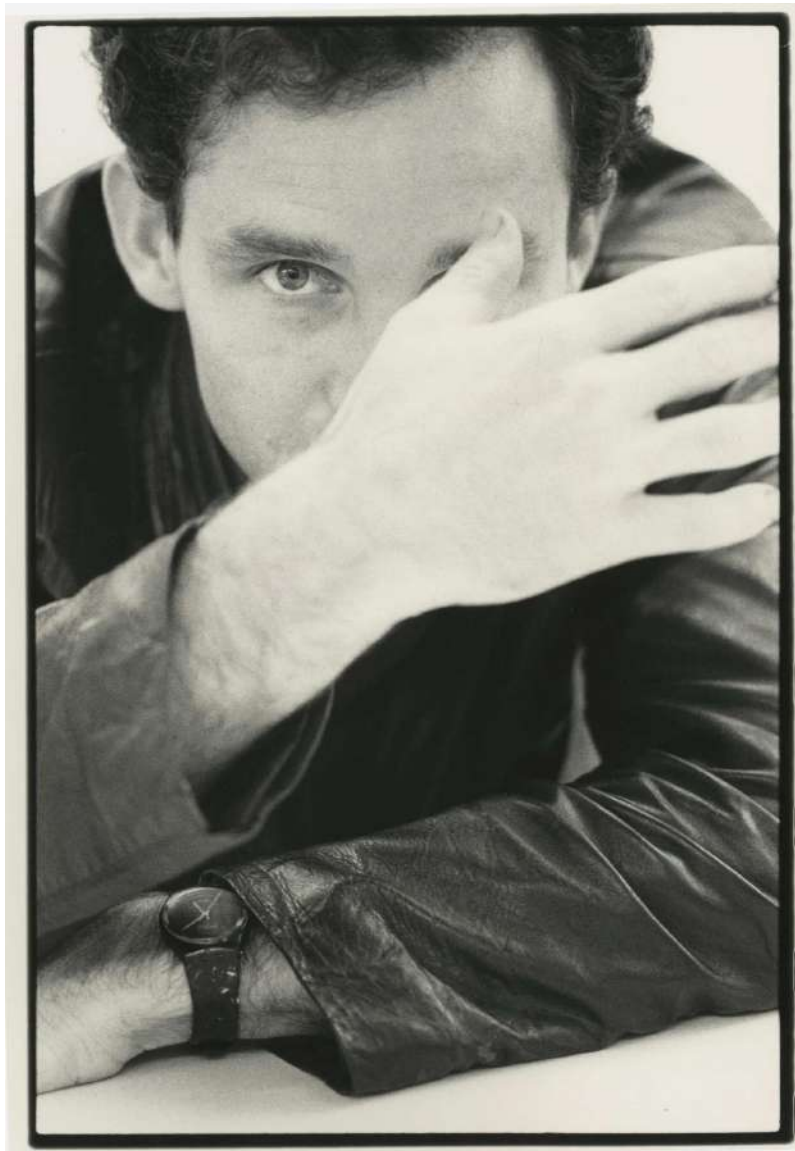
Mr. Hambleton in 1984. "He was so charismatic and so manipulative, but once you were in his sphere you couldn't shake him," a gallery owner said.  Fran Van de Hoeven/Woodward Gallery Archives

"There are three paintings called 'Rainstorm,' in which raging water seems to be rushing toward us from within the canvas," Mr. Brenson wrote. "In each of the paintings, sea and sky rage a bit more until they seem on the point of swallowing everything."

Mr. Hambleton soon moved into his "beautiful" period, painting landscapes with gold and silver leaf and tinted varnishes.

But by the early 1990s he had begun to withdraw from the art scene. Mr. Haring had died of AIDS at 31, Mr. Basquiat of a drug overdose at 27, and Mr. Hambleton, Ms. Woodward said, had become "paranoid about gallery culture and the impact on the artist and his freedoms."

His life had begun to unravel. His drug use continued. His skin cancer worsened. He lived in increasing squalor.

"His goal was to reach the sublime," Ms. Woodward said. "He used drugs to get there. It was just who he was."

In 2009, two art entrepreneurs cajoled him into producing some new work, paintings of shadowy figures wearing suits, which were added to a retrospective exhibition in New York sponsored by Giorgio Armani. For his documentary, Mr. Jacoby filmed Mr. Hambleton as he procrastinated and battled with his anxious patrons.

The show, which traveled to Europe the next year, was successful, and a comeback seemed possible. But the moment did not last long. While Mr. Hambleton kept painting almost until he died, he was becoming increasingly frail. His cancer was eroding his face. His back was bowed and lopsided from his spinal conditions. He used his folding bicycle as a walker. At times he was homeless.

"At least Basquiat, you know, died," he says bitingly in the documentary, during a scene shot in 2014. "I was alive when I died, you know. That's the problem."