



A Journey To Live Among Art

Drew Grossman | June 8, 2015

JJ Cromer became an artist for practical purposes. He was 31 years old, he'd just gotten married, and his walls were bare. It was 1998 and Cromer had been married to Mary Varson for two weeks. He'd met her at the library on the campus of Clinch Valley College where they both worked in Wise, Virginia. They went on a date the night they met, Cromer invited her to his house and they shared a pot of beans for dinner. They were married six weeks later. In life, like in his art, Cromer follows his intuition. As the couple formed a life together, they talked about what it means to be married and live as one. Together they decided to live among art.



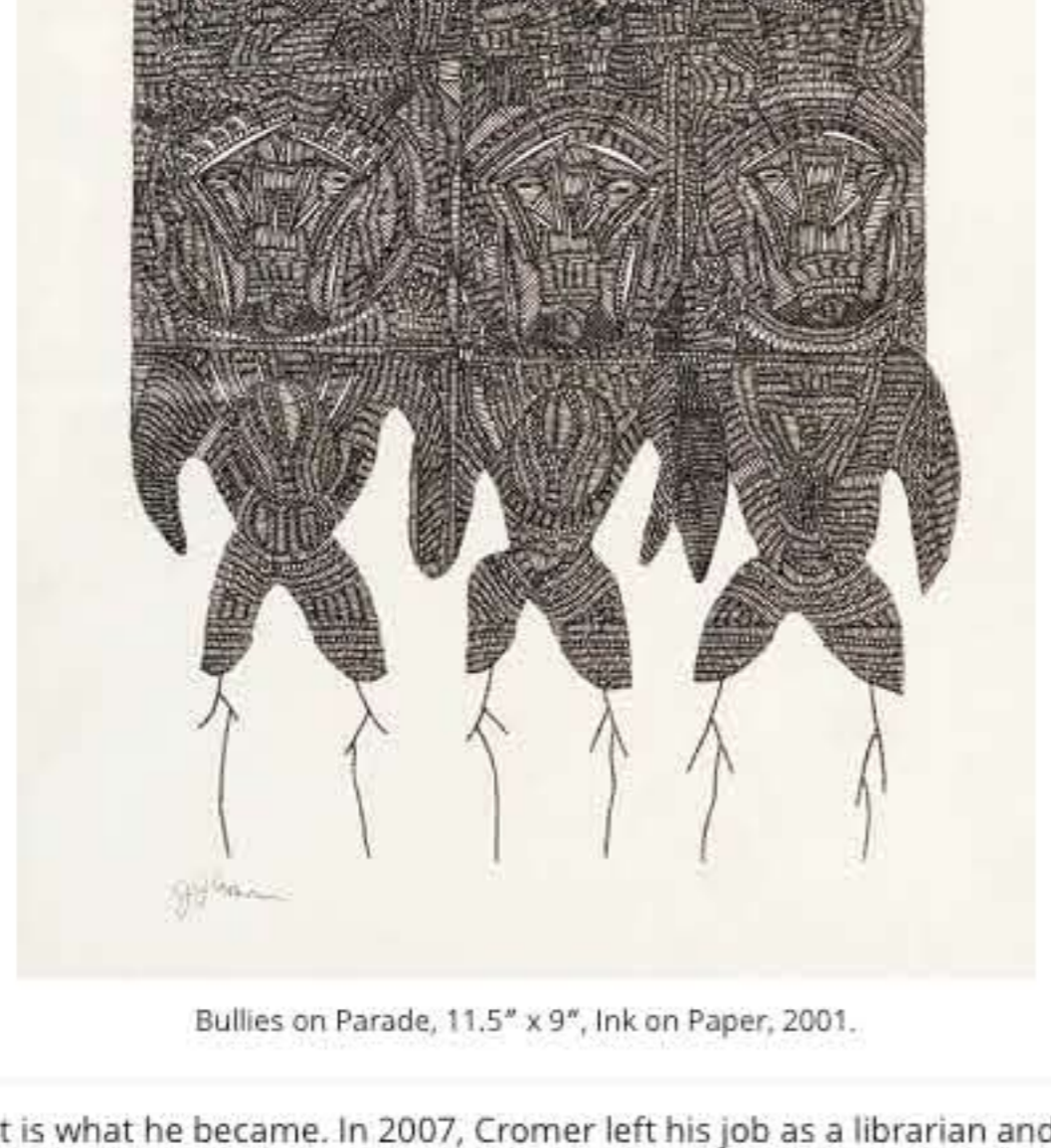
JJ Cromer in his beekeeping suit.

The Cromers lived in a small cinderblock house on the farm where Mary had grown up. It is in a tiny town called Pound, Virginia—about a 40 minute drive from the library where they worked. The house's white walls were almost completely empty, so in creating a home together, the couple started with a literal blank slate.

"We just came up with the idea that we wanted to live with art, but we really didn't know what that meant," Cromer says.

Neither Cromer nor Mary grew up with art work in their homes, aside from the kind of landscape prints you buy at K-Mart or Wal-Mart. They figured they would eventually have money to buy some and fill their walls, but at the moment, they didn't have much. One night, sitting in front of the TV, Mary was copyediting when Cromer grabbed a scrap sheet of typing paper and started doodling. He'd found a little suitcase that belonged to his new wife; it was filled with art supplies—pencils, oil pastels, watercolors. It was a children's art supply kit. With these tools he started drawing symbols. He drew late into the night. That was 17 years ago and Cromer has drawn every day since.

"I was drawing and doodling not with any clear idea of becoming an artist," Cromer says.



Bullies on Parade, 11.5" x 9", Ink on Paper, 2001.

But an artist is what he became. In 2007, Cromer left his job as a librarian and worked on his drawing full-time. His work has been featured at the Outsider Art Fair in Paris, in the folk art collection at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and he was awarded the Hemphill Art Purchase Award by the Folk Art Society of America. All this from a guy who didn't pick up a pencil and take art seriously until he was over 30.

A Kid from the Sticks

Cromer grew up in a town called Tazewell, Virginia. The young Cromer never had aspirations of being an artist. He liked exploring and climbing with the kids in the neighborhood and with his younger brother, Chris. He also loved to read. Cromer's parents, both public school teachers, lined the walls of the home with books. Fiction, poetry, science, it was all at the young reader's fingertips.

One summer in high school, Cromer made it his goal to read one book each day for a month. He was also writing at the time, short fiction. It was these interests, not art that would guide his studies in college. After spending a few years at Clinch Valley College (now the University of Virginia's College at Wise), a liberal arts school in the UVA system, Cromer transferred to the University of Wyoming, where he studied poetry and history.

"I was writing a bunch of poetry at the time and I was submitting all over the place," Cromer says. "My walls were covered with rejection letters."

By his own account, he's been rejected by The New Yorker almost a billion times.

As many college students do, Cromer wondered what he would do after graduation. All the energy he poured into reading, writing, and exploring, where would he channel it?

A poetry professor at the University of Wyoming recommended library sciences school. Cromer would table the idea for a few years. First he took some classes in the philosophy masters program at Western Kentucky University, but it wasn't his thing. He left and instead enrolled in WKU's English masters program and earned his degree in 1994.

After graduation it was off to the beaches of Jacksonville, FL where Cromer settled in for a year off to plan his next move. He lived with an aunt, picked up odd jobs, and read and wrote voraciously. It was then he recalled the advice from his University of Wyoming poetry professor, library sciences school. He soon enrolled in the program at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. After graduation, his job search landed him about an hour and a half from his childhood home at the library of his former school, Clinch Valley College. His first day of work was also Mary Varson's first day.

Becoming an artist

In 1998, the curiosity and intensity that propelled Cromer to read a book a day or submit countless pieces of poetry to the country's top literary magazines was now fueling his drawing. After Mary went to sleep, Cromer would stay up until two o'clock in the morning working.

"At the time, I was working with really fast media. I was working with acrylics. I was just going really fast," Cromer says.

He drew standing up at a table.

"It was very quick and intuitive and I was just cranking out work. I was really working hard," Cromer says. He listened to indie rock while he worked. Once he found a song with the right beat, he would put it on repeat and work himself into a trance.



Picnic II, 10.125" x 7.125", Mixed Media on Paper, 2004.

"Eventually it wasn't even a song, it was just a sound that I locked into, this current I drew to," Cromer says.

He was producing half a dozen pieces a night. After a few months, he had boxes and boxes full of drawings.

At the end of each night's session, he would tack the work to the bookshelf in the bedroom he shared with his wife. He'd sleep a few hours and then get up at 6:30am to prepare for work at the library.

"The first thing Mary saw when she woke up was the new art," Cromer says.

Mary was supportive of his work. She was happy to hang it in her home and the two of them were content with that. They were making good on their intent to live among art. It was private and personal and a nice thing in a rural home in a small town in southwest Virginia. Then his mother noticed.

"My mother saw these boxes of drawings and said, what are you doing with all this?" Cromer says.

Cromer's mother, Sarah Cromer, encouraged him to share his work with a friend of hers who was also an art teacher. The art teacher recognized something good. She put Cromer in touch with a friend who ran a gallery in Bluefield, West Virginia. The idea of showing his work outside the home had never dawned on Cromer. He grabbed a random box of drawings and he and Mary drove to the gallery in Bluefield. While waiting to speak with the owner, the couple began laying out pieces on the floor in a corner of the gallery. Soon the entire area was blanketed with his work.

The owners were surprised to see the artwork covering their floor but they were also intrigued with what they saw. The owners picked out a few and the local hospital was featured in a small group show. He even sold a few pieces to the local hospital.



Honest Applesauce, 23" x 29", Mixed Media on Paper, 2011.

"That sort of opened things up," Cromer says. "It wasn't like, holy shit now I'm an artist, but it was still a shift mentally that somebody else other than Mary might be interested in this."

Finding Outsider Art

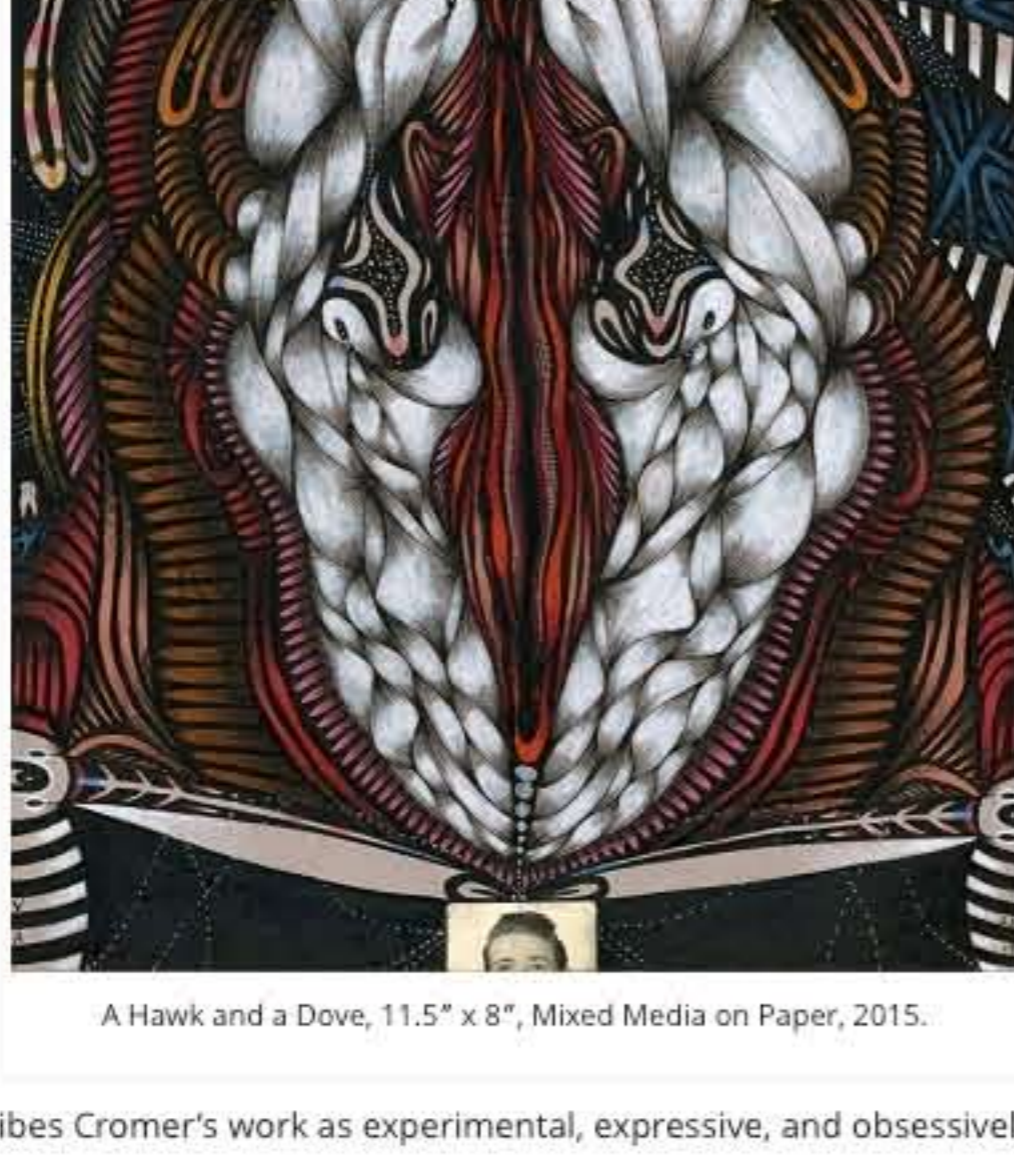
Before he became known in folk art circles, Cromer was a fan. About six months into his drawing habit, he and Mary took a vacation to Madrid, New Mexico.

"It was in Madrid I learned about Howard Finster and that's where I first learned about outsider art," Cromer says.

They bought a few Finster prints from young woman who described the folk art hero as an African American gentleman from Alabama. She missed the mark on Finster's race, but nonetheless it was Cromer's introduction to the world of outsider art.

"There was something about the heart of that work that really spoke to me," Cromer says. While Cromer deflects talk of his own work, he gets excited when the conversation turns to other folk artists he admires. When the Cromers returned home from New Mexico, JJ took to the Internet searching for folk and self-taught art. Before he was in the game himself, Cromer owned pieces by notables such as Moses Tolliver, Buddy Snipes, and Willie Jinks. Mary and JJ were building their life together among art. It was an inquiry into buying a piece by Malcolm McKesson that Cromer was introduced to Grey Carter, the man who has represented his work for the last 16 years* (*others have also represented Cromer's work).

"I liked the work he was showing and then just asked if he looked at new artists," Cromer says of the beginning of his relationship with Carter. Carter lived in McLean, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. and about a 10 hour drive from where Cromer lived. The two men decided to meet halfway in Wytheville, Virginia where Cromer had an aunt who agreed to let him use her home as a makeshift gallery space. Cromer selected about a few hundred drawings for the trip and he covered his aunt's floor. Carter liked what he saw and took 30. He brought them to the Slotin Folk Fest in Georgia and sold most of them.



A Hawk and a Dove, 11.5" x 8", Mixed Media on Paper, 2015.

Carter describes Cromer's work as experimental, expressive, and obsessively detailed. Objects may be recognizable, he says, but it's always described in JJ's special viewpoint.

"They are sometimes witty, sometimes satirical, or even sad, but rarely obvious or normal."

And in his 16 years in the business, he keeps getting better.

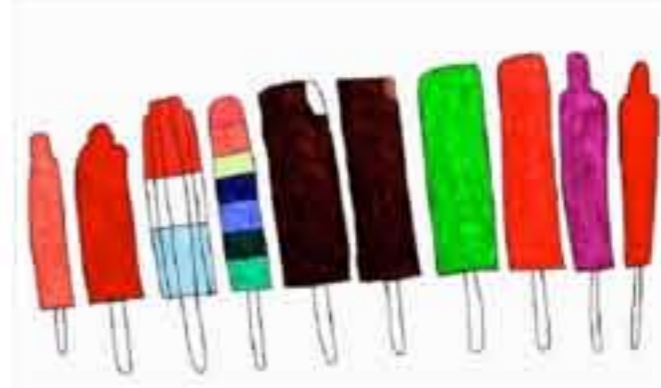
"He's not coasting," Carter says. "He still works at it vigorously and he still tries to develop new techniques."

"When I first saw his work, it was interesting and fun but it was loose and most everything was small," Carter says. "As he's worked at his craft over the years and devoted his attention, his work became larger in scale and tighter in detail. He had talent to begin with, but he's developed into fine, fine artist."

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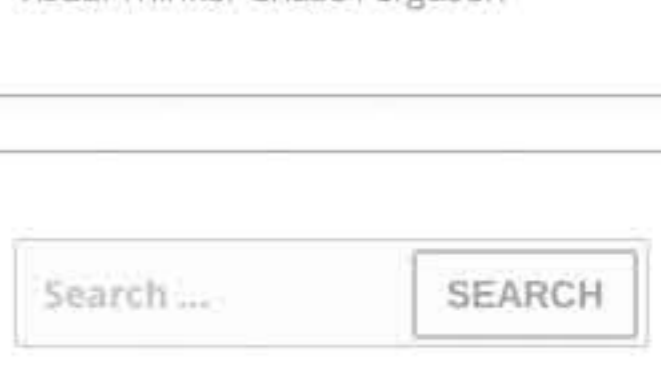
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