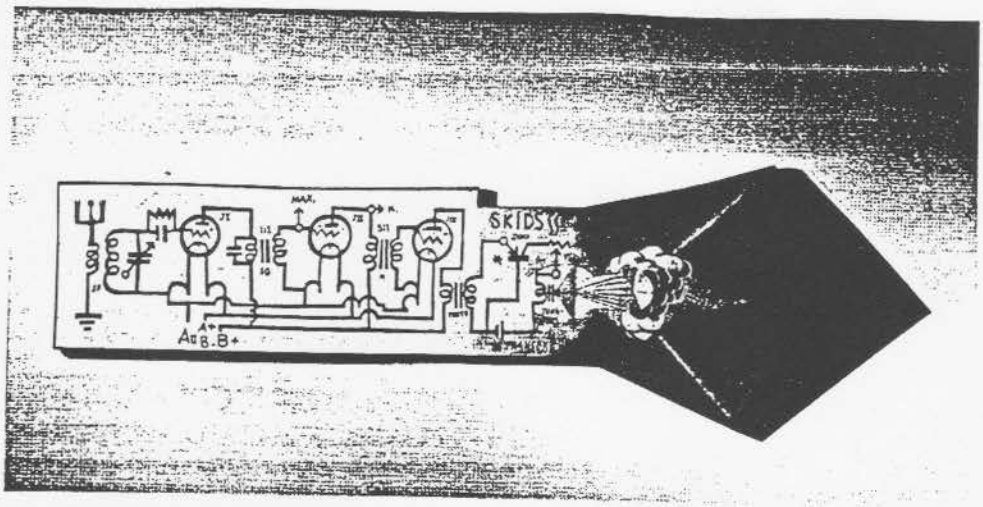
Arts Magazine



Wally Hedrick, *Your Cliterin Geometry/The Artist's Life/Skids*, 1980, Oil on canvas,60" × 186". Courtesy Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Wally Hedrick

In the art world, each generation inherits terms and designations that have been used to characterize an earlier era, particularly in relationship to a geographical location. Chicago, for example, has its "Imagists"; Washington its "Color Field School"; San Francisco its "Bay Area Figurative Artists." One would think we were naming baseball teams. Just this year a lavish catalogue with the summary title, *Bay Area Figurative Art: 1950-1965*, was published by the University of California Press and the San Francisco Museum of Art. As much as I love the work of some of the artists who are said to belong to that group, I am also tired of a narrow, already well-known classification being used as if it told the whole story of the very active scene that has been going on in San Francisco since at least the late 1940s. The term literally leaves out far more than it includes and, in the process, marginalizes the presence of such Bay Area artists as Bruce Conner, Wally Hedrick, and Jess, while also minimizing the accomplishment of at least one artist who is considered a member of the team, Joan Brown.

Wally Hedrick was born in Pasadena in 1928. He moved to San Francisco in 1947 and studied at the California School of Fine Art before being drafted into the army in 1950. In 1952, he returned to San Francisco and resumed his studies. Between 1952 and 1959, when his work was included in the *Sixteen Americans* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (the show also included his then wife, Jay De Feo, who died last year, as well as Frank Stella and Jasper Johns), Hedrick studied, helped start the Six Gallery, an important artists' co-op, and worked in various mediums. *Sixteen Americans* proved to be one of the few times Hedrick's work would be exhibited in New York. While unfortunate, it is not altogether surprising. Hedrick's development is not linear; he seems never to have developed a signature style by which a viewer (critic, historian, or curator) could pin him down and thus designate his oeuvre; he seems not to be interested in making art about art. Consequently, his entire project and practice (and Hedrick is not alone in this) stands in opposition to the diluted classification, "Bay Area Figurative Artists."

Throughout his career, Hedrick has been an artist working with ideas, what we in New York would call a "conceptual artist," except his so-called concepts have little in common with the ones that are fashionable. He is too interested in humor and bad puns to pass as an "intellectual" conceptual artist. (Have we actually come to think of that as a redundant term?) He is, in fact, too topical, too critical of consumerism to be considered a Pop artist, too interested in the relationship between the sexes to be considered socially and politically correct, and he derives too many of his images from outré sources, such as alchemy, pictographs, and Far Eastern cosmological diagrams of the relationship between mind and body, the self and other. Finally, by New York art-world standards, he is too self-mocking, whimsical, and unpredictable. And yet these terms—the ones that might be held against him—are the very ones we should value Hedrick for. He makes us realize that we take art too seriously as an aesthetic, classifiable object, but cannot accept it as the result of a way of thinking and being.

Hedrick's recent exhibition of paintings is best viewed as a focused survey of work done during the past decade (1979 to 1990). The compositions are largely graphic and are apt to include some combination of images, mock pictographs, words, and schematic diagrams. Their graphic aspect recalls Hedrick's work of the 1970s, when he used ink on canvas to depict images derived from seed catalogues, matchbook advertisements, and comic book come-ons about magic tricks, crystal radios, and pistols. These subjects evoked both the American do-it-yourself, self-sufficiency streak and the underbelly of consumerism; they spoke to, and about, our independence and isolation.

A number of the recent paintings deal with both the need for and the illusion of meaning. In *Antique Kunst* (1981), which effectively combines a number of pictorial syntaxes, a checkerboard pattern frames an open mouth from which a cartoon balloon, containing orderly rows of mock Sanskrit, emerges. Sanskrit, which is considered the root of all Indo-European languages, is something we are cut off from. It speaks, but we can neither understand nor hear it. In his strongest work, Hedrick reveals an uncanny ability to depict a memorable image without appearing to strive for it.

In *Your Cliterin Geometry/The Artist's Life/Skids* (1980), Hedrick constructs an arrow-shaped canvas. Reading from left to right, the painting begins with a network of gray, technical-looking pictographs, words, abbreviations, and puns on a whitish ground, and ends up in a dark, swirling, polychromatic "void." All our paradigms can only get us so far, the painting suggests; and then we reach that threshold, where what models and categories we have constructed can no longer aid us. In Hedrick's work, there are no final proofs or definitive statements; it is probably the deeper reason why he never developed a signature style or followed a linear development. He doesn't collapse surface meanings; he punctures the models behind them.

Hedrick's juxtapositions of image and text, and his long interest in language as a system, suggest that he is an important postmodern precursor. Certainly, he is one of the few artists of his generation who has consciously developed an anti-ideological stance. That he has done so without becoming programmatic, without alluding to historical genres à la Gerhard Richter, should suggest something about his strength, stamina, and inventiveness. *(Paule Anglim, San Francisco, February 7–March 3)*

John Yau