

# HAVE ANOTHER DRINK AND CARRY ON

Josh Crow, Painter

Josh Crow is a fan of Bernie Sanders. The self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist running for President. I have known this for some time now because we are friends. I know that Crow feels the Bern.

On a Saturday in January, he all but confirms it. When I walk into my living room—where he had slept last night—he looks up from his book and says, “Good morning” in a wispy, tired voice. I ask what he is reading. He holds up the book: *Outsider in the White House* by Bernie Sanders. It is bright blue with neon italics and a picture of Sanders beaming on the front. Crow smiles a little and returns to his task. He has spectacles, like the kind at Warby Parker, on his small white nose. The rims are clear around the eyes and blue on the sides where they meet his ears.

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On one wall of the room, a watercolor—that he painted three years prior—hangs. It’s a waist-up profile of a woman with a subtle smile on her face. She has brown hair with straight, clean bangs and an expression that mimics her dress: calm and blue and effortless. The painting is, to any ordinary eye, not overdone. Each brushstroke feels deliberate, smooth, and contained—but also spontaneous and driven by the moment. From fashionable women and motorcycles, to rural environments and still lifes, these are traits that each of his watercolors, sketches, and oil paintings exude. At the onset, it appears that Crow, as artist, has something to say and that we, as viewer, are nudged to peel it back. After all, that is the intention of most artists.

It may surprise some, though, that Crow has no intention with what he paints. This confession, which he has mentioned on a few occasions to me, only feigns curiosity about the transformative power in art. It probes the question: what can we learn about life from an artist who doesn’t have a motive, one with no sense of his own power? It probes the answer: to fall in love with the moment of things, to soak our feet in beauty in order to find some relief from the worst aspects of our Selves.

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I tell him that the restroom is free. We are going to The Art Institute of Chicago today. Crow nods a little and plops Bernie on the coffee table. He gets up and unzips a tie-dye backpack. He removes a black cosmetic bag (housing his toothbrush, contacts, and solution), a Sunday-through-Saturday container of pills, and a jar of Organic peanut butter. I am pulling the blinds up as he walks soft-footed to the kitchen and stops, spilling the handheld contents onto the island.

“Do you have some toast? I need to take these pills with food.” I nod and ask what the pills are for.

“My heart.” He tells me that when he was a baby, the main chambers of his heart were flipped. There was a hole between the vessels that doctors had to patch. At 18-months old, Crow had open-heart surgery.

I prepare some gently-warmed toast on a plate and give him a butter knife. I watch as he spreads the spread thinly across the surface. He flips open the ‘Saturday’ pill container. There are three or four—of varying color and size—inside. Crow swallows them in one swoop, takes a swig of water, and then bites into the toast like a bird.

“Why do you bring your own peanut butter everywhere?”

He laughs lightly. “I don’t know. I’m vegan. Not many options around.”

He heads to the restroom to get ready for the day.

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Crow wears a 312-beer baseball cap, a T-shirt under a hoodie, a pea coat with a faux-fur collar, skinny jeans, and boots that “were on sale at Nordstrom.” He stuffs his gloved hands inside his pockets and lowers his head against the wind.

After breakfast, we split the bill and head for the museum. We bumble inside to escape the cold and Crow sits, waiting for his friends, Danny, David, and Lauren, to arrive. He flips through the directory to pass the time, eyeing one of the current exhibitions: The Contemporary. Fifteen-minutes later, they arrive. After a quick stop at the museum café for beer, David suggests that it’s time for some art.

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The Art Institute feels like a giant Russian nesting doll holding thousands of baby dolls as we traverse deeper through the space. It’s not too crowded so we’re able to move at our own pace. Crow stands in front of a painting that covers almost one wall. It’s big and bright. When I ask who the artist is, he replies simply, “It’s a Hockney.” His voice is low. He blinks a couple of times, blue eyes behind blonde eyelashes gazing at the woman in the painting—the woman with the grey hair and the pink robe. On closer inspection, the plaque next to the piece says:

David Hockney  
English, born 1937  
*American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)*

“Look, there’s a spot in there he didn’t paint. Do you see the pencil marks? In the leaves?” Crow says. I edge closer and squint. David does the same. We agree that he is right.

I hear the snap of a camera behind us and turn around. Danny has taken a picture of us gazing at the painting—or really, at Marcia Weisman and the unfinished leaves. He shows me the photo on

the camera. Our backs are turned to the lens and the only figure in focus is the woman with the grey hair and the pink robe.

After sampling some more contemporary rooms, we move on. Crow follows the group toward the Impressionist collection. Colors dripping, thick and visceral, held in place along mahogany walls. The group scatters except for Crow. He stands in the Degas room and scans the perimeter—looking, searching. For what I do not know. I give him some space and wander to David who is in an adjacent room.

“That, over there,” David tells me. He points to a van Gogh from 1888 called *The Poet’s Garden*. “That’s my favorite.” From afar, it is a lush green garden of various greens, oranges, and yellows blanketed with thick and imposing brushstrokes that are heavy and light.

I notice Crow wander into the room. He is clutching his black and orange knapsack hung across his body, as if for support. Despite his average height, his thin frame and baseball cap make him easy to spot amongst the tourists. But perhaps he is noticeable because he is not a tourist at all in this space. This is someone who has been here before. Someone who is seeking something, wanting to return to something, and trying to retrace his steps back to the very thing he’s lost.

He goes up to a painting—one I had not noticed before—to the left of David’s favorite. Crow spins around, spots me, and calls my name as he saunters over. “I want to show you something,” he urges. I oblige and walk with him back to where he stood.

“This.” It is the first time he’s smiled today, genuinely and unprovoked. I follow his expression and find a modest painting of a French woman reading. Crow regards her with an adoration I haven’t seen in him before.

“This is my favorite painting in the whole museum probably.” He gives me a quick glance as he says this but soon returns to the woman, as if he would hate to let even a second pass in viewing her.

“Why?” I ask.

“The mark-making is insane. Look at her lip.”

Her lips are a subtle shade of rouge. That is all I notice aside from the fact that the painting is an 1879/1880 Édouard Manet called *Woman Reading*.

Crow continues. “How it was painted. He might have used just a single mark to describe her lip or the underneath of her nose. The fluidity of the mark even though it may not be super accurate. Stopping just before taking away the sparkle.”

This, I would learn, is what Josh Crow admires in art. It’s what he hunts for. Yearns for. Even in his own work. It’s the only thing that truly, unabashedly, makes him beam. And the woman in the bonnet, ruffled coat, and gloves continues to read, with a hint of a smirk on her face as if she knows something I don’t. As if she and Crow, together, are in on a little secret.

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The next day, interview day, is one that Crow has been dreading for weeks. I figure maybe he's not used to having the tables turned, where he's the subject for once.

Our conversation takes place in a hidden, speakeasy bar named Watershed. Located in the River North neighborhood of Chicago, Watershed is all low ceiling and dimly lit, small yet unstuffy. There is a striped couch on one side, a green chaise at the opposite end, and flower-lined chairs—the variety you'd find in a grandmother's home. There are a handful of scattered tables and chairs on one side, orderly, defined, refined—with a lime tufted bench lining the closest wall. Two tall, wide booths merge in the corner and that is where Crow and I sit opposite each other.

Watershed has just opened for business and we are the only patrons. The bartender hands out two menus that feel like giant leather wallets. Inside, an assortment of cocktails, beer, whiskey, and snacks. We flip through the pages while James Taylor plays in the background.

“I'll have a Founders Azacca IPA,” Crow tells the bartender. On the table, a tea candle flickers inside of a blue incandescent holder as we wait. The light dances across Crow's hand—the same one that holds a sterling silver ring his father designed and welded for him. When he notices me eyeing it, he tucks it inside of his elbows and leans forward, anticipating my questions. As I pull out my recording device, I distract him about the ambiance. “It's very quiet,” he says, slanting his expression in a somber way—eyes big and bright.

The drinks arrive and Crow takes a hefty sip of his IPA. He looks more relaxed. He uncrosses his arms and wraps a hand around the base of his glass. That is my cue to press ‘Record’.

As we discuss his experiences as a painter in Chicago and—now—in Missouri, he says, “I was surprised to hear that you wanted to interview me.” His chuckle, the one I heard briefly at The Art Institute, has now transformed into a hearty, squeaky laugh. It's still a laugh contained under his breath, in that Crow way, but also one that is full of life.

An hour passes. The bartender interrupts and asks if we want a snack. “Yeah, I kind of want to try these macadamia nuts,” Crow says. “And can I get a Third Coast?” The bartender nods and scurries away, returning with a white bowl of nuts. Crow pops one in his mouth and chomps heartily. He has just finished telling me that he classifies his art as Realist Expressionism—not really Realism, not really Impressionism.

“What are those again?”

“Spiced macadamia nuts.” He pops another in his mouth.

“Are they burning your tongue?”

“They’ve got some spice,” he replies matter-of-factly but not without another chuckle.

Something compels me to ask how he’d feel if his work was stolen out of a museum. He says, “I think I would actually kind of like that. That’s spicy.”

I cannot decide whether the macadamia nuts or the beer is forging a stronger impact.

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By the end of the two-and-a-half-hour interview, Crow is an open book. He says he doesn’t fit the stereotype of an artist driven to get a message out there or to be totally consumed with what they make. He admits that he can’t really identify what he’s trying to pursue and that he is far more passive about his art than most others are.

“I feel like I’m very critical and maybe have a more narrowed view of what I tend to appreciate in art. And maybe—maybe—it’s not necessarily the center of my life but there’s not anything else that’s the center either. So it’s just as important as anything else.”

This is precisely what is unusual about Crow: he is the complete antithesis to art. And yet, he doesn’t aim to prove himself; or suggest that he’s the answer the art world is hunting for. Rather, it is in his humble drive to create work that is spontaneous and grounded in a sparkle—to create art solely for the enjoyment it brings—that guides him along an often murky, unpredictable path.

When I ask him what happens after this moment, he replies as fittingly as Josh Crow can:

“We have another drink and carry on. We get Bernie Sanders in office. And then people in this country will actually have money to buy artwork again.”