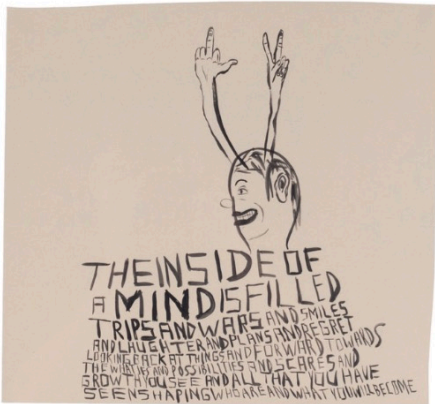


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Prickly but Puppyish in San Francisco

5 Artists in 'Energy That Is All Around: Mission School'

By Ken Johnson
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Chris Johanson's "The Inside of a Mind" from the early 1990s. Courtesy of the artist, Collection of Mariallidia Marcotulli, Bolinas, Calif.

Youth, they say, is wasted on the young, but it wasn't on the five artists featured in "Energy That Is All Around: Mission School," an exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery that bristles infectiously with youthful urgency.

The artists — Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen, Barry McGee, Alicia McCarthy and Ruby Neri — were all born between 1967 and 1970 and came of age while living in San Francisco's Mission District when it was still a low-rent neighborhood, in the 1990s on the eve of the first dot-com boom. Mr. McGee, Ms. McCarthy and Ms. Neri were students at and then graduates of the San Francisco Art Institute, while Ms. Kilgallen, who died of cancer in 2001, had moved to the area after earning her bachelor's degree at Colorado College. Mr. Johanson didn't attend college or art school. Bonding as friends within a convergence of predigital scenes — punk music, skateboarding, graffiti, queer politics and zine publishing — they shared penchants for funky cartooning, offbeat social satire, quirky abstraction, folk art and old-fashioned graphic styles. They favored found, roughly used materials to paint and draw on and make sculpture out of. Their work is simultaneously upbeat and downbeat, animated by both puppyish

enthusiasm and prickly negativity. Though not a collective, they shared enough to warrant a group label, and as they became celebrated in San Francisco and beyond, the critic Glen Helfand's coinage stuck: the Mission School.



An untitled work by Margaret Kilgallen from 2000. Estate of Margaret Kilgallen and Ratio 3, San Francisco

Organized by the independent curator Natasha Boas for the [San Francisco Art Institute](#), where it appeared last year, the exhibition presents nearly 130 paintings, drawings and sculptures dating from roughly 1990 to 2013. Works by the five are intermixed throughout so that at first it's hard to tell which are whose without a checklist. The four artists who are still alive have gone separate ways since their formative years, but Ms. Boas's selection of later works tends to affirm the group's early commonality of vision.

Here's a rough guide to the differences.

Mr. Johanson's acidly comical drawings and paintings feature images of people crudely rendered as if by a child. They emit speech bubbles expressing dopey, angry, politically irritated and self-absorbed thoughts. In "Dome," a man standing outside his dome house in

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the woods soliloquizes: "I am really glad that I made the decision to get away from all the head trips compacted together so intensely. I feel a little more freedom here. I can breathe better and don't use my inhaler as much anymore."



An untitled work by Ruby Neri from 1994.
Courtesy of the artist

Mr. McGee is best known for cartoon images of droopy-eyed men, young and old, drawn precisely in high-contrast black-and-white on all kinds of surfaces, frequently on glass bottles. These depressed, possibly homeless and alcoholic fellows represent a population left behind by the forward rush of modern economic times. Mr. McGee empathizes.

With a subtly feminist attitude, Ms. Kilgallen drew and painted cartoon images of oddly solemn women who seem to belong to the 1920s and '30s. Some represent types of female independence: "Surfer Girl," for example, a black-and-white drawing of a slender young woman in a '20s-style swimsuit and bathing cap riding a wave. Others, like those in a group of drawings mixing images of women and trees, play on more timeless, mythic associations.

A latter-day surrealist and the most versatile draftsman, Ms. Neri drew and painted horses, dinosaurs, advertising signage, male and female nudes, and other images in crude and refined ways, creating streams of restless, disjunctive consciousness. And Ms. McCarthy has been the most invested of the five in abstraction. Her colorful paintings and drawings of radiating zigzags and interweaving lines and stripes are sensuously handmade but feel as if they are animated by some sort of transpersonal psychic energy.

As Ms. Boas notes in her informative catalog essay, these artists were influenced by San Francisco's mid-20th-century art and literary history, which includes [Bay Area Figurative Art](#) of the 1950s — a West Coast alternative to Abstract Expressionism — and [the Beats](#). It strikes me as significant, too, that all five were born during or just after the euphoric peak of the hippie counterculture and at the start of a darker, less hopeful time. So it seems that in many ways they've been dealing with and in some ways resurrecting the youthful, utopian impulses of their parents' generation, albeit with a mordant, less optimistic edge.

The show's title is apt. It comes from a 2011 painting by Mr. Johanson in which multicolored letters spell "Energy That Is All Around." I thought it was a line from a Beatles song, but the closest words I could find were these from a 1967 [interview](#) with John Lennon: "You can be aware of your energy and all the energy that's around you. All the energy is God." Mr. Lennon was saying something he sincerely felt; in Mr. Johanson's case, it's ambiguous. He may really believe his painting's words or, in the style of the television series "Portlandia," he may be satirizing New Age sentimentality. I think he's of both minds, and I sense such a divided consciousness in the four other artists, too — a quietly painful split between belief and doubt. It gives the show a poignant resonance.

"Energy That Is All Around: Mission School" remains through July 12 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; 212-998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart.