

Biographical Chronology

A painter spends his life preparing for the moments when 'it' happens. 'It' comes out of living, and experience, and technique.

Walter Kuhlman

1918

Walter Kuhlman is born on November 16 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His parents, Peter and Marie (Jensen) Kuhlman, are Danish immigrants.

1925

Sent to live for a year with an aunt in Saeby, a small coastal town in the northern Jutland region of Denmark.

1934

Takes Saturday art classes with Clement Haupers, a local artist who had trained in Minneapolis and Paris. Haupers is directing a public art center funded by a New Deal program, the State Emergency Relief Administration.

Haupers also administers the Fine Art Department of the Minnesota State Fair, and he includes Kuhlman's work in the exhibits.

1936

Enrolls at the St. Paul School of Art, where he studies with Cameron Booth, a notable modernist who had trained in Europe with André Lhote and Hans Hofmann. Booth becomes a key mentor.

Kuhlman's early work includes landscapes and city scenes executed in a structured, modernist style.

While at the St. Paul School, Kuhlman will become friends with Frank Lobdell, a fellow student.

1937

Enrolls at the University of Minnesota in order to pursue a bachelor's degree while continuing art studies at the St. Paul School.

1939

Completes his studies at the St. Paul School of Art, and begins teaching there.

Paintings are shown at the New York World's Fair, where Duncan Phillips purchases Kuhlman's *State Street*.

Work by Kuhlman is also included in a touring exhibition organized by the Minnesota Artists Association.

1940

With Lobdell and other friends, makes an arduous journey by car to see *Picasso: 40 Years of his Art* at the Art Institute of Chicago. This touring exhibition is the first American retrospective for Picasso, and it will greatly influence a generation of artists.

First solo show, at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

1941

Graduates with a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota.

1942

Awarded a fellowship from the Tiffany Foundation, which Louis Comfort Tiffany established to support young artists. The fellowship provides a working residency at Laurelton Hall, the former Tiffany estate near Oyster Bay, Long Island.

1943

Awarded a residency by the Cummington School of the Arts, an arts center in Cummington, Massachusetts. Kuhlman is among a diverse group of musicians, writers, and visual artists invited to the school.

Kuhlman is drafted into the U.S. Navy, and assigned a position as a medical illustrator at the naval hospitals in San Diego and Bethesda. The artist sees war from the perspectives of the injured and dying, experiences that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

1945

Marries Nora, who is also serving in the navy. Both are discharged at the end of the year.

1946

Studies literature at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Kuhlman then moves to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where he has the freedom to focus on painting. Kuhlman's work becomes freer, with a bold palette that reflects the brightness and intensity of the Caribbean setting. Some paintings explore religious subject matter.

1947

Kuhlman has been investigating art schools, looking for a place to study using his G. I. Bill education benefits. His friend Frank Lobdell is already enrolled at the California School of Fine Art (CSFA), and Kuhlman follows Lobdell's recommendation to join him.

Walter and Nora settle in Sausalito. The town is home to Lobdell, as well as to fellow CSFA student John Hultberg and a young CSFA instructor, Richard Diebenkorn. The men become friends, often being joined by others from the school.

Under the direction of Douglas MacAgy, CSFA (today, San Francisco Art Institute) has blossomed into a nationally important center for progressive art studies. Faculty members include Clyfford Still, David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Hassel Smith, Clay Spohn, Jean Varda, and Dorr Bothwell. Visiting instructors include Mark Rothko, Ab Reinhardt, and William Stanley Hayter.

CSFA students and faculty embrace Abstract Expressionism, and Kuhlman immerses himself in the emerging movement.

During his time at CSFA, Kuhlman's art will be included in exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Art (today, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor (today, part of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). Both institutions are led by dynamic directors committed to contemporary art: Grace Morley at the Museum and Jermyne MacAgy at the Legion. Kuhlman will later

credit both women with providing essential encouragement to his developing career.

1948

Studies lithography at CFSA.

Kuhlman, Lobdell, Diebenkorn, Hultberg, and two more CFSA students, James Budd Dixon and George Stillman, produce the portfolio *Drawings*, with 17 off-set lithographs. The portfolios are sold at the CFSA bookstore for one dollar each. The project will come to be viewed as the first print portfolio to be produced in an Abstract Expressionist style. The group will be labeled as the "Sausalito Six."

At this time, Kuhlman and his colleagues are showing in Sausalito at small galleries devoted to avant-garde art, theater, and literature. These include the Seashore Gallery and the Little Gallery by the Sea, run by Edwin ver Becke, and the Contemporary Gallery and Schillerhaus, run by Bernard "Bern" Porter.

Kuhlman teaches in the summer session at the University of Michigan.

1949

Continues his exploration of Abstract Expressionist printmaking with the help of James Budd Dixon, who had previously studied intaglio with William Stanley Hayter.

Kuhlman produces nearly 100 impressions from copper plates, using techniques in etching, dry point, and aquatint. He puts aside the results, in order to continue his focus on painting.

He and Nora purchase an empty lot in the hills above Sausalito and build a house. The house will remain Kuhlman's home through his life.

1950

Joins Lobdell in Paris, where the two artists take advantage of their remaining education benefits under the G. I. Bill.

Kuhlman obtains a studio at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, a standout among Parisian academies because of its openness to non-figurative trends. Others at the school include the California artists Claire Falkenstein and Sam Francis.

1951

Falkenstein is invited to show at the annual Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (or "new realities"), an exhibiting society committed to abstraction. She brings not only her own work, but also pieces by Kuhlman, Lobdell, and others that are included in the Salon. It is among the first exhibitions in Europe to feature American Abstract Expressionism.

1952

Work is included in a second Paris exhibition, *Un Art Autre* ("art of another kind") curated by Michel Tapié. This landmark event helps establish a European equivalent of Abstract Expressionism, which Tapié names *art informel* ("art without form/structure").

Kuhlman returns to his home in Sausalito. The Marin County town has gained national recognition as a creative community, and Kuhlman is cited as a notable artist-resident. He maintains his focus on Abstract Expressionist painting, while earning income by working at Heath Ceramics and the Glad Hand Restaurant.

1953

Birth of his son, Christopher.

1955

Work is included in *Pacific Coast Art*, the United States exhibition at the International Biennial of São Paulo, Brazil.

The Industrial Center Building (ICB) in Sausalito is converting to artist work space, and Kuhlman is among its first artist-tenants. Kuhlman will maintain his ICB studio for the remainder of his life.

1957

Receives a fellowship from the Chicago-based Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, due in part to the recommendation of Grace Morley. This prestigious award – then being offered for the first time – provides a \$10,000 stipend and the opportunity to interact with important artists, architects, and critics. Kuhlman is among nine fellows; the others include sculptor-designer Harry Bertoia, photographer Harry Callahan, and architect Frederick Kiesler.

Kuhlman begins teaching at CFSA, and will continue there through 1960.

About this time, Kuhlman reconnects with Jermayne MacAgy, who has moved to Houston. MacAgy is director of the Contemporary Arts Museum and an adviser to collectors John and Dominique de Menil. Kuhlman's art will be exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum. He will later show at the New Arts Gallery, a leading Houston gallery.

1958

San Francisco Museum of Art organizes a three-person show, exhibiting Kuhlman with his friends Claire Falkenstein and James Budd Dixon.

Kuhlman teaches in the summer session at the University of California, Berkeley.

1960

Accepts a faculty position at the University of New Mexico.

Kuhlman's artistic focus begins to shift. He creates a series of abstracts using a new palette – reds, oranges, yellows, rich browns. Kuhlman also begins to explore figurative work, which will come to dominate his later career.

Kuhlman will exhibit at the university and elsewhere in New Mexico.

1963

Work is included in a group exhibition at the International Center of Aesthetic Research in Turin, Italy, which has been co-founded by Michel Tapié. Lobdell and Falkenstein are also represented.

1965

Leaves the University of New Mexico.

1966

Teaches at Stanford University.

1967

Teaches at Santa Clara University, staying for two years.

1969

Given a retrospective exhibit at Santa Clara's de Saisset Museum.

Kuhlman accepts a faculty position at Sonoma State University, beginning a tenure that will last nearly 20 years.

1976

Divorce from Nora is finalized.

1973

Work is included in the exhibition *A Period of Exploration, San Francisco, 1945-1950*, held at the Oakland Museum. Interview excerpts appear in the accompanying book by Mary Fuller McChesney. McChesney's source materials, including her interview with Kuhlman, will be later deposited at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art.

1979

Kuhlman marries his second wife, Tulip Chestman.

About this time, Kuhlman develops a strong interest in monotype printmaking. These unique works begin as paint on a smooth surface, transferred to paper with a pass through a press. Most are further worked with pastel. Landscapes, seascapes, figures, and surreal/symbolist images result. Kuhlman will produce monotypes through the remainder of his career.

1981

Shows at the Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco – Kuhlman's first involvement with a retail gallery in nearly two decades.

In the years to come, Kuhlman's artwork will be presented at other galleries in the Bay Area: Natsoulis Gallery, Davis. Robert Green Fine Arts, Mill Valley. Carlson Gallery and George Krevsky Gallery, both San Francisco.

1982

Awarded a Maestro Grant as an "Outstanding Artist and Teacher" by the California Arts Council. The complementary Apprentice Grant is awarded to **Gregory McIntosh**, a former student.

1988

Retires from teaching. Sonoma State honors the artist with a retrospective exhibition.

1994

Deposits his papers at the Archives of American Art.

1995

Elected to the National Academy of Design.

1996

Work is included in the exhibition *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, as well as in the accompanying book by Susan Landauer. The exhibition is organized by the Laguna Art Museum and travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This landmark event wins national attention for the distinctive art centered at CFSA in the period following World War II.

The year also marks the 125th anniversary of the San Francisco Art Institute (formerly, CSFA). Kuhlman is among the alumni recognized on this occasion.

About this time, Kuhlman begins showing examples of the prints he had produced at CFSA in 1949, long since stored away. The etchings will generate strong interest among critics and historians.

2001

An etching from 1949 is included in *The Stamp of Impulse: Abstract Expressionist Prints*, a national touring exhibition organized by the Worcester Museum of Art and accompanied by a book by David Acton. The other members of the "Sausalito Six" are also represented, each by an individual print. Kuhlman and his associates are recognized as pioneers who helped make San Francisco the most dynamic site for Abstract Expressionist printmaking in the late 1940s.

Age and failing health are having an impact on Kuhlman, who will produce his last signed artworks about this time.

2004

Work is included in *San Francisco and the Second Wave*, an exhibition at the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, and the Laguna Art Museum. The exhibition draws on the Blair Collection, an important survey of Bay Area Abstract Expressionism with a focus on the 1950s and 1960s.

2009

The artist's health has been deteriorating through his last decade. He and his wife have moved to The Redwoods, a retirement and assisted living facility in Mill Valley, California.

Walter Kuhlman passes away on March 20.

His second wife, Tulip, passes away later the same year.

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