

Perception is Everything

Japan has long designated previously unsung heroes or heroines in the arts or crafts as Living National Treasures. Perhaps we should have such a program here in North Beach, certainly a hot bed of artistic creativity. My first nomination would go to Marcia Clay, artist, writer and teacher who has lived in the neighborhood for more than 27 years.

I first met Marcia when she was a 9-year-old blonde brat who lived with her mother Anita in the Haight-Ashbury. Anita Clay Walker, a divorced single mother, was from Kansas City. A would-be writer, she was encouraged to come to San Francisco by the Kansas City novelist Evan Connell. She picked up her three kids and her manuscripts and moved here. Later I met her at the Monterey Jazz Festival. She married impresario John Kornfeld who presented concerts, recitals and other performing arts programs in San Francisco. Anita Kornfeld went on to publish two novels--the autobiographical *In A Bluebird's Eye* and the highly successful saga of a California winemaking family, called *Vintage*. Today she lives in Palm Desert with her husband John, sells real estate and is writing once more.

Marcia Clay came back into my life in the 1970s when San Francisco writer Alexander Beshner and I worked together for awhile. Beshner lived near me in North Beach and wanted me to see his wife's oil paintings, watercolors and etchings. "What's her name," I asked? When he told me it clicked. I went to the couple's flat and wound up becoming a long-time admirer of Marcia and her work. Alexander "Sasha" Beshner and Marcia were married for about two years and a son, Nicholas, 22, a student who now lives with his mother in her cluttered North Beach flat.



North Beach artist Marcia Clay's oils, watercolors and etchings have been shown worldwide.

As I write this Sketch I glance from time-to-time to a nearby wall on which hangs a large self-portrait of Marcia that I purchased from her in 1979. It's an etching, a nude study called *Day Dreaming*. Marcia was born with cerebral palsy and that left her a somewhat canted, saucy look that comes through in this and other self-portraits. The disorder also gave her an assertive, slightly off-kilter gait, much like a two-year-old filly on her way to the starting gate that already knows she is going to win the upcoming race. Marcia Clay has that kind of buoyancy and confidence in herself. She's the eternal optimist with a broad and friendly smile. "I even enjoy my bad moods," she says.

In 1968 when she was 15 Marcia skipped out midway in high school and went to France to study art at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Brittany. When she returned to California a few years later she stopped into an art store to have one of her paintings mounted and framed and was "discovered" if you will, by a curator who gave her a one-person show at the de Saisset Museum in Santa Clara. She was 17 and with her Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts classes added to her school record here she was granted her high school diploma. And, to continue the horse race metaphor, she was off and running.

Today, she has a Bachelor's degree in fine art and a Master's in creative writing, both from San Francisco State. In addition to her career as an artist, she has been an English composition instructor at USF for ten years, works as a French translator and has found time to write two autobiographical novels now making the rounds of publishers. One concerns a young girl growing up with cerebral palsy; the other is based on her life as an art student in France.

She draws inspiration and themes largely from North Beach -- street scenes with Chinese and Italian children, their mothers and grandparents. They interact in Washington Square, at outdoor markets, flower shops and playgrounds. Many of these have sly, humorous and frequently poignant, aspects. Other work depicts North Beach interiors, bedrooms, kitchens, restaurants and coffeehouses, with opulent figures brimming with life. Then there are her self-portraits -- frequently edgy and sexy. "They all go through my perception of the world and of me as I see myself," she says.

Marcia's work sells well here and abroad. In reviewing an East Coast one-person show, the *Washington Post* described her as "a prodigious talent." Her paintings jump out at you with rich, deep color and movement. In my view her black and white etchings sizzle with what legendary photographer Henri-Cartier-Bresson described as his seemingly random but exacting approach to the photographic art he identified as -- "The Decisive Moment." But Marcia's work is not photographic. It reveals a distorted realism skewed by her highly selective imagination. See what you think.

What keeps Marcia Clay in North Beach? "I love the cultural mix; the foreign influence, Italian, Asian," she says. Marcia's oils, watercolors and etchings have been featured in major galleries in France, on the East Coast and here in California. She has had one-person shows' at Enrico's on Broadway and at the Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville. You can take a look at her work at www.marciaclay.com