

Mark Chamberlain



I met Mark Chamberlain in March 2003, a few days after the onset of the Iraq War. I had gone to his Laguna Beach gallery to write a review of his art exhibition, “Pretty Lies, Dirty Truths,” chronicling the potential horrors of that war.

As Mark and I dialogued, I understood that he had been mounting politically charged installations for decades. I also learned that he made his living as a fine-art photographer, often addressing environmental aspects in his work.

Mark was a tall slender blue-eyed blonde. He dressed casually with a frayed work shirt and sandals. Yet his elegant manners revealed his Patrician lineage. He had profound knowledge of history and politics. And he possessed razor-like focus, along with a desire to save the world around him through his gallery exhibitions and art projects.

While I admired Mark’s demeanor and insights, I was more enamored with his conviction and desire to save Laguna Beach from rampant development. His confidence and ability to accomplish these daunting tasks became the magnet drawing me to him.

We became fast friends based on our mutual interests in art, politics and popular culture. Our complementary professions—he was an artist/curator, I am an art and cultural journalist—soon became the undercurrent of our relationship. We began attending art exhibitions and parties throughout Southern California, and seeking advice from each other about our work.

I moved into Mark's home in Laguna's Top of the World area in 2010 and spent several years there with him. We shared meals, watched historical programs on TV, and discussed political, social and personal events. Mark told me stories about growing up in Dubuque, Iowa, exploring the area's topography and riding boats on the Mississippi River. I shared memories of my childhood in the Manhattan suburbs with my culturally adventurous parents. We went on several road trips and spent a week touring his hometown of Dubuque staying in his houseboat on the Mississippi River shores.

Mark and I began collaborating on curatorial and journalistic projects and edited each other's writings. We worked on a book, "Laguna Canyon Project: Refining Artivism," describing his Laguna Canyon [installation art] Project, which helped save Laguna Beach from suburban development in the 1980s. As we wrote and edited the book, we often struggled with and then resolved our differing opinions about words, phrases, descriptions and intent.

As part of that Project, in 1989, Mark and an army of supporters erected what he called "the largest photo mural ever made" in the bucolic Laguna Canyon. The mural, which he named "The Tell" (an archeological term), became a 636-foot-long sculptural installation.

Undulating through the landscape, echoing the shape of the surrounding hillsides, the mural was comprised of thousands of donated photographs and snapshots depicting all aspects of California life. "The overall impression of the sculpture was that of a giant pointillist figurative painting, relating many tales within tales," he explained.

"The Tell" and a subsequent canyon walk attended by many thousands of people alerted Orange County officials and beyond about the potential decimation of the land. As a result, The Irvine Company agreed to abandon their massive suburban housing project in Laguna Canyon and to sell that property to the city.

As Mark and I wrote and edited the Laguna Canyon Project book, we often struggled with differing opinions about words, phrases, descriptions and intent. As we worked through our differences, our mutual wordsmithing became inspiring to both of us. Through our collaboration, we experienced a profound meeting of our minds. And Mark's inherent mentoring ability was dramatically affecting my confidence and the proficiency of my work.

An aspect of Mark's confidence was his belief in his indestructibility. This attitude often drove him to stress his body beyond its capacity, as he spent six weeks every summer laboring on his Mississippi houseboat. He also smoked, stubbornly insisting that the habit would not damage his body.

He returned home from a grueling Mississippi trip in August 2016 with a heart infection. Soon after he developed atrial fibrillation. While receiving numerous treatments for this condition, he continued to work intensely and to smoke.

In December 2017, Mark felt pain in his lungs and had difficulty breathing. He was soon told that he had terminal lung cancer. He accepted this diagnosis with quiet resignation. I told him that I would do my best to tell the world about his significant accomplishments.

For the next several months, Mark's breathing was aided by oxygen 24/7. In March 2018, his cancerous tumor broke up, filling his lungs, making breathing more difficult. He went back to the hospital where he spent his final six weeks. During that time, numerous friends and family members visited him. And the Laguna Canyon book was finally published—a development that brightened his outlook.

In late April, I visited Mark in the hospital and told him how I had evolved creatively and in my life during our relationship. He reflected on the fact that inspiring his life partner and others who were close to him were as important as saving Laguna Canyon. He talked about the Pygmalion parable in which a sculptor brings to life a statue he has created. Through his influence, encouragement and mentoring, I had grown in many ways.

Mark passed away on April 23, 2018. An artist friend soon after told me, "It is a gift when art can create connections with human emotions and interactions." Our mutual love for art and humanity, our shared passions and the larger world had become the glue in our relationship.

Mark's mission to save his community through art installations and his empathy for others were so profound that I feel his presence in the expansive Laguna Canyon, which he fought so valiantly to save, years after his passing. His magnanimous nature continues to nurture my heart, mind and soul.