



BROOKLYN DISPATCHES: I Wish They All Could Be California...

by James Kalm

With the harmonies of Jan and Dean and the Beach Boys pouring out of every car radio, as a kid growing up in the West during the '60s, I didn't have to be reminded that California was where it was happening. I ran away from home the day summer vacation started after my junior year of high school, and hitched to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district to spend a month getting a firsthand introduction to West Coast hipness. To us back then, the Continental Divide wasn't just a ridge that dictated whether a river would run east or west but was also an aesthetic division. A rock 'n' roll analogy would be West Coast bands like Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Doors versus New York's doo-wop-derived Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons or folk-based performers like Bob Dylan or Simon and Garfunkel.

However, when it came time to fly the coop and pick a coast to pursue an artistic "career," even though Bay Area Funk Art and Finish Fetish seemed more approachable, sexy, and fun than the buttoned-down formalism of Minimalism and Conceptual Art that we were reading about in *Artforum* and *Art in America*, New York seemed the only logical choice.

Memories of this long ago decision came surging back during a recent visit to Los Angeles. Art history geek that I am, I dragged Kate and our son Mac on a pilgrimage to 723 North La Cienega Boulevard, the location of the legendary Ferus Gallery. We got there to find the gallery mysteriously recreated, complete with the original sign, and even some period artwork in the window. What we had stumbled onto was a re-discovery campaign organized by New York art dealers Franklin Parrasch and Tim Nye of Nyehaus titled "Ferus Gallery Greatest Hits Volume I." It was staged in conjunction with the Art Los Angeles Contemporary Art Fair, and was then taken on the road to New York for the 2010 Armory Show. Riding this momentum, Nye and Jacqueline Miro curated last summer's three-gallery must-see mega-show "Swell: Art 1950 – 2010" at Nyehaus, Friedrich Petzel, and Metro Pictures (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XlzUSrvKaY>).

With over 70 artists, and a nearly 60-year chunk of West Coast art production on display (including one of the most extensive selections of surfboards ever seen in New York), "Swell" left viewers feeling not only sun-bleached and sandy, but hankering for more insights into the artistic precedents and practices of the Sunshine State.

Although not often cited and difficult for metro-centric chauvinists to admit, there's long been a California

worm inside this Big Apple. The interests of cultural hegemony, however, have kept it, perhaps inadvertently, under wraps. Its history is much more fundamental to the New York School and its aftermath than the more recent manifestations of Funksters, Finish Fetishers, or even the Cal Arts Mafia, whom we'll touch on later, and it reinforces my long held contention that it's always individuals acting in unpredictable ways that cause things to happen, kicking off changes that reverberate over time.

This historiography begins in San Francisco in the early 1930s with a character described by Peggy Guggenheim as “a big fat blond” who was gay, epileptic, drank too much, and had a bad ticker. His name was Howard Putzel. After seeing a major exhibition of the “Blue Four” in Oakland, (a repackaging of “Der Blaue Reiter,” this group was made up of Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, Paul Klee, and Alexej von Jawlensky), Putzel was inspired to foray into the art scene. He organized the first West Coast exhibition of Joan Miró, which took place at the East West Gallery, San Francisco, in 1934. Soon afterward he became the director of a tiny gallery in the back of the Paul Elder bookstore. His passion led him in 1935 to Los Angeles where, as director of the Stanley Rose Gallery, he sold Surrealist art to movie stars like Edward G. Robinson and helped build the world-class Arensberg Collection.

During this stretch, acquaintances are made not only with the famous, such as Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, but also with younger local artists who showed at the Rose Gallery—Philip Guston and quite possibly his circle of friends from Manual Arts High School, which included Jackson Pollock and Reuben Kadish. The Howard Putzel Gallery opens in 1936 at 6729 Hollywood Boulevard with a show that includes Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Kandinsky, Klee, André Masson, Miró, Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault, Henri Rousseau, and Yves Tanguy. Though short-run, the gallery receives extensive media attention stoked by a political battle between the “Marxist propaganda” of social realism and Modernist Surrealism, with Putzel coming down on the side of the latter.

Though having already corresponded about lending works for exhibit at the Guggenheim Jeune gallery in London, it was in Paris in 1938 that Putzel and Peggy Guggenheim first met face to face. At this time the eccentric heiress was on a philanthropic and acquisitional quest to buy a painting a day, and Putzel seized the opportunity. He volunteered his expertise and Surrealist connections to accompany Peggy on tours of Parisian bohemia, and the gears that would change the world started to grind.

Putzel's introduction of Guggenheim to uber-Surrealist Max Ernst leads Ernst to dump his then-wife Leonora Carrington and, perhaps as a ticket out of France before it falls to the Nazis, into a short-lived marriage to Guggenheim, which hooks her up not only with the German artist but also makes her sugar-mommy and den-mother to the whole Surrealist gaggle. Skedaddling out of Paris just hours before the Nazi takeover,



Charles Seliger (1926-2009). "Howard Putzel" (1943).
Ink on paper, 5 × 3 in., signed and dated. Credit Line:
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY.

Guggenheim returns with her collection to New York where she's ensconced in an East 53rd Street townhouse and begins her new life as patroness and mascot of Surrealism. Using her clout and wealth she helps to evacuate many leading Surrealists from Europe and opens the groundbreaking gallery, Art of This Century, the likes of which New Yorkers had never seen. The hottest thing in town, Art of This Century focuses almost entirely on the European Surrealists, allowing a token few locals to kiss the ring of André Breton for entrée. Despite the war, things for Peggy are going swell—time for Putzel to pop up again.

While consulting for Peggy on a group show of female Surrealist artists, Howard, the consummate social networker, introduces Ernst to the young Dorothea Tanning. They begin a tumultuous relationship. When Peggy finds out about the affair, her reputation for vindictiveness rears up and she bails on the whole Surrealist crowd, dumping advisor Marcel Duchamp and Max's son, her secretary Jimmy Ernst. Putzel steps in and accentuates the split with the idea of promoting Downtown artists, and the seeds of the New York School are ready for planting.

Reviewing his list of California artists, Putzel finds that many have relocated to New York and established themselves in Greenwich Village, Jackson Pollock being the most prominent. Other painters with California connections whom Putzel introduced to Guggenheim include Hans Hoffman, Buffy Johnson, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.

Hoffmann had taught during the summers of 1930 and 1931 at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Chouinard School of Art, Los Angeles (oddly, no schools on the East Coast were interested in his services). In 1932, after being advised not to return to Germany due to political unrest, he settles in New York. Buffy Johnson (included in the 1943 Female Surrealist show with Tanning and 29 other artists) attends the University of California before sailing for Paris to study with Francis Picabia. Back in L.A. in 1943, Johnson meets Mark Rothko during a West Coast tour and gets him in touch with Putzel. Aware as he was of Guggenheim's fickle nature, Putzel tricks Peggy into viewing Rothko's work by inviting her to a party where he's secretly hung several Rothko paintings. On the same West Coast tour, Rothko also meets Clyfford Still, who is teaching at U.C. Berkley and who becomes a major catalyst for Rothko's own work. Putzel introduces Still's work to Guggenheim as well, but by the time of the show, Putzel has escaped his servitude and opened his own 67 Gallery.

With "A Problem for Critics," his provocative 1945 show at 67 Gallery, Putzel is seen as a leading aesthete. Casting about for an appropriate name to codify the notion of what would become Abstract Expressionism, he woos several top artists to join his gallery (Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and the young Charles Seliger) and made a play for Pollock, who was still under contract to Guggenheim. He stages screenings of avant-garde films by Maya Deren, and becomes an impresario of the burgeoning New York scene. With Peggy Guggenheim's immanent return to Europe, his 67 Gallery is positioned to become the most cutting-edge venue in the world. In 10 short years Putzel has ridden the wave from a backroom gallery in a San Francisco bookshop to the heights of the New York art world, recognizing and shepherding the founders of Ab-Ex. The wipeout comes August 7, 1945, just one day after America unleashes its first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. During a train trip to Connecticut, Putzel, who has a long history of health problems, dies of a heart attack, and to all but the specialists, Howard Putzel and his achievements sink into the dark ocean of obscurity.

Though no one can argue the predominance of Manhattan as art market capital, it's this role that discourages

its tendency toward risk. If there's one thing the market hates, it's change. A crucial aspect of our California connection is how it's functioned as a testing ground for New York developments in advance of local taste. Case in point: one would be hard pressed to name anyone more integral to New York's current post-conceptual milieu than the duo of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. After five years of running the Ferus Gallery, a young Walter Hopps is hired as curator by the Pasadena Museum. In 1961, while searching for artists to populate what is generally considered the first Pop Art show, "New Paintings of Common Objects," the visionary Hopps, on an East Coast visit, meets and eventually cajoles Warhol into debuting his "Campbell's Soup Can" paintings at Ferus, establishing him as the preeminent Pop artist.

Marcel Duchamp had been a fixture on the frontline of New York's avant-garde since 1915, with his last showing around 1923. Accepting the subterfuge that he's quit making art, for the next forty years no New York gallery or museum has the gumption to investigate or offer him a one-man exhibition. Since the greatest collection of Duchamp's work had by that time moved to L.A. with the Arensbergs, Hopps may have been more aware of its timeliness than most easterners. He arranges the seminal Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum to coincide with Warhol's second L.A. showing in 1963, and begins a reassessment of this master that continues to this day.

A resonance of this conflation of Pop and Conceptual can be seen in the work of John Baldessari and his influence on a generation of CalArts students that includes Jack Goldstein, David Salle, Troy Brauntuch and James Welling. This group makes up the core of what was unleashed on New York as the "Pictures Generation," perhaps the most consequential movement since Pop, and a precursor to much of what we now think of as "New Media."

Which, more or less, brings us up to today. Consider one last twist in this tale: as if retracing Putzel's odyssey thirty years later, *Artforum* begins publication in San Francisco in the early '60s, then relocates its headquarters to L.A., where it moves in upstairs from Ferus on North La Cienega and acquires one of the Ferus artists, Ed Ruscha, as art director before cutting out for New York in 1967. When I first encountered this periodical, which would one day be regarded as the epitome of New York super-slick high-glam art journals, it was still referred to as "that California magazine." Surf's up!

CONTRIBUTOR

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

IN CONVERSATION



DEAN LEVIN with Alex Bacon

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Over the past year Dean Levin and Alex Bacon have been meeting regularly to discuss the evolving nature of Levin's work, and the ideas behind it. The following is a composite of some of the issues they have discussed. Levin's first solo exhibition in New York City, "A Long, Narrow Mark" runs May 3 – June 7, 2015 at Boesky East.