

FOUR BAY AREA ICONOCLASTS AND ECCENTRICS

For New Yorkers, the artists Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, Franklin Williams range from little-known and neglected to unknown altogether.

by John Yau



Jean Conner, "Gary at Ease" (1981), paper collage, 13 3/8 × 10 inches; 18 1/4 × 21 1/4 inches framed (all images courtesy of the artists, and Karma, New York)

For New Yorkers, the artists in this exhibition of four Bay Area artists, Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, Franklin Williams at Karma (November 12–December 22, 2017), range from little-known and neglected to unknown. Two of them — Wally Hedrick and Deborah Remington — were original members of the Six Gallery, which was where Allen Ginsberg first read *Howl* on October 7, 1955. The idea for the reading came from Hedrick who asked Ginsberg to organize the event. The other readers were Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

In 1965, Remington moved to New York and showed with Bykert Gallery (which also represented Chuck Close, Ralph Humphrey, Brice Marden, and Dorothea Rockburne) four times between 1967-1974, but after that her work never really got seen with any regularity in New York, and it certainly never caught on.

Hedrick met a similar fate in New York. His work was chosen by Dorothy Miller to be in 1959 exhibition, *Sixteen Americans*, at the Museum of Modern Art, along with his then wife Jay DeFeo. Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, and

Frank Stella were also in the show. Nothing came of it. The first time that Jean Conner's work was shown in New York was when her collages were included in the exhibition RAT BASTARD PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION at Susan Inglett (April 27 – June 3, 2017), which was curated by Anastasia Aukeman, and which I reviewed. Franklin Williams, who was included in Peter Selz's exhibition Funk at the Berkeley Art Museum (April 18 – May 29, 1967) is all but invisible in the history of New York exhibitions. I found one reference, but when I checked the gallery website his name was nowhere to be found.

Other than the fact that these artists lived in the Bay Area when they made the works in this exhibition, and that they more likely knew each other, and, in some cases, were friends, there is little to connect them, stylistically speaking. In each case, the selection has focused on a particular kind of work, which, in the case of all four artists, seems to tell a very small part of the story. If anything, it is like going to four shows, with each selection drawn from a different period in the artist's career. There are the large black monochromes of Hedrick made in protest against the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq, the gestural paintings that Remington made before she abandoned this manner of working for a more precise approach, the pictorial collages of Jean Conner, and the unclassifiable mixed media works and weird objects of Franklin Williams.

Although Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko taught in San Francisco in the 1950s, and much has been said about their influence on the scene, it seems to me that the other equally important side of the story is that there were a lot of idiosyncratic individuals living in the Bay Area who went their own way, completely disregarding New York and all its theories about doing the right or next thing. While there were many powerful figures in New York constructing a narrative regarding the history of art, some of these artists seem to have not gotten the news or simply dismissed it: they were not interested in joining a club unless it was the collective, Rat Bastard Protective Association, which Bruce Conner started in 1957, and counted Hedrick and Jean Conner among its members. More importantly, Franklin Williams never joined this group, meaning that in a scene full of iconoclasts and outsiders, one could still chose to not belong to anything.

Remington's six paintings date from between 1953 and '63. In 1955, after graduating from the San Francisco Art Institute, she lived in Japan, where she studied calligraphy. During this same period, she also traveled throughout Southeast Asia and India. The black gestural forms in the paintings done in the late '50s and early '60s seem to have their roots in the kimono as well as the black line she learned in her study of calligraphy; the paint is applied thickly and forcefully, which may have been inspired by painters associated with the Gutai group, which formed in Osaka in 1954. From the small groups of work by Remington that I have seen over the years, it is clear that in 1963 she took the interiority that we associate with Abstract Expressionism and shifted it into new territory that we have yet to fully understand.

Hedrick's four large, rough-surfaced black monochromes are inelegant – the opposite of what Brice Marden and Ellsworth Kelly did. Made during two wars (Vietnam and Iraq), and, in the case of “Vietnam/Irac” [sic] (1970, 2003), painted over, these paintings are grim dirges full of imploded rage. A related project is the War Room (1967/68-2002), eight eleven-foot-tall black paintings that the artist bolted together to form a room. About this series, Hedrick said: “Since there is no way for me to affect any political decision, what I'll do is I'll deny Western Culture my contribution.” A Korean War vet, his remark shares something with the ending of Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*: “I can't go on. I'll go on.”

Jean Conner's section consists of nearly two-dozen collages dated between 1957 and 2013. The main sources of these images seem to be from Middle American magazines and advertisements. Although I don't think Conner would call herself a feminist, there is a strong concern with the representation of women running through these works, which anticipate the collages of Martha Rosler by nearly a decade, but which have gotten very little attention. Less strident and didactic than anything Rosler has done, Conner's collages can be simultaneously sharp and whimsical. In “Are You a Springmaid?” (1960), which was previously shown at Susan Inglett, Conner pokes fun at society's idealization of women. In “Untitled (Man and Swooning Girl)” (1978), she makes a terrific visual pun: a man holds a swooning woman, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead as she falls backward into the cradle of the man's arm. No wonder, since his head is a series of onion slices, overlaid each other, becoming an abstracted giraffe's neck.

Even in Northern California – in a scene populated by what the art historian Susan Landauer calls “arch-eccentrics” — Franklin Williams's unclassifiable work stands out. The primary reason for this is that Williams's work — both the ones on the wall and the sculptural objects — are made of acrylic paint and yarn. In “Untitled” (1965), an object done in acrylic, graphite, crochet thread, yarn, canvas stuffed with cotton batting, and wood, a pebbled form seems to be emerging out of a box whose dimensions recall a Kleenex box. Williams's objects, which might recall something found around the house — a handbag or a tchotchke — have been transformed into something talismanic, strange, and inviting.

Williams' work anticipates what the artists Miriam Shapiro and Melissa Meyer called “Femmage,” which they defined as follows: “a word invented by us to include all of the above activities as they were practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art-sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquing, cooking and the like — activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women.” The nine works by Williams were done between 1965 and '75. The densely patterned works on the wall are often done on paper, which has been painted and stitched, before being mounted on a flat support. The symbolism is both accessible and personal. According to Landauer, Williams is evidently fascinated by the writings of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, which connects to artists as diverse and

distinct as Forrest Bess and Art Green. But Williams has articulated and inhabited a world that is all his own.

This is what these four artists share: they did not fit in and they never tried to. Electing to fit into a group, whether small or large, is about privilege and perceived commonality. It is about conceding power to the larger body. These artists refused to do that, which is why they are still out in the cold. Make no mistake — the distrust of outsiders isn't just a social or political phenomenon. It is also an aesthetic one.

Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, Franklin Williams continues at Karma (188 East 2nd Street, East Village, Manhattan) through December 22.