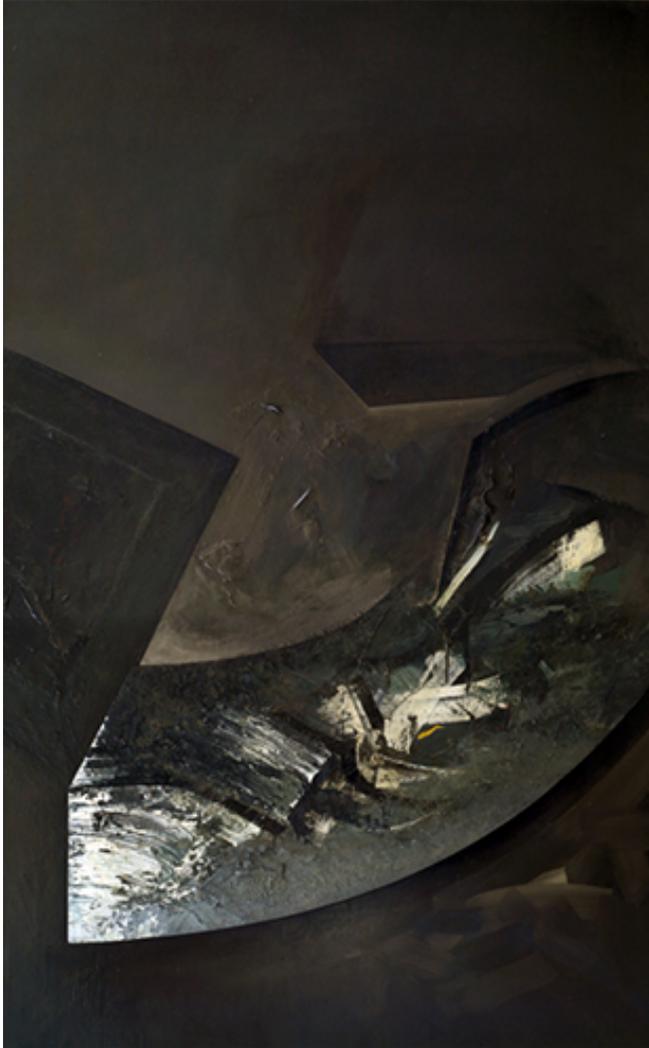


Sight Vision: The Beat Era at Gallery Paule Anglim

Posted on 31 October 2013. Tags: [Gallery Paule Anglim](#)



Jay De Feo, Arcturus II, 1984-85, oil on canvas, 96 x 60"

If you walked into the apartment shared by Jay De Feo and Wally Hedrick and spent some time, you'd probably have met every important Beat artist in the city. That's how small the SF art scene was in the late 1950s. In fact, many of their closest cohorts lived in the same building, at 2322 Fillmore St. The group also included Jess Collins, Bruce Conner, Joan Brown, Wallace Berman and George Herms — all legendary figures today. Back then they were unknown, except to each other. Together, they created the first wave of Funk, and their impact, more than 50 years later, remains far out of proportion to their size and means.

That is part of what makes this — the sixth exhibition of this group by Gallery Paule Anglim since 1983 — something of a milestone. The other part has to do with the gallery itself: From its inception in the mid-1970s, it showed Beat-era artists when few other commercial galleries would. If the show appears less than cohesive, that is because of the fierce individuality of the artists involved. Rejecting the stifling formalism that held sway in New York, they committed themselves to doing things *their* way, privileging

nature over culture with an art that had no signature style other than what the individual artists forged for themselves. Dada, Surrealism, Existentialism, Eastern religion, occult practices, hallucinogenic drugs, visionary art and jazz were their shared interests. But the expression of those interests took myriad forms, constantly shifting with little concern about financial consequences because in the late 1950s and early 1960s there were none; the market for their work didn't exist until dealers like Anglim and Ruth Braunstein stepped in to create it.

Appropriately, when you reach the top of the staircase that leads to the gallery you are greeted by one of De Feo's monumental canvases, *Arcturus II* (1984-85). It measures eight feet tall, with the image of a deformed anvil or a steam iron occupying the lower half. While the painting's mix of thin and thick paint deviates from the heavy impastos for which De Feo is best known, the main form is familiar. It, and others like it, appeared over and over during her career, which ended with the artist's death in 1989. It's a prime example of how she used a combination of photomechanical and manual techniques to transform everyday household objects and studio detritus into forms that looked both familiar and strange. That tension, between the strange and the familiar, runs like a refrain through the show.



Wally Hedrick, *Physical Experience #1*, 1963, oil on canvas, 36.5 x 97.5"

If you lived through this period you understand why. If you didn't, a vitrine filled with writings and memorabilia from Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia and Wallace Berman informs that this was an era rocked by war, assassinations, political upheaval and drugs. Drugs especially. They helped inspire some of the headiest works in the show, including those from Berman (who favored peyote) and Conner (who liked to draw while high on hashish.) Berman, like De Feo, fully exploited the possibilities afforded by photocopiers. He used one to create some of the most arresting photo collages ever made. He called them *Verifax*. The largest on view, created between 1964 and 1976, consists of 16 negative images of a hand holding a transistor radio. Onto the face of it he superimposed other images: of statues, figures, birds, dancers, athletes and Hindu gods. Together, they read like a pack of Tarot cards, unfolding a Jungian vision of a psychological netherworld.

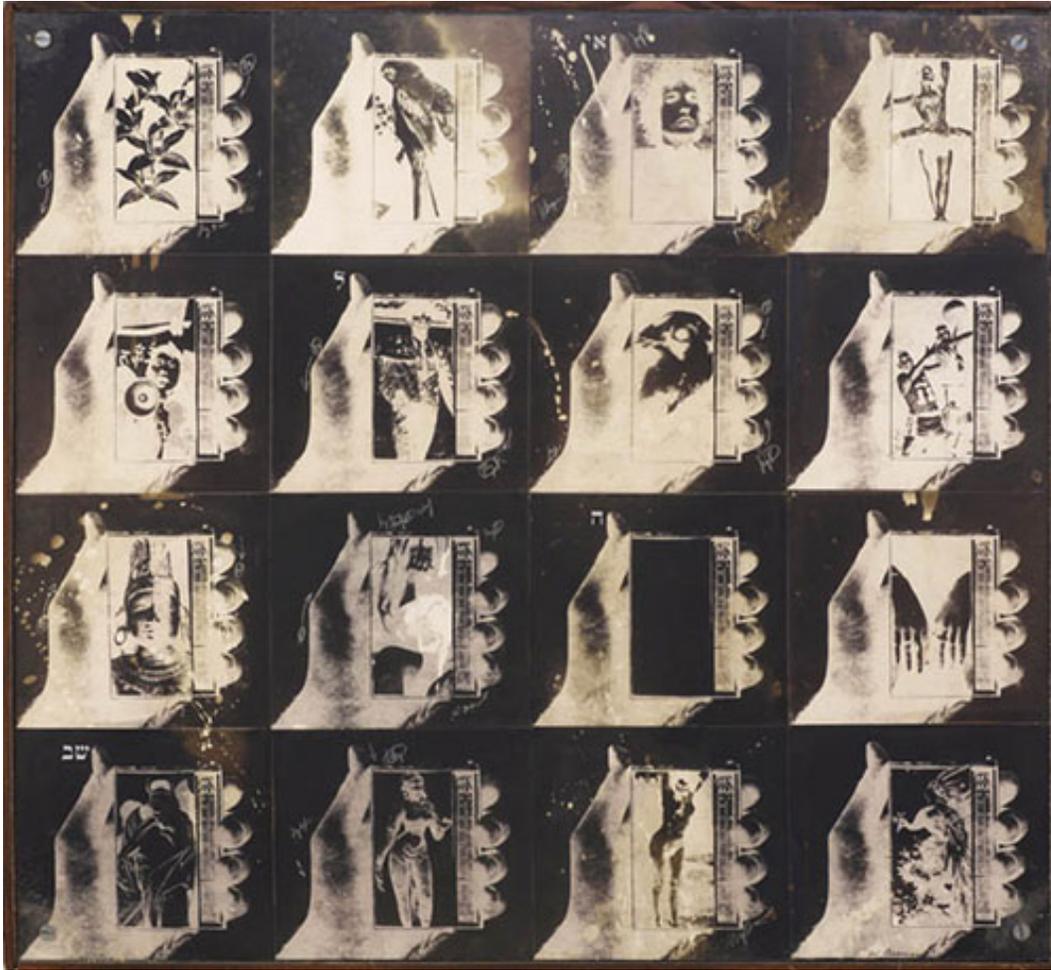
Conner was best known for creating fetish sculptures out of stuffed nylon stockings and for groundbreaking experimental films, like *Three-Screen Ray*, a forerunner, if not a model, for the modern music video. But he was also an exquisite draftsman. He made obsessive, detailed pen-and-ink drawings that resemble topographic maps composed of magnetized iron filings or hieroglyphic marks, committed to paper under what I imagine was a lucid trance state, similar to that experienced by people who perform automatic writing.



Jess, *Untitled (with Joan Crawford Head)*, 1952-3, mixed media collage, 18 x 23"

Several small works represent Jess, arguably the world's greatest collage artist. Working with cut-up magazines and printed matter of all kinds, he moved fluidly from Dada/surrealist social critiques to compositions that bordered on pure abstraction. Some, like *Untitled (Cars on Rooftop)*, flirted with science fiction. All of those on view pack a memorable wallop. *Untitled (with Joan Crawford Head)* pictures a city as a grotesque bestiary. Another, *Blasted Beauty*, made of orange-tinged paper scraps from 1954, suggests a city in flames; while a third, *Untitled (Professor in Art Gallery)*, mocks art world pretensions. In it, a bespectacled professor is so engrossed in thought he fails to notice a fallen statue laying behind him on the floor. It's almost slapstick.

Needless to say, these artists operated far outside the mainstream. Some, at certain junctures, could even be labeled visionary. De Feo's then-husband, Wally Hedrick, certainly could have. Like most everyone else in the group, Hedrick worked in multiple media, and his paintings, while exhibiting few classic outsider traits, certainly signaled a yearning for alternate realities. *Physical Experience # 1*, a long, narrow painting based on his and De Feo's shared love of mountain climbing, makes the case. It shows jagged peaks ringed at either end by what look like quotation marks, a visual parable, perhaps, about the difficulties of communication. It reminded me of Richard Burton's story about a voice coach who, while standing at a considerable distance from the young actor, instructed: "Whisper so I can hear you." It has the ring of a cosmic jest.



Wallace Berman, Verifax Collage, 1964-76, 16-image collage, 24 x 26"

There is one bona fide outsider on view, and that's Marjorie Cameron. An occultist and an associate of pre-Scientology L. Ron Hubbard and a follower of Aleister Crowley, Cameron believed herself to be the incarnation of the imaginary character, The Scarlet Woman, and she portrayed herself in that role in Kenneth Anger's film, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, one of the director's tamer offerings, but still pretty freaky. The same holds for four of the artist's drawings, one of which shows a figure resembling the Statue of Liberty in orange flames, a self-portrait I presume.

Georges Herms and Joan Brown are also represented, the former by an exemplary wood sculpture, the latter by a suite of ink drawings, all models of economic expressivity. Also on view are works by Jean Conner and Lawrence Jordan. The only question raised, is why, on this occasion, didn't the gallery come up with a major Brown canvas as it does each year at artMRKT? It's a small nit to pick in an otherwise museum-quality presentation.

In its sixth incarnation, it shows the bona fides of gallerist who has never been afraid — as Lou Reed put it — “walk on the wild side”

—DAVID M. ROTH

“Sight Vision: The Urban Milieu” at [Gallery Paule Anglim](#) through November 9, 2013.

Photos:

All photos Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Wallace Berman's *Verifax*: Courtesy of the Estate of Wallace Berman and Gallery Paule Anglim