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PASSAGES

OSVALDO ROMBERG (1938– 2019)

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Osvaldo Romberg. Photo: David Romberg.

OSVALDO ROMBERG WAS ONE OF THE FIRST ARTISTS that I met upon my arrival in New York in 1992. My friend, the painter Fabián Marcaccio, was his assistant at the time, and he considered meeting Osvaldo an unavoidable rite of passage for any recent Argentine émigré. Larger-than-life in all possible senses, a mountain of a man with a voracious intellect and inexhaustible energy, he was welcoming, if slightly intimidating, when we visited him at his chaotic studio on Broadway and Prince, full of architectural models and canvases of all sizes. In a single sentence he could string together thoughts on Duchamp's readymades, politics in Argentina, and institutional gossip in Israel. More than a force of nature, he was nature at its most forceful, vibrant, and perspicacious, as entrepreneurial as he was honest and kind. Across geographies, he helped and championed generations of artists and curators, including Fabián and me.

His students described him as an amazing teacher at both at the Bezalel Academy in Israel and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in the US. In Philadelphia, he was one of the founders of the Slought Foundation with Aaron Levy and Jean-Michel Rabaté, an extraordinary place for art and intellectual debate. I have no doubt that Osvaldo was, as Schoenberg wrote about John Cage, an inventor of genius.

Much of his life's work was groundbreaking, but I don't believe that he ever got the recognition that he deserved. He was too restless, too intellectual, and too outspoken to fit in. In the end, he remained an exile, an Argentine artist in Israel, and an Israeli artist in the US, all the while remaining a true cosmopolitan who had little patience for anything but excellence and creation. I think he was happiest on his little island in Brazil, where, far from social obligations and cell phones, he would escape to at least once a year, smoke cigars, and talk, endlessly, about art.

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