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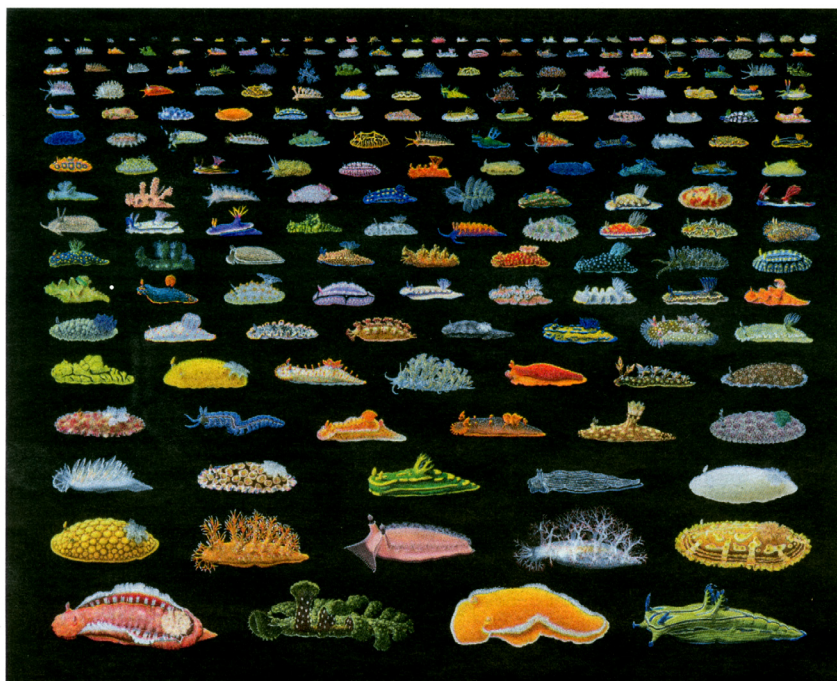
Paradise Lost

The Aquarian spirit of pre-disruption NorCal lives on at Matthew Marks Gallery

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

What certain New Yorkers “know” of Northern California’s history they’ve likely learned from Joan Didion’s 1967 essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” her deft but damning portrait of San Francisco as a city in moral free fall. In her eyes, the countercultural revolution had stalled out, the quest for liberation having given way largely to addictions: whether to crystal meth or macrobiotics, swamis and mantras, or, most toxically, to the sleazy rhetoric of self-dubbed radicals. (“It is possible,” Didion noted, “for people to be the unconscious instruments of values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level.”) Her eye wasn’t on the real revolutionaries, of course, and in hindsight, she was mapping the roots of the city’s inevitable gentrification, and of Silicon Valley’s deluded ethos of *disruption*—one that invokes innovation and progress in order to veil fanatical consumption. As it turns out, Didion’s wasn’t a story of failed consciousness; it was about the frauds committed by a curdling American conscience.

The exhibition “So I traveled a great deal. I met George, Ebbe, Joy, Philip, Jack, Robert, Dora, Harold, Jerome, Ed, Mike, Tom, Bill, Harvey, Sheila, Irene, John, Michael, Mertis, Gai-fu, Jay, Jim, Anne, Kirby, Allen, Peter, Charles, Drummond, Cassandra, Pamela, Marilyn, Lewis, Ted, Clayton, Cid, Barbara, Ron, Richard, Tony, Paul, Anne, Russell, Larry, Link,



Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Anthea, Martin, Jane, Don, Fatso, Clark, Anja, Les, Sue, and Brian.” features six artists from Northern California who are of a generation closer to Didion’s than Zuckerberg’s—and can be said to have created art propelled by an unimpeachable consciousness, one that has largely disappeared from the wider culture. MacArthur-winning sculptor Vincent Fecteau and curator Jordan Stein have organized an invigorating, moving exhibition of artworks rarely (if ever) seen before, all produced from what they name an “ecstatic anxiety,” a transcendence achieved via grappling with how earthbound our experience is. The exhibition is a subtle portrait of a place insofar as it captures a cultural position, as well as the seismic vibrations that moved some of the hands and minds of those who created there.

One year after Didion’s essay, poet Joanne Kyger made *Descartes*, an eleven-minute video “song of herself” playfully constructed in the spirit of the French philosopher’s *Discourse on the Method* (1637), in which he famously declared, “I think, therefore I am.” (The long title of the show is taken from Kyger’s poem “Descartes and the Splendor Of: A Real Drama

Joanne Kyger made *Descartes*, an eleven-minute video “song of herself” playfully constructed in the spirit of the French philosopher’s *Discourse on the Method* (1637), in which he famously declared, “I think, therefore I am.” (The long title of the show is taken from Kyger’s poem “Descartes and the Splendor Of: A Real Drama of Everyday Life,” which she recites in the video’s voiceover.) Born in Vallejo in 1934, Kyger was a practitioner of Zen Buddhism and one of the few women associated with the Beats; she passed away in March of this year. In *Descartes*, Kyger considers how she is and will be, forging a self of her own design: “I CONTEMPLATE THE REFORMATION OF MY OWN OPINIONS AND WILL BASE THEM ON A FOUNDATION WHOLLY MY OWN.” Her image is dispatched as a slippery, kaleidoscopic thing, her figure at times abstracted or multiplied by way of rudimentary special effects. But her psychedelia is punctured by moments of

‘So I traveled a great deal...’

Organized by Vincent Fecteau and Jordan Stein
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practical, comic relief: Kyger sitting on a couch, darned what looks like a pair of men's boxers until the video cuts to her leisurely enjoying a cigarette, the underwear still unattended. Clearly, she has better things to do.

If the self is created by wish and will, so too is the other. Two sumptuous and unexpectedly hypnotic photorealist paintings by Jack Mendenhall depict luxe interiors that look plucked straight from chichi design magazines. No people appear, only their visions of domestic life as it should be lived: undisturbed by imperfection. *Yellow Tulips* (1973) captures the flowers in a vase that seems almost to float above the black glass of a dining room table; in *Mirrored Table With Decanters* (1981), a posh living room is reflected in a mirrored table and wall, Picasso painting and all. Into these looking glasses — into the lives of others — we fall via the choreographed gleam of surfaces: glass, Plexiglas, mirror, rug nap, table linens, petals.

Equally sumptuous and dynamic, if less rarefied, are Robert Strini's intricate, hand-crafted large wood sculptures *Sheridan Piece* (1974) and *Goolagong* (1975),

both abstractions that show off the supple muscularity of his medium. Their gorgeous forms appear exoskeletal, as though weirdo musical instruments or cuckoo flying machines have been gracefully flayed and re-composed on the floor so that we can get closer to their upended insides.

The world isn't only to be bent and shaped to our liking; it must also be preserved, celebrated, lest it vanish. The marvelous painter Isabella Kirkland renders creatures from the natural world that are in danger of extinction with such jaw-dropping fineness that you might mistake these earthly flora and fauna for alien jewels. Poet/publisher Tisa Walden too has an eye for disappearance. On view are pages framed from her 2011 book *San Francisco in the 21st Century*, a collection of photographs she took on walks around the city beginning in 2003. The images are small — captured with a 1.3 megapixel camera — documenting intimate non-events around town: shadows falling across a sidewalk; a colander filled with tomatoes and basil; an elderly busker playing an erhu. The images' resolution means they're not easy to see — a poi-

gnant detail when one considers why and how quickly the city has changed.

Perhaps the best-known artist in the show is artist/filmmaker Jordan Belson (1926–2011), though instead of projecting his iconic moving-image works, like *Mandala* (1953) or *Allures* (1961), Fecteau and Stein have included works on paper, most notably selected pages from Belson's *Peacock Book*. From 1952 to 1953 he filled a sketch pad with whirling drawings, in ink and pastels, that he made while accessing a particular state of consciousness. Are these solar systems, blossoms, fireworks? They are, in essence and presence at the very least, cosmic energies channeled through the artist's hand. If that seems too out there for some, I invoke Belson's own words to encourage a deeper communion with the art on view: "It can be quite mind blowing if you have a mind to blow. Not everyone meets that criteria."