

Wally Hedrick

Parker Gallery and the Box

Bay Area Funk art has never received the shine bestowed upon art of 1960s and '70s from Southern California. Light and Space and Finish Fetish artworks are cool and refined, with their slick presentation and rich color, whereas Funk is irreverent, weird, smutty, and can look, well, funky. Wally Hedrick, who was born in 1928 and made art right up until his death in 2003, did not identify as a Funk artist, but is exemplary of that movement and much more besides, all of which was evident at his retrospective, titled "SEX POLITICS RELIGION" and held across Parker Gallery and the Box.

With works spanning from 1946 through 2003, the exhibition was a rare and welcome opportunity to take stock of Hedrick's diverse practice, which included sculpture, assemblage, deadpan appropriation, and lushly brushed paintings. It also affirmed Hedrick's reputation as a visionary proto-Conceptualist open to any material or process. His beer-can pyramid sculpture, *Small Peak #1*, 1966, is a grungy cousin to Jasper Johns's trompe l'oeil Ballantine Ale bronze. He even reveals a mystical side in works such as *Spirit + Idea #1*, 1958, and *Ignacio Spirit*, 1977: strange, dark paintings with near-monochrome evocations of energy emerging from a central spine.

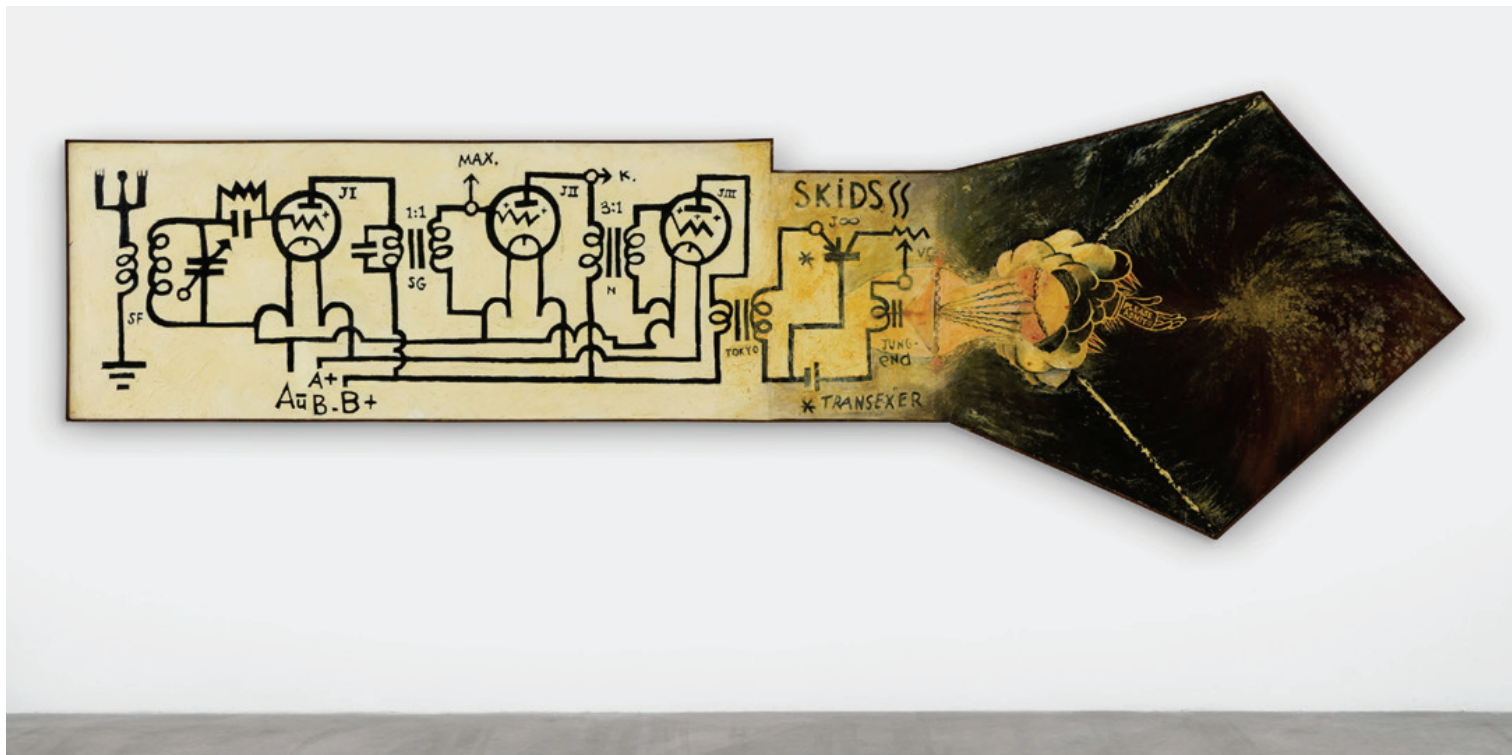
Most lively to my twenty-first-century eyes were three paintings in which Hedrick turned electrical schematics to his own ends, which happened to be comic and lewd, along with a rich admixture of wordplay whose equal is hard to find in that period outside Basquiat. Of these, the most intriguingly bizarre was *Your Cliterin Geometry/The Artist's Life/Skids SS*, 1979/1980, a more than fifteen-foot-long, phallically shaped canvas with a faux electrical diagram involving three penises. Toward the work's right edge, the diagram transitions into a woman's body possessing, instead of a human head, a terminus that is both breast and glans, which morphs into the hand of God emerging from a cloud of boobs shooting lightning bolts into the black void of the universe. Far out.

Though he never stopped painting, Hedrick removed himself from the art world in the '70s after being fired from teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute over his Vietnam War protests. He opened a one-man repair service, Wally's Fix-It Shop, in San Geronimo, California. His canvases from the '80s are sensuous of surface and vibrantly hued. *Fallon*, 1983, looks fondly back at his earlier home and studio in Marin County, depicting an above- and belowground cross section of the landscape. Dynamic crimson brushstrokes convey a sensation of artistic energy emanating from outside the self as power seems to ascend to Hedrick's house from underground, like magma.

Throughout his life Hedrick made dark works that functioned as protest paintings—black, heavily textured canvases replete with thick brushstrokes, ridges, and cracks. They were often painted and repainted over again, with each act performed in protest of yet another American war: Vietnam and later Iraq (Hedrick pointed out that they are painted in black oil). My gut tells me that the black pictures may be kindred to his "spirit" paintings, the other side of that mystical coin. The heavy accretion of paint suggests the influence of his wife of fifteen years, Jay DeFeo. Most impressive among the black monochromes was *War Room*, 1967/1968/1971/2002 (the dating reflecting the times it was painted in response to the Vietnam War and again when there was congressional authorization of military force against Iraq in 2002), an interior volume made from four monumental canvases placed at right angles, with the painted sides facing inward, a small door cut out for entry. Once inside, one is surrounded by eleven-foot-high canvas walls covered with slashed-on, viscous black paint, the odor of linseed oil still powerful after twenty-four years.

What's the point of engaging with Hedrick's anti-commercial, anti-career, anti-institutional attitude? What do his acts of negation offer us today? From one year to the next, art feels ever more dominated by commerce, luxury, branding, and status, forces that push away from the capacity to move, sensitize, and produce new forms for ideas and emotion. Hedrick's work tugs us back to a small but sturdy core where creativity is quirky, unpredictable, uncontrollable, at times unpalatable, and always passionate.

—Daniel Gerwin



Wally Hedrick, *Your Cliterin Geometry/The Artist's Life/Skids SS*, 1979/1980, oil, graphite, and synthetic varnish on canvas, 5' x 15' 4 3/4".