

Celebrating S.F.'s postwar art hub

Multi-venue show honors pioneering Dilexi Gallery

By Charles Desmarais

The history of art, like the history of war, is written by the victors.

No credible history of American art could ignore Abstract Expressionism, “The Triumph of American Painting,” as Irving Sandler titled his authoritative book on the subject. A credible case can be made for the seminal role of San Francisco artists, and particularly Clyfford Still, in that movement. Yet, New York had great artists, and many more of them, and it’s where the most successful galleries were in the post-World War II period, as they are now. As a result, Abstract Expressionism will forever be known as primarily a New York phenomenon.

Dilexi in the 1960s “was the place in San Francisco for contemporary art.”

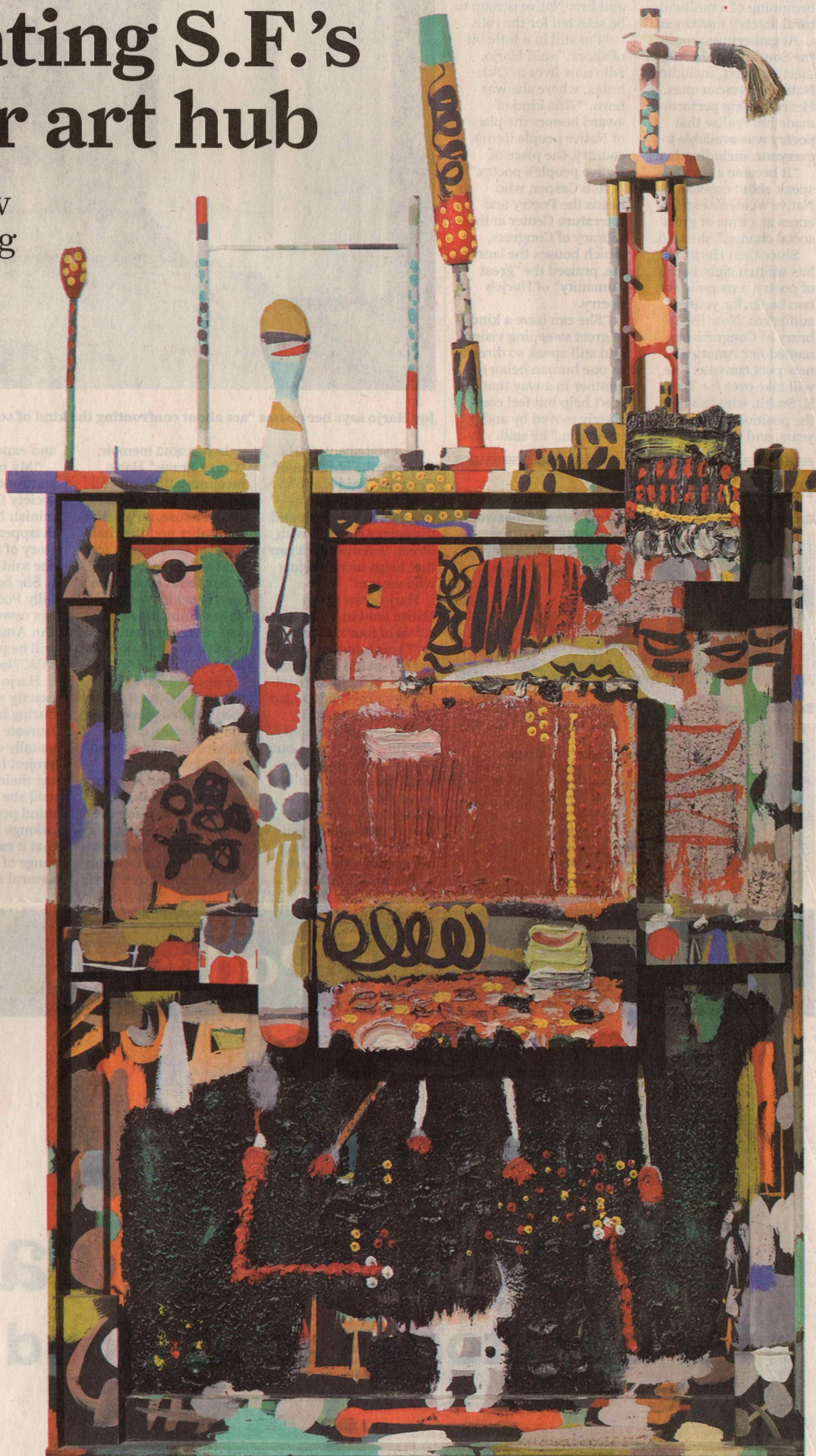
Robert Bransten, collector

In the 1950s and early ’60s, San Francisco and Los Angeles had artists, many of them innovative and exciting and ready to make waves. But those cities did not have art galleries

to speak of. Without a market and a financial imperative to make work in California, the artists mostly went their own way — either they moved, as Still did, or they evolved to suit their environment.

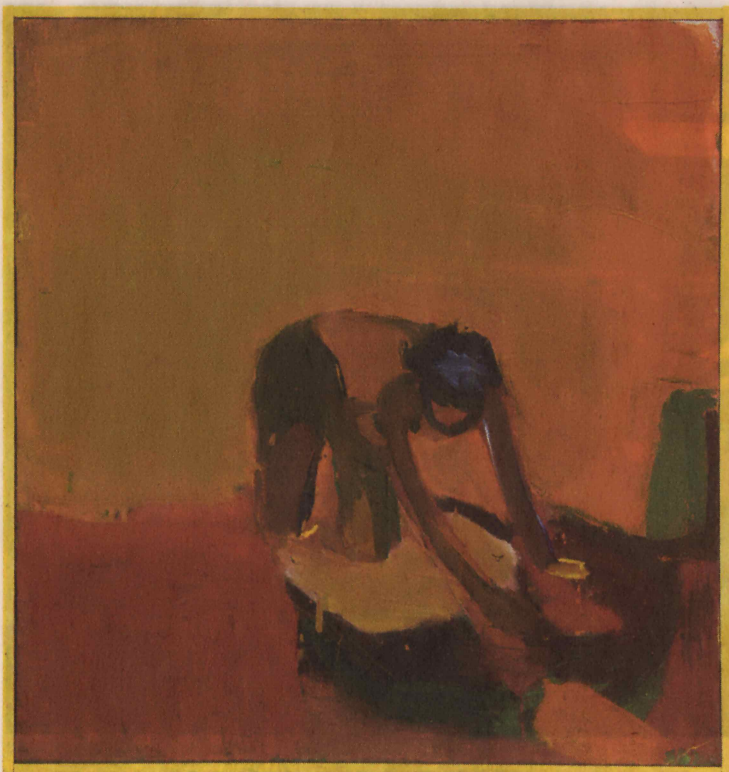
It’s almost as if the biological “island rule” applied to artistic careers, as well: Cut off from mainland competition, insular animals tend to become bigger or smaller than other individuals of their kind. That is how San Francisco became a hotbed of highly individualistic art, which cross-fertilized out of sight of the mainstream. It would be inaccurate to say that sales for such work languished; they simply never got a strong start.

One extraordinary exception in the art market of the day was
Dilexi continues on E3



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Roy De Forest’s “Concerning White Elephants” (1960) offers a glimpse of the artist’s freewheeling imagination and sure graphic intuition before that fateful turn to his better-known pictures of dogs.



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Joan Brown's "Untitled (Woman washing floor)," circa 1958, oil on canvas, 19 by 18 inches.

Dilexi Gallery, S.F. art history live on in show

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San Francisco's Dilexi Gallery. It was founded in 1958 by Jim Newman, who had earlier partnered in a Los Angeles venture with the pioneering curator and cultural impresario Walter Hopps. (Newman's friend and co-founder, Bob Alexander, left Dilexi within a year.) Right now we have a rare opportunity to view 23 works of the highest quality from the period, plus an enchanting portfolio of etchings — many of which were shown at Dilexi 50 or more years ago.

"Dilexi Gallery: The Early Years," at Brian Gross Fine Art, and "Fred Martin: Beulah Land," at Crown Point Press, continue through July 27. In addition, four Los Angeles galleries are participating in what is being called "the Dilexi multi-venue exhibition." Together, the series amounts to the most important chronicle of the gallery's achievement since a 1984 exhibition at the Oakland Museum.

Dilexi in the 1960s "was the place in San Francisco for contemporary art. There was nothing that competed with it," collector Robert Branstetter told *The Chronicle* in a 2018 Newman profile. Judging from the works at Brian Gross, we missed a lot.

A luscious abstract painting, circa 1959, by Robert Morris, who would later become famous in New York for his role in the development of minimalist sculpture, is a great battle of vaguely vertical and horizontal swipes. It's an almost animal thing, squirming but caged by the framed border.

Anyone who thinks Abstract Expressionism is merely undisciplined smearing would do well to study this work for half an hour.

Leo Valledor's "Groundwork" (1956) is an apt contrast, a glowing presence that might remind you structurally, though certainly not chromatically, of works by Jay DeFeo from about the same time. DeFeo herself is represented here by a sweet but minor work, "Landscape With Figure" (1955), that gives no warning of the explosive power she would unleash just a few years later.

Seeing the early works of artists we now think of as Bay Area masters is instructive. Roy De Forest's "Concerning White Elephants" (1960) gives us a glimpse of the artist's freewheeling imagination

and sure graphic intuition before he made that fateful wrong turn to his better-known pictures of dogs. Ed Moses' work "Rafe Bone" (1958) still sends off that charge of almost electrical energy that must be what first brought him to attention.

But it is a work called "October Drawing" (1955) by Sonia Gechtoff that most surprises. A surreal landscape that is a little bit reminiscent of Monet "Haystacks" and a lot anticipant of Anselm Kiefer, it's an unheard statement that seems apart from its own time.

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© 2019 Estate of Leo Valledor / Brian Gross Fine Art

Leo Valledor's "Groundwork" (1956) is a glowing presence that might bring to mind Jay DeFeo.



© 2019 Estate of Sonia Gechtoff / Courtesy Brian Gross Fine Art

Sonia Gechtoff's 1955 "October Drawing," reminiscent of Monet and anticipant of Anselm Kiefer, is a statement that seems apart from its own time.