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Painterland: Four From California, at Karma

by **John Mendelsohn**

Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, Franklin Williams at Karma

November 12 to December 22, 2017

188 East 2nd Street, between avenues A and B

New York City, karmakarma.org



Franklin Williams, *Untitled*, 1968. Acrylic, polyurethane, yarn and crochet thread on canvas stuffed with cotton batting, 14 × 14 × 9 inches.

Courtesy of Karma

With the distance that time affords, we can see communities of artists as neural networks, firing their energies into a nexus of human connections. Collectively they create a complex that nourishes and amplifies the efforts of each individual artist.

Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, and Franklin Williams, the artists gathered together at Karma, emerged from a small, but vital art scene in Northern California in the 1950s and 1960s. Their compatriots included Bruce Conner (who was married to Jean Conner), Jay DeFeo (who was married to Wally Hedrick), Joan Brown, Michael McClure, Manuel Neri, and Wallace Berman, who all worked and exhibited together.



Franklin Williams, *See and Always Seen*, 1975. Acrylic and yarn on paper, mounted to canvas, 72 × 60 inches. Courtesy of Karma

These artists are featured in Anastasia Aukeman's book *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (University of California Press, 2016), which explores the personal and artistic fermentation that animated their time together in San Francisco, and how it reflected the Beat scene, radical politics, and the emerging counterculture. In their relative isolation from a major center of art, these artists were able to develop both their own personal visions and a model of mutual support and scrappy self-reliance that still resonates today.

The exhibition at Karma gives us just a slice of the four artists' individually diverse work, while capturing aspects of the spirit of Bay Area art of the period. A revelation for me was the work of Franklin Williams, who was based early on in Oakland and taught for many years at the San Francisco Art Institute. The artist is 78, and in this exhibition are a selection of nine works from the 1960s and 1970s that are fresh and pulsing with high key color and textural surfaces, made of paint, yarn, and crochet thread. With their freewheeling, obsessive funkiness, they have a particularly contemporary feeling.

See and Always Be Seen (1975) is a large-scale painting, composed of strips of painted paper, rearranged and sewn with yarn, whose hieratic lattice structure is filled by swarming brush strokes, whorled lines, and stylized flames. The effect is of a kind of crazed joy. *Untitled* (1968) is an exuberant party of a sculpture, with a pillow-like form whose surface vibrates with springy tendrils of multi-colored yarn.



Jean Conner, *Are You a Springmaid?*, 1960. Paper collage, 10.125 × 8 inches. Courtesy of Karma

Jean Conner, who is 84, and until recently has rarely shown her work publicly. Her twenty-two small collages in the exhibition, dating from the 1960s through the 1980s, are all composed of images culled from magazines. They are beautiful works in rich, subtle colors that are surreal, refined, and subversive, all at the same time.

Some of the works, such as *Are You a Springmaid?*, use advertising imagery; its title and female figures, both sleeping and cavorting, are drawn from a long-running ad campaign for a line of sheets. Like a number of Conner's works, it questions women's social identity as an icon of commerce or desire. Most of Conner's collages employ images from the natural world, often combining different species and settings to dream-like effect.

The work of Deborah Remington, who died in 2010, is full of fierce painterly gestures and allusions to the landscape. They reflect her studying with the Abstract Expressionists Clyfford Still, Elmer Bischoff, and others at the California School of Fine Arts. The paintings, four of which are very large, express Remington's sense of ambition and her desire to create pictorial experiences that confront and encompasses the viewer.



Deborah Remington, *Dr. S.*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 84 × 68 inches. Courtesy of Karma

Dr. S. (1962) is painting with black, slashing brush strokes in a field of yellow-orange. The blocky forms coalesce into an instable image that recalls the Pacific Ocean shoreline that Remington drew during her formative years as an artist. *Winter* (1963) has a similar structure, with black strokes emerging from cadmium red to create a looming presence. With their central, isolated masses and hints of secreted interior spaces, these painting anticipate the hard-edged, shield-like paintings that Remington would become celebrated for after her move to New York in 1965.

Wally Hedrick, who died in 2003, was an iconoclastic artist whose work ranged from assemblages, to proto-Pop paintings, to politically charged works. He was a central figure among the Bay Area artists, and along with Remington and four others organized the seminal Six Gallery, the site of Alan Ginsberg's first reading of his poem "Howl" in 1955.

In this exhibition the intersection of art and activism in Hedrick's work is embodied in four examples of his *Black Paintings*. He began the series in the 1960s as a protest to the Vietnam War by taking over 50 of his earlier canvases and painting them black. The *Black Paintings* continued into the 2000s with works that opposed the first Iraq War.

Hedrick's *Vietnam/Irac* (1970, 2003) spans the two wars, and like the other related works, is a painting in mourning. A tondo, whose canvas is split at its equator, is over 10 feet in diameter, and thickly painted in

oil. Its rough, monochromatic surface suggests a shroud of negation that covers over a field of buried evidence.

The gathering together of the four artists in this exhibition reconstitutes a moment in which a confluence of individual and collective efforts expanded into a stream of art that continues to reverberate. It reminds us that art from anywhere can become a watershed that flows beyond itself into time and space.



Wally Hedrick, Vietnam/Irac, 1970, 2003. Oil on canvas, 134.5 inches diameter. Courtesy of Karma