

Sunnyvale Creative Arts Center Gallery

In partnership with the
Euphrat Museum of Art

NEWS RELEASE

December 30, 1994

Exhibition:

*From Brno and Fort Defiance to Sunnyvale:
Paintings, Drawings, Collages, and Art Book by Edith Argabrite
Paintings, Drawings, and Sketchbooks by Harry Bridges*

Sunnyvale Creative Art Center Gallery
550 E. Remington, Box 3707
Sunnyvale, CA 94088-3707

January 10 - March 11, 1995
Tuesday through Friday 1 - 5 pm, Saturday 10 am - 12 noon

Reception February 24, 3 - 5 pm

Two artists featured in this exhibition mark meandering paths around the world, sometimes making art, sometimes dealing with conditions of war, on their way to Sunnyvale, California.

From Brno and Fort Defiance to Sunnyvale presents two very different expressions of art and life. Edith Argabrite's vibrant images are evidence of her inner process — for example, posing a question to herself and letting the response unfold spontaneously in rapid expressionistic brushstrokes. Harry Bridges chronicled his years with the Navajo Nation with detailed renderings and with written journals of his feelings and experiences — from the mundane to the most heartfelt.

Acrylic painting, drawings, torn-paper collages, and book art by Edith Argabrite are on view along with watercolors, graphite drawings, and sketchbooks by Harry Bridges. Argabrite has lived in Sunnyvale for twenty-eight years; Harry Bridges also was a longtime Sunnyvale resident. *From Brno and Fort Defiance to Sunnyvale* was curated by the Euphrat Museum of Art, as part of an occasional series focusing on artists in Santa Clara Valley.

Edith Argabrite

Born in Brno, Czech Republic, Edith Argabrite was eight when her family fled German invasion — traveling through Germany, Russia, and Japan, finally settling in Shanghai, China for seven years, most of the time in the Hongkew ghetto. Friends sponsored their immigration to the U.S. (San Francisco) in 1947.

"I was drawing ever since I was about five," she relates. "In Shanghai, I drew people's dogs." Her parents

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discouraged her from an art career because "it didn't make money. I became an elementary school teacher. My father, an artist, taught me and was my art critic. He was a realist."

Argabrite's images, though recognizable, are hardly realistic. They are energetic results of her process, for example looking at issues like death. In 1988 Argabrite painted *Death Cradles Bear* and *Death Moves Me*. "I thought it would look awful because I was afraid of it. I was shocked and surprised, and pleased that it was cheerful."

"Recently I started to write. Like painting, I want to express simple stuff — ugly, beautiful — beyond the superficial. Sometimes I don't know how I feel and find out when I portray it. To me, the process is more important than the product."

When she was a child, Argabrite's father took her to see two aunts; she remembers them standing behind a cage with two canaries, remembers the yellowness of the canaries. She never saw these aunts again; they died in a concentration camp. In 1992 she returned to this same building in Brno. "I needed closure with an image." She painted *Two Great Aunts* in 1993.

Argabrite is prolific and wide-ranging in choice of subject: a street scene, a mythic narrative scene, familiar animals, personal monsters, the holocaust. A cat yawns with an intense stretching and becomes the subject matter of a canvas (*Giant Yawn*, 1990). She explores a variety of media: acrylic, monoprint, colored pencil, collage — most recently building up a collage image of her father (*Father, In Good Mood*, 1994) from thousands of bits of colored paper torn out of magazines.

Restitution (1993) is an artist book containing images of Brno, along with drawings and writings about the home that the Nazis forced her family to leave. She recently returned to Brno and is attempting to regain her home. "Last spring I went to court [in Brno] and the judge said, "You should have your house back, but I'm not going to give it to you." Argabrite's return to Brno was about much more than the house. "I have gone back to Brno, no longer a child." "I walked the same streets my grandfather walked." "It's raining in my homeland — raining on the Jewish cemetery — bright crystal chandeliers over my relatives' graves." "I went to Brno searching — searching for something I cannot name."

In *Restitution*, her writings cover multiple struggles and meanings. "Everyone in Czechoslovakia is very busy forming a democracy. That is why the bullet holes in the fancy buildings have not been fixed. No one has the time to fill holes; they wait in line to buy cheap bread." "A man carries his hopes in a shopping bag." "Now...I live my life in endless hallways." She is starting a second book and writing poetry. Argabrite continues to work with torn paper, an appealing process — "more unconscious. As raw as possible."

Harry Bridges, 1934-1978

Harry Bridges was a native San Franciscan: his mother, Persian, his father, Cherokee. At age thirteen, he moved to Tucson, Arizona and was raised by his aunt. There he spent summers at Fort Defiance on the Navajo Reservation. By the time he joined the Army in 1952, he spoke Spanish and Navajo fluently. In 1976, he wrote:

"A long time ago I lived among the Navajo in Fort Defiance. I used to say that I was born for the Navajo, but really I was born for another tribe. My father's people are called Cherokee. Now I live among the Whitemen, but I still think about the Navajo People."

Languages came easily to Bridges. The Army sent him to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey to study Chinese. In a library in Korea in 1953, during the war, translating a Chinese document, he was surprised to find that the librarian could read it. The next day, he brought her a copy of *Arizona Highways* magazine, saying, "This is where I came from." He drew a picture of his house. The librarian, Oksub Song, immigrated to the U.S. to study at San Jose State University. They married. Back from the service in 1956, Bridges began

study at San Jose State in Art and Geology. After graduating in 1960, he taught Spanish, Chinese, and science in a Palo Alto high school. His language proficiencies earned him several important grants, one for making 200 Chinese translations on tape for Voice of America.

Bridges returned often to Arizona in summertime with sketchbook in hand. "When I was a child they [the Navajo People] were very good to me. I was an orphan and I was raised by those who are called Stewart. The Stewart boys all called me brother. Every year during the summer I go back to see them."

The drawings, sketchbooks, writings, and watercolors of Harry Bridges are all interrelated. The beautifully rendered images are drawn from actual scenes Bridges experienced. Combined, they are a unique window to the world of the Navajo in the mid '70s and an insight into a man who, yes, bridged several cultures. Bridges' sketchbooks include not only finely finished drawings and studies for future paintings, but also a journal of his trips, personal feelings and views, specific information regarding Navajo arts (along with prevailing prices and purchase sites), and conversations written in Navajo along with translations — and even a novel which relates to Navajo ceremonies and which he would submit to the Native American Church before any potential publication.

The images seem straightforward: a horse and rider in bright sunlight, a woman weaving a blanket, a woman washing clothes in dappled shade, an old man and a child, an Indian mother and her baby. Yet the connections between written word and image are complex. At Lorenzo Hubble's in July, 1976, he writes: "...since Song has not yet seen Navajo women weaving rugs, we both went to the back...and sat, talked and watched." And then: "It never fails, when I am on Reservation, the instinct to return to the blanket overrides all other considerations. Here I am a person again; I feel all the inner themes of my life; I hear my mother's words echoing in the far reaches of my brain, "You are an Indian, my son," she used to say, "And be damned proud of it. You're no son of a chief, just the son of an Indian, and you are my papoose.' These are the only kind words she ever told me, and they imprinted an indelible streak on my brain. I remember these words, especially when she said, "Be proud of it." And proud I am indeed!" "The Navajos here about are calling me *xadani*, which means that my language is good enough to pass for native Navajo... After a few hours of bouncing about in the four-wheel drive trucks, I began to sing some old style War Dance (Squaw Dance) songs." "Again a great surprise. The truck drivers were all kinsmen of the Stewart family, so that I had a great deal to talk about... When I told the truck drivers I grew up in Fort Defiance, they were curious... I talked about my relationship with the Stewarts... [Canyon de Chelly, July 21, 1976].

Bridges came back from the 1976 trip with pneumonia and was diagnosed the next year with cancer, to which he succumbed in 1978.

On many of his drawings and paintings (usually untitled) he signed his name *Na'nizhozh*. In Flagstaff on July 27, 1976 he had written: "Today I've chosen another pseudonym for my paintings — *Dine bitah yaneya*. This will be my warrior pseudonym."

Sponsored by City of Sunnyvale, Department of Parks and Recreation, Cultural Arts Division, in collaboration with the Euphrat Museum of Art, De Anza College, Cupertino.

Contact:

For information about the exhibition, call the Euphrat Museum of Art at (408) 864-8836.
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