

Wally Hedrick

Wally Hedrick is a Bay Area artist. Most of his student days were spent in the Bay Area, and all of his adult painting has been done here. Excepting a preliminary time at Pasadena City College, and brief, abortive periods at the California College of Arts and Crafts and San Francisco State College, his entire study of art was at the California School of Fine Arts. His time there as a student was between two periods of powerful faculty; he was there after the Douglas MacAgy-Clyfford Still time, and before the Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell period. It was a time when one needed, as an individual, to create one's own ambience; there was not the feeling of great affairs and the cultural destiny of mankind which had been so strong in the late forties, nor was there the strongly developed inner-art circle which would provide security and life during the later fifties. It was a slack time, a time in which the artist could be no one but himself because no one but he would care anyway.

Several basic interests and methods were developed then into his first mature style. They were the use of a semi-cubist style, of rather arcane and not very permanent media and a verbal punning approach to the development of subject matter. This latter was shared by many of Hedrick's contemporaries, the former by few. Of his semi-cubist style, one might say right off that he never really understood cubism; certainly, the lines, planes, flat and transparent areas in his work do not add up to a Picasso or Braque. Instead, they are the unique, provincial re-playing of a style long before emptied of content in the capital. However, because he is far from Paris or New York and has never sat at the feet of a cubist master or epigone, the apparently cubist forms add up not to emptiness but to a new, very strong and precise carrier of his sensibility of that time: hot, ornate, almost feverishly whimsical, the analytical lines and planes cut through the figures in a fashion which fails to analyze because it is bent upon a new creation; *Bottom Jelly*, painted in 1954, and the frontispiece to the San Francisco Art Association monograph on Hedrick published in 1956, does not become an academic analysis of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* because its full urge is toward the embodiment of his own imagination and sensibility.

Hedrick has been interested always in the methods of painting or drawing, and an important part of his sensibility lies in the media themselves. The way tempera is used, a glaze laid on or rubbed in, or a canvas stretched over unusual stretchers have all held a steady fascination for him. Not that he is a technical perfectionist; rather, like Leonardo, the paint often cracks or the stretchers warp from the very urgency and ingenuity of his methods. The cracking, the twisting, and the quite failing to dry, all form part of the basic sensibility of his works from the very beginning until now.

The puns, the verbal gymnastics, are part of his sensibility too. He would in the earlier years construct long chains of related words, by slow permutations of sound and sense moving from Botticelli to *Bottom Jelly*, from Schopenhauer to *Shopping Hour*. The direction of development was from the accepted, the respectable, the concepts of a high culture, to the unacceptable and disreputable facts of vulgar and common life. But in this transformation there was no disrespect, hatred or envy for high art; his purpose was to make life, and to know the life he lived.

In all three of these, style, method and subject, Hedrick was profoundly realistic. He made what he could in the fashion that he might of the materials that were at hand. And so, because he created out of the stuff of now, his painting, sculpture and printmaking were always immediate and often prophetic. A friend gave him a television set and so he painted a picture of it, almost ten years before Pop Art. John Coplans called him a precursor because of this, hoping thereby to provide academic and historical validity to a style which seemed to have none. But he was not a precursor, because the works were not participants in some large and objective cultural involvement: they were only Hedrick making what he would make out of the stuff of his life. His realistic acceptance of the materials at hand, his own plain life and its urges, the mind's somehow inevitable transformation of the arty and intellectual into the personal and functional and his knowledge of jazz, led him to work in a way which would be later called "funk" and to use the work himself in an everyday way, a decade or more before its now imminent popularization and emasculation in contemporary art criticism.

Hedrick ultimately abandoned the neo-cubist aspects of his style, coming to regard style simply as a function of idea and replacing the cubist lines and planes with anything from bent Byzantine to puffy Baroque to all brown striations and currently to black stuff. Because idea is the source of his art, each style or permutation thereof is executed with an almost staggering directness, and the frills of the professional stylist are torn everywhere by his almost elephantine stomp of authenticity, by his intent, in his own words, to paint out what doesn't count.

He has also abandoned the elaborately developed word plays, but not the wayward and casual cultural studies which were their source. As time passed he has taken in the culture of the mountain climber, of the Brahmin, and of the alchemist. He made pictures clumsy as mountains, converted the Kama Sutra into drawings from photographs, and remade the alchemists' star as a mandala for our time where gin, joy and sex replaced the more common planets and their associate metals. He went on into politics, painting in his straight and clumsy way such unforgettables as *Madame Nhu's Barbeque*, *Take a Vietnamese to Bed Tonight*, and *The Stripper Peace*.

Hedrick's position in the art of the Bay Area has been usually an outside one . . . but one which has never been easily ignored. He won important prizes in his mid-twenties, was an American among fifteen others at the Museum of Modern Art when hardly thirty, yet never caught on and never became established or part of a group. More than likely, this too is due to his realism. He has painted and lived always only in terms of himself and his experience, he has kept the horizon of his life only the size that he can walk. He has not sought to make some larger scene than the one in which he eats, sleeps, looks out at the world and paints knowledge and comment. It is his position of standing securely on his own square foot that is exemplary of the best art of the Bay Area, and is a guide and an emblem for independent artists everywhere.

FRED MARTIN