I am widely familiar with almost all Beat work done in the early 50s in Los Angeles and then in the late 50s and 60s in San Francisco. I had not seen this very fine work before. Another of Bowen’s paintings was in fact used to illustrate the Time magazine review of the exhibition.

I was further intrigued after having been invited to a press lecture at the Whitney where this rather raving artist spoke with vivid and historically accurate anecdotal detail about his intense and long term contacts with seminal figures of the 60s both in Los Angeles and in San Francisco: Tim Leary; William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Edward Kienholz, John McCracken, Allan Cohen, the poet Ferlinghetti. The more interesting fact to me was that Michael Bowen’s name reoccurred in passing in ephemera of the era, like letters by
and within the inner circle of Beat culture, but neither his work nor his art were in any official historical record of the Beat generation.

Some dogged research over several years led me to a collector in Northern California, Phil Johnson, who put me in touch with this bristly but brilliant creator. He was resistant for several years but I did not give up. Eventually he suffered me regular phone calls. I began to learn that there was a remarkable trove of art by this artist - over 200 paintings and graphic works — including original hand wood blocks for the first editions of the first underground Beat paper, The Oracle. In addition, he shared with me information of his museum quality trove of archival letters, books, ephemera, photos related to the Beat era — all in dire need of professional archiving.

As it turns out the famous Summer of Love and the Human Be-In where Tim Leary uttered the call of the age, “Drop out, tune in, turn on,” both were Bowen’s performance conceptions — as corroborated by letters between Leary and Bowen where Bowen convinces the acid dropping Leary to participate, and Leary inquires “what is in it for me?” I have hit on a scholarly gold mine. . .

I used my own funds to travel to San Francisco to do an initial interview with this eccentric and recalcitrant artist. He undertook a thorough research into my own scholarly credentials and publications. I finally won him over and he agreed to have me do an extended interview, as well agreed to permit me to research and publish his art and his archival holdings.

Michael Bowen is in his late 70s and suffers from childhood polio; between the time of my initial interview last year and my intention to travel to see him, he became quite ill and moved his studio, holdings and family to Sweden where he has relatives and health care (like so many Beats, he lives in poverty). I notified Randy Lavender immediately of the delay in my ability to use the Faculty Grant due to Bowen’s unexpected move out of the country.

The purpose for this grant is to continue and formalize my research into Michael Bowen with the view to writing a book on this hidden Beat. My faculty development grant will fund my travel this January to see him for ten days. He will put me up and so I am asking only to be reimbursed my air fare to Sweden. I have already purchased my ticket and documentation of that purchase is enclosed.

I have some initial tentative interest from several noted publishers who will look at the possibility of a hard bound book on Michael Bowen if I can generate a first chapter. This grant will defray some of the cost I must personally undertake to generate that first chapter.

I thank Otis and each of you most genuinely for providing me with this opportunity to do something that eventually reflects well not just on me personally but on Otis as well.

--Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue (/faculty/marlena-donohue)
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