

Walter Kuhlman

Like Barnett, Walter Kuhlman (1918–2009) progressed through a series of styles and genres during his career. His earliest work had a decided Regionalist tendency and focused on the people and places of the American heartland. After World War II, Kuhlman took advantage of the GI Bill to advance his art education. On the advice of his friend Frank Lobdell, Kuhlman and his wife moved to Sausalito, California, where he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA, now known as the San Francisco Art Institute). The choice was auspicious. Around this time, CSFA had begun to attract a prestigious group of faculty members,

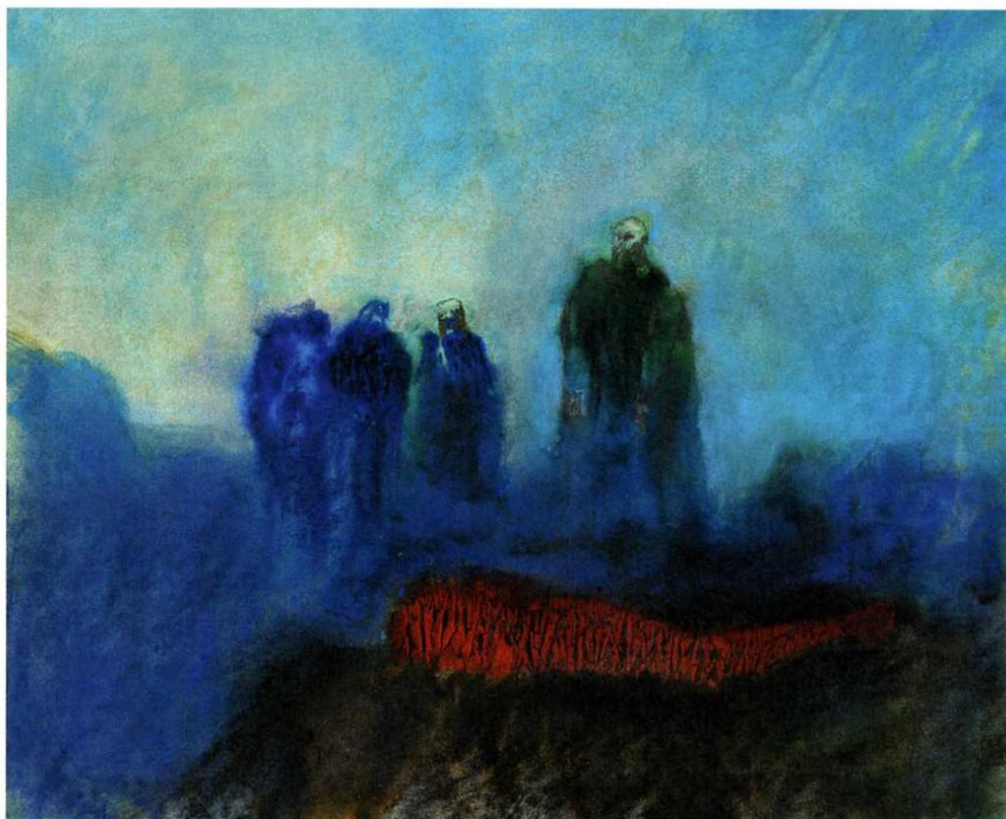
including Richard Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt, and it evolved into a nationally important center for progressive art studies.

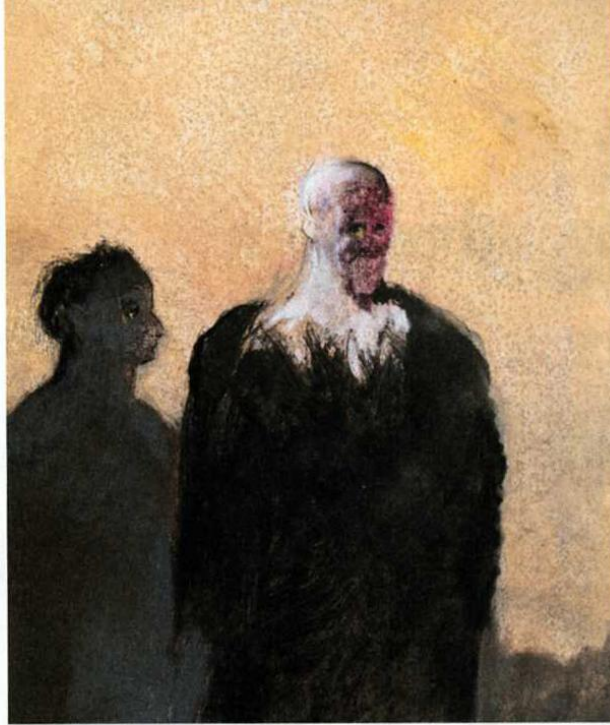
The non-objective works that Kuhlman produced while at CSFA, and immediately after, demonstrate his exposure to the school's modernist sensibilities. In his catalogue raisonné, he is quoted as saying, "The California School of Fine Arts was a miracle. It was filled

with young people and with different experiences and young people who had come out of a war ... We didn't think about making it—we thought about painting. There was no literal content. The painting was the thing ... shapes and colors exploding on canvas." Kuhlman was eager to find an individual path within the Abstract Expressionist movement, which was then primarily focused on painting. He began to explore printmaking, and his pioneering efforts—which included intaglio, etching, drypoint, and aquatint—subsequently garnered widespread critical acclaim and can now be found in major museum collections.

The Ceremony

by Walter Kuhlman, 1987, pastel over monotype, 13 x 15. Courtesy David Findlay Jr. Gallery, New York, New York.





In the 1960s, Kuhlman, then an artist of national stature, returned to figurative forms and subjects. People, animals, and mythical beings began to emerge in his paintings—mysterious yet powerful expressions of emotional and philosophical content. “I deal with the shadow, with the dark side of our nature,” the artist wrote. “You have to accept the shadow in your personality. You have to

come to grips with that guy. He’s not so bad really. Sometimes he helps.”

A collection of these numinous works, which recall the bizarre yet delicate visions offered by Odilon Redon and his fellow Symbolists, were recently on view at the David Findlay Jr. Gallery, in New York City. The show focused on Kuhlman’s mixed-media monotypes, a technique used by Degas

and pursued by Kuhlman with great fervor during the later years of his career. The artist executed these works in his studio with a hand press. He first created abstract compositions with water-based paints applied to metal sheets and Plexiglas, and he then transferred the paint to paper using a press. He often employed multiple passes through the press to build up color and form. Kuhlman would then see identifiable images emerge from the various shapes and forms created during the press passes and further delineate them with pastel. “The pastel puts the actors on the stage” he wrote.

In *Man and Dog*, *The Ceremony*, and *Untitled*, Kuhlman’s shadowy figures emerge from the muted background tones of the print like chimeras and inspire musings and wild imaginings on the part of the viewer. Yet the triumph of Kuhlman’s work, even at its most fantastic, is its truth. The view presented in his work is of an ambiguous world, but it is never detached from reality. Constructed with a visual logic that interlocks a reality felt with a reality observed, Kuhlman’s work invests his improbable creatures with a life all their own.

ABOVE
Untitled
by Walter Kuhlman,
1987, pastel over
monotype, 14 x 11¼.
Courtesy David Findlay
Jr. Gallery, New York,
New York.

RIGHT
Man and Dog
by Walter Kuhlman,
1995, pastel over
monotype, 10 x 13.
Courtesy David Findlay
Jr. Gallery, New York,
New York.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Walter Kuhlman was a prominent California painter and printmaker throughout the second half of the 20th century. He was the recipient of many notable awards and fellowships, and his works can be found in numerous museums. For more information, visit www.walterkuhlmanart.com.

An excerpt from “Will Barnet, Walter Kuhlman, Burton Silverman: Three Painters Visualize the Real World” by Michael Gormley, a review in the February, 2012 issue of *American Artist* magazine (www.artistdailey.com).