MATT LAMB

~ THE ART OF SUCCESS ~

REVISED EDITION

RICHARD SPEER

The Critics on Matt Lamb's Art

"The brightly colored canvases come from the brush of a lively character named Lamb, a former funeral director who believes in reincarnation and the existence of a spirit world."

—Ruth Gledhill, *The Times of London*, June 9, 2000

"Here is an artist who celebrates life with big, free shapes and unabashed color."

—Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Catholic Herald* (London), June 3, 1998

"The paintings seize the viewer on an emotional level with freewheeling, joyous movement and exuberant, earthy colors . . . sending up a kind of hymn to universal forces and the ascendancy of natural order."

—Margaret Hawkins, *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 8, 2000

"These powerful protests against social and political injustice meld Christian beliefs with Zen Buddhist and Jewish echoes and Romantic contemplations of the American Indian."

—Angela Tamvaki, curator, National Gallery, Athens, Greece, *Agony and Hope: Matt Lamb's Optimistic Vision of the Universe*, November 1994

"Lamb's paintings perfectly express the core of pure emotion unique to his sensibility." —Pierre Cardin, *Visions*, October 2, 1990

". . . a remarkable body of work characterized by bright, clashing colors and dark, dreamlike imagery. These mysterious dramas are enhanced by the rich and often rugged surface textures he creates. Seemingly transforming from plant to animal to human to spirit, these figures take part in fragmented narratives drawn from Lamb's imagination."

—Carol Damian, *Art News*, January 2000

"Lamb's work evokes a surreal, fairy-tale sense of the fantastic . . . integrating semblances of Chagall's poeticism with Lamb's personal symbology of primordial memory in an exquisitely sensuous vocabulary of pure, luscious pigment." —Olga Zdanovics, *New Art Examiner*, September 1994

"His rainbow-hued oil paintings . . . of folks, flora, and fauna recall the slap-dash, faux-naïve style of European postwar artists like Karel Appel and Asger Jorn." —Elisa Turner, *Miami Herald*, November 14, 1999

"For more than a quarter-century I have dealt in art. I know thousands of artists. But I have encountered only one true visionary: Matt Lamb."

—Virginia Miller, *A Life-Affirming Art Born of Death*, November 2001

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For Patricia and Janie,
my cheerleaders

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INTRODUCTION

This is the life story of celebrated artist Matt Lamb (1932–2012), whose boldly colored, richly textural paintings and tireless activism for world peace earned him a place among the most fascinating public figures of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the chapters that follow, I lay out Lamb's extraordinary life from his birth in 1932 up until the first publication of this book in 2005, when the artist was 73. During those seven-plus decades, Lamb rose from humble beginnings on the South Side of Chicago, overcame a learning disability, and turned a family-operated funeral home into a highly successful chain of businesses. In his late 40s, a trio of diseases hit him at the same time and threatened to take his life. This is where the story takes a fantastical turn. After his doctors advised him to put his affairs in order, Lamb made a fateful vow to his wife, Rose: "If I beat this, I'm going to sell all the businesses and paint." He did beat it—his symptoms inexplicably disappeared—he did sell his businesses, and he did become a painter.

Roundly hailed for his lusciously textured compositions—filled with fanciful characters that were part-human, part-animal, and part-wraith—he was also demonized within the Outsider Art movement as the antithesis of the starving-artist archetype so ingrained in that movement's ethos. Lamb moved beyond the controversy, was proclaimed an artistic heir to Picasso, Miró, and Dalí, and became increasingly well-known as a peace activist. The "Lamb Umbrellas for Peace" workshops and peace parades he created in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were adopted as teaching tools throughout the world. Millions of children on six continents have participated in this uplifting program, which instills young people with

the values Lamb considered paramount: peace, tolerance, hope, understanding, and love.

When this biography was first published, Lamb was entering the most productive period of his art career. All of the important developments that happened after the book was released are addressed in a new Afterword, which follows the original text. It charts the extraordinary surge in the artist's creative, critical, and popular appeal, including a groundbreaking exhibition at the State Russian Museum (St. Petersburg); the publication of a major essay about his work by that museum's curator, Dr. Alexander Borovsky; an exhibition in Barcelona, Spain, linking Lamb to the legacy of surrealist painter Salvador Dalí; his acceptance of the Gold Cross of the European Union, one of the Continent's most prestigious art awards; and his efforts to spread his message of peace on the Internet via his blog and Facebook fan page. The Afterword also discusses the development of Lamb's ideas about the relationship between his painting, spirituality, and activism. Finally, it chronicles his journey into the end of his life after a diagnosis with pulmonary fibrosis. Lamb approached dying with the same blend of realism, optimism, and humor with which he had lived his life. To the end, he remained a man who practiced what he preached. "This is a time for me to accept and be glad," he said on his deathbed. "I'm on the move." After his passing, hundreds of fans and friends from around the world convened in Chicago to bid the artist farewell in a funeral exquisitely choreographed by his daughter Rosemarie Lamb, complete with a Dixieland jazz band and representatives of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic faiths. His artistic and spiritual legacy is being carried on by another daughter, Sheila Lamb Gabler, who has made it her mission to see her father recognized as a seminal figure in contemporary art and a visionary in the quest for world peace.

Matt Lamb lived larger than life, and he died that way, too. His is a sweeping narrative of risk-taking, bravado, integrity, compassion, and conviction. As his biographer, I grew to know and respect him over a 10-year period, during which his artwork underwent a sea change from figuration to abstraction and back again, and his work's philosophical underpinnings grew ever more mystical and ethereal.

His unshakable, glass-half-full attitude remained an inspiration to the end. I learned a lot from him, and I believe you will, too. So, as he loved to say at the beginning of his peace parades, "Strike up the band, and away we go!"

Richard Speer
November 13, 2012
Portland, Oregon

"What I want is to be able to live like a poor man with plenty of money."

—*Pablo Picasso*

PART ONE

THE PRINCE OF PARADOX

"We need our art fictions. We need Paul Gauguin dumping his career in stock brokering to paint in Tahiti. We also need that which ties the Gauguin myth to a contemporary saga in which a Chicago entrepreneur named Lamb sells his corporation to spend time among the flowers, gnomes, and archangels that materialize under his paintbrush."

—Michael D. Hall ("Just A'Looking for a Home," Raw Vision, *Summer 2000)*

CHAPTER ONE

A PORTRAIT OF THE STARVING ARTIST AS TYCOON

There are demons in the gallery. Swooping up from the underworld, sulfur clouds in their wakes, they bolt up in front of us, only to be met and repelled by archangels descending with flaming swords. Other creatures pile into the mêlée: things that look half-man, half-insect, wielding umbrellas like shields against the angels' onslaught; and a Cossack on horseback, galloping alongside a Cherokee brave in full headdress; and a troupe of harlequins tossing confetti into the air as if to conjure a glittery fog of war; and a woman with a pink beehive hairdo, emerging from a plume of smoke, her mouth agape in some unknown horror or rapture. It's not clear whose side these motley combatants are on, the demons' or the angels', but clearly they're locked in some sort of winner-takes-all cosmic conflict—and while in

reality these creatures are confined to canvases on the gallery walls, something about the angry insistency of their forms, colors, and textures allows them, seemingly, to puncture the picture plane and blaze forth into three-dimensional space.

This is not the kind of battle normally waged in an art gallery. But then, there is nothing normal about the painter Matt Lamb, who brought these Manichean warriors into being, nor is there anything remotely normal about the art itself. Make no mistake, this is some majorly weird stuff. Fellini freak show meets fine art. A menagerie of the damned and the redeemed. Garishly hued, splattered as if in a mad rage with oil paint, cement, turpentine, and a toxic, secretive mix of other ingredients, the paintings portray their armies of good and evil atop an undulating, puckered background. Indeed, the canvas itself is scarred and charred, as if the artist had thrown it wholesale into the mouth of a volcano, fished it out, then immediately freeze-dried its lava-layered surface only a split second before the whole shebang would have burst into flames. This artist, this Lamb fellow, must be either profoundly inspired or profoundly disturbed. His technique is as sophisticated as his imagery is primitive, his demons as fearsome as his harlequins are droll. It's as if he's walking a tightrope over the great eternal questions, holding for balance a steel bar weighted with profundity on one end, whimsy on the other.

Lamb is standing tonight in the center of the battles he's painted, here amidst the Syrah and brie and hardwood floors of the Judy A. Saslow Gallery in Chicago's River North district. I'm standing next to him, watching him mingle with the city's most prominent art collectors, because it's my job to follow him around for a year, to find out what makes him tick and uncover the combination of skill, inspiration, and luck that transformed him from a dyslexic gang member on the rough-and-tumble streets of 1940s Southside Chicago, into the CEO of one of the Midwest's largest family-owned businesses, and then, improbably, into one of the world's most revered—and reviled—painters. To figure Lamb out will be an epic challenge, because his has been an epic life.

But the woman who's talking to him now, the one with the obnoxious voice and the attitude to match, doesn't know anything about

Lamb, except that he made the paintings all around us. She's not impressed.

"I've never heard of you," she brays, approximating the sonic effect of Melanie Griffith and Fran Drescher declaiming the word "Fahrvergnügen" in unison.

He smooths his white hair casually back. "Well, I've been painting for 20 years."

Gucci-garbed, Bulgari-ringed, she peers down her spectacles, looking and sounding every inch and decibel the imperious collector she is, her hauteur fitting her even more snugly than her couture. "If you've been painting 20 years," she demands, "then why haven't I heard of you?"

He smiles. "I don't know."

As even the most militant feminist would be forced to concede, the gal's a shrew in need of taming, and Matt Lamb is about to oblige her. But for the moment, she has the upper hand, because she has him cornered. Literally. The three of us form points of a triangle, the woman and me at its legs and Lamb at the pointy tip, wedged in the gallery's corner. Which is exactly where she wants him.

"Where else have you shown your work?" she wants to know.

"Oh, here and there."

"For example?"

"I've shown with Carl Hammer and Ingrid Fassbender," he says, invoking the names of two respected Chicago gallerists. "Here in town, that is."

"So you show out of town, too?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where at?"

There's a glint in his eye now. "Well, where do you want to start? New York, Miami, Buenos Aires, Lucerne . . ."

She arches her left eyebrow.

". . . and Germany and China, and I did a big installation over at Westminster Cathedral and a show for Pierre Cardin at his gallery in Paris, and . . ."

"But you live in Chicago?" she interrupts, her voice ricocheting off the walls.

"Part of the time."

"And the rest of the time?"

"I have studios in Paris, Ireland, Germany, the Florida Keys, Wisconsin . . ."

"My, my! And these are big studios or small or . . ."

"One of them is 30,000 square feet, another one is 20,000 . . ."

"Thirty-thousand feet?" she gasps.

"The others are much smaller, only 9,000 or 10,000." He's beginning to enjoy this.

"You must sell a lot of paintings."

"It's all thanks to Judy," he tells her, shooting me a quick wink as he gestures toward Judy Saslow across the room. "See?" And he points at the little red dots beside several paintings, the stickers that indicate a work has sold.

Lamb knows, as do many, that he was a high-profile business tycoon decades before he ever laid hands on a paintbrush. He hadn't purchased his expansive studios with money made from selling paintings. But this woman doesn't know that, and Lamb likes the fact that she doesn't.

"So," she intones in the manner of summation, "you jet around to all these studios in Paris and Germany and Key West . . ."

There's a sudden draft as someone opens the door behind us.

". . . and you have 30,000 square feet here and 20,000 there . . ." The pitch of her voice is rising.

A man in a black suit pokes his head into the gallery and nods in Lamb's direction. Behind him, through the open door, a stretch limousine idles.

The woman looks up and sees the waiting car. "You have all this money, and you ride around in a limo, and . . . so . . ." Flustered, she shakes her head, takes a breath, and says something I'll never forget. "What kind of a starving artist's life is *that*, anyway?"

A hint of a smile traces his mouth.

There is a beat, and another.

The man in the black suit approaches and ends the silence with a deferential whisper. "The car's ready when you are, Mr. Lamb."

And with that, Lamb bids the woman adieu, waves good-bye to

Judy Saslow, and bids me follow him out into his black bubble of luxury on wheels. As the driver pulls onto West Superior, Lamb chuckles over the fun he had with the collector. "Did you see her face when I told her about the studios?" he asks, then breaks into a lusty laugh.

His amusement and her pretensions aside, I can't help but think, as we slink through the blur of city lights, that something important was buried within the woman's hypothetical question: What kind of starving artist's life *is* this, indeed?

We love our starving artists, after all: young and piss-poor, selling plasma to buy paint, tossing poetry into the woodstove to keep the garret warm while Puccini swells in the sound track. We like our artists right out of central casting, and we give bonus points if they're cute, fashionably scruffy, and/or addicted to heroin. Extra bonus points if they're under 30 or dead (provided they died penniless), and a shiny gold star if they hail from broken homes, lead colorful sex lives, have multiple facial piercings, or spell their names all in lowercase. It's our ideal, this melding of Left-Bank *vie bohême*, with its tableaux of cafés and rat-ridden apartments, with the American street-artist prototype, downtown and downrent. If only the art world could borrow from science and fuse the exhumed DNA of Vincent van Gogh and Jean-Michel Basquiat, then implant the cloned zygote in the postmenopausal but still avant-garde uterus of Yoko Ono! No doubt the unholy spawn would become the toast of SoHo.

Nowhere does our fantasy of the starving artist hold more sway than within the fiefdom of Outsider art, in which Matt Lamb's work has been stirring up controversy for decades now. Outsider art (a term coined in 1972 by British critic Roger Cardinal) is the domain of the untrained, naïve, and self-taught. The French painter and collector Jean Dubuffet began the Outsider boom in the middle of the twentieth century when he took a shine to the crude but highly expressive art of a Swiss schizophrenic and asylum inmate named Adolf Wölfli. Dubuffet called Wölfli's art—and other, similar work he later discovered—*Art Brut*. Which pretty much means what it sounds like: brutal art. Art that punches you in the gut when other, more refined, art merely tickles your ribs. A whole movement grew out of Dubuffet's obsession with *Art Brut*, and gradually the public came to appreciate these

unschooled painters, who made up for in sheer visceral impact what they lacked in academic training.

Today's Outsiders flourish on the fringes. While many of them are as well adjusted as the next person, those considered the most glamorous (and therefore most collectible) are in some fashion disadvantaged: drug addicts selling their art on the streets, paranoids, sociopaths, shut-ins, and deaf-mutes who paint as a sole means of expression. Even more so than dime-a-dozen starving artists, the art establishment values Outsiders who are damaged goods: marginalized economically, geographically, socially, or psychologically. The worse the life, the better the life story. The better the life story, the better the sales.

All of which is why Matt Lamb, who is neither destitute nor deranged, has made and is still making such a stink. He confounds the gatekeepers who sort artists into piles to make them more profitable to dealers. How are the categorizers to categorize Lamb? Into which pile are the sorters to sort him?

Consider the conundrum. Like all Outsiders by definition, Lamb is self-taught. He never once took an art lesson during his 73 years, but taught himself to paint through trial and error. Like most Outsiders, he works obsessively and prolifically, completing between 500 and 1,000 paintings a year. Like many Outsiders, he's guided by an inner vision: He claims to see the spirits of dead people and creatures from other dimensions in the chaotic ooze of his paintings and considers it his life's mission to give these ghosts corporeal form by outlining their contours in shocking color. Finally, like the work of many Outsiders, Lamb's painting is fueled in part by emotional wounds: He had an authoritarian father who didn't know how to express love, and he suffered—and suffers—from a learning disability that made his school years a living hell and left him with a playground nickname that echoes to this day in his mind's ear: "Dummy."

But that's where his similarities end, because unlike the typical Outsider, Lamb is loaded. Not Bill Gates loaded, not Donald Trump loaded, but assuredly richer than most. He is, as they say, "comfortable." Despite his academically challenged childhood, he used his

street smarts and tireless work ethic to achieve great wealth and prominence, parlaying his father's cash-poor funeral parlor into one of the largest and most profitable family businesses in the Midwest, Blake-Lamb Funeral Homes.

During what he calls his "first life," before he became a painter in his early 50s, he lived the type of life that bohemian Outsiders condemn (and sometimes secretly covet), traveling by Rolls-Royce and private jet and hobnobbing with the world's political elite: Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, presidential cabinet member Ed Derwinski, Vice President Walter Mondale, congressmen, senators, and a cadre of other players who push the buttons and pull the strings that make things happen. Using the funeral business as his cornerstone in the 1960s and 1970s, he branched out into real estate, oil, and stocks, eventually running 36 different businesses throughout the nation and consulting for other companies around the world. Far from a shut-in, the guy was all over the place.

Making a living from death was a job with all the drama and pathos of the HBO drama *Six Feet Under*, and Lamb played the role of power-brokering patriarch to the hilt, dealing deals, chairing boards, organizing fundraisers, and living in opulent fashion. Paparazzi snapped his picture at charity balls and glitterati gatherings, plastering him all over the society pages: There he was with Sherill Milnes on opening night at Chicago Lyric Opera, and there on the next page with Hollywood tan-man George Hamilton and crooner Tony Bennett, and on the overleaf getting tapped on the shoulder with a golden sword by order of Pope John Paul II. The man was loaded, lauded, *knighted*, for crying out loud, which is about as far from a schizophrenic sanitarium dweller as you can get—all of which has made him a pariah among New York art dealers hell-bent on limiting the Outsider club to an easily controlled handful of spare-changers and head cases.

Then there's the matter of Lamb's outspokenness. While more typical Outsiders have a vested interest in keeping their mouths shut, even if their dealers rape them financially, Lamb is beholden to no such restriction. With a sharp Irish tongue and Southside Chicago

temper, he indulges his penchant for withering tirades against the art establishment, entertaining the press, the cognoscenti, the neighbors, and anyone else who'll listen, with bon mots like:

"An artist and a gallery owner are like two whores dancing."

"Museums are about exclusion; galleries are about business; neither is about art."

"Some gallery owners are great people, but a lot of them are shitheads, and most of them don't have a clue what my art is about."

And "The art establishment is like OPEC. They determine who's in and who's out, and then they control the artist by determining the output, the distribution, and the price. But they can't control me—I don't have to prostrate myself before the almighty dealer. I'm too old and too rich to give a shit."

He's a loose cannon, this man relaxing in the limo tonight as the Sears Tower looms through the moonroof. He's also a cipher with whom the art arbiters, press, and public have had a field day, projecting onto him their most Machiavellian stereotypes of the greedy, robber-baron fat cat: J.R. Ewing with a paintbrush. How they love to attack Lamb, damning wealth and fetishizing poverty as an artistic credential even as they sit in Le Corbusier cube chairs in sprawling SoHo galleries, whispering that he simply *must* have bought his way into the art world. How they—the board members of Sanford L. Smith & Associates, the powerhouse New York art-fair organizer—love to blacklist him, as they did in 2003, when they kicked him out of the Outsider Art Fair explicitly because of his wealth, in a move that prompted the *Wall Street Journal* to ask, "When Is an Outsider Really an Insider?"

And yet there are so many things that they, the naysayers and detractors, don't know about Lamb in their rush to judge him, things like the medical crisis that led him to become a painter in the first place. Diagnosed at the age of 48 with a grim trio of diseases, he'd been given only two to three years to live.

"If I were you," his doctor had intoned, "I would put my affairs in order."

The millionaire undertaker, now facing the prospect of becoming his own customer, had taken stock of his frenetically paced life, so full

of meetings, profit-and-loss statements, and the trappings of material wealth. On death's doorstep, he'd experienced only one regret: Deep within himself, he had always harbored a secret dream to paint, a dream he'd ignored in his quest to expand Blake-Lamb and his other businesses into major financial players. But now, suddenly, the boundless future, the "someday" when he'd finally get around to painting the spirit-laden visions in his head, had been whittled down to an hourglass swiftly draining two to three more years' worth of sand.

"If I can just kick this thing," he'd told his wife, Rose, after a long night of soul-searching, "then I'm going to sell all the businesses, resign from all the boards, and become a painter."

"Why would you do that?" she'd asked, surprised.

"Because I think I have something to offer the world as an artist. I think I have something to say."

Something amazing had happened next. During a follow-up visit at another hospital, after a week of exhaustive tests, a team of specialists had sat him down and told him the news: "For whatever reason, Mr. Lamb, your tests turned up negative on each of the three conditions we were testing you for."

He'd sat there, stupefied.

"Other than some stress," the lead specialist had told him, "you're a perfectly healthy man."

While some had attributed his medical turnaround to a misdiagnosis, he had preferred to think of it as a miracle, a kick in the pants needed to jump-start his life as a painter. He'd made good on his promise to Rose, sold the businesses, and begun the arduous task of teaching himself to paint. Starting from a point of utter ignorance, he'd eventually arrived at a technique of eye-popping sophistication, discovering along the way a series of innovations no painter had ever before achieved, and which none has thus far replicated. He'd painted in seclusion at first, then finally allowed artist friends to see his work. Thereafter, word of his talent had quickly spread. His Chicago gallery debut had nearly sold out but was trashed ruthlessly by the city's most influential art critic, the redoubtable Harry Bouras, who'd pronounced the show "horrible . . . the work of an undertaker who thinks he's an artist."

Far from deterring him, the critical flogging had emboldened Lamb to up the ante and produce increasingly more outlandish portraits of the spirit world only he could see. Within three years, legendary fashion designer Pierre Cardin, struck by Lamb's "core of pure emotion," had invited the painter to exhibit at the Espace Cardin in Paris. Four years after that, the Vatican Museums in Rome had acquired Lamb's work and hung it in its permanent collection. In 2000, Her Royal Highness, Princess Michael of Kent, had officially opened a soaring installation of Lamb's work inside Westminster Cathedral. The next year, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Lamb had led a series of art workshops for children orphaned by the tragedies. Sponsored by the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and mandated by the U.S. Congress, Lamb's "Good Grief Camp" had helped the children begin to overcome their paralyzing grief. Painting umbrellas as symbols of protection and inclusion, Lamb and the kids had paraded through Washington, D.C., like a latter-day Pied Piper and his flock. Later that year he'd founded the nonprofit "Lamb Umbrellas for Peace" project, working pro bono to instill the values of understanding and tolerance in children around the world.

These are things the pigeonholers don't know about Lamb—nor do they likely know that he's worked for years to improve the infrastructure and quality of life in remote Peruvian villages, traveling into the jungles in the midst of revolutions, obey-or-be-shot curfews, and the firebombing of his colleagues' homes by the Shining Path terrorist organization. It's doubtful J.R. Ewing would have done such things, with or without a paintbrush in hand. Nor would J.R. have spent the better part of the 1980s as Lamb did, organizing symposia among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders with the aim of finding common ground between them. No, the stereotypers are more interested in the controversy that dogs Lamb in the United States than for his humanitarian causes and his art itself, which is embraced without caveat in Europe. Fixated on his ouster from the Outsider Art Fair in January 2003, the pigeonholers neglect to note that in September of that same year, he was hailed as an heir to Pablo Picasso and fêted with a one-man show at the Centre Picasso in Horta, Spain, one of the world's