

Whatever Gets You Through the Night

The Artists of Dilexi and Wartime Trauma

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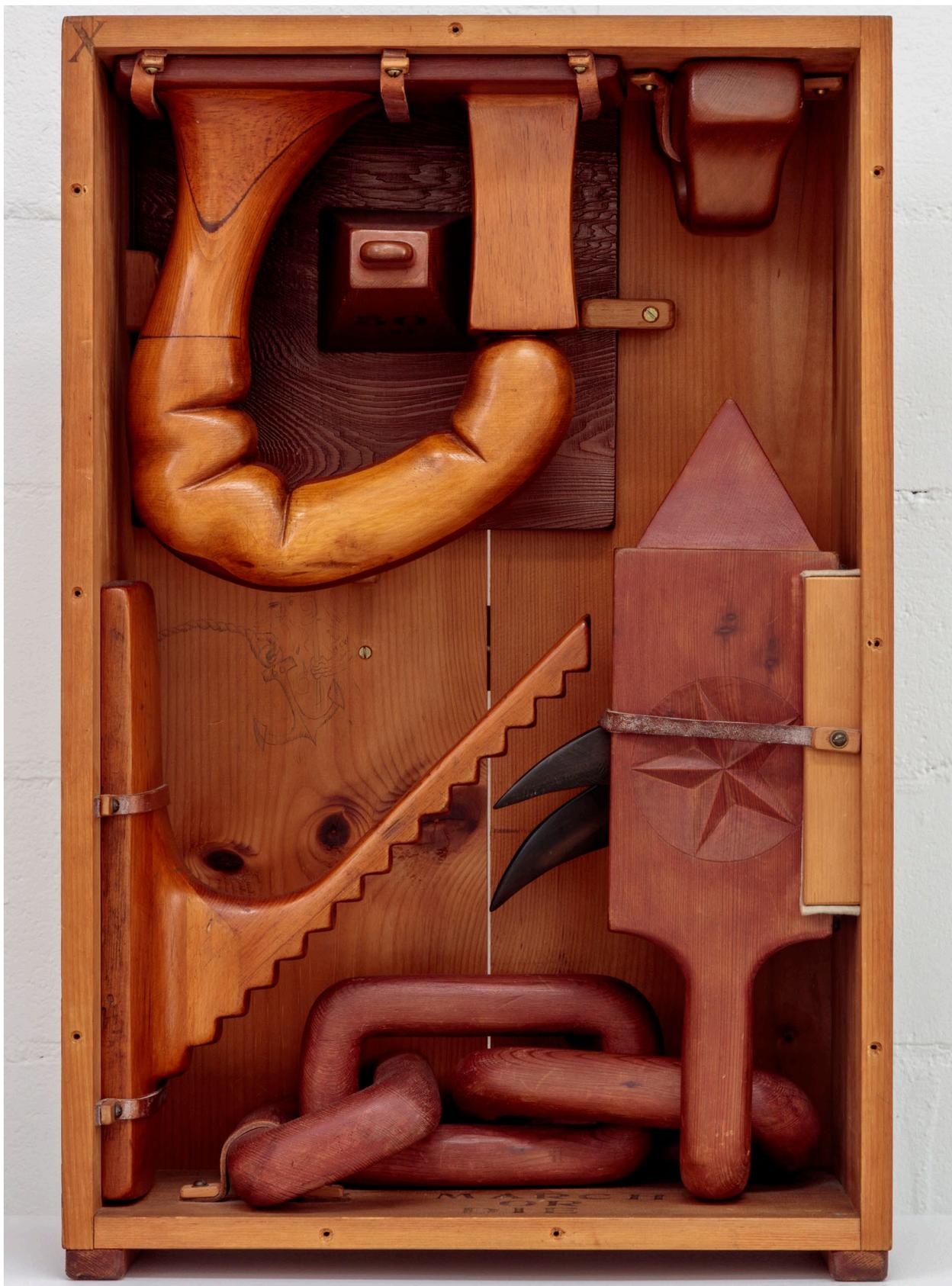
If you sometimes find life in America in 2019 to be a little too much, imagine living in California in the early 1960s. Since the end of the Second World War—a conflict that, for the United States, superficially led to domestic prosperity—the world had been racked with anxiety over the possibility of atomic apocalypse, while under McCarthyism a new strain of Fascism was spreading on home soil. Then just as progressive causes—including civil rights for African Americans—seemed to be gaining some ground, Kennedy was assassinated for no apparent reason, and for many on the left, all seemed utterly lost.

This past summer, six coordinated exhibitions took place at Parker Gallery, Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, the Landing, and Marc Selwyn Fine Art in Los Angeles, and at Brian Gross Fine Art and Crown Point Press in San Francisco. The shows took a close look at the activities of the pioneering, influential Dilexi Gallery, which operated in San Francisco between 1958 and 1969—journeying from the tail-end of McCarthyism to the heady cataclysm of the Summer of Love. The endemic mistrust of government, the legitimate fear of global devastation, the growing intolerance and paranoia on the right, and the desperate desire for new social models on the left, were all common to California in the 1960s and are again echoed in our present day. Revisiting this period in history puts our

current state of crisis and conflict into perspective, revealing some surprising parallels and even more surprising strategies for moving through it.

Jim Newman, the musician and jazz impresario who helmed Dilexi throughout its 12-year run, set up his first gallery, Syndell Studio, in Brentwood, Los Angeles, with Walter Hopps in 1954. Hopps went on to found the infamous Ferus Gallery, while Newman traveled north to San Francisco—at that time, the epicenter of the Beat movement—where he occupied a space above a jazz club in the North Beach neighborhood. The Beat poet and artist Robert Alexander partnered with him for the first year, until he began to find Newman's approach too professionalized ("New York style," as he later said) and went off instead to found his radical secular ministry, the Temple of Man. While it is true that many of Dilexi's artists hailed from the unkempt countercultural scenes of San Francisco or Los Angeles, what Newman offered them—which did not exist before—was a shot at sustainable careers and institutional legitimacy. Ferus and Dilexi sustained close ties, often exhibiting the same artists, and in 1962, Newman entrusted New Yorker Rolf Nelson to operate a short-lived Dilexi outpost in Los Angeles.

Virtually none of the work included in this ambitious six-venue retrospective project could be described as overtly political, still less activist. Nevertheless, what the artists who exhibited at Dilexi shared was a will to imagine an alternative reality to a present that they rejected—be that in schematic or microcosmic form. Some, like Jess or Wallace Berman, turned to mysticism or ancient esoteric beliefs; others, including Franklin Williams and Roy De Forest, devised their own aesthetic systems based on numerology or traditional handicrafts and folk art. "There are so many different formal expressions within the Dilexi artists," Laura Whitcomb, curatorial director of the project across all six exhibitions told me. "Yet they collectively are championing the same



H.C. Westermann, *March or Die* (1966).
Pine, redwood, leather, ebony, metal, felt, and ink,
30.75 x 20 x 10.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and the Landing. Photo: Joshua White.



Above: Wallace Berman, *Untitled (Sound Series)* (1966). Verifax collage and transfer lettering, 8.5 x 10 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Courtesy of Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles © 2019 Estate of Wallace Berman / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Below: Franklin Williams, *Sweet Garden* (1967). Acrylic, graphite, yarn, and thread on fabric, 17 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.

plan, the same aspirations. It's an over-used expression but they are striving towards a post-war utopia."²

Californian artists, in the early 1960s, "were thinking that everything they believed in was falling apart," said Whitcomb. "By the time that Kennedy was assassinated, they just decided that they needed to drop out as a cultural resistance, that there needed to be a whole new world carved for the psyche."³ For many artists, this entailed a turn towards solipsism. The exhibition at Parker Gallery, titled *Dilexi Gallery: Seeking the Unknown*, focused on artists who established hermetic cosmologies through their work, often drawing on esoteric traditions and mystical beliefs. This aspect of the Dilexi program is of particular interest to Whitcomb, who is currently working on a book titled *The Passing of the Torch: Occult Roots and Post-War California Art*. In tracing this lineage, she points to the magical practices of émigré Surrealists (many of whom were influential on this later generation of Californian artists) that intended to "counterwork" the occult activities of the Third Reich. Separately, Alfred Jensen and Kurt Schwitters, influential antecedents from beyond California whose work was shown together in a 1960 Dilexi show, created numerical and alchemical systems that structured the respective forms of their art.

Jess, whose intricate collages ("paste-ups," as he called them) hung opposite a 1921 Merz collage by Schwitters at Parker Gallery, was inspired by the esoteric studies of his partner Robert Duncan, the poet who was raised as a Theosophist. In his folding triptych *Variations on Durer's Melancholia I* (1960), Jess fastidiously layered a cornucopia of black and white printed imagery—from instruction manuals and technical illustrations to photographs and medieval prints—to achieve astonishing depth and an almost neurotic intensity. Jess was famously racked with guilt over his involvement in nuclear research with the Army Corps of Engineers; in 1948 he had a vivid and traumatizing dream

that the world would end in 1975, a premonition that ultimately led to his enrollment via the G.I. Bill at the California School of Fine Arts and his subsequent life as an artist. While his role in the Second World War was relatively minor, especially in comparison to many other artists of this period who saw combat, Jess saw that complicity was practically unavoidable for members of mainstream society. Instead, he and Duncan sought to conceive a reality that was insulated from contemporary life at nearly every level.

While the couple's studies of Tarot, Mayan myth, and Kabbalah were sedulous and sincere, artist Wallace Berman—who lived in the Bay Area between 1957 and 1961—was much more carefree with the Kabbalistic signs that he collaged into works such as *Untitled (Sound Series)* (1966), also shown at Parker Gallery. Berman's oft-used motif of a hand holding a small transistor radio contains a smaller image of a hand with the Hebrew letter Tet (ט) on its wrist. Tarot cards, also with Hebrew letters on them, are arranged nearby. Berman's son Tosh has written that his father was "utterly indifferent to magick and all of its off-shoots."⁴ But Whitcomb contends that Berman was responding to rich intergenerational language: the "atavistic memory that runs through us, through which we respond to symbols and forms and archetypes."⁵ That is to say, perhaps, that Berman may not have consciously been casting spells, but he understood the potency and broader significance of the symbols he incorporated into his art.

As with so many of the artists associated with Dilexi Gallery, Berman's response to the social and political tumult he witnessed in the wider world involved a retreat to the past. Franklin Williams, somewhat like Alfred Jensen, created his own system of logic and pattern that borrowed the detailed stitching, beadwork, and ornamentation of domestic handicrafts (as in his untitled, stuffed canvas sculpture at Parker Gallery, bristling with tentacles

1. Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art* (Santa Monica, CA: James Corcoran Gallery, 1988)

2. Laura Whitcomb in conversation with the author, July 2019.

3. Ibid.

4. Tosh Berman, *Tosh: Growing Up in Wallace Berman's World* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2019).

5. Whitcomb.

6. Ibid.

like some giant anemone). Roy De Forest's exuberantly colorful paintings and painted wooden constructions reference both sacred artifacts of the Yakama Nation with which he was familiar from his childhood in Yakima, Washington, and Indigenous Australian bark painting and songlines—which he knew only from books and anthropological museums.

While there were a few female artists shown at Dilexi—including Deborah Remington, whose striking paintings featured prominently at Parrasch Heijnen, and Jay DeFeo, the subject of a solo presentation at Marc Selwyn—this story is largely about men, as both *Dilexi Gallery: Seeking the Unknown* and a sprawling all-male group show at the Landing attest. Although a few servicewomen benefited from the G.I. Bill, it was predominantly men from blue-collar backgrounds who found themselves unexpectedly able to go to college after their service in the Second World War. Artistic solipsism is a close cousin of

male self-absorption, and it is clear from the work included in these exhibitions that these artists were far more concerned with grappling with their own problems than those of others.

At the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), under visionary director Douglas MacAgy, enrollment soared in the post-war period, its student body predominantly made up of military veterans. It became something of a clubhouse, filled with jazz, poetry, booze, woodwork, and camaraderie. Teachers and students worked alongside one another with scant professorial hierarchy. Whitcomb, whose great uncle attended the college at the time, says that Eastern religious study (particularly Zen Buddhism), indigenous ceremonies, experimenting with peyote, and psychoanalysis were all encouraged—“anything that could bring the war experience in a process of catharsis onto the canvas.”⁶

War stories abounded. Horst Trave, a German émigré who fled Europe



Dilexi Gallery: Seeking the Unknown
(installation view) (2019). Image courtesy
of the artists and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.
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in 1941, then returned as a soldier on the U.S. side, was reputed to have liberated his own father from a German concentration camp. At the Landing, an amorphous abstract canvas by Trave from 1960—starkly titled *12 November 1960*—is rendered in blues and greens so dark they devolve into blackness. H.C. Westermann, to whom Newman was introduced by fellow Chicagoan Irving Petlin, witnessed as an anti-aircraft gunner in the Pacific the destruction of the USS Franklin, on which over 800 seamen were drowned, burned, or eaten by sharks. Despite the horrors he saw, Westermann reenlisted in the Marines in 1950 to serve in the Korean War. It was after the senselessness of that conflict that he really became disillusioned with U.S. imperialism. In *March or Die* (1966), shown at the Landing, oddly shaped wooden instruments are strapped into the interior of a wooden box, part anatomical model and part demented tool kit: an allusion, perhaps, to the psychic baggage that a soldier carries around. Critiques of U.S. foreign policy at Dilexi came, by and large, couched in personal terms.

Westermann's carved wooden sculptures, along with those of the Bay Area artist and fellow veteran Jeremy Anderson, signal a rejection of the gestural exuberance of New York School Ab-Ex painting and instead a continuation of pre-war biomorphic European Surrealism. Many sculptures in this tradition at the Landing—from Anderson's cutaway of a boat, *Between* (1961), to Rodger Jacobsen's abstract *Untitled* (c. 1964), to photographs of William Dubin's now lost wooden sculptures from 1964–67—recall not just abstract notions of interiority but explicit depictions of organs and viscera. As for the European Surrealists after the First World War, the trauma of seeing bodies torn open on the battlefield—a brutal and indelible education in human anatomy—must have dramatically impacted these artists' understanding of the figure and its abstraction.

Again and again, throughout the Dilexi project, we witness artists turning

inward, and casting back. For most, inward meant somewhere quiet, private—furtive, even—somewhere with deep wounds and the urgent need for healing. At best, it entailed self-reflection and self-knowledge; at worst, self-absorption and self-indulgence. Remember that many of these artists were damaged men who were not equipped by tradition with the tools to fix themselves—let alone the world—and so were grasping at alternatives new and old. This generation never did attain the utopia it sought, as we now know, but that is no reason to belittle its quest to get there, nor to undervalue the often strange and wonderful creations that emerged along the way. It is hard not to happily abandon oneself to the eccentric, off-kilter worlds conjured by De Forest, Franklin, Jess, Anderson, and their peers. They all found their own unique means of weathering the successive storms that raged across the United States in the 1950s and '60s. Perhaps it is wisest to respond to the diverse work exhibited at the Dilexi Gallery with a mixture of empathy and skepticism, observing both examples of radicalism and conservatism in these artists' strategies for moving through times every bit as "interesting" as our own.

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