An Opening of the Field
Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle

Michael Duncan and Christopher Wagstaff
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Michael Duncan

For lucky visitors who frequented it, 3267 Twentieth Street in San Francisco’s Mission District was an extraordinary place, a realm of art and literature shaped by two complementary sensibilities bent on vitalizing and reinhabiting culture at large. One of the most productive artistic couples of the twentieth century, artist/poet Jess (1923–2004) and poet/artist Robert Duncan (1919–1988) established a domestic space that fostered their practices and inspired a generation of Bay Area artists and poets. The couple nearly filled all four floors of their rambling Victorian house with libraries—mythology and reference on the ground floor, Oz books and fairy-tale editions in the bedroom, French literature and an exhaustive modernist collection upstairs. All remaining walls were covered with the visionary art of friends such as Helen Adam, Wallace Berman, Edward Corbett, Lilly Fenichel, Tom Field, George Herms, Harry Jacobus, R. B. Kitaj, and Philip Roeber.

Like 27 rue de Fleurus—the Paris apartment where Gertrude and Leo Stein amassed their early collection of Matisse, Gris, and Picasso—the house embodied a distinctive cultural moment. While certainly not as well known as that of the Steins, the alternative aesthetic that Duncan and Jess espoused had a remarkable impact on their peer group and has vital significance for artists and writers today. Their symbiotic relationship and the cultural view it generated are showcased in this exhibition, evidenced through their work and that of their immediate friends and colleagues. Centered on Jess and Duncan’s own collection, “An Opening of the Field” presents art with a refreshingly different set of values from mainstream museum fare.

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Reexamining myths through a broad synthesis of cultural references, Jess and Robert Duncan’s deeply interrelated works stand as crucial assemblages of the meaning of our time. Jess’s art was about the retrieval of images from a culture overflowing with them. In his collages—or, as he called them, “paste-ups”—he created mind-bending interminglings and fantastic juxtapositions, using images taken from sources ranging from Dick Tracy to Dürer, from *Life* magazine ads to medical-textbook drawings, from classical engravings to beefcake photos from *Physique Pictorial*. Jess filtered these far-flung references through a self-described Romantic sensibility, one that valued the transforming power of the imagination above all else.
Jess, Sent On The VIIth Wave, 1979
Collage and mixed media
Wax crayon on paper
Although he died prematurely, William “Bill” McNeill (1930–1984) is still recalled as one of the most gifted painters among the circle of artists, poets, and writers who gathered around Jack Spicer at Gino and Carlo’s bar and other North Beach meeting places in 1960s San Francisco.

McNeill was born to a well-to-do family in Pee Dee, North Carolina. After serving in the navy, he first pursued commercial art and design at the Art Center School in Los Angeles and then attended Black Mountain College, where he studied with Franz Kline and Joseph Fiore. Abruptly leaving Black Mountain in 1953 or 1954, he moved to New York, finding employment doing architectural renderings, especially interiors. Relocating to San Francisco in 1958, he connected with several Black Mountain alumni and spent time writing poetry.

Zen Buddhism was being introduced to the Bay Area at this time via books by Daisetz T. Suzuki and the talks and writings of Alan Watts, and this spiritual tradition immediately absorbed McNeill’s interest. According to Joanne Kyger, his longtime friend, McNeill and his wife, Lou, began sitting in 1959 with Shunryu Suzuki at Soko-ji at 1881 Bush Street, the only Soto Japanese temple in the Bay Area. Late in 1960 McNeill and Bob Hense, another of Suzuki’s first American students, flew to Japan to study at Rinso-in, Suzuki’s home temple. Eventually they had their heads shaved, received robes, and were given the precepts in Japanese.1 At this time McNeill studied the Japanese method of painting with broad, minimal, spontaneous strokes. Although this period of exploring Zen was essential to McNeill’s development, in 1961 he realized he was temperamentally unsuited for such a disciplined path and flew back to San Francisco to again take up his life as an artist.

This was the period of the engaging and lively interchanges between painters and poets known as the “San Francisco Renaissance,” and although he was not immediately accepted by some of the poets, McNeill became an enthusiastic member of this community. Experimental filmmaking was an emerging part of this scene, and he spent several years working on both his own 16 mm films and those of others. In 1963 he served as Helen Adam’s cameraman and editor for a black-and-white silent film she was making called Daydream of Darkness, based on her poem “Anaid Si Targa (Great is Diana).” McNeill and Adam spent the summer of 1963 making trips to Big Sur and Golden Gate Park, shooting footage for which there was not always a script; the film seems to revolve around calls to the moon-goddess to come to life and purge the world of opposites.2

Although he actively painted during his post-Japan years, a defining moment occurred when a restaurateur friend brought McNeill an eight-panel, eight-foot-tall folding screen for him to paint. Paul Alexander has recalled, “Bill did a Japanese poppy field right out of Monet . . . no figures, just the poppies, the suggestion of plants, stems, grasses, and poppies. It was very beautiful and one was very impressed by that.”3 This screen was an impetus to McNeill to become even more dedicated to painting in various mediums. His most sensitive and delicate

WILLIAM McNEILL

William McNeill, c. 1955
Photograph by Helen Adam
Acrylic on linen
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Artist Jess (1923–2004) and poet Robert Duncan (1919–1988) were one of the most fascinating artistic couples of the twentieth century, together sharing a rich, complex intellectual and emotional life that resulted in some of the century’s most satisfying and moving artworks and writings. After meeting in San Francisco in 1950, they soon created a domestic life based on mutual intellectual and aesthetic interests. In reexamining myths through a synthesis of art and literature, their deeply interrelated works stand as crucial assemblages of the meaning of our time.

An Opening of the Field presents a rich cross-section of Jess’s paintings and collages and Duncan’s colorful abstract drawings, as well as a gallery of works by the artists and poets who were intimates in their circle, including Helen Adam, James Broughton, Patricia Jordan, R. B. Kitaj, Michael McClure, Jack Spicer, Dean Stockwell, and many others. Essays by Michael Duncan and Christopher Wagstaff examine the artists’ lives and works; William Breazeale interprets the complexity of a major Jess collage; and James Maynard offers a synopsis of the poetry scene of the time. Concise biographies are included for each of the artists and poets featured in the “circle.”

Robert Duncan and Jess believed in imagination and metamorphosis as guiding powers. Their households at Stinson Beach and in San Francisco’s Mission District were models of social conviviality and domestic tranquility. Their close friends and associates shared their Romantic aesthetic, appreciation for myth, and sense of joyful play. For the most part, they operated outside the marketplace and art- and literary-world strictures, creating lyrical, intimate works for their own edification and enjoyment.

An Opening of the Field, the catalogue for the traveling exhibition of the same title, is the first publication to focus on the relationship of Jess and Duncan and their remarkable circle of friends. With more than 260 artworks and photographs, it illuminates an extraordinary era in twentieth-century American art and literature.