

**Kevin Killian presents ... Fran Herndon Day**  
*from DC's [Dennis Cooper's Blog]*  
<http://denniscooper-theweaklings.blogspot.com>  
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Dear Dennis, let this post introduce you to Fran Herndon, the Beat-era California painter I've admired and loved for the past 20 years or more. This month and next a gallery in San Francisco, Altman Siegel, is running a retrospective exhibition of her work, so I want to urge San Franciscans and visitors to come on down and take a look at it. The show has been organized by the young Canadian curator Lee Plested, assisted by myself. Maybe some of your readers will take a look at this post here, and come and see for themselves, in person, the things I like most about this strange and disquieting work.



Fran Herndon and Kal Spelletich. I see many younger artists drawn to Fran Herndon today. Here's Kal Spelletich, best known perhaps for his work with Survival Research Laboratories, a genius of hydraulics and the made, approaching Fran at her opening at Altman Siegel.

----I became acquainted with Fran Herndon through my work on Jack Spicer, the poet whose biography Lew Ellingham and I worked on in the 80s and 90s. Eventually our book, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*, appeared in 1998 (Wesleyan University Press). When I met Lew in the early 80s, I asked him, did Spicer really know about art? (He had founded, with five of his former students at the San Francisco Art Institute, an

exhibition space they called the "6 Gallery," but you know how sometimes you do things just to go along with a pushy crowd? Maybe, I thought, maybe Spicer was weak like I am in this one regard.) Lew advised me to look at Fran Herndon's work and then make up my mind for she, Lew said, was the visual artist with whom he was closest.



Fran Herndon and Lewis Ellingham. Lew is the man who wrote *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Wesleyan University Press), which benefitted from many interviews with Fran. Asterisk: he and I are co-authors.

----When I met her I remember feeling that strange thrill that I had when introducing myself to the redoubtable Elaine Sturtevant, or when grabbing the hand of Marianne Faithfull as she stormed into "Why D'Ya Do It" onstage at the Fillmore. Each had been there ("there" in some ultimate, Platonic sense) at the beginning, and done something unique, bizarre, beautiful and misunderstood. Fran Herndon showed me into her place in the unfashionable Richmond district of San Francisco—on an avenue totally off my route!—and it would be hard to describe what an Angela Carter-esque experience this was, but in fairy tales one is often taken offguard because one is on wholly new territory, without most of the rules one lives by, unable to cling to familiar landmarks. I wasn't there long, but I asked her to sign my copy of *Everything as Expected*, and she concurred. She had been asked about Jack Spicer, I expect, many times before, but I thought if I took the high road, and approached him through her own art work, I might come up with a different angle than all those other bozos. Thus began a long engagement.



Herndon Family.... Fran Herndon at the opening of her retrospective at Altman Siegel with her younger son, Jack, and Jack's wife, Tamara.

---Everything As Expected is a peculiar book, written by Fran's then-husband, the late Jim Herndon in the early 1970s. James Herndon was once quite a famous author, a schoolteacher who has written up his experiences teaching in the inner city schools of the Bay Area and made a pair of amazing books about them, works of radical pedagogy that had enormous influence in their day. The Way It Spozed to Be came out in 1968, and its successor, How to Survive in Your Native Land, in 1971. Remember the season of The Wire that focused on public school systems and its built-in wiring for failure? Total Jim Herndon knockoff. In Everything As Expected, Herndon wrote of the summer of 1962, when Fran Herndon had embarked on a complicated series of "sports collages" under the tutelary spirit of Jack Spicer (1925-1965). Fran worked from sports magazines, tearing out illustrations that caught her eye, and making a new picture each week by arranging the found elements and then treating them with watercolor, gouache, sculptural ornamentation, mounting them on masonite, cardboard, sometimes adding homemade frames. Herndon's book reproduces almost all of the collages finished that spring, summer and fall, adding some wry, even caustic anecdotes in the Vonnegut manner. The text becomes an extended meditation on magic—the magic of bringing something to our world, from what Spicer called the "Invisible World." Here in San Francisco it's easy to feel magic all around one every day, but to find its source is a sometimes terrifying avon.



Claudia Altman Siegel (gallerist), Lee Plested (curator), Fran Herndon (artist) meeting for the first time at Fran's San Francisco home, mid-December, 2010.

---Years later, last October in fact, the curator and writer Scott Watson came to visit San Francisco from Vancouver, where he directs the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia. Scott came to attend the opening of SFMOMA's exhibition "New Work: R.H. Quayman," but we organized a trip to the Richmond so Scott could pay a studio visit on Fran Herndon. We brought a second curator with us Lee Plested, who had worked with Scott at UBC and with me at CCA, the art school in San Francisco where I sometimes teach. Scott asked Fran to show us not only her most recent work, but to take us back to the beginning, to her garage, where in a stable of flat files she had miraculously kept her large paintings from the earliest days of work. I hadn't seen but the tiniest number of these

pictures before, and Lee, whose first meeting with Fran this was, was as blown away as I. He hit on the idea of somehow organizing a show to exhibit this early work, and within a week or two after our visit announced to me that he and I were going to curate it together, and that he had secured the participation of the gallerist Claudia Altman Siegel, and the thing was practically was for the fall. Well, that was around the New Year, and now months and months later the show is up.



Christian Marclay made an appearance at the opening of "Fran Herndon" and, paparazzi-style, autograph book in hand, I approached him studying Herndon's anti-Vietnam War collages from 1965.

---Fran has always maintained the respect of coterie of experimental poets; from Spicer, Blaser, Duncan, George Stanley and Jess in the early days, to the very young of today. In recent years the poet Avery Burns and his wife, Andrea Koehler, have organized several shows of Fran's work at the North Beach gallery Canessa Park: beautiful shows, vivid, wildly ornate and personal. Altman Siegel is a very different sort of art space, clean, uncluttered, with a clientele of international artists, curators and collectors, what my dad would have admirably called a "blue chip" gallery. At 82 or 83 this was a different sort of opening for Fran Herndon, but she was there, still somehow as young as she was the day I met her, very radiant and composed under this new, somewhat bewildering barrage of attention. (Dennis, even Christian Marclay poked his head in.) Here's the essay I wrote for the catalogue of the present show, which closes at the end of October, please go in and take a look if you're in town.



Saturday, September 24, 2011 we had a poetry reading at Altman Siegel. Eight poets read briefly in honor of Fran Herndon, the artist was present as well as a distinguished (well, a wonderfully random) crowd. Back row: Steven Seidenberg, Kevin Killian, Avery E.D. Burns, Matt Gordon. Middle row: Norma Cole and Lewis DeForest Brown. Front row: George Albon, Fran Herndon, Elizabeth Robinson, Colleen Lookingbill. Photo by Takming Chuang.