

Adaline Kent: The Click of Authenticity

Collection CAE2303

Introduction/Abstract

This archive contains materials from the life and artistic practice of mid-century artist Adaline Kent, who created sculpture, drawings, and paintings, that expressed her deep interest in the organic world with her steadfast pursuit of authenticity.

Biographical Note: Name

The mid-century artist Adaline Dutton Kent (1900–1957) was an energetic innovator who hailed from the town of Kentfield in Marin County, California—named after her grandfather, Albert E. Kent. She came from a legendary family of early environmentalists who donated land to the U.S. government to preserve the areas now known as Muir Woods National Monument, Mount Tamalpais State Park, and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. She was also a member of the San Francisco Bay Area’s most productive modern artistic clan, which included Charles Howard, Madge Knight, John Langley Howard, Robert B. Howard, Henry Temple Howard, and Jane Berlandina.

While Kent considered herself primarily a sculptor, she applied her aesthetic skills to a wide variety of media, including drawings, paintings, design, and even jewelry, so that each endeavor was a newly formed idea and expression. Merging formal dynamism and inventiveness, her stylistic approach was personal and yet also connected to and informed by antiquity, as well as such contemporaries as Gordon Onslow Ford, Charles Howard, Roberto Matta, Isamu Noguchi, and Jeanne Reynal. Beginning in 1949, Kent showed with the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, a dealer known for supporting exceptional talent such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.

Kent was a devout explorer, both aesthetically and recreationally. She and her husband, Robert B. Howard, spent months at a time each summer venturing into the craggy terrains and higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada mountains, with their experiences and discoveries informing the objects they produced. Guided by her love for the natural environment, Kent made inventive abstract sculptures, drawings, and uniquely incised paintings that merged her deep interest in the organic world with her steadfast pursuit of authenticity. She wrote down many of her ideas on art and nature, filling notebooks and scraps of paper with her thoughts. In part of a poetic note entitled “Classic Romantic Mystic,” she wrote, “I want to hear the click of authenticity.” The title of the archive takes its inspiration from this quote, underscoring the creative drive that propelled Kent in life.

Scope and Content

This archive contains materials from the life and artistic practice of midcentury artist Adaline Kent, who created sculpture, drawings, and paintings, that expressed her deep interest in the organic world with her steadfast pursuit of authenticity.

Nature played an important role in Kent’s family life. She and her husband, the sculptor Robert (Bob) Boardman Howard, were members of the Sierra Club and often spent time in Tahoe with their two daughters, Ellen and Galen, and on many occasions adventured into the High Sierra on their own for weeks at a time, traveling on horses or mules. The mountains were a place they regularly visited for artistic inspiration and rejuvenation, in addition to health reasons.

Bob Howard often brought his 16mm film camera along to the High Sierra, and the couple took turns recording their adventures. An agile Kent can be seen climbing the craggy terrains, happily guiding horses along narrow paths and steep inclines and otherwise relishing in the many natural wonders of the mountains. It was through nature that she found what she often referred to as “the plan:” visible patterns and phenomena that recur and lead to greater understanding. In a note she wrote in her studio, during one of what she referred to as her “intuitive flashes,” Kent referred to “...the plan in nature. It is endless and you can find new directions.” Upon returning from the higher elevations, Kent typically brought back many items she had collected such as striated rocks, scraps of metal, rusty nails, shells, weathered branches, fungus, and fragments of obsidian, etc. These objects, as well as the films and photographs from their excursions, were later often used by Kent as source material, and she kept them on display in her studio along with other Indigenous artifacts she collected and consulted for inspiration.

Movement was something Kent appreciated in sculpture, and realizing the rhythms of her own body in space was likewise an important dimension of her own artistic practice. She kept gymnastic rings hanging in her studio, and her family reports that she utilized them regularly and with skill. Physical movement, whether skiing or hiking in the mountains, dancing, or practicing on her rings, was something she thought about in relation to her art.

Kent's evolving interest in abstraction was gradual; it wasn't until the early 1940s that it took a marked departure from the figurative styles she had been working with since her return to San Francisco from Paris in 1929. While few figurative motifs were still evident in Kent's work in the early 1940s, by 1945 it was almost entirely abstract, possessing subtly recognizable references to nature and ancient art forms. About this transition Kent remarked, “For the first fifteen years, with a few exceptions, I worked with the idea of the generalized, the essentially dignified appearance of, usually, the human body.

The moon was similarly a recurring theme in Kent's work, well before the Soviet Union's spacecraft Luna 2 touched the moon's surface in 1959, and the Apollo 11 mission brought the first astronauts to land on the moon in 1969.

In Kent's work, the infinity symbol, which she aligns with representations of alpine waterfalls and ski slopes, can be understood as a fusion of her interests in time, space, and nature. Kent was conscious of developing original ways to represent time and the fourth dimension in her art. The infinity symbol is her most literal manifestation of these concerns. For Kent, the infinite was the wellspring of the growth and knowledge that led her to the discovery of *her* truth, which was what she experienced in the mountains, and it was what she hoped to express in her art.

Materials include photographs, video, notes, notebooks, small sculptures, correspondence, exhibition ephemera, collected materials such as shells, rocks, and minerals, objects from Kent's studio, a hat, and press materials. Also included is the extensive research conducted by curator Apsara DiQuinzio for the exhibition at Nevada Museum of Art from January 28 – September 14, 2023, and the book, also published in 2023.

This archive is currently in process.