

Fran Herndon

Prepared for exhibition, "Fran Herndon," at Altman Siegel Gallery, September 8, 2011

by Kevin Killian

Born in Oklahoma in 1929, of Native American origin, Fran Herndon escaped to Europe just as Senator Joseph McCarthy turned this country upside down. The US, she told us recently, was then "no place for a brown face." In France she met and married the teacher and writer James Herndon, and the couple moved to San Francisco in 1957. (The first of their two sons, Jay, was born the same year.) Shortly after arriving in the Bay Area she met four old friends of her husband's: Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan and Jess—the brilliant crew that had invented the Berkeley Renaissance ten years earlier, artists now all working at the height of their poetic powers in a highly charged urban bohemia.

Fran Herndon became most deeply involved with the most irascible of them all. From the very first evening that they had spent time together, Jack Spicer (1925-1965) seemed to see something unusual, something vivid in Fran that she had not seen herself. It was as if he were establishing a person the way he created a poem, out of the raw materials she presented, and for a long time she did not know what it was he wanted her to be. Fran was mystified but elated by a power that Jack saw hidden inside her demure, polite social persona. He knew before she did that she would never be completely satisfied with the roles of mother and housewife.

When Spicer scrutinized her, as if envisioning in his mind's eye a new and somehow different person, she began thinking: there must be some off-moments from being a mother—and during those moments what would she do? "I remember clearly discussing school with him. And out of the alternatives I mentioned, he zeroed in on the Art Institute."

She began to drop off two-year-old Jay at a nursery school in North Beach, and walk up the hill to the Art Institute on Chestnut. She was quietly astonished at this turn of events, but already Jack was "a very powerful figure in my life. His opinions were crucial."

"He saw in me," she recalls, "something greater than I saw in myself." In 1959 she and Spicer inaugurated a series of joint projects, beginning with their editorial work on the mimeo magazine "J." Simultaneously they collaborated on Spicer's poem "Homage to Creeley," each working independently and meeting weekly to share results. "J" was devised as a reply to the Beat magazine "Beatitude," recently launched in San Francisco by Spicer's rival, poet Bob Kaufman. Spicer and Herndon launched an open letter, saying what they wanted and more importantly, what they didn't want. Submissions were to be left in a box behind the bar at The Place, a prominent poetry/jazz/performance space in North Beach. Fran took charge of the artwork, requiring artists to work in stencil or typewriter font or a combination of both. Under the constraints of DIY was born what has been called "in many ways the most beautiful of all the mimeo magazines" (Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, in *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980*, their 1998 survey of mimeographed poetry journals and ephemera).

Simultaneously, Spicer's "Creeley" poems and Herndon's lithographs startled and enchanted them both.

In the evenings Spicer came by the Herndons'—sometimes three or four times a week, sometimes every night. Fran felt herself waiting for his visit, convinced of the link between the lithographs she was creating and the poems that were pouring out of him. He was never present while she worked on her graphics, and she never saw him writing, but somehow the results of their private endeavor meshed in a way that seemed perfect to them both. Jim Herndon later wrote about the experience. "Jack would show up at his certain night with his new poem and Fran would have a new litho. Jack would point out a correspondence between the two. He would show how Fran couldn't have known about the content of the poem. He would show that he couldn't have known about the image in the litho." Fran said, "Sometimes it was reaching, but he knew that there was some connection in [my] work and what he was writing. It was as if at times it was prophetic (I

mean, he would never have expected that to happen)—and he was just ecstatic when he could see that connection. At times it surprised *me*, because I had no inkling of the poems that were preceding or coming after those lithos. He saw it as not in any way illustrating the poems, but just an interaction of some kind.”

She was skeptical, but wavering. She wasn’t sure what to believe. Herndon wrote, “She wanted to forget it. She wanted to have it. She didn’t want ghosts drawing her lithos. She hoped they were. She wanted the visible. She loved the litho-stone, apparently firmly connected to the invisible. One night Jack produced a poem about *a white rabbit absolutely outlined in whiteness/ upon a black background* and Fran produced her litho of a white rabbit absolutely outlined in whiteness upon a black background, and the correspondence between the two was thus exact, as if the ghosts had gotten tired of just hinting about it.” This experience lasted no longer than four or five months. “It was a magic process.” She loved the litho stone she used, its perfect smoothness and porousness, its absorption of acid. Never again, she recollected, did she achieve the singularity she achieved with the lithos for “Homage to Creeley.” “Somehow when the poems were finished, that’s when it was over, really.”

In the meantime Fran turned to painting, and never really looked back. (Her second son, Jack, was born in 1960). The work in the present exhibition is largely drawn from a furiously concentrated period of time, where she painted as though her life depended on it. In these pictures all of American painting seems drawn into the vortex: the social realism of such predecessors as Grant Wood and Thomas Benton; the furious blend of abstraction and figuration that flowed into de Kooning’s brand of “action painting”; the canny, mystic attention to details of nature and landscape of Marsden Hartley and Georgia O’Keeffe. Pop art, too, figures into the mix, and the mixed media suspensions of Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner and Jess. Not here, but in the library at Special Collections of SUNY Buffalo, hangs Fran’s portrait of Robert Duncan, festooned with sparkly cloth to represent his shirt of many colors. In the present exhibition, note the thickness and the sculptural mass of the paint, writhing and byzantine, as though trying to pry itself loose of the canvas. In “Opening Day,” the exuberant, rabbit-filled picture of Willie Mays, number 24, Mays’ famous words float in medieval gold. “I don’t compare ‘em,” he told a sportswriter in 1959, on being awarded his third Golden Glove award. “I just catch ‘em.” Similarly, Spicer never took credit for his own poems; they didn’t really belong to him, he said, he hadn’t written them, he had just received them from an outside force he called the “Invisible World.”

Spicer couldn’t type, and entrusted the manuscripts of his new book-length projects to Fran’s secretarial skill. She typed *The Holy Grail* for him, as it appeared to him little by little, in 1962, and created a series of lithographs centering on the figures in the Arthurian legend. (“Percival” 3 appears in the present exhibition.) At the same time, Fran completed the “sports” collages that make up her most intriguing achievement in art. The lithographs for Spicer’s “Homage to Creeley” were, of course, black and white; in the collages she burst into color as though entering a paradise of revealed myth and truth. Across town, Jess was creating a similar series of “paste-ups,” like Herndon ripping and slicing up visual images and rearranging them onto canvas. Spicer assigned Herndon the humble pages of *Life* and *Sports Illustrated* for her materials, and she painted over and under these images and achieved a rich, often misty glaze. The subjects of this series were sports-world versions of betrayal, tragedy, and loss, such as the trade of Y. A. Tittle for Lou Cordilione by the San Francisco 49ers—“King Football”—the first Liston-Patterson heavyweight fight; the scandalous death of the boxer Benny “the Kid” Paret. Take the haunting “Catch Me if You Can”: Herndon’s brushstrokes transformed the photographed horses straining for the finish line into wraithlike creatures, like Kandinsky’s horses, not “real” beasts but expressionistic, ephemeral, alert animals, closer to unicorns. Perspective is flattened: foreground and background keep switching, giving the collages a watery, dreamlike quality removed from Jess’ ornate, precise surrealism. The “sports collages” also are very direct about race subjects; in the throes of the civil rights struggle, America was ripe for the sort of rich, dazzling imagery Herndon brought to her athletic subjects; there’s tragedy and anger here—as in the later anti-draft, anti-war collages—but there’s also a glorification of

black and Latino athletes that anticipates the work, forty-years later, of a SFAI graduate, Kehinde Wiley. Even Marilyn Monroe pointedly becomes *The White Angel*, in Herndon's memorial collage of the same name; we see first Bert Stern's memorable *Vogue* image of a fretful Monroe, then her whiteness collapses into a mad sprawl of faces, body parts, skull, wraith and animal imagery as she sinks underground into the dark.

These pictures were made by a kind of given chance structure, whatever was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* from week to week dictated the image structure of the work. That was the magic part; the rest was up to Fran Herndon, and into art history through a very long circuitous route.

All the artists in the Spicer circle vacillated between trying to get their work shown, and another, queasy feeling that art was over. In addition, Spicer was intently contemptuous of those who tried to make money from art or writing. His own books were issued without copyright. Anyone who published a poem in a magazine outside of San Francisco was labeled a "sell out" to the larger, eat-em-up consumer culture. Or they were part of what he called the "Fix." It would have been enormously difficult to move out from beneath that psychic plane, that heavy disapproval. In *Secret Exhibition*, her 1990 survey of Bay Area art, that focuses on "six California artists in the Cold War era," critic Rebecca Solnit employs a cultural studies approach to analyze the propensity of many San Francisco artists to make art in secret. On the one hand, such propensity stems from occulted traditions, including that of the hermeticism of the artist; in another light, as Solnit shows, San Francisco was so far off the art map that the artists she describes felt curiously free to invent their own, tiny, freakishly distorted art world, and a new kind of art to show in it: the funk-junk assemblage rag bag thing we all know well now. Few artists took any precautions to preserve their work, taking a Darwinist view, "sink or swim," or perhaps yielding to an Existentialist urge to cast one's fates to the wind. Documentation was unheard of. The scene was thus rather nihilistic. And gave birth to a lot of artist-run spaces, from the King Ubu Gallery of 1952 to the Batman Gallery later in the 60s. Spicer and five of his students from the California School of Fine Arts established the "6" Gallery in 1953. But Solnit's book omits discussion of the galleries run by this group of artists, Borregaard's Museum of 1960; the Peacock Gallery of 1963; and Buzz, the gallery organized by Paul Alexander, Bill Brodecky and Larry Fagin in 1964. The outsiders and rebels of Solnit's world, whose work was shown in the big Whitney show of 1995, "Beat Culture and the New America," had only a very distant interest in this group, who were beyond the pale in many ways, even to the outsiders of *Secret Exhibition*.

The problem with artist-run spaces is, of course, that though they deliver the means of distribution back to the producer—which has a beauty of its own, an exhilarating freedom—they depend on continued enthusiasm, and enthusiasm comes easy at first but quickly slows to a trickle. Thus Borregaard's Museum, the Peacock Gallery, Buzz lasted only a few seasons at most. The present exhibition gathers together a representative sampling of Herndon's portion of the grand November 1963 Peacock Gallery show organized by the poet Robin Blaser (1926-2009). If you squint and look at the splendors of "Ophelia," "Tile Rats," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" or the sublime "Doodlebug," it might almost be 1963 over again.

In the 1970s, as contemporaries like Jess, Bruce Conner, and Jay DeFeo began finding fame, Herndon put aside art for personal reasons, and when she returned to painting she did so in a deliberately low key, unheralded way. But in that period a coterie of admirers from many disciplines has grown vocal, and through a sprinkling of small but important exhibitions, interest in her work has reached a new height. Fran Herndon continues to make paintings and collage in her home studio in the Sunset district of San Francisco.

Appendix I

Text of Jack Spicer and Fran Herndon's J Manifesto of spring 1959.

The first issue of J will appear in the early part of September. J will be a 16-page mimeographed flyer very much like Beatitude. It will sell for the same price or lower. It is non-copyright.

POETRY—I especially want poems from people who have written very few poems. Criteria of selection will be personal and arbitrary but poems will be selected mainly on the basis of whether, for one reason or another, they are likely to be exciting to other poets. Good or bad, beat or square, rhymed or unrhymed will, I hope, have nothing to do with it. This will not be a little magazine.

PROSE—Prose will be entirely secondary to poetry. Anything that is temporary (out-of-date in three weeks) will be acceptable. Letters, ill-tempered comments, suicide notes . . .

ART—Each issue will contain several [full-page, 8 1/2 x 11] drawings. These must be line drawings that can be reproduced on stencil or actually submitted by the artist drawn on a stencil. Painters, students, even instructors.

Jack Spicer
Fran Herndon

Manuscripts and drawings should be submitted to the Box marked J in The Place, 1546 Grant Ave.

Appendix II
Three Poems by Jack Spicer

Billy ["A Gang Of Teenagers"], 1962

Billy came into the bar and we were all scared.
His mouth was curved into our smile. "I
Am a gang of reckless teenagers," he said.
"I am going to shoot you."
George and I had been talking about the San
Francisco Giants. Hal and Dorrie and Russ
had been singing.
No, you' ve
Made a mistake
I'm not a victim. Try
Your gun on some other body.
They tell me that life here is more alive
That bullets have the sound of the space they've traveled
That bullets
Could cover the space of a whole mountain.
No, I do not believe. Poetry
Has the sound of other people's lips
Try
Some other victim

Shark Island, 1962

One edge of the sky is a rainbow; the other cloud
There is nothing on this spit of the sea
But sand. Grinding
Of rock.
Promises
A new day.
To get out of a poem is no
more difficult than the choice both edges
of the sky
Have.

Stinson, 1962

At the edge of the known world, we stand amazed
One step and the water would make us wet,
The sky fall on us in packets, the moon,
If there was a moon, make tracks for us.
In the little ocean that we walked in.

Note

The text of the essay draws from some of my previous writing on Fran Herndon's work, from the afterword to the Granary Books edition of Spicer's poem, "Golem," which was printed with seven of Herndon's sports collages in 1998; from the biography of Spicer that I wrote with Lewis Ellingham, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (also 1998), and from talks on Herndon's art I've given over the years on kind invitations from poets Charles Bernstein and Bill Berkson. Most of the quotes from James Herndon (1926-1990) are from his book *Everything As Expected* (1973), an account of the making of his then wife's sports collages; in addition, some of the testimony of Jim and Fran Herndon is taken by interviews conducted at various times by Lew Ellingham, by myself, and by Lee Plested. Unpublished material by Jack Spicer appears here through the courtesy of Peter Gizzi and the Jack Spicer Literary Estate, copyright @ 2011.