

KEVIN KILLIAN / George Stanley Picture, a History

I'm trying to remember when Ernie Edwards left San Francisco. He was the great collector among the circle I got to know and love when writing, with Lew Ellingham, the biography later published in 1998 as *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Ernie kept everything, in his big flat at Bush and Laguna in the Western Addition: when efforts were made to uncover Helen Adam's experimental "catgaze" feature film *Daydream of Darkness* (produced with the artist William McNeill), Ernie revealed a lustrous print that had been sitting in his closet for thirty years. Where did he keep all the things he had? He must have had a storage unit for his place never looked cluttered. And how did he acquire all of this art in the first place? He was the San Francisco equivalent of those New York civil servants, Herb and Dorothy Vogel, who befriended the conceptual, minimalist artists like Sol LeWitt and Richard Tuttle, and bought 1,200 works over the years, works they could fit into a one-bedroom apartment on city salaries. The artists on Ernie's walls were nowhere near as celebrated as those in the Vogel collection, but Dodie and I would go slackjawed every time we were invited to Ernie's place, for we loved the art of the period both for its connections to the poetry, and for its negotiations with and defiance of AbEx hegemony of the '50s and '60s.

He hung Tom Field and Paul Alexander with the conviction and the lighting with which others across town might show off their Rauschenbergs and their Jackson Pollocks. Some, like Field and Alexander, had trained at Black Mountain College before coming to the Bay Area, but others had not; they were the artists who showed at the poets' galleries of the early 1960s—the Peacock Gallery, Buzz, Borregaard's Museum. Anyhow one day Ernie said he was leaving San Francisco and buying a condo in—Utah or somewhere, a smaller place in which he wouldn't be able to keep his collection intact. He liked us, he said, and before he left he wanted us to come by to take away a few souvenirs with us, pictures to remember him by. There were literally piles of paintings on the floor, some in boxes, some not, and we knelt on the floor and sifted through one after another. Well, apparently Ernie wasn't leaving behind any of his Jess pictures!—but there were still plenty of lovely things, and we felt like we were in an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* come to life! Some of the pictures were unattributed, and Ernie would scratch his head and admit he didn't know who had done them nor even how he had acquired them.

We nabbed a study for the giant portrait Bill McNeill had done of Robert Creeley, now in the collection of the Bolinas Public Library (north of San Francisco). We took another McNeill watercolor from the days when he used to live in my building, south of Market in San Francisco, a view from the windows of the apartment next door, Potrero Hill cool and refulgent in the background, the gold towers of St. Joseph's Church gleaming on the left. Another picture stood up against the wall, its back turned to us, lonely somehow. "What's that?" "Oh," Ernie laughed. "That one has to go to the picture hospital, it's in real bad shape." Apparently the picture in question had fallen from the wall, its glass shattered. He showed us its face. "It's by a man you know," he said. "A man who, to my knowledge, hasn't done much in this line since." We stared at the picture and tried to attribute it to an acquaintance, but I, at any rate, was drawing blanks. As it turned out, the artist was George Stanley. "I'll take it!" I exclaimed. Dodie, Ernie and I wrapped up the patient in white shelving paper and brought him to the trunk of the car.

A few days later we wondered how we had not immediately known it was George's work for it seems, in its own way, to partake of the qualities I love in Stanley's poetry. Collage was in the air, the ripping and shredding and slicing of known entities to create worlds without recognizable borders—Stanley was very much doing the work that Jess was doing at the time, and Fran Herndon. Our picture isn't perhaps as finely worked as the best of Herndon and Jess, yet it manages to create its own realignment of textures, tones, and colors, working one corner at a time. Like a child I press my nose into the glass, delighted to recognize as a common object what from yards away appears only as a gesture. "Good Collage/Assemblage," writes the young L.A. based artist Paul Gellman, "involves inserting one language into another... juxtaposing and playing with contrasting imagery from the culture at large. From Dada through the punk era, one finds elements of transgression and mystery created through putting disparate images together."¹ Most obviously for Stanley, collage involves rehabilitating trash and kitsch, making high art out of gooping them together in swatches. Like Herndon's collages of the period, Stanley's

¹ Paul Gellman's unpublished essay is quoted at length in Chris Kraus' essay "You Are Invited to Be the Last Tiny Creature," in her recent book *Where Art Belongs* (Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2011).

work is composed of torn and slit found materials (book pages, scraps of paper, theater tickets, shirt cardboard and patterned cloth) across which is applied a colorful treatment of paint, gouache, and chalk: lots and lots of brightly colored chalk. It looks ready to burst, as if only the glass is keeping it all restrained on one plane. Depth is built up by layering, a layering so complex that like an Escher print you can rarely tell for sure what any particular element is on top of or under. We have had people come over impressed by the artist's fine handling of vegetables. I don't actually see any vegetables per se, but for sure the picture glows and winks with bright vegetable colors—the purple of what we call red cabbage, the drippy yellow and green of zucchini.

And there are texts buried in it, more internal evidence in regards to the dating of the picture, for, after all, the “turn to language” was working not only in New York but everywhere in the world after a certain date (Liz Kotz implies 1952 in her wonderful book about minimal and conceptual art practices and their various hookups with the written and sonic word, *Words to be Looked At*). Some of the various printed matter in Stanley's picture has been varnished to the point of no recovery—a point of reading without recognition. You know there are words but you can't make them out. The text with the most cogent message lists various varieties of horrid American salad dressings of the 1950s, each one “creamier” than the last. (Really a Cold War document?) The largest paper remnant shows the steeple of a San Francisco church, over which is printed, in religious Gothic font, the Cold War message “Go to the Church of your Choice.”—At least I'm guessing that's what it is, the injunction is ripped right in half.

The more I look at it, the more I see. It's not only flat paper here, but corrugated and patterned papers, paper tape you'd unroll to pack up a parcel with, torn color postcards of colorful city life, rugged paper towel saturated in pale blue ink, tiny, tiny fragments, some smaller than an aspirin. Lots of neutrals. Indeed the whole thing just screams of San Francisco. When I first moved here, neighbors told me in all seriousness that the city government required property owners to paint their houses from a stringently limited palette—you know what I'm talking about: fishy, watery colors; yellows that don't have the strength to announce themselves as yellow at all; blues lightened with calcium, like jeans worn right through to the original cotton; tans and mochas and the pale pink of sunrise. It was as if only an inventive and rebellious mind could paint a picture out of such nebulous pleasures.

Dodie and I brought the damaged work to a sympathetic framer who carefully pieced together the broken wooden frame, who found a near match for the peculiarly limpid gray of the mat, and we held on to our treasure for some years, and finally George Stanley came to town, a triumphant event to promote his grand collection *A Tall, Serious Girl: Selected Poems 1957–2000* (2003). To the reading, at a Berkeley bookstore, we secreted our picture under cover of a Hefty bag, and pulled it out at an appropriate moment. Stanley hadn't seen the thing in decades. For a moment I thought he was going to deny authorship of the piece—his face was a perfect blank, the look all his friends recognize, that means he's thinking something especially devastating and true—but then he flipped the picture around and signed the work for the world to see, in a blue “signing pen,” his careful hand climbing towards the right like a gladiolus on a trellis.



George Stanley, *Untitled*, 1960s
Acrylic and chalk on paper and printed matter, 21" x 13.5"



George Stanley, Stinson Beach, California, 1965
Stanley Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University



Fran Herndon and George Stanley, San Francisco, 1960s
Stanley Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University



George Stanley, Joanne Kyger, and Bill McNeill, San Francisco, 1964
Stanley Archive, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University