

The Contagious Joy of Maija Peebles-Bright's Animal-Filled World

By Sarah Hotchkiss  Sep 11  Save Article



Maija Peebles-Bright, 80, paints a sculpture in her home studio in Rocklin, California. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

Maija Peebles-Bright deploys puns with gleeful abandon. She loves alliteration and glitter and animals of all kinds. When asked what her favorite animal is to paint, she replies, without hesitation: “a Corgi.” (They’re well designed.) Signing a catalog of her work for this reporter, she did not hesitate before writing “Enjoy a ‘BeautiFOAL’ life!”

For six decades, Peebles-Bright, 80, has been a practicing artist in and around the Sacramento area, making vibrant, animal-filled paintings and ceramics. Today she’s ensconced in Rocklin, in a spacious home filled floor-to-ceiling with her own art and that of friends and contemporaries – Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, William T. Wiley and Clayton and Betty Bailey, to name just a few. Out back, a garage the size of two RVs houses her studio, along with a baby grand piano. A pool sparkles outside.

Hotchkiss, Sarah, “8 Over 80: The Contagious Joy of Maija Peebles-Bright’s Animal-Filled World,” *KQED*, September 11, 2023 (online)

2441 Glendower Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90027

PARKER GALLERY

She does not adhere to a studio schedule, but rather “dabbles around anywhere and everywhere.” A trail of glitter runs down her hallway carpet.

In most (accurate) histories of Funk and Nut art, two semi-synonymous Northern California movements that emerged in the early 1970s, Peeples-Bright’s name and work feature prominently, one of the few women in the scene. She was a member of Adeliza McHugh’s legendary Candy Store, a small Folsom house gallery that nurtured and supported an artistic scene defined by its maximalist, irreverent and exuberant output.



Artwork made by Peeples-Bright (note: Corgis), friends and contemporaries hanging in her Rocklin home. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

A hallmark of Peeples-Bright’s art is a sometimes overwhelming sense of abundance. The different sections of a painting might be filled with flamingos, dogs with lolling tongues, tigers, flowers and dots that give Yayoi Kusama a run for her money. In her home, on her hand-painted shirts and shoes, there’s a sense of horror vacui – a rejection of empty space. “I make piles,” she says, “lots of piles. I mean, cleanliness, neatness, it’s so unimportant.”

Thanks to recent Candy Store and Funk exhibitions at the San Jose Museum of Art, Crocker Art Museum, Manetti Shrem Museum and Museum of Arts and Design in New York, a new generation of art viewers are reveling in work that blossomed well outside of mainstream art centers. And Peeples-Bright, now represented by Parker Gallery in Los Angeles, is still creating artwork that sizzles the retina.

“It just felt so important to share her story and share her work with a broader audience,” Sam Parker says of showing Peeples-Bright. “Her whole career has been an incredible devotion to her practice.”

2441 Glendower Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90027

PARKER GALLERY



Peeples-Bright holds a photo of her parents and herself when they first immigrated to the United States. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

An artistic awakening

Maija Gegeris, born in Riga, Latvia in 1942, was not always destined for a life in art. The only child of two teachers, she and her family fled the advancing Soviet army in 1945, securing passage on a troop ship to the United States. She learned two words of English on the journey, thanks to sailors and their candy: “lemon drops.”

By 1962, she was pursuing mathematics at UC Davis, expecting she’d likely become a high school math teacher. But even while fulfilling this parentally approved plan, she harbored more extraordinary dreams. “I was decent at it,” she says of math, “but I don’t think I’d have been God’s gift to the Lawrence Livermore particle accelerator, which I really wanted to work on. I wanted to smash atoms!”

Her artistic awakening came during a required art class. These were the very beginnings of UC Davis’ art program, when department chair Richard L. Nelson recruited an all-star faculty roster to the school. (Wayne Thiebaud was the first hire, followed by Tio Giambruni, Ruth Horsting, William T. Wiley and Robert Arneson.) Within those ranks, a generational divide was already apparent.



Peeples-Bright paints in her home studio. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

“Wayne Thiebaud actually had a curriculum that he followed,” Peeples-Bright says. “Wiley did not.”

Wiley put on records, gathered piles of stuff, told his class to draw what they saw and walked out of the room. “I was just so enamored that I kept being late for my calculus class,” Peeples-Bright says.

So she changed her major and started taking every art class she could, staying on at Davis to get her MFA in 1965. Some of those early paintings still hang in Peeples-Bright’s studios, more abstract expressionist than her later work, with a darker palette and less fantastical subject matter. She had her first show at the Candy Store after graduation, and would continue to exhibit there about once a year until the gallery closed in 1991.

“My parents were not pleased,” she remembers of her switch to fine art. They had another vision of their daughter’s future: a professional degree, a Latvian husband, two kids and “happily ever after.” Peeples-Bright remembers they attended maybe one of her art shows over the years.



A photograph of Adeliza McHugh's Candy Store gallery in Peeples-Bright's studio. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

But she did get married – to a professor she met while taking a summer class at the San Francisco Art Institute. David Zack taught English at the art school; it was 1965 and Peeples-Bright was 23. “Those were wild times,” she says, describing a Friday afternoon scene of open-air debauchery featuring Wally Hedrick, homemade instruments and six kegs of Anchor Steam beer in the SFAI courtyard.

In Sacramento, Folsom, Davis, San Francisco and San José, Peeples-Bright rubbed elbows with and played host to so many artists from different scenes, I have to ask, Did she know everyone? The answer comes brightly: “I did, yeah.”

SJMA curatorial and programs associate Nidhi Gandhi, who organized the Candy Store “sampler” show, says Peeples-Bright’s experiences in these different circles makes it clear that terminology often fails us. In our very efforts to contextualize and label artistic movements, we can erase the nuance of real interactions.

“In art history we have such a tendency to want to box things and people in,” she says, “and it leaves out some of the lineages and the variety that occurs as people meet, and artists work together and learn from other artists.”



A postcard of the 'Rainbow House' at 908 Steiner St. in San Francisco that Peeples-Bright and David Zack lived in and painted in the 1960s. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

Devotion to practice

From the very start of her career, Peeples-Bright's work drew attention. With help from her parents, she and Zack purchased a Victorian at 908 Steiner St., adding their personal, eclectic touch to what became known as the Rainbow House. A 1968 San Francisco Chronicle story describes an exterior "painted in five different psychedelic hues" and an interior where "walls swarm with countless hand-painted animals." Peeples-Bright is pictured at the top of a ladder, grinning down in splattered clothes and a kerchief.

In 1971, after stints in Perugia, Italy and Regina, Saskatchewan as a professor's wife, Peeples-Bright returned to Northern California without Zack, a divorce imminent. She found refuge — and a temporary place to stay — at the Candy Store. (Only later did Peeples-Bright realize that Adeliza McHugh herself lived at the gallery, convenient for when Robert Arneson dropped by late at night wanting to talk art.)

Peeples-Bright found stability in her next marriage to Earl Peeples, whose investment career supported his wife's artistic practice. He died in 1999, and she married Bill Bright, Peeples' friend, shortly after. Bright died in 2015. "A man would have to be fairly special for me to take it on again," she says.

There are a lot of “lates” prefixed to people’s names as she talks about the past now: fellow Candy Store artists, friends and romantic companions. She misses having someone to go on longer trips with, to bounce ideas off of. She and Peebles made a conscious decision to not have children. “We made lists,” she says, of the pros and cons. “You know, we’ll be good parents. But he was working 12-hour days and I was making art.”



A collection of Peebles-Bright's hand-painted shoes. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

Evidence of that activity is dense: photographs of happy trips with her late husbands, flat files filled with in-progress works on paper and show announcements, her bedazzled potted plants. It looks back at her in the vibrantly rendered faces of all the animals, “beasties,” mermaids and people populating her art.

Is there anything she wishes she knew about this life back in 1962, when she took that first art class? Nope, she says – she wouldn’t want to spoil the process of discovery: “That would be kind of like opening a present.”

The real thing

The way she talks about the events of her life, both the accomplishments and losses, is relentlessly positive. Being an only child can be lonely, but it’s also “when you learn to sit around and doodle.” Yes, she divorced David Zack, but “we enjoyed it while it lasted.” Her openness to the world around her – and the inherent pleasure she takes in creating her work – is easily transferred to the viewer.

What if the island of Oahu was covered in ocelots and surrounded by beaming, topless mermaid Maijas (in a sea of penguins)? Her work is about expansive, fantastical, optimistic possibilities.



Peeples-Bright smiling in her home studio. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

“It’s these amazing utopian visions of the world that are divorced from humans entirely,” says Nidhi Gandhi, “and yet we see a utopian vision for humankind suggested within them.”

Parker concurs, noting that especially in recent years, he’s watched new audiences connect with Peeples-Bright’s commitment to her singular theme. When people see Peeples-Bright’s work, he says, he’s accustomed to a kind of dumb-struck awe. “It’s ‘I can’t believe I never knew about this. I can’t believe this exists,’” he says. “I think sometimes with a lot of these artists, there’s just kind of a right time and place. It’s just in the contemporary zeitgeist, her work just feels different now.”

In 1980, Adeliza McHugh, Peeples-Bright’s greatest champion, made a prediction to Sacramento Magazine. “It will take years for people to catch up to where she’s at,” she said. “Like Van Gogh and Gauguin and the great artists of the 1920s – whose work people will pay any price for today – Maija would create no matter who likes her work. Her art’s the real thing.”

In 2023, Maija Peeples-Bright shrugs off the idea of rediscovery, saying, “I was very fortunate all along.”