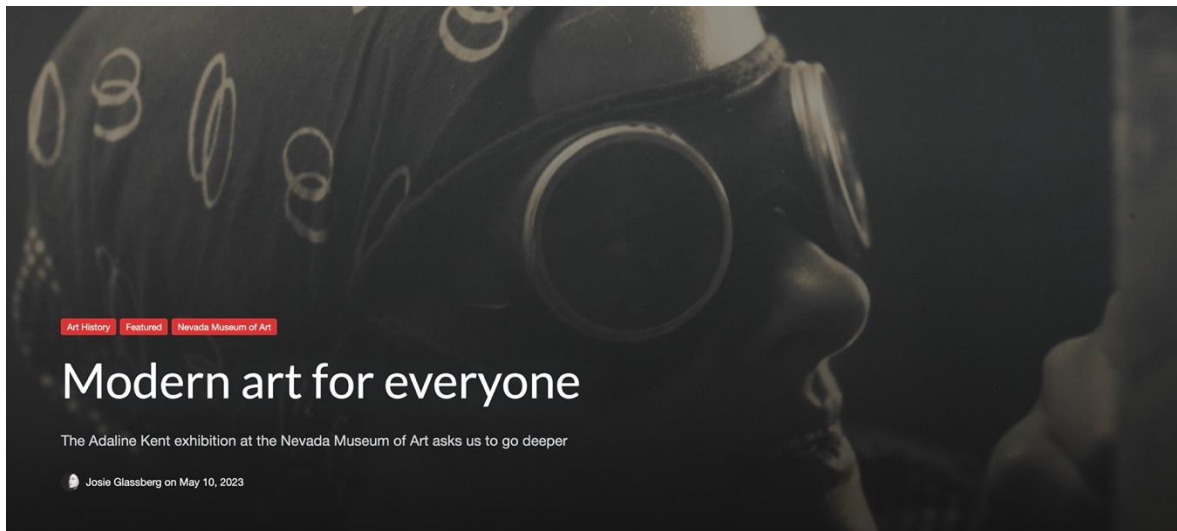


# Double Scoop

## ARTS IN NEVADA

Glassberg, Josie, “Modern art for everyone,” *Double Scoop*, May 10, 2023



Sometimes an exhibition is about what the museum says it's about and sometimes it's about how the artworld shows artwork. I have no problem criticizing the Nevada Museum of Art when they punt on the latter, but don't like to assume they will. Over the years, my remarks either stand up to scrutiny or they don't, but one thing I can always count on is that I will forever question which contexts are worth mentioning (and which are not) in an account of the work.



Adaline Kent in her studio, 1930

In the museum's latest retrospective on Adaline Kent— titled *Adaline Kent: The Click of Authenticity* — new NMA Senior Curator of Contemporary Art Apsara DiQuinzio displays an instinct for what is important in re-introducing an overlooked artist to a new audience. Here, DiQuinzio strikes a balance between artist and object by providing context for Kent's life and the midcentury era in which the work was made without overly interfering with the audience's direct experience of the paintings and sculptures. Notably, DiQuinzio avoids the temptation to inject an unnecessary presentism into a body of work that is best seen on its own terms.

This is not easy to do, but because Kent is largely controversy-free, the museum steers away from political discussion while still acknowledging that Kent came from money and married into Bay Area art royalty. While this no doubt contributed to the artist's success, it does not take away from the need to engage with Kent's work given its enduring interest or Kent's life given its “click of authenticity” — a phrase taken from one of Kent's poems.

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"Wellspring," 1945

This elevated sense of who Kent was as an artist is accomplished through all the usual tricks: loosely chronological sequencing of the work, old photographs, glass-case memorabilia, an exhibition monograph, and lots and lots of wall text.

Artworks that range from pen and ink drawings and hydrocal paintings to all scales of abstract sculpture attest to the stuff that Kent might be (poetically) made of: granite and plaster, Modernist sensibilities, and an infinite impulse to live on.

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"Lighthouse for Birds," 1956

Patterns emerge as Kent's sculptures and paintings depict the same sloping curves on different vessel- and figure-like shapes while fast, familiar lines swerve like acrobats before settling into near stillness. Symbols of infinity vibrate in two dimensions and open up like caverns of deep time in three. The artist's presence seems to multiply as you go further into the gallery.

Then, quietly, a reversal. Though most viewers who visit the exhibition are aware of Kent's tragic death (she died in a car accident in 1957 on the Pacific Highway at age 56), it takes the easy nostalgia of home videos to invert the artist's presence into a felt absence. Played on a loop in a dark side-gallery, the film footage taken by Kent and her husband (the artist Robert B. Howard) shows scenes from the couple's frequent visits to the High Sierras and California coast, zooming in on falling snow, close-ups of meadows, and tree roots creeping through granite rock. In one video, a sphinx moth visits a field of flowers. In another, Kent rides a horse down a mountain.

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"Figment," 1953

This sense of cut-short trajectory is never more pronounced than in the final gallery, where Kent's larger sculptures are given more breathing room, standing like monuments to strange truths and the naive idea that we can know them. With titles like "Finder," "Presence," and "Figment," Kent's mysterious forms belie a formalism that is no longer fashionable, but still fresh.

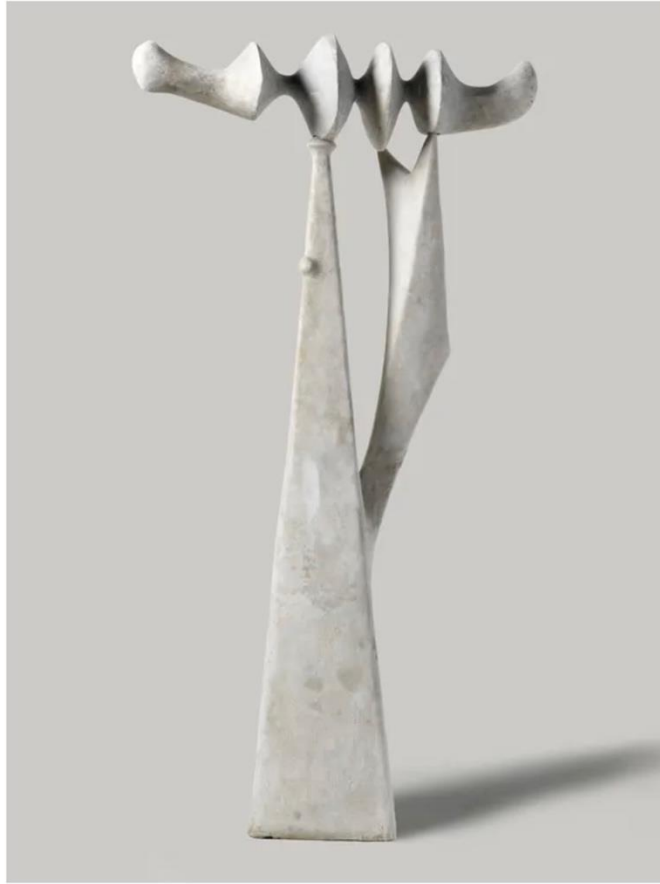
In "Figment" the viewer comes face-to-face with a five-foot-something bronze sculpture whose form and content fuse into an object that could be mistaken for a number of things (or Things as Kent would say) — a figure, a seedpod, a scepter — though none of these reductions really describe it. As its own form altogether, the surface and material of the object only hint at what it might contain. Metallic pulses of being, the terror-filled chimera of self, a bounded figure that stands alone.

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"Finder," 1953

"Finder" repeats the protruding shape, this time in white, bone-like magnesite and rotates it horizontally, offering up the figure on a pedestal that echoes Isaac's sacrifice on Mount Moriah. In this scenario, the beholder consummates the artwork by assuming the posture of Abraham, poised to kill his son. In this moment, the surface tension of what lies beneath the soft-looking plaster bubbles up a little – revealing the wide chasm between finite and infinite, daring us to take a leap of faith and place our hope in something beyond reason...a god, or a God, or the mystery beneath one of Kent's "unorthodox forms."

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"Presence," 1947

Next to "Finder" is "Presence," another slightly smaller, Noguchi-like magnesite sculpture whose similar jagged, pulsing shapes seem to smooth and fold back onto one another, closing the shocking chasm of the unbound object into a vessel-like structure that is rendered useless in its solidity, but useful as metaphor for infinity – which was arguably at the core of every piece Kent made, though hers was an infinity observed from somewhere – specifically – where the viewer stands.

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In one of her notebooks (posthumously published in her biography and reprinted in the exhibition monograph), Kent expanded on this qualitative and almost topographical understanding of time:

“Time to search out direction. Feel for currents. Not length of time but quality. You find it like shells or minerals, unheralded. The past changes with its offshoots to the present. Color and direction change relating to color and direction of Now. Old episodes take new accent as the strain/stripe emerges again in present context. As new understanding of motives (or lack of motives) comes to surface. Slow unmasking of truths of the Time.”



“Citadel,” 1955

Viewing Kent’s work now, each of us continues a line – an offshoot – begun by the artist, inserting ourselves into proximity with her objects, experiencing our own “click of authenticity.”

As postmodern as we all think we are, we are still just as good at regarding objects from a sensorial, personal perspective as humans were sixty, six hundred, six thousand years ago. This does not mean that each generation doesn’t have a new meta-understanding of the past or a need for new theories of power, we definitely do. It’s just that these tools can be present with artworks as they apply (and in addition to the sensibilities we’ve cultivated and faculties we’ve had forever).

It’s easy to take Kent seriously as a missing artist in the canon of Modernist sculptors. It’s harder to take her work at face value, simply because of our tendency to side-eye everything, including the idea of “being authentic” — which sounds more like a personal branding exercise than a state of being we can access without performing. But Kent’s authenticity is not unavailable to us, either. In fact, we might begin to approach it by standing next to her work for a few minutes, recasting the artist’s objects and closing our own loops. Wondering why there is still so much that is unresolved.