

KEITH WALLACE / Fran Herndon and Her Circle

In the context of the art that came to be canonized as art history in the US during the 1950s and 60s, the work of Fran Herndon presents a challenge. In New York, the aggressiveness of Abstract Expressionism was nudging towards a more introspective Colour Field painting, and in San Francisco, in particular in the Bay Area Figurative Movement, abstraction morphed into a figurative expressionism found in the work of painters such as Elmer Bischoff, Joan Brown, Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliveira, and David Park, artists who, at that time, became the iconic representatives of the northern California art establishment. While Herndon's paintings also explore figuration and expressionism, they appear less preoccupied with the genres of the nude and still life, solving formal problems, or fixating on the nuance of mark making. Instead, she delves into an exploration of the psyche where doubt, mutability, and intuitive abandon create an iconography with haunting, ambiguous, narrative subtexts that span from the ecstatic to the somber. Herndon's idiosyncratic imagery and paint handling suggest she could be an artist working in isolation rather than participating at the centre of the dominant art discourse, which, in any case, wasn't taking place in San Francisco.

Indeed, she does function outside of the dominant discourse, but she has not worked in isolation. In 1957, Herndon moved with her husband, writer Jack Herndon, to San Francisco and quickly became involved with a close-knit milieu of painters, poets, and actors who shared particular sensibilities philosophically, intellectually, and aesthetically. The members of the circle with whom she was most closely affiliated included the poets who represented the San Francisco Renaissance, the core members being Jack Spicer (with whom Herndon was especially close), Robert Duncan, and Robin Blaser, along with Stan Persky, George Stanley, Madeline Gleason, Helen Adam, and others, and its wider artistic coterie, among them the painters Jess, Tom Field, Paul Alexander, Lyn Brockway, and Harry Jacobus, with whom her painting style was associated—one of textured impasto and rough swathes of colour. Just as the Renaissance poets were aware of, but maintained a distance from, San Francisco's Beat poets, these painters did not consider themselves part of

the Bay Area Figurative Movement, even though some were their teachers at art school.

While aspiring to position themselves as the avant-garde was not on the agenda for these artists and poets, lurking within their practices existed a pursuit of art for art's sake. But instead of exploring what might constitute the essence of art from a formal or intellectual perspective, as was the case in New York, many of them turned to what was considered out-of-date or archaic as a source of inspiration. They embraced the abundance that exists in all periods of history and reconstituted it in an eclectic library of images and words that sought out the magical, mythical, subliminal, sentimental, and sexual—all catalysts for a poetic experience, but out-of-sync with the modernist agenda of the era—which, ironically, made them quite radical for their time, especially during the conservative decade of the 1950s. In their world, it was the potential of the poetic imagination through allegory, metaphor, and symbolism that predominated, as well as to live lives that were neither the norm nor the expected, anticipating the vast social transformations that would fuel the 1960s.

Herndon's milieu constituted a salon in the classic sense of the word; social interaction would not take place primarily in bars or cafes as is associated with the Beat generation, but was better suited to the intimate and less regulated domestic space of the home where unfettered social and intellectual exchange was exercised. In this respect, these artists and poets were less interested in, even mistrustful of, strategizing a career in art than in expressing their love for art regardless of their successes—or not (the poets exerted tremendous influence outside of this specific community, but most of the visual artists remained relatively marginalized)—and in producing work for their own edification. And galleries for them were also social spaces rather than harbourers of commerce and careers; Harry Jacobus, Jess, and Robert Duncan opened the King Ubu Gallery in 1952 where there was an underlying anticipation, but not ambition, of selling work and it met with little success as a business, closing within a year. Over the next decade there followed other such short-lived artist-run spaces such as the Peacock Gallery and Buzz, both of which exhibited Herndon's work.

These artists moved among various disciplines, and the cross-over between poetry and visual art, especially, was almost seamless. For example, Jess made paintings and collages that often incorporated text; Robert Duncan was celebrated for his poetry but he also drew and designed sets for the theatre; Fran Herndon collaborated with Jack Spicer in illustrating his books such as *Golem* and *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, and they created a kind of subliminal correspondence between her lithographs and his poem *Homage to Creeley*. She also made collages, in one case cutting up pages of *Sports Illustrated* as a resource for images that depicted unexpected versions of well-known sports scandals.

The work collected in this issue of *TCR* illustrates Herndon's painting, collage, and lithography from the early 1960s, and represents one of the most productive periods of her career. While the legacy of the San Francisco Renaissance poets within the Vancouver scene has been well-documented, the painters have had less influence on artists here. None of them relocated to Vancouver as Blaser, Stanley, and Persky did, and Fran Herndon's work has been seen here only sporadically, although a renewed interest in her work was manifested in a solo exhibition at Blanket Gallery in May 2012. It is the tentacular spirit of this particular strain of the poetic that Herndon was deeply involved with and that reached across the US and up the West Coast to Vancouver.