

# THROUGH THE FANTASY LENS

SÄTTY

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The cultural riches produced in San Francisco during the Sixties were so abundant that new treasures continue to surface. There was so much going on during that crazy renaissance! Radical hippie group the Diggers incited the community daily, the music scene was exploding, the Black Panther Party launched, the city was flooded with drugs, runaways were living on the streets, *Rolling Stone* magazine went on press, Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan, Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studios was operational – there was something for everyone, and a joint was always being passed. The city was a magnet for unusual people who drifted in from near and far, and among them was Wilfried Sätty.

Born Wilfried Podreich in 1939, in Bremen, Germany where his parents ran a flower shop, Sätty had a front row seat for one of the heaviest episodes in human history. Imagine the karmic weight of being a German child, living in Germany, during World War II; it must've been crushing. Attending a trade school as a teenager, Sätty earned a degree in industrial design in Berlin, then lit out for the adventure that was his life. Over the next two years he bounced from a job in Canada, to a brief stint working on Oscar Niemeyer's grand architectural folly, Brasilia, to San Francisco, where he settled in 1961. He was 22 years old at the time, and on arriving in the city he landed a job as a draughtsman at BART, but he didn't last long at the post. Grander things were calling him.

Officially changing his name to Sätty, he described himself as an alchemist and artist who resided simultaneously in the past and the future; chief among Sätty's artworks was his lifestyle. He lived for two decades in a rambling house at 2141-43 Powell Street that was within walking distance of the North Beach jazz clubs, City Lights Bookstore, and the San Francisco Art Institute, and was described by writer Thomas Albright as "a cross between Mrs. Havisham's parlor in *Great Expectations* and something out of Luna Park." The heart of the place was the basement Sätty transformed into an exotic chamber with walls hung with fraying tapestries and a dirt floor carpeted with threadbare oriental rugs. Perfumed with incense, furnished with odds and ends scavenged from trash bins, and lit primarily with candles, the basement housed a vast library of occult books, and one was obliged to travel by ladder to get from one floor to the next. Somehow it's not surprising to learn that Kenneth Anger lived there shortly before it was taken over by Sätty, who said he fashioned the place after the underground grottos built by Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria.

People who began experimenting with drugs in the early Sixties had no way of

knowing what the long game would be for the drug lifestyle, and by the early Seventies many naïve young lives had been derailed. Sätty was one of those casualties, and by the mid-Seventies he'd grown paranoid, was drinking heavily, his wife left him, he withdrew from friends, and refused to leave the subterranean lair where time stood still for him. He died in 1982, at the age of 42, from a head injury sustained in a fall from one of the ladders in his strange home.

The Sixties were a golden period for graphic arts, and Sätty produced hundreds of visually dense posters and collages in a kaleidoscopic style that synthesized old engravings, depictions of ancient mythology, and the ecstatic imagery manifested by psychedelic drugs. It's a heady brew whose best known Bay area proponents are Bruce Conner and Jess. Sätty's work exudes the feckless paganism of his era, but he was a brooding presence at the happy hippie party. His cultural ancestry included German artists like Georg Grosz, Max Ernst, John Heartfield, and Hannah Hoch—not a particularly light-hearted bunch—and Sätty had the fears and fascinations of a child. Witches, ghosts, naked people, the dead—there's not much sunlight in his world, where the sky is dark with low, heavy clouds and lonely children are surrounded by forces of darkness. And how could it be otherwise?

Sätty's experience as a child shows through in his work, which sits squarely in the tradition of artworks exploring madness and superstition, and has links with symbolist Gustave Moreau and the lunatic universe of Hieronymus Bosch. Francisco Goya's *Black Paintings* echo here, too, particularly Goya's devastating *Saturn Devouring His Son*, which illuminates the deep stupidity at the root of all evil. Much of Sätty's art has a similar tone; ghosts rise from rocky ground alongside figures that are bound and gagged in *Mad Man of the Mountain*. A centaur strikes a deadly blow to a rider passing on horseback in *Wild Man of the West*, and a crowd of naked women is banished into the void in *Purgatory Landscape*. Civilizations rise and fall in Sätty's pictures, which feature dramatic landscapes and vast interiors with soaring domed ceilings. The expansive emotional scale of the work lends it a prophetic quality that puts one in mind of the great British visionary William Blake, however, Sätty differs significantly from Blake in that redemption is never on offer in his art. A late work, *In the Dungeon*, depicts five people being subjected to various forms of torture in a candlelit chamber that brings to mind descriptions of his place on Powell Street. Sätty died in San Francisco, but he never got out of Germany.

– Kristine McKenna

Sätty (born 1939 in Bremen, Germany and died 1982 in San Francisco, CA) has been exhibited internationally and across the United States. Selected solo exhibitions include Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL (1985); California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA (1984); Claire Wiles Gallery, San Francisco, CA (1973); Goethe Center, San Francisco, CA (1971); Berkeley Gallery, San Francisco, CA (1970); and Moore Gallery, San Francisco, CA (1968). Selected group exhibitions include *Retro-spectacle*, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA (1987); *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: 1945–1980*, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA (1985); The Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA (1975); Kristiansand Art Association, Kristiansand, Norway (1972); Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (1971); Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA (1971); National Museum, Warsaw, Poland (1970); National Museum of Art, Belgrade, Yugoslavia (1970); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA (1969); and Museum of the City of New York, NY (1969). *Through the Fantasy Lens* is the first exhibition of Sätty's work in 35 years.