

SIGNIFICANT CONTENT



Logo of Stussy, Inc., apparel.

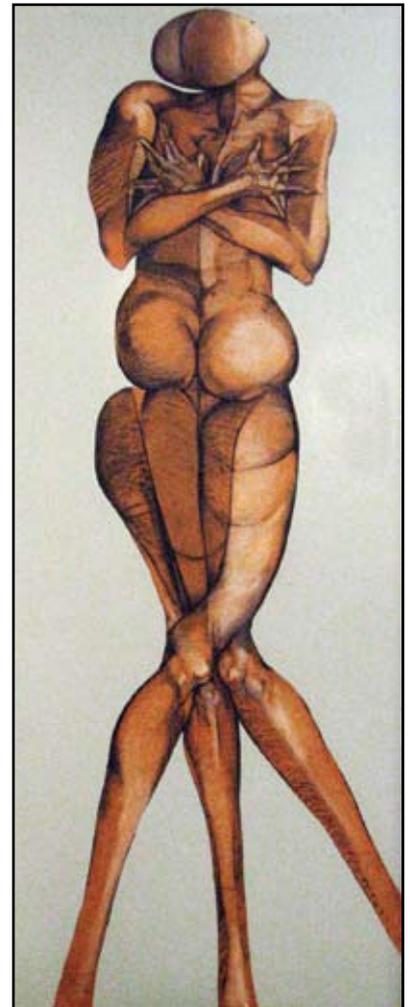
JAN STUSSY AND THE **MENDOCINO ART CENTER**

By Donald E. Paglia, M.D.



The Watcher, Maxine Kim Stussy, c.1980. Wood assemblage (89").

If you Google “Stussy” (pronounced stoo’-see), you will be directed to a popular clothing line whose stylized logo originated in the 1980s as a mark of distinction on surfboards handcrafted by a young Southern Californian, Shawn Stussy. Ironically, that unique calligraph is as iconic in the art world as it is among skateboarders, surfers and urban subcultures worldwide, because it was derived from the signature of artist Jan Stussy, Shawn’s uncle. You can see the original by visiting the Stussy retrospective exhibition, “Significant Content,” at the Mendocino Art Center, July 6–28. Representative painting, drawing and graphic artworks from the archives of the Jan Stussy Foundation of Woodbury University will be accompanied by bronze, wooden and ceramic sculptures created by Maxine Kim Stussy.



From God’s Acrobat series, Jan Stussy, c.1980. Acrylic, spray enamel and charcoal on masonite (84” x 36”).

Jan and Maxine were products of Los Angeles art schools and university programs (Art Center, UCLA, USC), and exhibited nationally and abroad and often together. They were married from 1949 to 1982, and their strong mutual influences are palpably apparent in this exhibition. Both of these singular artists were pivotal figures in the transformation of post-World War II Southern California art, a period that has been largely neglected by historians in deference to more celebrated West Coast artists of the 1960s and beyond. That oversight was partially redressed by “L.A. Raw: Object Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945–1980, from Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy,” recently at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. This landmark exhibition appropriately reconnected Jan Stussy and Rico Lebrun who, along with UCLA’s Stanton Macdonald-Wright, most profoundly influenced Jan’s evolution into master artist. Both Stussy and Lebrun

were meticulous draftsmen and disciplined anatomists who favored the disquieting imagery of existential anguish over more benign, pleasurable decorative art.

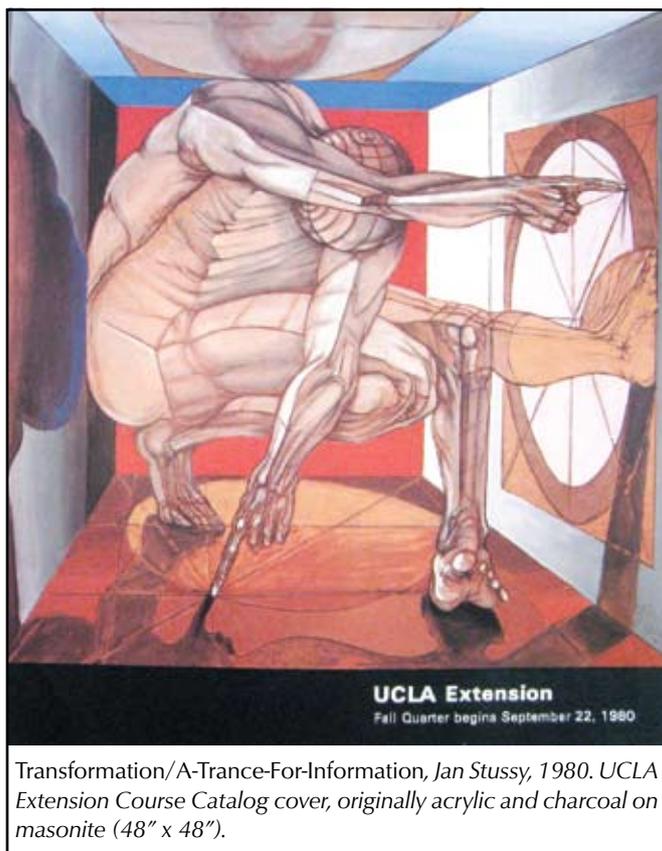
Unrepentantly dedicated to figurative work, Jan and Maxine Kim Stussy (now Frankel) and their contemporaries provided liberating alternatives to the then-dominant influence of abstract expressionism. In the process, they contributed to artistic and educational environments that shifted the art establishment’s center of gravity from East Coast to West. None contributed more to this tectonic

transformation than Jan Stussy, who founded the UCLA Art Extension Program with a Visual Arts component that “attained unprecedented levels of achievement under his tutelage” (Art historian Albert Boime). He became the University’s first artist to reach the academic level of full professor, serving for over forty years before his untimely death in 1990 from a malignant brain tumor.

Stussy became progressively more disenchanted with perceived machinations and crass commercialism in the art market, and he was equally uncomfortable with the anti-figurative aesthetic of contemporary trends such as minimalism and conceptual art. Eventually, he disengaged from the exhibition circuit and devoted the last decades of his life intensively to teaching and to a prodigious personal output. The latter is estimated to include over 12,000 drawings and 5,000 paintings, along with serigraphs, lithographs, etchings, and sculptures.

Stussy’s prolific and diverse inventiveness extended to film, highlighted by his 1978 Academy Award Oscar-winner, *Gravity is My Enemy*, documenting one of his students who was quadriplegic but drew and painted adeptly with instruments held between his teeth.

As an accomplished poet, Jan was equally masterful in command of language as he was of diverse visual art media. This made him an extraordinarily effective teacher who could eloquently critique our student artwork, invariably focusing on positive features and deftly



Transformation/A-Trance-For-Information, Jan Stussy, 1980. UCLA Extension Course Catalog cover, originally acrylic and charcoal on masonite (48" x 48").

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identifying potential pathways to encourage us beyond our comfort zones. His master classes contrasted dramatically with the cathedral solemnity of many traditional figure-drawing groups, and we were encouraged to observe, learn, interact, and overtly steal ideas, approaches and techniques from one another, which not only amplified our learning experience but also engendered an enduring camaraderie.

Regardless of the medium, Jan remained committed to the fundamental importance of drawing skills in the visual arts. In his own words: "I am only interested in drawing and painting with content. More specifically, significant content! (But not literary, descriptive, narrative or illustrative content.) ... Good painting and good poetry (because they are twins?) appear to exist on much the same protein. Leonardo said: 'Painting is poetry – made visible.' I think 'poetry' in painting is the most important thing, but I cannot define what that 'poetry' is ... except to say it exists (for me) as significant content in a few

pictures, by a few artists – and it is wonderful to come upon it, if only now and then." That holy grail of artistic endeavor is clearly present in exemplary works by both artists in the current exhibition.

Jan Stussy's influence as an educator now extends to the Mendocino Art Center. Some of us who were direct beneficiaries of his friendship and tutelage have inaugurated an endowment for a Jan Stussy Memorial Studio/Building, a facility that will project his teaching legacy far into the future. Additionally, an affiliation has been initiated between MAC and

Woodbury University, an institution with comprehensive programs in arts, architecture and design. This will provide opportunities for mutual interchange of students and faculty and, more importantly, students in MAC workshops will have the potential to receive academic accreditation toward BFA and MFA degrees. A trial program is already in place for this summer. Profits from sales of Stussy artworks in the MAC Gallery will directly support this collaborative program.

Such formal academic affiliations also enhance MAC applications for grant support from arts and educational organizations. This has long been a major goal for those of us who aspire

to see MAC build on the foundation of the Zacha legacy by evolving from a community art center into an independent, self-sustaining Mendocino Art Institute, fully accredited to inspire, train and certify our artists of the future.



Self-Portrait in Anatomical Sweatshirt, Jan Stussy, 1965. Acrylic, charcoal and photo-collage on masonite (40" x 30").