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■ VISUAL ARTS

Recognition, finally: The Nevada Museum of Art gives sculptor Adaline Kent (1900-1957) a long overdue retrospective exhibition



by Lucy Birmingham January 28, 2023

Women artists are finally getting the recognition they deserve—even in death. Thanks to the Nevada Museum of Art, one such artist is Adaline Kent (1900-1957), considered one of America's most innovative and under-recognized midcentury artists.

Adaline Kent: The Click of Authenticity, which just opened at the NMA and will be on display through Sept. 10, is the first retrospective exhibition of her work in nearly 60 years. It includes about 120 sculptures, drawings and other works that span Kent's entire career. Some of the works have never been shown before.

Kent's passion for nature, the High Sierra and her time in the Tahoe region are just part of her remarkable story. She was one of seven children of women's rights activist Elizabeth Kent and U.S. Rep. William Kent; their family home was at the foot of Mount Tamalpais in what is now called Kentfield.

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Adaline Kent in her studio standing next to her sculpture "Night Club," 1930. Collection of the Adaline Kent family

“When you look at the old family home, it seems embedded into the mountain there,” said Apsara DiQuinzio, senior curator of contemporary art at the Nevada Museum of Art. “I think that’s an important context through which to understand her work. She was very much a part of the early environmentalist movement in the early 20th century.” Family friends included John Muir, a naturalist famously known for creating several national parks.

Kent married Robert Howard in 1930; they shared a love of nature and spent much time in the Sierra Nevada, including skiing trips in the Tahoe region.

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Kent's connection to the Nevada Museum of Art came about through a blessing in disguise. The COVID-19 pandemic led to cancellations at two institutions that were organizing an Adaline Kent show. But DiQuinzio—working at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the time—had one more feather in her cap.

“When I started talking to the Nevada Museum of Art, I brought up the idea of this exhibition, realizing that it might even be a better fit for the Nevada Museum of Art, given its context of the High Sierra,” she said. “The museum was really intrigued and supportive.”

Her efforts to galvanize the exhibition led the museum to produce an exhibition catalogue that is the first scholarly publication on the artist to date.

“This is the outcome of many years of researching and thinking about Adaline Kent's work,” DiQuinzio said. “We have great contributions by Prof. Alexander Nemerov of Stanford University, and Jeff Gunderson, who is an archivist and librarian at the Anne Bremer Memorial Library at the San Francisco Art Institute. Both Adaline Kent and Robert L. Howard were closely involved with that institution for a majority of their lives. (Also involved is) Elaine Yau, who is an associate curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, where I used to work.”

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The catalogue was designed by the Purtil Family Business in Los Angeles.

“We had a great rapport with the designer, Connie Purtil, who really responded to Adaline Kent’s work,” DiQuinzio said. “I think the design of the catalogue turned out beautifully.”

The exhibition title, though, is a bit curious: *The Click of Authenticity*.

“It comes from a kind of poetic note that she wrote down in her notebooks,” DiQuinzio said. “The ‘click of authenticity’ would be when she developed a work of art that she felt was unique. She was very interested in the idea of infinity, and how infinity was experienced on mountain tops and in nature. Her notion of authenticity is linked to that experience.”

Kent considered herself primarily a sculptor, and began sculpting in her early 20s. She studied with Ralph Stackpole, one of San Francisco’s leading artists in the 1920s and ’30s. She then went to Paris and took lessons with the influential French sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumiere. She lived in Paris for several years before returning to the Bay Area.



“Never Fear” (1948).

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During the 1940s and 1950s, Kent's work was featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Bienal de Sao Paulo. She also became a member of the San Francisco Bay area's prolific mid-century artistic clan, with Charles H. Howard, Madge Knight, John Langley Howard, Robert Boardman Howard, Henry Temple Howard and Jane Berlandina.

However, the art world at the time was almost exclusively male-dominated.



"Figment" (1953).

"She was part of a whole group of women artists in the 20th century whose work was not recognized as being a significant contribution to art history," DiQuinzio said. "And so there is a kind of excavation that's happening now to re-explore and re-examine their contributions, because they play a significant role in shaping 20th century or modern art. ... We're looking beyond the Picassos and the Magrittes of art history and thinking about all the other artists who played an important role in helping give shape to what we now think of as modern art."

Kent's life was cut short just as her career was starting to take off: In 1957, she died in a car accident while driving on the Pacific Coast Highway in Marin County. She was only 56 years old. Left behind were her husband and their two

daughters, Ellen and Galen, both in their early 20s.

"There were a lot of people who her death impacted. The family still has boxes of condolence letters from people like Ansel Adams and Walt Disney," DiQuinzio said.

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Kent left \$10,000 in her will to create an annual award recognizing promising California artists. Long sponsored by the San Francisco Art Institute, the award was ultimately named the Adaline Kent Art Award. The Marin Conservation League also established a memorial fund in her honor that helped finance a redwood forest in Lagunitas called the Samuel P. Taylor State Park.

Kent's legacy is undeniable—but is the Nevada Museum of Art taking a risk in showing the work of a fairly unknown woman artist who passed away in 1957? DiQuinzio said that if so, it's a risk worth taking.

“I think there's a real hunger and desire to learn more about artists who are women and who have been overlooked by the historical canon,” she said. “I think it's necessary and very relevant to our moment.”

Adaline Kent: The Click of Authenticity will be on display through Sunday, Sept. 10, at the Nevada Museum of Art, 160 W. Liberty St., in Reno. For more information, call 775-329-3333, or visit nevadaart.org.