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Pritikin, Renny, "Beth Van Hoesen and Koak @ Altman Siegel," *Square Cylinder*, January 20, 2023

Beth Van Hoesen and Koak @ Altman Siegel

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by Renny Pritikin

If humor operates by introducing unexpected twists of thought, so, too, does curatorial practice, particularly when it involves juxtaposing disparate bodies of work. Claudia Altman-Siegel achieves this with her gallery's current pair of buoyant shows in which the drawings of Beth Van Hoesen (1926-2010) appear alongside those of an artist who goes by the name Koak. From Van Hoesen's estate, Siegel selected a set of portrait drawings of San Francisco street characters called *Punks and Sisters*; Koak is represented by mannered portraits of young women who I suspect are much like herself. Though occupying opposite ends of the spectrum—from the imaginary to the documentary—the two shows find common ground in portraiture created through the exercise of interpretive freedom.

Van Hoesen lived in the Castro district of San Francisco for almost 50 years; she was part of a circle of post-WWII Bay Area artists that, while not part of the Beats, nevertheless included many equally talented, if lesser-known, figures: her husband Mark Adams, Theophilus Brown, Gordon Cook, Wayne Thiebaud and others who, for decades, held a weekly drawing workshop. Though largely unfamiliar today, Van Hoesen was, in her time, regarded as a master printmaker, with works in dozens of major museum collections, many monographs and two retrospectives. While a quick online search reveals photorealistic depictions of animals, the current show focuses on images made late in Van Hoesen's life, when her drawing group would invite interesting-looking people off the street to pose for them. Culled from her immediate environs, they evince an abundance of queer style, taken to extremes in portraits of



Beth Van Hoesen, *Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, graphite on paper, 20 1/8 x 16 inches

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several members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a drag activist group famous for donning nun's habits.



Beth Van Hoesen, *Self Portrait*, 1980, graphite, gouache, ink on paper
11 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches

A 1980 self-portrait, one of 18 small-to-medium-sized works, a stunner in graphite, gouache and ink, steals the show. Measuring just 11 x 11 inches, it shows the artist from the shoulders up, looking to the left. Her straight black hair is severely cut at the jawline, making a dramatic swoop across a picture dominated by black and sepia, contrasting sharply with the subject's pale skin. Most of the other drawings were made between 1982 and 1994. However, two outliers from 1972 stand out. *Pat* and *Pat Drawing II* show the subject in a hippie-style outfit with a large torus of frizzy red hair. Her face, rendered in a simple colored pencil line, resembles that of ladies in Elizabethan paintings.

Bill (1984) shows a face in profile, a long nose prominent over a slightly protruding jaw; he looks pretty, young and vain. Van Hoesen

captures his well-coiffed hair in precise detail, swept back on the side, brush cut on top with a lick falling onto the forehead. *Waiyde* (1988) depicts a young man in profile from the shoulders up, dressed in a black leather jacket. The contrast between the two images is a study in the semiotics of dress: nude vulnerability versus icy rough trade.

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Koak, an artist new to me, seems destined for a notable career. Her exhibition, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*, somehow manages to whip together the title's sense of emergency with the aesthetics of Art Nouveau (elongated and curling flora and fauna) and a touch of mid-century pop a la Disney to create a rousing style all her own. *California Landscape #1*, measuring 6.5 x 10.5 feet, dominates the gallery.

Describing it as a burning panorama doesn't do it justice; an entire natural system writhes and suffers. The artist sketched the image with charcoal gathered after a California wildfire and then filled out the piece with flashe (a heavy opaque paint) and acrylic.

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California Landscape #1, 2023, flashe and acrylic (with underpainting sketch in charcoal from the California fires) on linen, 79 x 118 1/2'

A suite of three 9 x 7-foot paintings meditates on the nature of windows, that is, the process of looking at the world, framed literally by architecture and metaphorically by consciousness. They're also about the modernist debate over the character of representation: are paintings (or photographs) windows or surfaces? In all three, abstracted female nudes peer out of (or try to) climb through a window. In *En Garde*, painted orange-red, she gets one leg out, possibly fleeing a fire. *Façade*, done in lemon-yellow, shows the subject blithely watching an approaching blaze. *Promenade*, executed in pale blue and without incendiary elements, has her sitting on a window sill, cruelly grabbing at a passing bird, its egg-laden nest visible in a nearby tree.

Self Portrait w/Flowers proffers the self as a cracked vase of flowers, leaking from every crevice in elegant, comedic arcs of water. Like a life at midspan — Koak's — the flowers are unfinished, and the details of her face are subordinated to keeping a leaking "ship" of self afloat. *Bather* and *Sun Dour*, two tabletop bronzes, refine some of Koak's ongoing motifs: the stylized nude female form and mannered depictions of flowers.

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L to R: Promenade, Facade, En Garde, all 2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, and graphite on canvas, 108 1/2 x 84 inches each

Other reoccurring images, such as crocks and cats, further knit the show together. One such feline figures dramatically in one of the most unusual and effective works on view: *Parenthesis*, a small graphite-and-casein drawing in which a baby sleeps on a chaise longue with a predatory cat-like demon peering down at it. For this artist, human vulnerability and the threats posed by our degradation of nature are facts of life.

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Beth Van Hoesen: "Punks and Sisters" and Koak: "Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)" @ [Altman Siegel Gallery](#) through February 25, 2023.

Cover image: Koak: *The Parenthesis*, 2022, graphite and casein on fawn rag paper, 8 x 10 inches.

About the author: Renny Pritikin was the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco from 2014 to 2018. Before that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. The Prelinger Library published his most recent book of poems, *Westerns and Dramas*, in 2020. He is the United States correspondent for *Umbigo* magazine in Lisbon, Portugal.