di Rosa Artist Interview Series

Wally Hedrick

By Leslie Goldberg

Wally Hedrick has been called "the quintessential funk artist." Yet, during an interview, he preferred to call himself a "politician." At his small studio in Bodega, California, several huge all-black canvases were propped up against the walls a protest, he said, against American military actions. One of the canvases had a tiny Iraqi flag in the middle of it.

Hedrick, who looks kind of like Santa Claus, with blue twinkly eyes and a long white beard, said that the FBI came calling recently, just to ask a few questions. "They figured out pretty quickly I was harmless and they left," Hedrick said. "I told them I was a veteran."

Hedrick, 74, who was in the Korean War, has often responded to world events with his art. During the '60s, he made a series of black paintings as a protest against the Vietnam War. He even created an 11-square-foot black room, complete with door -- another protest against the war.

The Bodega artist, who attended the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in the '50s, was at the center of the Beat movement. Hedrick's friends included poet Allen Ginsberg, as well as artists David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Bruce Conner and Joan Brown. He helped start the famous 6 Gallery in San Francisco, where Ginsberg first read "Howl," with Kerouac in the audience. Hedrick was married to artist Jay DeFeo, and he was living with her when she created her monumental "The Rose."

His own work, primarily painting, has been exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Oakland Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art, the Richmond Art Center and many other venues. He had a one-person show at San Francisco's M.H. de Young Museum when he was only 27 years old. He and his then wife, Jay DeFeo, were included in the "Sixteen Americans," a major exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1959.

Hedrick has three pieces up at the di Rosa Preserve: "Red Boots at the Brown Bag Corral"(1980) -- located near the living room ceiling in the house, near the balcony; "The Tree of Noledge" (1992), located in a hallway near the master bedroom of the house "$18.00 Giant Power Heidelberg Electric Belt" (1973), located in the main gallery.

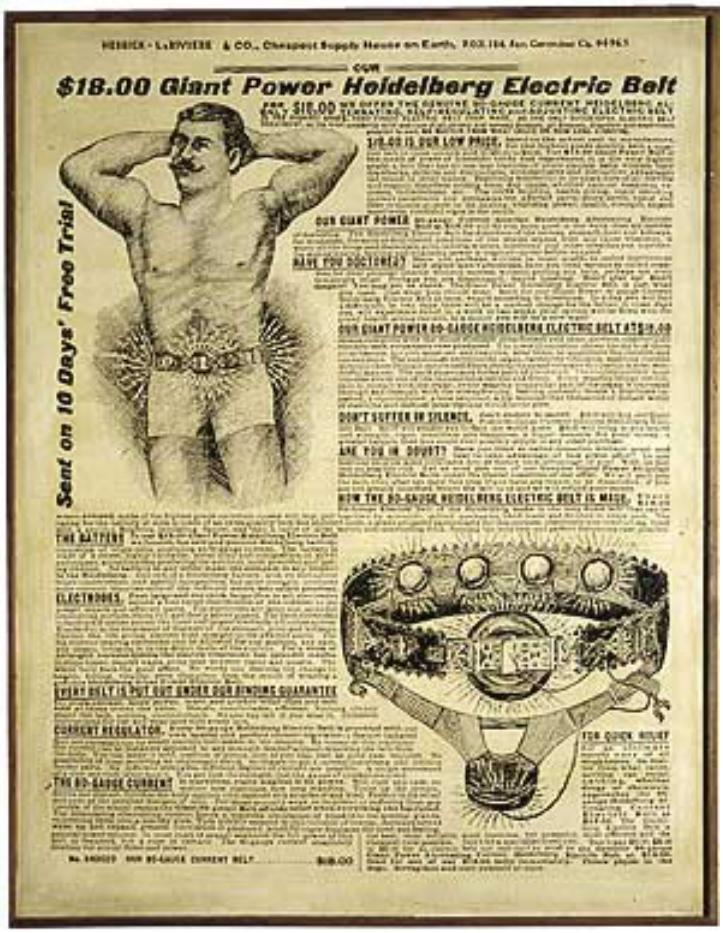
Hedrick has employed a variety of styles in his work, and Paul Klee has been considered an early influence. But Hedrick said he felt a strong affinity to the Dadaists, especially Marcel Duchamp; many critics have called Hedrick most essentially a conceptualist.

The artist divides his work into three categories: political, sexual and religious. Critics have also noted Hedrick's use of "appropriated images" in his art. His paintings are often raw and confrontational. But Hedrick said he had no intention to shock the viewer with his sexually graphic "Red Boots in the Brown Bag Corral.""It's real -- but I know Rene (di Rosa) put it upstairs by the balcony so that little kids wouldn't see it," Hedrick said.

His painting "$18.00 Giant Power Heidelberg Electric Belt" is classed as an "appropriated image," not unlike Duchamp's ready-mades. Hedrick photographed the Heidelberg Belt advertisement from an old catalog, then projected the image onto a canvas and painstakingly reproduced it.

The advertisement promises that the belt can do almost everything for the wearer, providing "healing, vitalizing power, health, strength, superb manliness, youthful vigor…."

"It is this absolute belief in technology," Hedrick said.



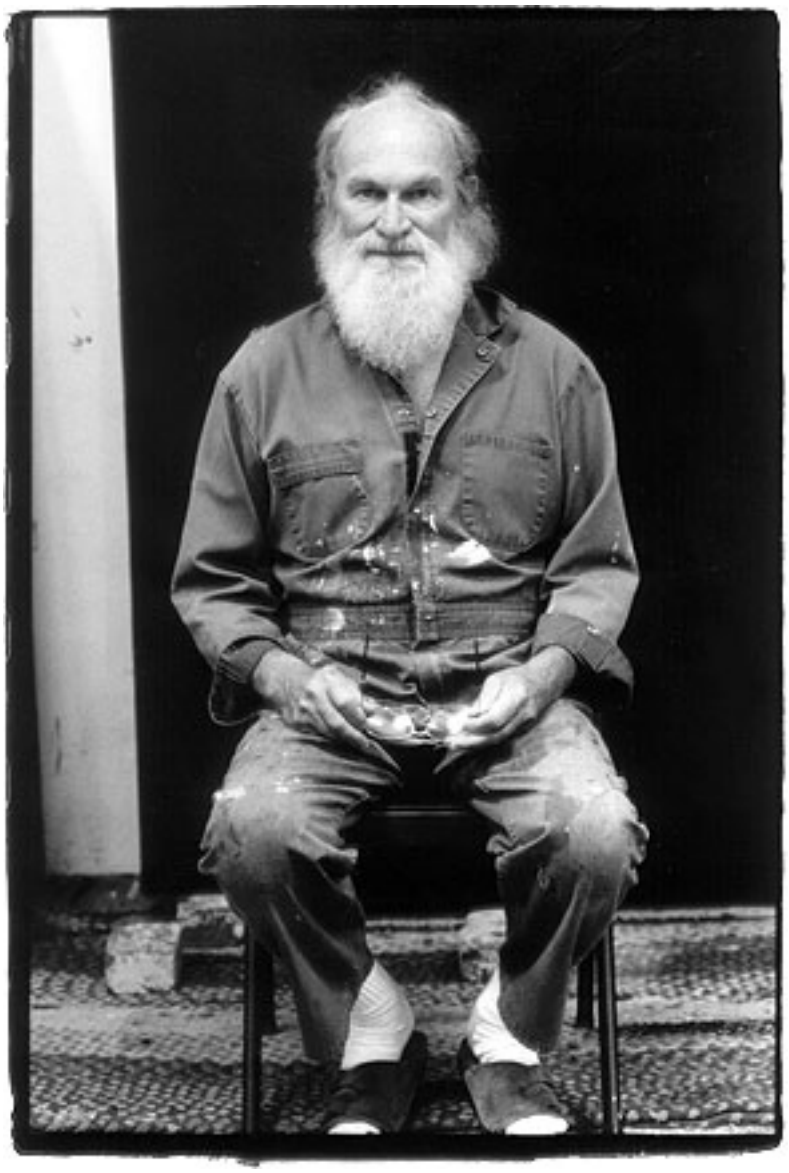
$18.00 Giant Power Heidelberg Electric Belt
1973, ink on canvas, 69-7/8" x 54"
Collection of di Rosa

Like Duchamp's ready-mades, Hedrick's appropriated images have not always been well received. "It wasn't that I was criticized for them," Hedrick said. "They just didn't take them seriously."

Yet Hedrick has never courted the Art Establishment. When he and Jay DeFeo were invited to the opening of the prestigious "Sixteen Americans" at the New York Museum of Modern Art, they declined.

Hedrick said he had no interest in the "Art Bizz" then and has no interest in it now. Asked when his career really started to take off, Hedrick let loose with a big laugh: "Oh, maybe next year."

I spoke with Hedrick at his studio on August 16, 2002. What follows are excerpts from our conversation



Family

I was born in Pasadena. My parents were a funny duo. My father was Pennsylvania Dutch; he was a liberal. My mother was a Southern belle, a Bible-thumping Baptist from Texas. My father didn't really trust Southerners. I don't know how they ever hooked up. Every morning at breakfast, we would re-fight the Civil War.

They came to Southern California, because they had this idea that California was this free and open place -- Hollywood and all of that.

Childhood

One of my earliest memories of Southern California was of the Meglin Kiddies. It was a school that tried to turn children into little Shirley Temples. You'd learn to tap dance and speak. They would teach you how to look at the camera and how not to look at the camera. It was awful.

School I went to Pasadena Junior College. I got in with a bunch of strange-o people who were into folk music. This was the '40s. Woody Guthrie was touring the country. Henry Wallace was running for president. But the school was basically run by two groups: the jocks and the girls who wanted to be Rose Queen. The art department was devoted to designing Rose Parade floats. To show you what a phony I am, one of my designs won and they actually built it.

My group of friends was called the Progressive Art Workers. It was made up of people who were interested in the arts. I was investigated by the FBI because of the Progressive Art Workers.

I remember the day that Wallace's vice presidential candidate came and spoke at the school. The jocks beat him up! The frat people applauded. We were horrified.

The Korean War

Me and my buddies, we thought we were real intellectuals, so we decided to beat the draft by joining the National Guard. We figured that all we had to do was show up and give them our name. They'd pay us too. But when the Korean War started up, the first ones they called was the 40th Infantry Division from Southern California. I ignored the notices they sent me, and finally the MPs came and took me away in a jeep. My parents just flipped out. They had a nervous breakdown.

I ended up going over there and things were bad. We replaced the 24th Infantry Division that had just been shot to pieces by the Chinese. They gave us guns and told us to go into these bunkers. I don't want to talk about it.

Choosing Art School

When I got out of Korea, I had the GI Bill. That was crucial. I knew about the California School of Fine Arts [the San Francisco Art Institute]. I had visited there before; that was when I met Clyfford Still. I didn't know who he was. Here I was, a young guy with a couple of canvases under my arm, and I walked into the patio at the school. There was this tall, thin gentleman. He said, "Hi, what've you got under your arm there?" And I showed him these two god-awful paintings. They were just terrible. He paused, and then he said, "Well, we might be able to help you."

I knew I wanted to go there, but at the time [before the GI Bill], I didn't have any money. My father was a used-car salesman and my mother was a housewife; they sure weren't going to pay for it. I mean, the idea of moving to San Francisco so I could go to college was just unthinkable. Nobody in their family had ever gone to college. But later, because I had the GI Bill, I knew I could do it.

Going North

I had packed up everything in my car and drove to San Francisco. I didn't have anything except for a few things and my car. I got here at about four in the afternoon. I'm driving up Franklin and I get up to Sutter Street; I see a sign saying, "Studios for rent." I didn't know anything about studios, except artists' studios. Anyway, I rented one. I was very lucky, I might've had to sleep in the park because I had nowhere to go. I didn't know anybody.

At the Art Institute

I don't believe that art schools train artists. At the Art Institute I was around people I stole ideas from. Maybe I've taken some of their ideas and pushed them a little further. You can't learn to be an artist.

The 6 Gallery

I helped start the 6 Gallery when I was a student with these people who had also come up from Pasadena: Deborah Remington, who is a painter in New York now; John Ryan, who is a poet; Jack Spicer, who is a poet; David Simpson, who is a professor at UC Berkeley; and painter Hayward King.

There were six of us. The 6 Gallery was located at 3119 Fillmore St. Now it's a hardware store. In San Francisco in the late '40s, early '50s, there was no venue for artists like us, or anybody really. There were a couple of galleries that showed contemporary work, but they were sort of holdovers from the Depression.

The 6 Gallery was very successful. People were starting to get recognized. Allen Ginsberg first read *"Howl"* there.

The Beatniks

It was a lot of fun, and I got a lot work done. I knew the term, but I never thought of myself as being beat. We were all reading Kerouac then. We began to see that maybe there was something going on, but personally I just sort of went underground. And I did what I did. I know it sounds like I'm dropping names, but Ginsberg was a very close friend of mine. We hung out together in North Beach. He didn't look then like he did later. He was wearing suits and ties and worked at a bank.

But like I said, it was fun. There were some of the best parties I ever went to, and sometimes we would take the party on the road, so to speak. Once, when the school was having financial difficulties, we made a casket, and the casket had a model of the school on top of it, and on the side of it, it said, "Art is dead." So the whole student body marched down to City Hall with it. We went right through the Financial District. It came off just beautifully.

The first demonstration against the Vietnam War was designed and executed in the

back yard of the Art Institute. We went to the Presidio and we faced soldiers with guns. This was '57 or so.

The Battle of the Figs

There were these two painting philosophies going on at the time; they were going at it. It was serious. They would have a faculty meeting, and it would end up in a brawl. If it wasn't Clyfford Still and David Park, it would be their surrogates.

Every year, there would be a softball game between the "Figs" and the "Creepy Crawlies." The Figs were the figurative painters and the Creepy Crawlies were the Abstract Expressionists. I couldn't be on either team. I was the umpire.

Meeting Jay DeFeo

Bill Morehouse was a teacher at the Art Institute and a friend of mine. He said to me one day, "There's this woman in Berkeley that I think you should meet -- Jay DeFeo." Turns out, she was the star of the Cal art department at the time. So I went over there and there was a bunch of lumber that had been delivered to her doorway. The bill was attached and I thought that I would just collect the money. So I rang the bell and she leaned out the window and when I saw her I decided that I didn't want to do that.

So I said, "There's some wood down here, do you want me to bring it up?" And she said, "Sure!" So I threw the wood over my shoulder and went up there. I said to her, "Well, I'm not actually the delivery guy." And she said, "Well then, who are you?" And I said, "Bill Morehouse sent me." And she said, "Who's he?"

So we got to know each other. And eventually I just stole her away to San Francisco and we got married.

"The Rose"

I was living with her when she painted "The Rose." I built the stretcher bars that it's on. It was an experience. A lot of people have asked me about that painting. Initially where the points come together, the center, was at her eye level. It was sort of like a mandala. But it's centered on her; she was where the perspective disappeared. The eyes were centered on infinity. That's my interpretation; she never said that. Actually, we never talked about it.

The paint she used came from the old Bay City Paint Company. And we used to buy it by the truckload. It came in gallon cans, four gallons to the case, the same oil paint they used for billboards. I used to carry it up the stairs for her. She used Pro white, which means it was a mixture of titanium, lead, white and flake white. And it was cheap.

She used to smoke two or three cigarettes at once and with all that lead paint all over her hands it went into her lungs. And I used to tell her not to do that, but it didn't do a bit of good. Luckily lead is now illegal in California.

When she finished the painting that was the end of us. We had to tear off the front of the building to remove it. The landlord just went bananas. As soon as he saw the condition of her studio -- there was paint a half a foot deep on the floor -- he raised

our rent by a factor of 10. And we couldn't afford that. And so we had to leave after the building was ripped up. And Walter Hopps, who was a friend and a supporter, had the building put back together -- I don't know where he got his money.

To me that painting was just a white elephant. It practically destroyed my life. (*Hedrick and DeFeo divorced. She later died of cancer in 1989.)*

Supportive Women

There have been several people in my life. Jay was one of them. My son's mother was another. Catherine Conlin (Hedrick's current partner, nicknamed Wiggy) is one of them. And they sort of run in 10-year cycles. The '90s was one of them. Two thousand is Wiggy. These people helped me. If you don't have some sort of support, it's hard to do stuff. Each one of those people were great people.

Art Career

My career has never really taken off in the usual sense. I just couldn't take New York seriously. When Jay and I were in that big show at the New York Museum of Modern Art with Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg and those famous people, they sent us tickets and said, "Come to the opening, we'll put you up and show you New York." I sent a representative. We didn't want to go to New York; we hated the place. We thought it was arrogant.

I don't think of this as a profession; I'm a used-car salesman.

Artistic Process

I don't believe in this European notion, "The materials got me -- I went to bed and I woke up and the painting was there." Jackson Pollock is a perfect example of somebody who gets loaded and paints, and that's fine. I understand how that could happen, but for me that's an alien idea. I think the mind is more important than the heart. I like control; I like using one's mind to make decisions.

I'm a politician. I'm trying to make these paintings do what politicians should be doing.

Craft

I have contempt for style. People who have gone to professional art school should have control over a variety of styles. If I have something to say I think I have the skills to do it. I can paint with a 000 brush as well as a house-painter brush. I know about color; I know what color can do, and I know what color can't do.

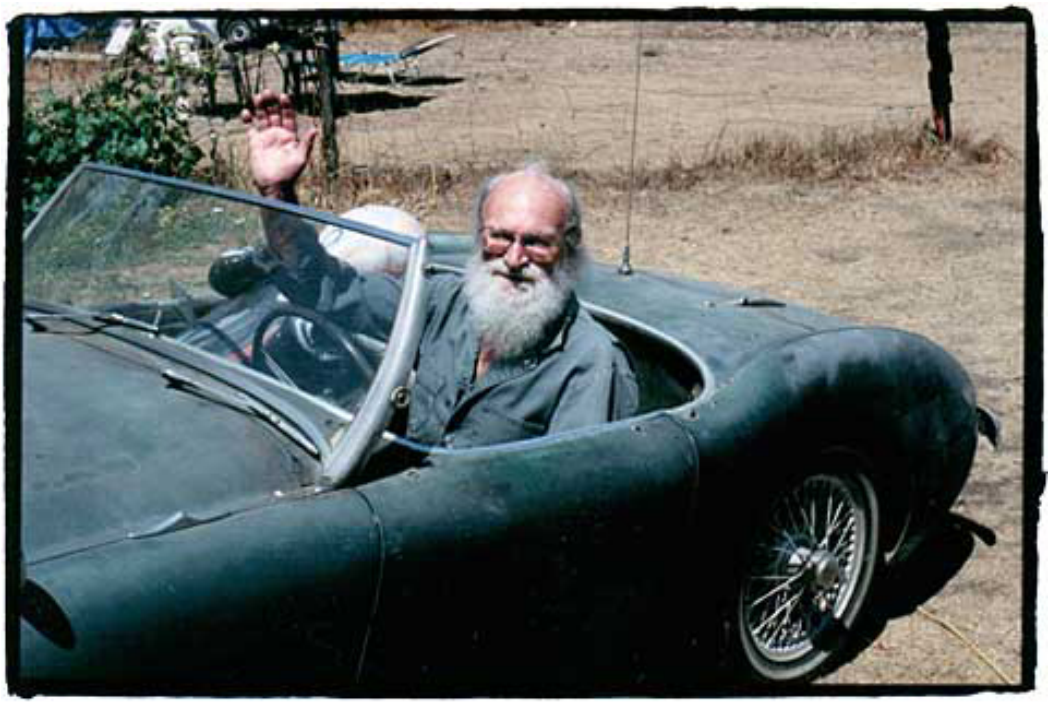
Color

Color is really a superfluous element in most paintings. It isn't used except to titillate the eyes. The lack of color is an important thing. It's what you paint out that counts. There is no such thing as taste, except in middle-class designery.

Art as Political Protest: Hedrick's Black Paintings

When 9/11 happened I knew we were going to have a fascist state in the United States and we were going to go to war. And if I have one fundamental conviction, it's

that I do not want Americans killed, or anyone killed, for that matter. I don't want young men and women sent to war by old men who aren't capable of doing anything else besides becoming senators or presidents. I don't use black oil for no reason.



The Art Business

It's not that I don't want to sell my paintings, it's just that people who can afford them don't deserve them, and people who deserve them can't afford them. So I give them away to people who deserve them. And sometimes they give me recompense. If I know they're going to get a good home and not be stacked up in the barn, it can sometimes be handy. I don't do my work for Western culture. (Many of Hedrick's paintings are owned by museums and individuals across the country.) If I could afford it, I think I would buy some of them back.

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5200 Sonoma Highway Napa, California 94559 • 707.226.5991