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Bohemian California and Political Dissent

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Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California. By Richard Cándida Smith. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. 560 pages. $35.00.

EVER SINCE THE GOLD RUSH, EARLY CALIFORNIANS WORRIED ABOUT THE state's geographical isolation and the kinds of adverse effects this might have on its high culture. The new inhabitants were, after all, transplanted easterners and midwesterners whose sense of elevated culture was bound up with old, or at least older, institutions, relatively recognized cultural producers, and an identifiable patron class that mediated debates about the fine arts. The anxieties led, for example, to the 1872 founding of San Francisco's Bohemian Club, which was comprised of journalists, novelists, painters, and poets, along with the enormously wealthy members of the Comstock generation and their newly found, *arriviste* pretensions. The Club was dedicated to the promotion of the arts and "good [male] fellowship." This pattern of collectivization and cultural promotion was to be repeated, with each new group proclaiming that its very existence was a sign that the state had overcome its unfortunate distance from the centers of high culture. The developing urban arenas were the new artistic centers, so it was argued, and its artist and patron members comprised the new cultural elite. But more often than not, these claims were followed by

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others immediately pointing to their speciousness. As late as 1928, a skeptical critic could protest, without too much worry of being contradicted, that "San Francisco is frequently proclaimed as an art center—but only in San Francisco."[1]

For most observers of California's art and culture, the real and imagined marginality of the state has been an impediment to more probing analyses. It has led to a number of familiar scholarly modes which tend to reproduce the same verdict of inferiority. San Francisco's 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, for example, is frequently understood as an overblown display of old world taste and culture, an apparent compensation for the city's real worries of being uncivilized. This assessment seems to hold despite the fact that expositions were notoriously overproduced affairs to begin with. As another example, the Bay Area painters known as the Society of Six are lauded because of their naïveté. As one art historian argues, their paintings are worth scrutinizing precisely because the Six were "innocent of theory, dogma, and establishment ambitions."[2] And perhaps most exemplary of all, the critical subtext has led to an apparent disjunction between California's art and culture before and after World War II. How do we account for the state's sudden, post-war flowering of ambitious and compelling art and poetry? The answer, until now, has been that we do not, at least if it means dredging California's pre-war culture and trying to make it the basis for some kind of renaissance. According to conventional wisdom, there was nothing really worth reviving.

Richard Cándida Smith's ambitious *Utopia and Dissent* is the first book to change this pattern. Smith argues that the pre-war culture not only was a foundation upon which truly daring art and poetry developed but, in fact, was a basis for the entire countercultural movement of the 1960s. Reaching this conclusion requires an intricate argument, and it leads Smith to consider the kinds of linkages between pre-war and post-war cultural institutions, the contentious character of bohemian subcultures, the various means by which these rather marginal groups reached public attention, and the complex interactions between late modernist artistic ideas and political dissent. Along the way, he discusses in detail such diverse practitioners as Lorser Feitelson, Helen Lundeberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, Wallace Berman, Connor Everts, Edward Kienholz, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Robert Duncan. The Beat writers Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg make cameo appearances; the painters Clyfford Still, Hassel Smith, Elmer Bischoff, and David Park receive useful, if somewhat passing, attention; the unjustly forgotten

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artist, Clay Spohn, is given a serious look and a much more central place in the state's art history; and so on. *Utopia and Dissent* is indeed a daunting work, ranging widely over the state's cultural terrain and taking risks in linking what have heretofore been understood as separate practices.

For Smith, bohemian California is best understood by the claims made for and against it and by how those claims can be related to larger intellectual and political debates. The task, as he puts it, is an "analysis of ideas and the influence those ideas had upon aesthetic practice and the conceptions of the relationship of self to society" (xix). Thus the book is as much an intellectual as it is a cultural history, and the seemingly diverse practitioners are tied together through an assessment of their positions on several familiar debates: the relationship of public and private life, the character and requirements of insulated communities, the questions surrounding gender roles in bohemian enclaves, and the role of art in communal life.

This kind of intellectual-cultural analysis has several notable advantages. For one, it sidesteps the conceptual impasse which plagues previous accounts. Smith does not worry, for example, if pre-war culture was or was not truly marginal. He is concerned with the claim itself, the reasons for it being made, its relationship with others of its kind, and the various effects it had on artistic and communal activity. Another advantage is that his discursive emphasis allows him to put to use perhaps the most abundant and readily available archival materials from the period—namely, oral histories and personal narratives. Indeed, much of his evidence rests on interviews, autobiographies, personal histories, letters, diary entries, and the like. One of the most problematic and yet truly interesting features of the book is Smith's struggle to control such an array of potentially unruly and untidy subjective sources. The egomaniacal Kenneth Rexroth, for example, is hardly the kind of person whose autobiographical account is to be trusted, especially when he casts himself as a vatic poet. And yet Smith concludes the same thing, though with enough critical distance on his sources and a healthy complement of competing voices to clarify his stance. One need only compare his assessment of Rexroth to Linda Hamalian's recent and fully adulatory monograph to recognize that there is a larger historical trajectory to which his conclusions are aimed.[3] Smith wants to know, for example, what the role of vatic permitted in a contest to define the public role of the poet.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is entitled "Modernism Transplanted" and is concerned with the kinds of awkward and self-

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conscious California re-workings of Modernist painterly and poetic models. As we learn, the transplantation was hardly a smooth one, compounded by the now-familiar worry and experience of isolationism. Lundeberg and Feitelson inverted the Surrealist project; Rexroth concluded that Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were too "full of indigestible learning" and avoided "the slightest hint of self-revelation";[4] Still came to loathe cubism and the "authoritarian implications" of the Ecole de Paris.[5] With high culture so tenuously sown to begin with, Modernism seemed to take hold in California as a negation of its more familiar forms. The upshot was that by the end of World War II, California (and the Bay Area in particular) had nurtured a particular kind of cultural environment, which was an odd nexus of ambition and repudiation, an investment in private, potentially anarchic experience over public, normative value, and a growing and institutionalized belief in a "cosmological-theosophical" (141) basis for art.

The second part is provocatively titled "Mythopoesis and Self-Narration," by which is meant a full historicizing of the Beat phenomenon and which is primarily concerned with its intellectual and ideological underpinnings. The kinds of nonconformist, deeply personal projects advocated by Rexroth and the pre-war cultural practitioners permitted a certain diversifying of "self-expression," severed, as California artists and poets were, from the demands of the marketplace and sustained by self-consciously and quite happily insulated art communities. Smith hovers between two argumentative modes here. The unabashedly gay eroticism of Ginsberg's "Howl," the prolonged and phallic maturation process in Kerouac's *On the Road*, the "de-gendered" (186) ambitions of Joan Brown's paintings, and the kabbalah-suffused notions of domesticity in Wallace Berman's wooden constructions are all linked together under the Beat rubric. But the Beats, as Smith wants to argue, could hardly be pigeonholed into an easy set of defining features (though they all emerged out of the pre-war environment), and one of the important tasks of "Mythopoesis and Self-Narration" is to reveal the disjunction between the complex and often contradictory practices and the media-construed, monolithic image of them. If we look at the public image of the Beats or the strange, hyperbolic claims concerning sexual liberation made in their name, we will most certainly lose our way; but if we temper these with the intellectual foundations, based on certain fetishized conceptions of individual freedom and private imagination, we can discover the common and historical ground of Beat practice.

The tension between multiple, private experience and public

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accountability is what animates much of Smith's various interpretations. Whereas the pre-war artists and poets described in Part One struggle to define a Modernist practice outside of public acclaim, and whereas the Beats described in Part Two retreat into a self-imposed cultural sanctuary for private and in-group experimentation concerned with individual identity (including well-known episodes of drug use), the third generation of California bohemians put the private and public into harsh but productive contact. The third section, entitled "Return to History," is the real payoff of the book, for *Utopia and Dissent*'s entire momentum is in preparation for the historical moment when California's bohemian subcultures are able to make the personal and the individual a public and publicly recognized value. The true transformation apparently happened in the mid-1960s, especially in the contentious legal debates surrounding the sexually explicit works of Everts, McClure, and Kienholz. The discussions were carried out under the demand for and against censorship, but as Smith shows, they were projections and articulations of much larger questions concerning public authority, normative behavior, and freedom of speech. The key is that the debates themselves tied these larger questions into a discursive framework suggested by the concerns of artists and poets. Thus by the time of the Vietnam War and the acknowledged and undeniable presence of the counterculture in political debate (especially with the poets Snyder, Duncan, and Denise Levertov as relatively popular leaders), bohemian California—the subculture of intense introspection and subjectivity—had provided a model and a set of terms for resistance.

The dust-jacket for *Utopia and Dissent* calls this a "landmark study," and with its interpretive and historical net cast so wide and plumbing areas generally reserved for the selective troller, the book is indeed a foundational account. This is not to say that readers will not find individual points with which to contend. Surrealism—that most shifting of signs—becomes a strangely solid and stable thing in Smith's hands. In the same way, the Modernist art and poetry which Smith sets the pre-war practitioners against seems more monolithic and rigid than is usually the case, especially for those working in the 1930s. In addition, to claim that a distinct pre-war California art took shape as a negation of Modernist art (but was still Modernist in its attention to the medium and to a highly subjective mode often based on sexuality and theosophy) might require further explanation. After all, some observers might find this a particularly suitable description of Modernist art's general interests, its repeated, self-proclaimed exceptions, and its voracious colonization. There is no doubt

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that others will find similar gristle, but these will probably remain minor points of debate against what will be acknowledged as a more important and usable structure.

Perhaps this is the place, then, for me to raise a few questions about the scaffold itself. The great power of the book is its ability to carry an argument about private and public life through some four-and-a-half decades of California art and culture. Smith clearly means for the private-public structure to be flexible, and while it serves as a framework within which the paintings and poetry are scrutinized, its specific terms—the ways in which private and public are characterized and debated—remain open to the contigencies of history. Thus the meaning of "public" for such first-generation practitioners as Spohn and Rexroth was inflected by New Deal politics and government intervention in cultural affairs. In contrast, the notion of "public" for Brown and DeFeo was constituted by a strikingly different set of terms which included the New York gallery scene and the private dealer-critic system. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the book is to produce a strangely monolithic discourse. The public and private come to mean so much, and ultimately come to combine so many different and potentially contradictory social experiences into a dual system of individual freedom and social responsibility, that they begin to act as catch-all explanations for a huge array of cultural practices. For *Utopia and Dissent*, nearly a half-century of art and poetry can only signify within an argument about private and public life.

A second concern is a more specific interpretive problem associated with the monolithic discursive framework. That is, the book tends to move quite rapidly, almost too quickly, from the art and poetry under scrutiny to questions of intellectual history—this, despite the detailed readings of several poems, paintings, and sculptures. And it is a problem apparent in the stated intentions of the book—the "analysis of ideas and the influence those ideas had upon aesthetic practice" (xix). For Smith, the ideas are prior, and the art and poetry often seem merely to give transparent form to a much more seminal and already developed intellectual debate. One obvious objection to raise is to say that intellectual questions tacit in the practice of art and poetry, especially Modernist art and poetry, are often worked out in conjunction with work on the medium. At the California School of Fine Arts, we are told, students and teachers shifted painting toward a "philosophical rather than a practical discipline" (87), by which is meant the very craft of applying paint. But it would be hard indeed to stand before one of Still's huge canvases and not be struck by the myriad,

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microlevel color and brush choices, the constant workings and reworkings, that obviously preoccupied the painter for weeks at a time. By suggesting this, I do not mean to return painting to some privileged or independent status—that has been the unfortunate legacy of some versions of Modernist art—but merely to put the facts and investments of painting back into some kind of dialectical or, better still, dialogical tension.

A third and final concern is about the actual transgressive potential accorded to bohemian California. Ultimately, *Utopia and Dissent*'s true test rests on its ability to construct these subcultures as productively and engagingly different and that somehow this difference possessed a subversive, political utility. Yet, so many of Smith's descriptions would seem to suggest the absolute conventionality of most of the bohemians themselves (who were almost all white, middle-class, and educated). During the Beat experiments, as Smith readily admits, most of the male poets conceived of themselves as the genius-creators who harnessed "phallic energy" (260); the women supported them. During Snyder's heyday as guru of a utopian community, he advocated an ideology of the family based on male heads of households "who based their worth on skill" and female housekeepers "nurturing those who enclose them" (386). Smith is certainly aware of the problem and is worried that his bohemians are merely exploring the "limits of bourgeois identity" (392). And he includes a concluding chapter on Robert Duncan as a metacharacter in his historical narrative. It is Duncan, according to Smith, who recognized the true limitations of bohemia's grand claims and who portended its political impotence. As Smith acknowledges, the multiple women's, ethnic, gay, and lesbian movements made much more striking headway in bringing about political change in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The aesthetic avant-garde, which had very little concrete to say about specific political matters, simply foundered in the face of real and directed activity.

Yet Smith wants to assign the original momentum for such identity politics to the bohemians. The discourse of the private, begun by the prewar practitioners and steadily nurtured by succeeding artists and poets, provided a foundation and a language for political dissent. The remaining question, however, is whether Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers, for example, or Malcom X's Organization of Afro-American Unity really required artists and poets in order to understand and articulate their most fervent demands for equality. Could it be, instead, that bourgeois America required the much more acceptable bohemians in order to become comfortable with the needs of the less culturally interesting? Perhaps, then,

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the historical trajectory of bohemian California is much less insulated and linear than is supposed—that it had in fact always possessed some kind of relationship, perhaps only imaginary and perhaps (because imaginary) artistically enabling, with the racially and economically oppressed.

These last questions are not meant to contradict or undermine *Utopia and Dissent*. I simply cannot think of another book which accomplishes or, for that matter, even attempts such an ambitious intellectual history of California's avant-garde. But the questions need asking nonetheless, since they are important to any historical study of the relationship between Modernist art and poetry and their mass appeal.

NOTES

1. Arthur Upham Pope, "A Museum Program for San Francisco," *The Argus* (Mar. 1928): 1.
2. Nancy Boas, *The Society of Six: California Colorists* (San Francisco, 1988), 10.
3. Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York, 1992).
4. Smith quoting Rexroth, originally in Kenneth Rexroth, ed., *The New British Poets: An Anthology* (New York, 1949), vii.
5. Smith quoting Still, originally in Ti-Grace Sharpless, *Clyfford Still* (Philadelphia, 1963), 4.

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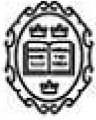

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California by Richard Cándida Smith

Review by: Julie Wilson

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levels. MAYO may serve as an example of how—echoing Navarro's words—"to recommit, reorganize, and remobilize."

ELAINE CAREY
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Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California. By Richard Cándida Smith. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xxvi + 536 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. $35.00.)

Like a skilled painter, Richard Cándida Smith fools the eye. Much of his work seems representational—perhaps just another art history of a particular community. Yet this view is deceptive, and upon careful examination, the fifteen essays that make up the book merge into a colorfully sophisticated theoretical pattern. Smith's argument pushes the reader deep into the picture plane of the California arts community. Only by getting very close to the work can one see the broad sketches of an extraordinary outline.

This is an important work for historians, not only because of its subject matter, but also because of its convincing methodology. While presenting an intellectual history of California's arts communities from 1925 to 1975, the book's essays (each of which can easily stand alone as strong pieces) show how subjective data such as interviews can be used to construct an exceptionally strong argument. Not incidentally, the work includes many illustrations that remind us of the importance of including discussions of visual language in assessments of culture.

Smith fleshes out a compelling argument for the influence of the avant-garde on society. He admits that the work was not envisioned as a conventional history; instead, he intended the book to stand as a careful analysis of ideas. It is impressive to watch how Smith answers the main question he poses—"how and why did the concerns of art communities enter the general culture as potent social forces"(p. xx)? He presents the work in three parts. The first explores the issue of Modernism being transplanted into a western state that, by 1925, was still considered a "backwater" with no cultural life of its own.

In the second section, Smith shows how some members of the postWWII generation used "mythopoetic" thinking to carve out a place for their personal beliefs and ideals opposing a hierarchical social reality. Part three highlights the different ways that this new thinking influenced political debates about issues such as freedom of speech, the Vietnam War, and the role of the American citizen. In the end, Smith frankly admits that the philosophies of his idealistic main characters resulted in a contradiction—at one and the same time their ideas reproduced and disrupted existing social hierarchies.

Some historians will undoubtedly leave the work disappointed by its lack of exclusive focus on chronology or periodization. Interestingly, Smith's resulting argument is strengthened by his choices. Something that the painter Hassel Smith believed seems to apply to Smith's strategy. "For art to generate a crisis in the viewer," he thought, "it had to challenge conventions of perception and cognition"(p. 107). Certainly this book operates in such a way. For the historian, it seems to unnecessarily muddy preconceived periods, and it undoubtedly strains the mental eye as we attempt to grasp its complexity of vision. Yet this is precisely how the work succeeds. It contains an admirable depth and breadth that makes reading each page a rich learning experience.

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