

BASED ON A TRUE STORY: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DI ROSA COLLECTION

Begun by Rene di Rosa in the early 1960s, the di Rosa collection serves as a rich and vital record of Northern California art since the late 1950s. It captures the distinctive spirit of the area and includes significant works by many of the region's most noteworthy artists.

Based on a True Story illuminates this ethos through a number of key encounters: between art and art history, curator and exhibition, collector and artist, teachers and students, lovers and friends. Highlights from specific areas of di Rosa's holdings that have not been collectively viewed before are presented here through the lenses of these various relationships, simultaneously illustrating important movements in Northern California art history such as Bay Area assemblage, Figurative, Funk, ceramic sculpture, and Conceptual art, many of which form the core of the collection. The show reveals a constellation of special affinities and close connections through juxtapositions of artworks and never-before-presented letters and ephemera from the archive, providing an intimate and powerful take on the artistic legacy of the region. In assessing this distinctive array of artists, objects, and stories, it could be argued that relationships and community, more than any formal criteria, characterize the art of the Bay Area as well as di Rosa's collection.

The 1950s were formative years for the avant-garde in San Francisco, and that decade serves as a critical touchstone for the exhibition. The apartment building at 2322 Fillmore Street (dubbed "Painterland" by Michael McClure), where couple Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick lived after meeting at California College of Arts

and Crafts, became a nexus for artists who distinguished themselves by an experimental attitude and a disinclination to participate in the mainstream art world, then primarily driven by Abstract Expressionism. Bruce Conner and his wife Jean moved to the city in 1957 from Kansas and became fast friends with DeFeo and Hedrick as well as Joan Brown, Manuel Neri, George Herms, Wallace Berman, and others. Conner quickly established himself as a ringleader for the group by forming the Rat Bastard Protective Association, a kind of underground society of kindred artistic spirits. This creative and social alliance, whose name was coined from a slang term picked up at the gym coupled with a riff on the city's trash collectors (the Scavengers Protective Association), supported an art scene that lacked traditional infrastructure such as viable commercial galleries and private collectors. This freedom from the expectations of an outside audience or market was liberating for all involved.

A number of seminal artist-run alternative gallery spaces, which often presented one-night-only shows-as-parties, nurtured these makers' idealistic and anticommercial values. Among them was the famous Six Gallery, founded in 1954 by Deborah Remington, Wally Hedrick, David Simpson, Hayward King, Jack Spicer, and John Allen Ryan, which played host to the historic first reading-performance of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1955. (*Howl and Other Poems* was subsequently published by City Lights Bookstore cofounder Lawrence Ferlinghetti.) Six Gallery took root in a converted garage space formerly home to King Ubu, a



Joan Brown, *The Long Journey*, 1981



Bruce Nauman, *Studies for Holograms* (detail), 1970

short-lived but influential gallery founded by Jess, Robert Duncan, and Harry Jacobus with the mission to present under-recognized local artists (Roy De Forest and Deborah Remington first showed there). It helped pave the way for a number of other galleries that opened in San Francisco in the years following, such as East-West, Dilexi, Hansen, Spatsa, and Batman, all of which supported the work of emerging artists. Batman opened in 1960 with an inaugural show of Conner's recent assemblage and black wax works³, followed by *Gangbang*, a group show that captured the roster of artists working in the area at the time.³

Conner's assemblage works, fittingly referred to as Ratbastards, developed one day when he tore apart a painting (then his primary medium) that he had become frustrated with and stuffed it with nylon stockings and wire. This newfound approach, involving cast-off objects and materials, was an apt rallying point for a group of marginalized misfits who prided themselves on rebelling against convention. The dialogue and exposure to peers' works at this unique moment led to assemblage becoming a shared form that was highly influential for a number of other contemporary movements and a younger generation of artists.

As this moment continued to ripen, the trio of William T. Wiley, Robert Hudson, and William Allan, who had grown up together in Washington state, were attending the San Francisco Art Institute. Also outgrowing the confines of painting, they wed two and three dimensions by literally tethering rope, wood,

feathers, and other found objects to their colorful canvases.⁴ Hudson soon translated these investigations into welded polychrome steel, while Wiley's diverse output grew to include sculpture, filmmaking, and performance that likewise embraced low-tech materials and a steadfast engagement with daily life.

In the early 1960s, the recently founded art department at the University of California, Davis, hired Wiley and Robert Arneson, later joined by Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, and Wayne Thiebaud, to develop what would become a renowned program. Bruce Nauman, Robert Kinmont, and Richard Shaw are just a few of its students who went on to play key roles in the development of Conceptual art and the revolution in ceramics. In the spirit of Painterland, the experimental atmosphere at Davis was genuinely familial thanks to the generous approach of Arneson and Wiley, who encouraged teachers and students alike to gather at the studio, bar, and dinner table. The school became a hotbed of activity across all media and pursued in earnest the Funk aesthetic conceived in San Francisco's Upper Fillmore neighborhood through the improvisational use of abject materials and unconventional techniques. This transgressive attitude came to define the countercultural movement associated with the region and was eventually canonized in Peter Selz's controversial 1967 *Funk Show* at UC Berkeley's University Art Museum, which featured the likes of Wiley, Conner, Hedrick, Brown, De Forest, Arneson, Neri, Hudson, Peter Saul, and Peter Voulkos.



Peter Saul, *Master Room (Hide a Bed)*, 1961

Arneson, often called the father of Funk ceramics, was introduced to Voulkos's work at the end of the 1950s and the moment forever expanded his view of clay as a medium. Voulkos's spontaneous pokes, cuts, rips, and tears abandoned the conventional form-follows-function ethos of craft in favor of riffing on everyday objects to make a subversive statement. It was this approach that, for Arneson, distinguished potter from artist. This ideological shift became the foundation of Arneson's ceramics department at Davis (known as TB-9), the first of its kind in the country. Several notable ceramicists, including Richard Shaw and Diane Flyr (Arneson's students), Jim Melchert and Ron Nagle (who both studied under Voulkos at UC Berkeley), and Viola Frey (who taught at CCA [then CCAC] and is, with Melchert, amply represented throughout di Rosa's grounds), proceeded to elevate the medium to a fine art form.

As with the assemblage artists, an interest in everyday objects and a healthy dose of humor prevailed among this group, and became a shared visual language intended to make their work accessible to viewers. Saul's early paintings of household objects and Shaw's trompe l'oeil ceramic sculptures point to the enormous influence of H. C. Westermann, whose folk-inspired wood sculptures, stick figures, and cartoonlike works on paper signaled a return to craft, real-world objects, and a link between art and life. Saul has often recalled a Westermann show presented at Dilexi Gallery in 1962 as a paramount influence on Bay Area Funk art as a whole. Westermann has also been noted as a



Richard Shaw, *Warren Walker, William*, 1981

"guiding spirit" for Wiley in particular.

By the mid- to late 1960s assemblage had fallen out of favor (perhaps peaking with William Seitz's 1961 *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York) with the advent of new technologies, Conceptualism, and a distinct interest in the dematerialization of the art object. On the whole, artists were beginning to take stock, clean the slate, and redirect their practices. Fletcher Benton, another North Beach artist who had grown frustrated with the limitations of painting, ushered in the notion of new technologies with his slick kinetic sculptural light experiments. Conner expanded his experimental embrace of film and photography, as did other artists working under the rubric of Conceptual art, such as Paul Kos, Dennis Oppenheim, David Ireland, and Howard Fried, all four of whom studied at the San Francisco Art Institute and were engaged with Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA) in downtown San Francisco. Robert Kinmont and Bruce Nauman both studied under Wiley, Arneson, and De Forest at UC Davis, while Lynn Hershman Leeson received her MFA from San Francisco State University. An emphasis on process, idea, and humble materials united these artists, each of whom found a distinct method of melding art and life. They shared a mutual respect for creative action in and of itself, over and above tangible objects created for gallery display. Kinmont, Kos, and Oppenheim were also moving their explorations into the raw California landscape, the latter two having met and spent time creating new works on the di Rosa property.



David Ireland, *Nimbus*, 2000

Rene di Rosa's own trajectory in Northern California mirrors that of the featured artists in numerous respects. Having landed in San Francisco in 1950 after attempting to write the great American novel in Paris, di Rosa was drawn to the bohemian spirit brewing in North Beach and became fast friends with its artists, writers, and musicians. He eventually shifted to the North Bay in 1960, settling in Napa's Carneros region, and began to study viticulture at UC Davis. This stint connected him to the rich hub of artists who were teaching and studying there and deepened not only his appreciation for the art of our time and place but also his relationships with the artists themselves, many of whom became lifelong friends. In this vast landscape, di Rosa freely shared space in the spirit of experimentation and conviviality. He derived great pleasure from inviting artists to create new works on the site and gathering them around the large dining table in his home, coming full circle with the intrinsic values of community and unbridled creativity that defined his first forays in the region, and which left an indelible mark. He was, like the artists he so admired, a character who defied convention and thumbed his nose at authority. This clearly endeared him to the artists he worked with and collected. The correspondence and mementos displayed in this exhibition manifest di Rosa's deep entanglement in the fabric of Bay Area art history. His sustained commitment to art and place continues to inspire and guide the mission of the organization today.

— Amy Owen, Curator



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction*, 1990

Please see the wall labels for more information on the works included in the exhibition.

Selected Bibliography:

Albright, Thomas. *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Aukeman, Anastasia. *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Lewallen, Connie. *State of Mind: New California Art circa 1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Nadel, Dan. *What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960s to the Present*. Providence: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art/D.A.P., 2014.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990.

Notes

1. Founders William and Joan Jahrmarkt asked Conner to design the space. Conner painted the walls matte black for his inaugural show.
2. di Rosa's own *CRUCIFIXION* (1960), currently on loan to Conner's touring retrospective *IT'S ALL TRUE*, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was likely included in the exhibition.
3. This exhibition included the work of Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, George Herms, Robert Hudson, Ray Johnson, Michael McClure, Manuel Neri, Carlos Villa, and William T. Wiley, amongst others.
4. While Allan also expanded his work beyond the canvas at this time, his explorations represented in the di Rosa collection manifest primarily in a number of film collaborations with Bruce Nauman.

Works in the Exhibition

Robert Arneson

Brick Portrait, 1979
Ceramic
69 x 16 x 16 in.

Fletcher Benton

Synchronetic C557-S, 1969
Plexiglas, formica, light, motor
20 x 23¾ x 5 in.

Wallace Berman

Posthumous Fragment #16, 1976
Single negative photographic image
6 x 6½ in.

Nayland Blake

Untitled, 1992
Steel, sponge, soap
65 x 10 x 8 in.

Joan Brown

The Long Journey, 1981
Enamel on canvas
78 x 96 in.

Bruce Conner

FIGURE OF DEATH, 1958
Oil on canvas
51½ x 47¼ in.

AS IT IS TO-DAY, 1973

Marbleized paper, cloth,
decorative metals, postcard,
photograph, thread
14½ x 10¾ in.

RICKY WILLIAMS: SLEEPERS,

January 20, 1978
Unique black-and-white
photograph
36 x 41¾ in.

Jay DeFeo

Isis, 1972–73
Acrylic and mixed media on
Masonite
48 x 24 in.

Roy De Forest

40 Miles West of Rabbit Corner,
1981
Polymer on canvas
75½ x 170 in.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Sluggo, 2000
Oil, baseball cap, aluminum bat,
two baseballs on canvas
69 x 28¼ in.

Diane Flyr and Lynn Hershman Leeson

See Hear, 1976
Glazed ceramic
4¼ x 5 in.

Howard Fried

*Sea Sell Sea Sick at Saw/Sea Sea
Soar*, 1971
Videocassette transferred to
video, black and white, sound
49:40 min.

Wally Hedrick

*\$18.00 Giant Power Heidelberg
Electric Belt*, 1973
Ink on canvas
69⅞ x 54 in.

George Herms

Untitled R, 1990
Assorted shoes, plywood, wire
32 x 27 x 4 in.
Gift of Bruce Conner

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Seduction, 1990
Gelatin silver photograph
30 x 40 in.

Robert Hudson

Untitled, 1975, 1975
Acrylic, pastel, charcoal, found
objects on paper
32 x 26 x 2 in.

David Ireland

Nimbus, 2000
Steel, concrete, gold leaf, wood
panel
47 x 26 x 24 in.

Jess

And It's Jung By a Gnose!, 1955
Mixed media collage
13 x 21 in.

Robert Kinmont

Lesson #7, 1974
Leaves, twigs, sticks, photograph,
wood, paint
3¼ x 7¾ x 7¾ in.

Paul Kos

*Lot's Wife (Documentation - 3
Part)*, 1969
Photomontage with typed text
20 x 8 in.

Tom Marioni

Friday, 1989
Shadow box with mixed media
36 x 48 x 4¼ in.

Ron Nagle

California Dreamin', 1975
Slipcast low-fire clay with
overglaze
5¼ x 3¼ x 2¾ in.

Anderson Ranch Series - Turquoise, 1988

Porcelain, multi-fired overglaze
earthenware
2½ x 3½ x 1⅞ in.

Bruce Nauman

Studies for Holograms (a-e), 1970
Five color screenprints on paper
Each 26 x 26 in.
Gift of Phyllis Wattis

Manuel Neri

*Fragment No. 2 from Seated
Male Figure*, 1972
Fiberglass resin, wooden stool
57 x 24 x 25 in.

Noel Neri

Untitled, 1989
Ceramic tiles, mixed media
23½ x 32¾ x 16¼ in.

Dennis Oppenheim

Site Marker #10, 1968
Milled and anodized aluminum,
Plexiglas, paper, map, photograph
9¾ x 1 x 2 in.

Deborah Remington

Untitled, 1951
Oil on canvas
28 x 30 in.

Peter Saul

Master Room (Hide a Bed), 1961
Oil on canvas
60 x 77 in.

Peter Saul

Frisco, 1969
Oil on canvas
48 x 76 in.

Richard Shaw

Warren Walter, William, 1981
Porcelain with decal overglaze
59 x 25½ x 10 in.

Peter Voukos

Plate, 1973
Stoneware with porcelain
21½ x 21½ x 4½ in.

H.C. Westermann

The Big Red Bridge, 1965
Ink and watercolor on paper
15 x 22 in.

William T. Wiley

Zoo Who, 1977
Mixed media on canvas
36 x 41½ in.

All works are courtesy of the
di Rosa Collection, Napa.

About di Rosa

di Rosa is a catalyst for transformative experiences with contemporary art of Northern California. A nonprofit contemporary art center, di Rosa presents dynamic exhibitions and educational programs for all ages and houses the foremost collection of contemporary Bay Area art in the world. A wide range of styles, media, and subject matter provide an overview of the creative energy and freedom to experiment that characterize this region of California. di Rosa features three galleries, a sculpture park, a 35-acre lake, and a wildlife preserve, all located on 217 scenic acres in Napa Valley's famed Carneros region. For more information, visit dirosaart.org.

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Public Program

Wednesday, January 18, 7-8:30 PM

Talk and book signing with Anastasia Aukeman, author of *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association*. \$10 general / \$5 members
For details, visit dirosaart.org. Addition events to be announced.

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