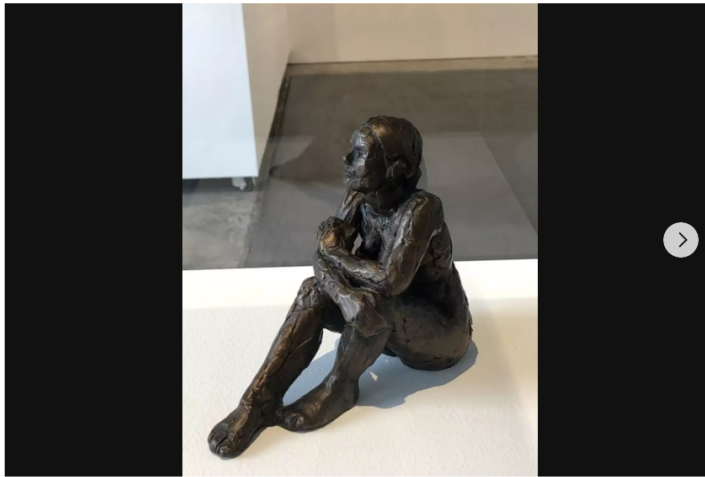


BAY AREA // NATIVE SON

Poets and artists once flocked to this lesser known S.F. arts community

By **Carl Nolte**, Columnist
Oct 12, 2024



A sculpture by Ruth Cravath is seen at the California College of the Arts gallery in San Francisco.
Carl Nolte/The Chronicle

If you've lived in San Francisco for a while, you know how things change. The city changes and then changes again. Nothing ever stays the same. And sometimes it changes back to what it once was.

People think of North Beach and Telegraph Hill as the center of art and writing in San Francisco — the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, the poets — but there was another center for the arts on Potrero Hill, both near to the rest of the city and far away.

And now there's a small show about art in the Potrero at the California College of the Arts gallery at 17th and Arkansas streets at the foot of the hill.

It's called Potrero Hill Perspectives and it is open Wednesday through Saturday through Nov. 2. It's free. It is about how art flourished on the hill and came back again.

The show is a mix: Paintings, drawings, photographs, a piece of sculpture or two, a bit of writing and a collage of life and of kids in the housing projects. All are produced by artists who lived and worked on the hill.

Potrero Hill is a San Francisco original, a neighborhood surrounded by industry, freeways and railroad tracks almost like an island. It grew to be what historian Kevin Starr called a "quintessential village on a hill." Starr should know: He grew up in a Potrero Hill public housing project.

Potrero Hill used to be a neighborhood of shipyard workers, merchant sailors, bus drivers and teachers. The houses were old and often ramshackle, the streets were steep and not all of them were paved. Housing was cheap.

The story goes that artist Henri Marie-Rose was able to buy a house on the hill with plenty of sunshine and good views for \$7,000. So artists driven out of North Beach by change and high rents moved to the hill. Even Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the North Beach poet laureate, lived on Potrero Hill.

But that was then. Not anymore. The median price for a house on Potrero Hill in September was \$1.6 million, up 4.5% from the previous month, according to the Redfin real estate website.

So the show offers a bit of what Jaime Austin, the show's curator, calls "documentary views of a moment of time in San Francisco."

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There is light and color: houses on a hill with open land just up the road in a 1920 painting by Lionel Edwards. A soft, almost hazy view of the north side of the hill by painter Charles Farr from 1965. Also, engravings of wooden hilltop houses by Charles Surendorf in the 1930s and sculptures by Ruth Cravath from a studio on the hill and the metal tools she used.

There are photographs by Minor White of workmen with jackhammers digging up a Potrero Hill street, the towers of a much smaller San Francisco in the distance.

White, one of the nation's premier photographers, lived and taught in San Francisco after World War II. He set out to photograph every bit of the city from the waterfront to the ocean in a series he called "City of Surf." It would have been a magnificent portrait of the city, part old San Francisco, part new. White made 6,000 negatives, but never finished the project.

Bob Hayes, who taught photography at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House, must have taken thousands of pictures himself.

A collage of his work is in the show. There's a single photo with dozens of pictures inside, all taken around the Neighborhood House: famous people of the day — George Moscone, Dianne Feinstein, Harvey Milk, Frank Jordan, O.J. Simpson, Willie Brown, Stevie Wonder, neighborhood leaders like former Supervisor Sophie Maxwell along with pictures of dozens and dozens of neighborhood kids.

Hayes's art was real life. Peter Linenthal, the director of the Potrero Hill Archives Project, remembers Hayes well. "Wherever he went, kids would follow him around and say, 'Take my picture! Take my picture!'" Linenthal said. "And he did and that explains the vibrancy of the pictures."

The exhibition is not just about yesterday's Potrero Hill artists. "It's for the artists who are here today," said Austin, the curator for the California College of the Arts. "Potrero Hill has a long legacy in the arts," she said.

She feels the California College of the Arts is continuing the story. "We have 1,300 students now, and 750 art students are living here today. 'Our students are the living legacy of those artists who worked here.'"

The college took over the old Greyhound bus repair and storage area nearby not long ago and has expanded since. A new campus facility opens in the Potrero Hill area on Oct. 19.

Carl Nolte's columns appear in The Chronicle's Sunday edition. Email: cnolte@sfchronicle.com

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Carl Nolte
COLUMNIST



Carl Nolte is a fourth generation San Franciscan who has been with The Chronicle since 1961. He stepped back from daily journalism in 2019 after a long career as an editor and reporter including service as a war correspondent. He now writes a Sunday column, "Native Son." He won several awards, including a distinguished career award from the Society of Professional Journalists, a maritime heritage award from the San Francisco Maritime Park Association, and holds honorary degrees from the University of San Francisco and the California State University Maritime Academy.

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