

ESP Gallery: A Retrospective

In the early autumn of 1996, I was a recent arrival to San Francisco, a Midwest transplant and MFA graduate. Visiting galleries, meeting artists, and exploring my new surroundings became a daily routine. Welcomed by the creative, communal activity that transpired along the Valencia Street corridor in San Francisco's Mission District, I rented a small, unfinished storefront at 305 Valencia for use as an art studio. It was near a Santeria candle store, an auto repair shop and across the street from a housing project. I had never run a gallery or sponsored an art show before, but one's enthusiasm, idealism, and naïveté can change things.

ESP (Extra Significant Productions) Gallery opened in early December of 1996. My intentions were simple: to share that sunny storefront with San Francisco's emerging artists and allow them access to exhibition space. ESP's exhibition history is an account of a visual art community's creative practices during California's most recent, world renown art movement, The Mission School.

As ESP's founder and curator, I was inspired by other spaces that had found their niche in "The City." Small alternative galleries had begun to appear with increasing frequency early in the decade, each with specific goals that culminated in a thriving gallery scene, unique in the nation. The topography of San Francisco cradled these galleries within a fifteen block radius providing an alternative "crawl" route for San Francisco's art audience.

Galleries such as Four Walls, Scene/Escena and Build enthusiastically hosted exhibits during this period. Likewise, non-profit art centers like Southern Exposure, The Lab, and The Luggage Store opened their schedules to recent art school graduates. San Francisco was home to a tightly knit art community that reflected a generous spirit. Quickly, international media began to take notice.

Looking back, ESP's exhibition history seems "do-it-yourself" on both curatorial and artistic levels. The first exhibit showcased collages made by a local artist/curator, Darin Klein whose artwork utilized photographic illustrations from 1950s dessert cookbooks and rub-on lettering. In addition, his calligraphic, graffiti-inspired drawings on name-tag stickers, purchased at Office Depot, were exhibited. Similar stickers by Klein were found in less formal settings during this time, stuck to barroom walls and lamp posts throughout San Francisco.

It was no accident that another artist/curator was the inaugural exhibitor at ESP. Choosing Klein, co-curator of Scene/Escena, was an act of solidarity. More importantly, his art was a fine example of the earnest, intelligent work then being created. Like many S.F. artists, he worked with what could be borrowed, found, and taken with minimal investment. Darin often espoused Scene/Escena's ethos: "Begin with what you have." By trusting in my own vision for the gallery, ESP's aesthetic began to take shape.

During its first two years, many now accomplished artists had early exhibitions at ESP including Kehinde Wiley, Paul Sietsema, and Marc Swanson. These early exhibitors had free reign to present work showcased by the gallery's large, front window. Swanson's life-like sculpture of a large, night time, bat swarm in flight, a metaphor for the gay community dealing with after effects of the AIDS epidemic, was an example.

By its third year, ESP showcased regular thematic shows challenging the notion that big ideas

required museum spaces to accommodate them. Well-known artists like Chris Johanson, Alicia McCarthy, Xylor Jane, and Rex Ray, took part in group exhibitions. Artists gathered, expanded their social circle, and compared processes. Exhibits at ESP, like "TIME ZERO: Artists and Polaroid's" and one of the first sticker shows in the world, "STUCK: San Francisco Sticker Art," are examples. Photographers Tobin Yelland and Ed Templeton, now well-known for their depictions of skateboarding culture, exhibited in "PURE: Five California Photographers," a survey of contemporary photography.

"EROTIC: Unsolicited Works from the Archive," was a collaboration between ESP and the Tom of Finland Foundation in Los Angeles. Opening in 1999, it showcased artwork sent by amateur artists from across the U.S. to the Los Angeles headquarters of one of the best known erotic art collections in the world. It was the first time this specific, private collection of naïve or outsider artwork had been shown to the public. At that time, an exhibition with openly gay, erotic imagery, was not the norm, even in San Francisco. In the larger art world, an explicit, queer aesthetic was emerging, and it could be found on ESP's exhibition schedule.

The pressures of the dot com boom and subsequent bust took their toll on San Francisco and the community's new art movement. Artist support systems were impacted negatively by the arrival of the technology sector to the Bay Area. As a curator and artist, also employed as a property manager, I saw the city experiencing a profound change. New neighbors began arriving: established galleries and boutiques. The housing project was demolished for renewal. My decision to move to Los Angeles was encouraged equally by L.A.'s seemingly vast opportunity and the sudden changes on Valencia Street. A new city beckoned me.

ESP's final exhibit was a two-part survey of LGBTQ artists, "Prettytown: Queer Americana in San Francisco, Parts 1 & 2." A survey spanning a three-month period, "Prettytown" emphasized the hand-crafted, Folk Art influenced work by queer-identified artists. It celebrated the street vernacular of the Mission School with gender non-conforming creativity and became a swansong to San Francisco, a city that had welcomed my efforts on behalf of the creative community. The gallery closed later that summer of 2000.

I now think of ESP as a bridge. It connects the nascent, artistic output of a younger self to my current efforts remaining an active and authentic participant in San Francisco's vibrant art history.