

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Revisiting the Witty Work of 1970s Bay Area Nut Artists

Parker Gallery's multimedia Nut Art survey intersperses new work with original pieces from the 1970s.



Franklin Williams, "Baby Girl #5" (1970)



Clayton Bailey, "Demented Pinhead (Portrait of Dr. Gladstone)" (1971)

LOS FELIZ, Calif. — There are two narratives that describe the founding of Nut Art. The more famous one is recounted in an unpublished manuscript called *Basic Art*, authored by prolific mail artist, art writer, and self-appointed "Nut chronicler" David Zack. According to Zack, painters Roy De Forest and Maija Peeples-Bright and ceramists Clayton Bailey and Dave Gilhooly were sitting around a table in De Forest's home when Zack proclaimed the need for a new art movement. The others assented but could not agree on how to christen the enterprise. The anecdote ends thus: "Roy's mother Oma came up with a round tray full of open brown bottles of Swan Lager, plus some vegetarian bacon crisps. Everyone said Nut Art at once. Nut Art was born."

Bailey's wife Betty described for me a different Nut genesis. Her version begins with De Forest and painter Harold Schlotzhauer visiting the Baileys' home in Crockett, California, during the late 1960s. The conversation drifted to the artists' frustrations with being erroneously labeled Funk, a term that crash-landed on the American art scene after the premier of Peter Selz's infamous 1967 *Funk* show. At the time, Journalists and art critics were especially fond of describing any difficult-to-categorize artist as "funky," particularly if that artist resided in the Bay Area. A solution occurred to Bailey, De Forest, and Schlotzhauer: They could start a new art movement and, perhaps, reinvent the way others saw and communicated about their art. A moment of inspiration struck when each artist decided to take on an alter ego as a way to refocus their energies. Bailey, for instance, dubbed himself Dr. Gladstone. De Forest chose Doggie Dinsmour.

Clayton Schuster, "Revisiting the Witty Work of 1970s Bay Area Nut Artists." *Hyperallergic* (July 14, 2017), accessed online.

A handful of Nut Art exhibitions cropped up over the next few years. Bailey organized the most important one in 1972 at the University of California, Hayward, where he taught. Not only was the art on display superbly Nut, but the catalogue featured De Forest's movement manifesto. One caps-heavy passage declares:

THE WORK OF A PECULIAR AND ECCENTRIC NUT CAN TRULY BE CALLED "NUT ART" ... THE NUT ARTIFICER TRAVELS IN A PHANTASMAGORIC MICRO-WORLD, SMALL AND EXTREMELY COMPACT, AS IS THE LIGHT OF A DWARF STAR IMPLODING INWARD AND IN PASSAGE COLLAPSING PARADISE AND HELL TO ONE AS IT VANISHES FOREVER WITH OUR JOYS, SORROWS AND UNREQUITED LOVE.

*Nut Art* at the Parker Gallery is basically a sequel to the Hayward show. Sam Parker, the gallery's owner, told me, "I grew up in the Bay Area, aware of all these artists that are rarely shown today. It seems like the right time to introduce them to a new generation." The multifaceted show brings together 10 of the greatest hits from the 1972 Hayward exhibition alongside several contemporaneous works and 10 pieces made within the last decade.

Despite its breadth, the show manages to come off as a unified thought. Each of the gallery's separate spaces vibrate with common purpose, of big bangs and primordial ooze. The power of Nut is the same power held by the storyteller who understands when a well-timed pause will drive a point home. It's the mask that imbues an actor with the agency of a demigod to create, as De Forest describes, a phantasmagoric micro-world.

That last quality permeates Gilhooly's "Classic Frog Pot" (1971), which is one of the original Hayward Nut show pieces. It's a typical example of Gilhooly's commitment to his self-made mythology, in which frogs enact the habits of people. Gilhooly brought full-measure resolve to the effort (as with Bailey/Dr. Gladstone's *World of Wonders*) that transcends his art's witty exterior. Therein lies an honesty and earnestness that undermines the typical critical assessment that blandly describe Nut as humorous exercises of faux-naïveté.



Sally Saul, "Sagehens" (2009)

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Harold Schlotzhauer, Nut Art exhibition announcement (1972)

Interspersing new artwork among the original Nut pieces proves very successful. Particularly well-done are ceramic sculptures by Sally Saul, wife of painter and sculptor Peter Saul. Her “Sagehens” practically collude with the original Nut pieces. They are the stuff of dreams, characters in an alternate reality seeping through into our own. The Sagehen on the right turns to its compatriot, who stares straight ahead and gives the impression that they are executing some mischief. They are well-placed alongside Gilhooly’s “Classic Frog Pot,” Betty Bailey’s “Goddess of Nut” (1972) (an on-the-nose homage to the longevity of Nut), and Peeples-Bright’s fractal yet kindly monsters in “SeaSaw Beasts” (1965).

On the steps outside the gallery (occupying the first floor of Parker’s home) are six pots by Calvin Marcus, each officially titled “Untitled” (2017). Marcus’s ceramic is so supple it appears made from human skin, or at least some kind of pig leather. The pots are planted with San Pedro cactus, which can be made into mescaline. Excess water drains away through four noses spaced evenly around each piece. The pots sweat with the phantasmagoria described by De Forest and are cloaked by Bailey’s twisted humor, as if one of Dr. Gladstone’s blob creatures reproduced with Bailey’s “Two Face Jug” (1990).

One slightly sour note is Benjamin Reiss’s too-slick “Conditioner (and Follicle)” (2016), which just barely misses the mark. To its benefit, “Conditioner” seems to be a part of a larger story, as if it were a trophy in the den of some extraterrestrial big-game hunter. But its overly perfect petals and (especially) the glow from the smooth, pornographic epoxy lack the imperfect mutations that unite the rest of the show.

While Parker’s curation is laudable, no discussion of Nut Art could end without celebrating Clayton Bailey. Anything that is known or knowable about the movement can largely be attributed to his love of the art, and art-making generally. Much of his time in the last few years has been devoted to his role as Curator of Curiosities at the Bailey Art Museum in Crockett, where he has created an entire hall devoted to the ongoing exploits of Dr. Gladstone. If Parker’s Nut Art inspires anyone to delve deeper, Bailey’s museum is truly the next best stop.

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Maija Peebles-Bright, "SeaSaw Beasts" (1965)



Calvin Marcus, "Untitled" (2017)

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