



North Beach Heyday Aesthetic Pluralism in 1950s San Francisco

In the spiritual and political loneliness of America in the fifties you'd hitch a thousand miles to meet a friend. Whatever lives needs a habitat, a proper culture of warmth and moisture to grow. West coast of those days, San Francisco was the only city; and San Francisco, our home post was North Beach.

-Gary Snyder, "North Beach"

The North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco is a trapezoid-like neighborhood wedged between Russian Hill, Chinatown and the financial District and the old Barbary Coast (Jackson Square) to the south. The historically Italian area became a "bohemian stronghold, with its low-rent flats and studio space, cheap Italian food, and informal bars."¹ As early as the 19th century when the shore of North Beach was still called Yerba Buena Cove, artists and writers gravitated to the Montgomery Block near Jackson Square. A few of the early artists with studios included Sargent Johnson, Dong Kingman, and Clay Spohn. In the 1950s, artists, poets, and teachers flocked to the area from around the city and from further points such as Marin, Berkeley and Oakland.² Poetry readings, informal gatherings and "happenings" became a critical part of the community that developed. City Lights Bookstore (1952) became another cultural meeting point for visitors and locals including the artists from the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA now SFAI) on nearby Russian Hill. These two underground cultural forces collided and burst forth in the Allen Ginsberg reading of *Howl* at the legendary 6 Gallery in October of 1955.

North Beach denizens shared venues such as Henri Lenoir's Vesuvio Cafe where artist Wally Hedrick was hired to sit in the window posing as the quintessential bearded bohemian. "There was Grant Avenue between Vallejo and Greenwich Streets, in places like The Place, Co-Existence Bagel Shop, Miss Smith's Tea Room (which later became the Coffee Gallery), and the Bread and Wine Mission. On Green Street, it was the Anxious Asp, Gino and Carlo's, and Mr. Otis."³ Bernice Bing and Wally Hedrick would hang their art at The Cellar where poet Ruth Weiss (aka ruth weiss) innovated Jazz Canto with live jazz and poetry. Other areas of nearby connection included the artist filled Painterland building on Fillmore with "a party about every weekend,"⁴ as well as a string of artist run galleries.

Artist run galleries played a major role in the development of art and community with the groundbreaking Clyfford Still influenced Metart Galleries in 1949 as well as King Ubu Gallery, the 6 Gallery, and Spatsa Gallery featuring an exhibition by the Rat Bastard Protective Association. At that time, the artists and poets of North Beach shared what poet Michael McClure described as “heady feelings of those early days, of new friendships, community and collaboration.”⁵

The Art

Along with geography, the poets, writers and artists of North Beach shared an aesthetic pluralism, which implies a multitude of ways to achieve a creative goal. There was a spirit of play and spontaneity among the artists many of whom had seen some of the worst of mankind as participants in WWII and the Korean War. This exhibition offers a brief snapshot of the creative explosion that ignited the area and its participants. This exhibition is not intended to be an encyclopedic inventory, but presents key works by some of the major contributors of North Beach aesthetic pluralism.

One of the earliest works in the exhibition is a painting by George Stillman. As a student at CSFA in the late 1940s, Stillman was a member of the so-called Sausalito Six group of artists that included Richard Diebenkorn.⁵ Stillman was considered one of the most independent and original of the first wave of San Francisco Abstract Expressionist (ABEX) painters. Wally Hedrick commented that Stillman “was a great painter” and his “early works preceded – you know they were in the early 40s, and they were as contemporary or as avant-garde as anything that New York produced.”⁶ The work in the *North Beach Heyday* exhibition is an archetypical example from 1948 as Stillman was pivoting into the new domain of ABEX. Two other members of the Sausalito Six, Walter Kuhlman and John Hultberg moved to the area to attend CSFA, and are represented in the exhibition with works on canvas.

Several of the artists in this exhibition were early proponents of found objects and especially beach detritus such as stone and driftwood. Along with JB Blunk and Alvin Light, the artists Arlo Acton, John Baxter, and Richard Faralla often utilized found wood objects often with a Zen mystique. Many of these efforts set the stage for an organic natural ethos that is dominant in today’s contemporary design world. Baxter is quoted in his 1967 SFMOMA memorial exhibition stating that he harnessed the abstract idiom, but often endowed the imagery with a “poetry of figurative connotation.”

There are multiple works by Faralla in the current exhibition with groupings of found wood that have been described as “work which, though of many pieces, is of one piece, art that is of today but not merely of the moment...”⁷ Both Baxter and Faralla were able to pursue innovation; as writer Rebecca Solnit points out, the North Beach artists produced art that “was a dialogue with friends, and since no one was listening almost anything could be said.”⁸

Wally Hedrick also created assemblage sculpture as well as painting with “staggering directness.”⁹ William Morehouse who is represented with an audacious 1966 sculpture painting in the exhibition commented that “Funk was not an esthetic stance for Hedrick. It was

his life style.” 10 The *North Beach Heyday* exhibition includes a large 1960s painting by Hedrick covered in midnight black to protest the Vietnam War. The surface is teeming with minute cracks, which artist Fred Martin described as integral to Hedrick’s process. “The paint often cracks or the stretchers warp from the very urgency of his methods ... The cracking, the twisting, and the failing to dry all form part of the basic sensibility of his works.” 11. This is another example of how these artists had “broadened the possibilities of art, had let junk, humor, politics, religion, and popular culture into the precincts of art in a new way, and nothing would ever be quite the same.” 12.

1950s Become 60s

Through art schools and museums, there was a shared presentation of ideas between UC Berkeley and California College of Arts and Crafts (now CCA) in the East Bay and institutions in San Francisco. A number of artists had studied or taught at both CSFA and UC Berkeley including Fred Reichman, David Park, Joan Brown and Nancy Genn who exhibited her innovative “open form” bronze sculpture at SFAI (previously CSFA) in 1963. The same year that she won the prestigious James D. Phelan award. Genn’s 1964 work, *Shard of Sea I*, received informal guidance from sculptor Claire Falkenstein, and casting assistance from Peter Voukos at the landmark Garbanzo Works foundry. Another sculptor, Bruce Beasley was involved with the Garbanzo Works foundry, and his sculpture from the early 1960s was included in the 1963 Biennale de Paris.

Another rare sculpture in the exhibition is by avant-garde jeweler and sculptor Peter Macchiarini. The artist helped organize one of the first California outdoor art festivals in 1938 and also the Upper Grant Avenue Festival in 1954. The city named the steps on Kearney between Broadway and Vallejo for Macchiarini in 2000.

Another unifying discourse between regions took place in the seminal Peter Selz curated exhibition *Funk* in the spring of 1967. With similar goals, an almost forgotten counterpart exhibition launched a few weeks prior with the *Grotesque Art* curated by James Monte at SFAI. *North Beach Heyday* artists Arlo Acton, Roy De Forest and William Morehouse participated in *Funk* and also *Grotesque Art* exhibitions (excluding Acton). Peter Selz commented in the exhibition catalog that “Funk art, so prevalent in the San Francisco-Bay Area, is largely a matter of attitude. But many of the works also reveal certain similar characteristics of form-or anti-form.” 13 Like their Beat predecessors in the 1950s, “the artist here (San Francisco) is aware that no one really sees his work, and no one really supports his work All this drives the artist’s vision inward. This is the Land of Funk.” 14

Later works in the exhibition reflect the new wave of industrial minimalism that was about to break onto city shores. This includes sculptor James Prestini, with a Bauhaus sensibility, directed to the assembly of highly symmetrical steel parts. Gerald Nordland, in his essay for the artist’s exhibition at SFMOMA in 1969, writes “Mies van der Rohe said that technology reaches its fulfillment when it transcends itself in becoming art,” which aptly summarizes the artist’s approach at this time. Another sculptor of metal, Fletcher Benton, had been a student at San

Francisco City College in the 1950s and created abstract Beat landscape paintings before moving to large scale sculpture.

Outposts

More distant bohemian enclaves such as Big Sur had early Bay Area connections with artists Jean Varda, Arthur Monroe and others. A small 1950s painting in the exhibition by Sutter Marin titled *Big Sur* is inscribed with the poetry of Ruth Weiss. Like many of the visual artists Weiss was heavily influenced by jazz and Bebop music. In the 1950s Weiss moved for some time to Big Sur which had been popularized by Henry Miller, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Jack Kerouac in a novel of the same name.

Further afield, Beat artists and poets were associated with mountain environments. Rebellious from prevailing consumerism and conformism, one group chased elevated experiences in the Colorado Rockies as well as mountains south of the border earning the moniker Volcano Poets. Artists such as Jay DeFeo, James Kelly and Joan Brown incorporated mountain names in the title of art works including Everest, Nanda Devi and K2. Locally, Mount Tamalpais and Mount Burdell in Marin became home to clusters of bohemians including the Druid Heights compound and the town of Bolinas on the flanks of "Tam."

Slightly more north, Sonoma Mountain became a creative and social hub as Robert and Mary McChesney welcomed visitors high atop the mountain. A sand painting by Robert McChesney is included in the exhibition as well as an eloquent painting by Philip Roeber that appeared in Mary McChesney's *A Period of Exploration* exhibition at the Oakland Museum of Art (now OMCA). These outposts formed an informal social network among "tribes," but also reflected the Beat generation's interest in nature and ecological awareness.

The exhibition *North Beach Heyday* at Modern Art West Gallery celebrates an innovative cultural period even as "much of what these artists created has been lost," but many regard their accomplishments as "the most vital, dynamic cultural period in the history of California."¹⁵ During these years, San Francisco's North Beach was more than a single place or nexus of a critical art movement. North Beach was perhaps more essentially a state of mind that embraced alternative paths to art and life.

Footnotes

1. Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area*, University of California Press, 1985, p85
2. Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, University of California Press, 1996 p38
3. Mark Green, "A Kind of Beatness" Photographs of a North Beach Era 1950-1965. Focus Gallery, San Francisco, 1975
4. Mary Kerr, *Swinging in the Shadows: San Francisco's Wild History Groove*, DVD, 2011
5. Anastasia Aukemon, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association*, Rat Bastards in Painterland, UC Press, 2016 p70
6. The artists of the Sausalito Six included James Budd Dixon, Richard Diebenkorn, John Hultberg, Walter Kuhlman, Frank Lobdell, George Stillman. Their portfolio of ABEX prints in 1949 is considered to be one of the first of its kind.

5. Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, University of California Press, 1996 p102
6. Mary Kerr, *Out of the Shadows, Women in the Cultural Underground-1950s/60s*, Interview with Wally Hedrick, p264
7. George D. Culler, catalog letter, *Faralla: 1959 through 1965*, SFMOMA, 1966
8. Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition – Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1990. p67
9. Fred Martin quoted by Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area*, University of California Press, 1985, p89
10. William Morehouse, *Wally Bill Hedrick, Funk Daddy*, April 8 through April 26, 1968. Sonoma State University
11. Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area*, University of California Press, 1985, p88
12. Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition – Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1990 p99
13. Peter Selz, *Funk*, University Art Museum, University of California Berkeley, 1967
14. Harold Paris, "Sweet Land of Funk," *Art in America*, Peter Selz, Funk, Berkeley Art Museum, March 1967
15. Mary Kerr, *Out of the Shadows, Women in the Cultural Underground-1950s/60s*, Interview with Wally Hedrick, p264

Copr. Modern Art West 2024