

A Storybook Come to Life

Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu Number Three at Gallery Paule Anglim

BY KEVIN KILLIAN

Rebecca Solnit's *Secret Exhibition* (City Lights, 1991) gave us a look at six California artists who were working in the Bay Area during the 1950s; in a fresh combination of history, narrative, anecdote and call-to-arms, she succeeded in harnessing a dizzying variety of art practice into a singular vision. As representative figures of the period, Solnit chose George Herms, Wallace Berman, Jess, Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo and Bruce Conner, and placed their

point and a disappointment, even as it underlines the fictive appeal of the rebel mythos worked up by *Secret Exhibition*. No longer are Hedrick, Conner, et al., "representative figures." They're the only ones, gods in a lonely temple of defiance; other presences have been abolished, except for the absent gods of Rome, the "Bay Area Figurative Movement" (absent but looming present by Lacanian default). The issue is not representation primarily, but canonization, and a show

might have given a sardonic chuckle at the attempted heterosexualization of Bay Area art. (Jess is the exception here, but even Jess is used as a figure of a clear, monogamous "sanity" that lends him a spurious

respectability he might himself rebut.) Where shall we go to see lesbian art of the fifties—or women's art, period, beyond DeFeo? And why's it all so white? Solnit is good with the sprawling diversity of race, gender and age that characterized the postwar Bay Area (though there's an understandable focus on youth) and her text is an open invitation to re-construct whatever combination of artists strikes a resonant chord. But *Sight/Vision*

allows no deconstruction. Its innocuous title disguises the lack of challenge at its core—perhaps it should have been called *Secret Exhibition—the Mimiseries*. An anteroom devoted to Wallace Berman is particularly egregious in this regard—Patricia Jordan's 1961 portrait dominates one wall, so that Berman, long-lashed, in a pin-striped collar, stares into the whiteness that surrounds us, and he's utterly handsome and poetic. It's an architectonic marvel, a fantastic statement that says, more or less, *I am Hollywood's holy Beat—I'm dead—I'm hot*.

But with that said, the exhibition is an opportunity to view work by three supremely original artists, as well as three others of somewhat lesser talent. In most cases, old and new work alternate along the walls, so that continuity of vision is foregrounded, and our judgments solidified. Standouts include three of Wally Hedrick's fifties-era paintings—a revelatory grouping. Under the open skylight, *Heroic Image* (1959) glows; on a squat hexagonal canvas, Maltese and other crosses write inside iron filigree, one tiny, beautifully painted sprig of holly at the picture's center. Hedrick's heavy lacquer links the whole, so that the painting seems almost to be under glossy water. *5/7/52* (1952) is smaller and just as striking, in burnt sienna, umber, red and dirt brown, under a lake of fixative; *Tenznig Zindabad* (1956) has brush strokes as thick and febrile as winter wheat. Hedrick's an overpowering painter. Only the last picture, a mandala of poppies, pomegranates and green and blue leaves, disappoints. Like the show it stars in, it's an opportunity missed. ❖



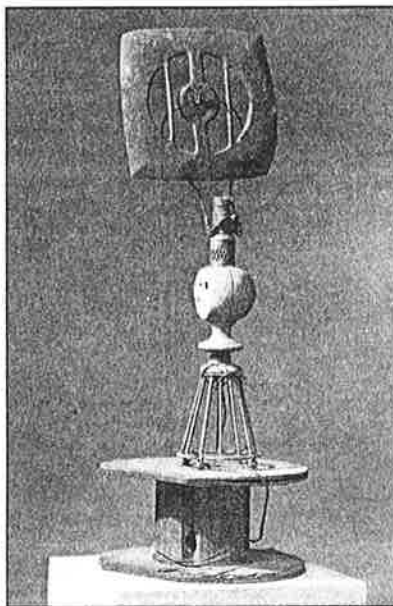
Jay DeFeo, *Untitled (Scuro)*, 1985, mixed media on paper, 60" x 45", at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

days and works inside a careful mosaic of innumerable movements and lives. She's a vivid writer and a forceful one, and her version of the Cold War era and of the strange, romantic apocalypses of its art production is now itself an object of scrutiny.

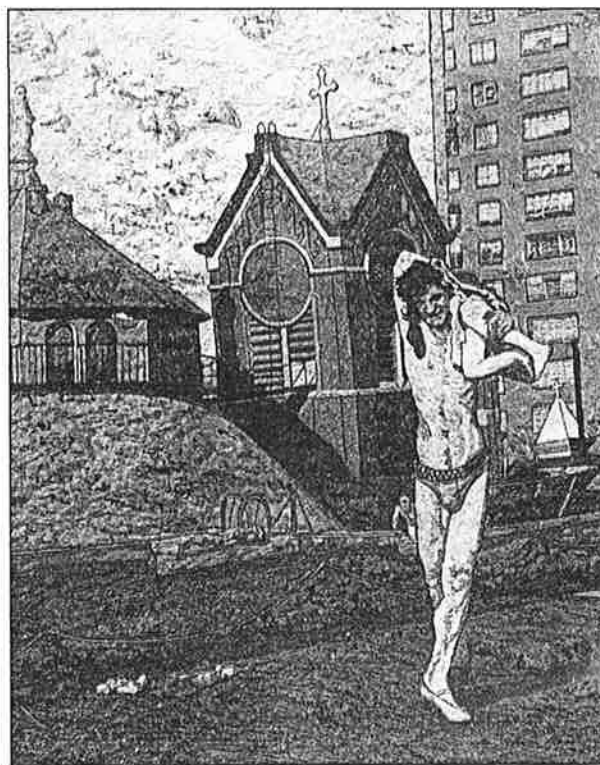
Unfortunately, the exhibition at Gallery Paule Anglim has frozen Solnit's vision into a schematic. Walking into this large show (sixty-five pieces by these six artists), you feel that it's like a storybook come to life. That's both the selling

such as this, lovely as it is, impoverishes the range and ambition of the whole counter-tradition. Isn't it far too early to restrict the cultural debates surrounding the work of these artists by the establishment of a gang of six?

The artist, as John Granger wrote, "composes a world from the fragments of division. According to Jack Spicer, you see division and then you see God." Spicer, as the friend, confidante, teacher and enemy to many San Francisco artists in the postwar era,



George Herms, *Solar Powered Herm's Light*, 1982, assemblage, 38" x 16" x 16", at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.



Jess, *Figure 6-A Lamb for Pylacchos*, 1964, oil on canvas, 24-3/8" x 20", at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Sight/Vision: The Urban Milieu Number Three through July 9 at Gallery Paule Anglim, 14 Geary St., San Francisco.

Kevin Killian, a poet and novelist, is co-authoring a biography of Beat-era poet Jack Spicer.