

FRAN HERNDON'S COLLAGES AT
 ALTMAN SIEGEL GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO
 September 8 - October 29, 2011
 by David Young Allen

In her collages, Fran Herndon uses photographic images taken from print media, and, along with her subtle and strangely bravura painting and compositional strategies, she inflects a world of modernist painting: she makes remarkably “economical” complex, dense and resonant pictures. This show at Altman Siegel covers work of the early sixties; I find her work resonates with much art since then. But there’s an independence from anyone else; nothing, none of her “strategies,” is meretricious—even painterly abstract-expressionist liberties easily take on meanings that work with the theme of a picture.

Herndon’s deft hand seems to be alive at every stroke, when, say, in response to a collaged image she’s selected, she’ll treat it so it becomes an underlying image. Look underneath or, better, through what Kevin Killian calls “misty glazes,” you see concomitant imagery. Such a strategy allows her to suggest other realms, invites us to glimpse alternate context(s) for her overall theme. In *Everything As Expected*, (1973) her then husband James Herndon (suggested reading!) says,

“It was that Japanese rice-paper that does it. Pulled and stretched apart and covered with white glue, it obscures everything. Obscure means to hide without quite hiding. This is the very stuff of the invisible world.”

Unlike the work of many artists who employ collage, Herndon does not cut out with laser sharpness bodies or objects placed so that they create surreal juxtapositions and fantastic spaces. Her photographic elements become unified with her painterly strokes, which include smears, scumbling, splashed spots, roughed-up or fog-enveloped edges. Close viewing is deeply rewarded, because underneath areas that may appear as just passages or intermittent “washes” are dim images: faces, grasses, distances, ambiguous forms and patterns that can suggest a universality of her overall themes, tiny splatters of paint are not just compositional but also atmospheric and can suggest bubbles or rain and other movements of water.

In “The Long Snorkel,” at the left of the composition, the text ELEPHANT SEA runs vertically congruent with a cut-out of an elephant’s head in profile. The elephant’s trunk is, of course, a kind of snorkel; a multi-serviceable product of nature, not technology. (Wikipedia says that the correct number of muscles in an elephant’s trunk or proboscis is close to one hundred thousand.)

Opposite that, from mid-picture-right, a white swirl of paint snakes diagonally to the lower left of the picture, and at its inception a yellowish glaze over the white allows that swatch of paint to suggest a geologic chunk that overhangs a cave, beneath which a few hazy natural and atmospheric passages descend to a sepia-toned photograph in the lower right corner.

If you’re over a certain age, this sepia color dates the image to our post-war newsprint industry’s proclivity to use a process called rotogravure for special Sunday sections, so the hue can suggest remoteness of time and place in American culture, not to mention race. The photograph of probably an African river scene with men spear fishing refers the viewer

to the also sepia tones of the elephant’s profile. The swirl suggests great movement, a storm, perhaps, and once it arrives at the lower left side of the picture, beneath the ELEPHANT SEA text, it has curled into two large ovals that look like enormous white sunglasses whose lenses are smudged (blind tourists?). Above what I say resemble sunglasses, is an urbane female eye in profile, suggesting a European or Western eye, and obliquely above that is another painted oval like a cross section of a small squid, but inside is a tiny sepia-color photograph of a supine skeletal spine and ribs. Go figure. It all hangs together amazingly suggestively.

Above all of this, in the upper third, say, of the picture, are abstract-looking strokes like wind-swept green grasses painted over sun-baked dry grasses like tumbleweeds. Accompanying that, about a dozen bead-like green balls echo the swirl as if a beaded necklace were thrown up in the air or cast aside somehow. All this conveys powerful cross currents of movement and excitement. Central to the composition is a small in scale but large in impact white object you realize is a syringe! If the snorkel is “long”, it’s a basic human strategy that extends all the way across the globe, and we witness its various nefarious uses here in the U.S. At the lowest right edge of this 15 x 15” collage on masonite, pasted paper curls slightly so that the reddish-brown color of the modern-day composite material revealed beneath complements the ancient muddy-river fishing practice, subtly taking us on a sense of voyage and full-circle to our ground: our culture of composite, artificial materials.

All these areas are so marvelously unified, many can be overlooked or taken for granted by a viewer; I had to look very closely to feel I’d really looked. You get a feeling of secondary or simultaneous realities, a sense of extra dimensionality. It’s as if peering through, you too are a visionary! Or, you have a sense of what it would be like to be, or that you might train yourself to see in layers, and maybe you, too, can have vision. Like other great shows, upon leaving the gallery and returning to the real world, you feel your way of looking has shifted.

In *King Football*, 1962, a central stark-white skull/death’s head at first glance looks like an unworkable, too obvious idea. This piece cries out against “trading” (by the San Francisco 49ers) the athlete Y.A. Tittle in a way that portrays how fans’ loyalty to deep American values that sports help sustain are constantly threatened by sports management and other interests invested in sports.

Within a hat-like form made from a brownish paper lace napkin crumpled atop the skull are the texts: “Coaches Pin Roses,” “Football Deaths,” “A Deep Bow to a Big . . .” Collaged images pour forth abundantly, tumbling as if they’re likely the skull’s female hair, an incredible cornucopia of images, texts, masks that give a sense of action, of plunging.

Fran was just beginning to work as an artist and she and the poet Jack Spicer had developed an extraordinary relationship. (For more see Herndon’s book previously cited and *Poet Be Like God*, by Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian). To cite Jim Herndon again,

“King Football wasn’t done when Jack showed up, so he got to sit down on the floor in the midst of all Fran’s Sports Illustrated photos and her Japanese and French fancy papers . . . and get everything mixed up and talk about what ought to go in to finish the collage. . . If Jack or anyone was around while Fran was working, she’d always have to ask them for

advice or suggestions, but after they began to suggest things or put in stuff, she would begin to get mad. So, here, she took the collage away from Jack and finished it off with a crown of crepe-paper flowers . . . They made Jack's notions less, by including them in an overpowering Mexican-Halloween dirge, a Dance of Death, reclaiming it all for what she had meant in the first place."

Forms like horses' heads in profile in "Ghost Riders," are echoed in triangular subordinate images that lend a kind of geometric structural support and are simultaneously partial glimpses of fences, barns or corrals, especially visible between and above the rider's and the brown horse's head; forms that enclose horses, that hold back the speed that Herndon's pictures have absorbed and which they convey. I don't get a sense of the presence of mainstream notions or ideologies in Herndon, but a total absorption of these into her idiom, so that I can imagine allusions to the work of artists working decades later.

Ostensibly, her main themes are a kind of perspective on America of the early sixties—the exhilaration of horse racing, dog racing, boxing, football and baseball; yet she picks major heroes who become also (except Willie Mays) inherently tragic: Joe Louis, Marilyn; so there's a pop sense and an all-out joy in sports and powerful figures along with sadness at the war and the fate of individuals and the undertow of racism. Besides this major gift of creating speed and movement, I like to pursue how her compositions work—I find a wizardly use of the human body as implied beneath complex compositions and an uncanny ability to create monumentality in very small format.

In "The Gospel According to Joe," a central childishly painted bright red and yellow lamp shade pasted over a photograph are cut out so that the two yield a pointed-arch form and an enveloping cone of light at the same time, which embrace the up-looking head and shoulders of Joe Louis. That's like a stage effect—the spotlight as well as the wide cone of light—his face is raised as if to implore, to transcend; the collar of a deep-blue overcoat is turned up dramatically about his neck in a way almost Napoleonic, and a huge teal blue collar button is just about mid-canvas and above the middle knuckle of his oversized pinkish fists that are in repose as if on a podium, in front of him. The "ring;" other photo-images, the "ropes" extend behind, to the upper left and right edges of the picture—the background is dim and dark and seems to stretch back to George Bellows' lurid painting ("The Boxers"). The head and shoulder of a referee in profile is barely discernible just above the Fran-painted arc of the lamp. A horizontal cone of light opens toward the left edge of the picture, and a similarly placed red cone on the right is like a searchlight, and it angles down as if to light an Edward Hopper movie theater aisle. Embedded in the shadows behind Joe are the money boys: they too are partially embraced and imprisoned by the ropes, the ethics of Boxing. Joe's big bare fisted fingers rest in front of him, enlarged. They emerge from this archway or boxing niche.

From this sort of monumental form tumble wrapped packages of booze, "Four Roses" reads one, a couple of TV sets, expensive wrist watches—all the perks. All this in a 21 x 24" format. An afterthought might be how much information is directed at us all the time; and how a mind has creatively assimilated it into sense/sensibility for our delectation if not greater wisdom.