

ESTRADA FINE ART NEWSLETTER – January 2010

This month I would like to tell my story of “**The Man Who Loved Art.**” John Fitz Gibbon (1934-2009) was a professor of mine while in art school at California State University at Sacramento. He is one of the foremost reasons I began to understand and love art. It was through his class on 20th Century Art, that I possess knowledge of art and artists. Through his love of contemporary art, artists and music and his unconventional way of explaining the inspiration and outcome of artworks, I was inspired.

According to John, art was about friendship, love, human storytelling and the Western ethos. He and his wife, Jane, amassed a huge collection of contemporary California art, **The Pilot Hill Collection of Contemporary Art**, which was shown at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, CA from December 2002 through February 2003. An incredible catalog written by Fitz Gibbon accompanied the exhibition.

John and Jane’s home in Pilot Hill, CA (El Dorado County) has been a retreat, salon and setting for happenings for over 40 years. Their collection of art from artists who have called California home, for however long, have a distinct west coast sensibility. This is distinguished by its humor, irreverence and adherence to the physical object. Some of the more famous artists included in the collection include Robert Arneson, Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Colescott, Elmer Bischoff, Joan Brown, William Wiley, Roy De Forest , David Park and Mel Ramos.

According to the Crocker Museum “Driven by an inexhaustible fervor for his subject, John Fitz Gibbon was an extraordinary art critic and an eccentric, intensely passionate man. For more than 40 years, he has collected, studied, written about and lived with art. He taught art history, from caves to De Kooning, for 20 years at CSUS. He penned dozens of articles, gallery guides, and catalog essays about the artists and the works he collects.”

Most of the Fitz Gibbon’s collection was compiled directly from the artists as gifts or through John’s system of barter and trade. Their collection is hung floor to ceiling (even on the ceiling). There is barely a square inch of interior wall space available. John believed art should breathe, not be kept in storage. He had an eclectic, intimate and highly personal approach to collecting.

When I returned to California in 1997, one of the first trips I made was to Pilot Hill. I brought the daughter of John Ford (1950-1996), one of the artists he supported, with me to make an introduction and so she could experience firsthand, what I had experienced for so many years. It was if I was back in art school. He took us through the house and collection, enlightening our view of the artworks with stories of heroic ideals, implied messages and analogies including *Homer’s The Illiad and Odyssey*. In his perspective, one could better understand art and artists through Greek mythology.

An example of Fitz Gibbon’s writing appeared in the **High Velocity** catalog of 1978: “John (Ford) can really put the paint down, oil, acrylic, rhoplex, it doesn’t matter. With brush, knife, paint-stick, wipe-rag, fingers, it doesn’t matter. He will work lickety-split on a painting, then meditate its fate at leisure. And back to rapid execution. He can turn `em out turgid and chthonic or, changing his mood,

gossamer and ethereal. He can soften you up with color, and in the next series subtract every hue and make as rich a farrago of black and white.”

Art criticism doesn't get much better than this. R.I.P. mon professor.

- Geneen Estrada

Geneen Estrada is the owner of Estrada Fine Art. We represent established mid-career artists. More information can be obtained at www.estradafineart.com.