

Byron Randall: The Mendocino Years

Story by Margi Gomez

“It may well be that a painter’s best thinking is done with his brush. But it can’t do much lasting harm for him to venture a thought with his head once in a while, either. It isn’t necessary to probe the very well-spring of creation...that sacred water is easily muddied.”

These are words of painter and activist Byron Randall, about whom the current exhibit at the Kelley House Museum revolves. The exhibit features drawings, paintings, and woodcuts created by Byron Randall during the ten years he lived in Mendocino, as well as the related history of Randall’s political life during this tumultuous decade. Exhibit chair Marty Simpson, in collaboration with local designer and decorator Claire Amanno, have recreated Randall’s working studio, and, with assistance from Randall’s daughter Gale and his son Jon, provide a fascinating glimpse into the early years of the art scene here [in Mendocino].

Byron Randall was born in Tacoma, Washington in 1918, and grew up in Salem, Oregon. In his extensive journals, he refers to his upbringing in Oregon with great sentiment. “About my paintings: The look of them might have been different if I’d grown anywhere but in Oregon. Brilliant sunlight nursing the green valleys after a long rainy winter...there’s a powerful bit of environment that would show in a man’s work all his life.”

Child of the depression, Byron Randall mastered a number of professions, and was never a stranger to hard work. He worked as a farm hand, a waiter, an auto mechanic, a house painter, a reporter, a janitor, and a cook, and even as an amateur boxer for a short time. In an on-line interview from Goblin Magazine, written by Randall’s son Jon in collaboration with Wesley Joost, Randall remembers, “My mother and grandmother were both good at painting and they encouraged me. I was pretty athletic, back in my day in Oregon. I had an older brother who was murderous, so I became a boxer to save my damn life. I resorted to self defense but I never could beat him, he was bigger and meaner.”

From early childhood and throughout his life, Randall rose early and painted for four to six hours. Daughter Gale Chrisman, who attended the show’s opening at the Kelley House Museum, says this drive to work was key throughout his life. “He definitely had a work ethic. He worked hard and long, and he fulfilled his abilities. Not only was he creative, he was very bright and insightful.”

Byron Randall attended Salem High School, where as a senior he ran for class president, even then exhorting his classmates to consider socialism as an answer for the poverty and social woes of the day. The summer after he graduated, he worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day at a local cannery. He managed to save enough money to buy canvas and brushes, and eventually purchased a Model-T Ford, in which he explored the Oregon backroads, painting and sketching as he traveled. He spent that winter alone in a mountain cabin owned by his father, with his two dogs, eating when he was hungry, sleeping when he was tired, and painting constantly. When he returned home, Randall became a member of Salem’s WPA Art Center, where he had his first one-man show. He worked for a time as a cook at the Marion County Jail, where he was able to paint between meals and after work.

Randall kept painting log books and journals, including a “biographical history” in which he tells his story in his own peculiar but colorful and poetic language: “As a barely dry child he was fetched down to the State of Oregon – the Willamette Valley to be exact, Salem to be the site where he was bread and buttered. Have you ever been to the Willamette Valley in the springtime? Ah! What bread—what butter!! There was a period of chrysalis. There was a period of working in hop yards, fruit canneries, pulling flax, picking string beans (25 cents for picking a peck), swimming endlessly, sun on summer beaches, selling newspapers (1 cent profit for 5 cents a newspaper.)”

Randall’s first major show was at the Whyte Gallery in Washington, D.C., when he was just twenty-one years of

age. It brought his work to national critical attention, and launched his professional career. *Newsweek Magazine* even referred to Randall, as, "The find of the season."

His first wife was leftwing sculptor Helen Nelson, from whom he took classes at the Salem Art Center. Helen's belief in his talent provided vital support for the young Byron Randall, and her impact on his life and politics was profound. They committed themselves to social and trade union activism, and Randall's work reflected his political views throughout his life. They married in 1940, and moved to Mexico for six months, where their first child, Gale, was born. Gale remembers her childhood fondly, "My father was a very patient father," she recalls. But, she adds, he was also "constantly torn and off' away." She continues, "I retain certain cameos of my young father. He was a very gentle man. It had to have been very hard for him to be so driven as an artist, and to have had to think of his family, and the practical side of life."

When the young family returned from Mexico to Oregon, Randall taught painting, drawing, and graphics at the Salem Federal Art Center, where he was given a retrospective exhibition of seventy-five paintings. They moved to San Francisco in 1942. Randall served in the merchant marines during the Second World War, as a cook and a baker. Some of his daughter Gale Chrisman's earliest memories come from this period, during which her father kept up a constant flow of letters to the little girl. Gale remembers, "They were letters that were really stories, full of vitality, color, and lots of humor. Also injunctions for me to follow, lessons for life. All the characters were the cockroaches that must have inhabited the night kitchen on the ship. It was a mythology, really, a cosmology."

Randall continued to paint while aboard ship, finding the time to do so whenever he could. After the war he worked on the luxury cruiser the *Lurline* in the South Pacific and specifically in Hawaii. The family settled in the North Beach area in San Francisco, and during this time he was able to mount one-man shows at galleries in Hollywood and in San Francisco. In 1948, a second child, Jon, was born to the Randalls. Jon showed much early promise as a pianist, and Gale was schooled as a dancer. Always painting voraciously, Randall encouraged cooperation among his fellow artists, forming the Artist' Guild of San Francisco, of which he was the first president, as well as the Arts Association (also in San Francisco) which successfully lobbied for public money for the arts.

An avowed communist, Randall spent a few years traveling and painting in the Communist East Bloc, working for the Canadian World News services, reporting from Yugoslavia. "My father was very pro-Tito in Yugoslavia," his daughter Gale relates. He saw what Tito had done for Yugoslavia firsthand, and talked about it. He had shows of his paintings from the area." All this captured the unwanted attention of the FBI, which began an extensive dossier on Randall's political views. Escaping the wave of anti-communism of the mid-fifties, the Randall family spent three years in Canada, during the House un-American Activities Committee hearings. Randall continued to show his work in San Francisco, Toronto, and Canada, to continued acclaim.

In 1956 tragedy struck. Helen was killed by a car while crossing the street with eight-year-old Jon. Randall, who had been studying fresco mural painting in Mexico, rushed back to Canada and his children.

He brought his family to San Francisco in 1958, at the beginning of what was to be a literary and artistic renaissance, renting a studio and living quarters in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's famous City Lights Bookstore. "In those days," remembers Gale, "North Beach was sort of a conjunction of Little Italy and Chinatown, a very stimulating environment. At six, seven, and eight [years of age], I wandered freely in the neighborhood, and it was very safe. This was prebeat, pre-Carol Doda. It was a wonderful place to be then."

Randall considered himself an expressionist. His work also contains elements of postwar social realism popular among Mexican muralists. Constantly striving to put his art at the service of progressive ideals, he wrote, "... painting is a language, and that language is a product of society, disturbed or healthy. Today we're living in one of the cruelest ages in man's history. At a time when unthinkably hideous destruction confronts all of us on earth, the fragile zone of creative expression seems of small moment."

Randall eventually sought a quieter environment, moving to Tam Valley [Tamalpais, Marin County] with his two

children. He met and later married Emmy Lou Packard, a well-known artist in her own right who went on to champion saving the Mendocino headlands from development. [It later became a state park.]

Randall taught art classes for a while, and continued to pursue cooperative ventures with fellow artists. They eventually moved to Mendocino, where they set up the Packard-Randall guesthouse in what is now the Mendocino Village Inn. Life was full, with running the guest house, organizing shows for their Mendocino Coast Gallery, and organizing against the Vietnam war and for the Northern California Chapter of the Peace and Freedom Party, of which they were founding members. On January 2, 1966 Randall wrote, "Body ought to be able to start a new year of work with a little thunder-hadn't one? Truth is otherwise, however...Started the new year like I ended the one just past, taking care of this big establishment. Friends and acquaintances been hanging from the rafters..."

Long-time writer Bobby Markels lives in Mendocino and worked for Byron Randall in the Packard-Randall guesthouse when she first came to Mendocino forty years ago. "They charged seven dollars a day back then. Emmy Lou had created a gorgeous garden there; it was like a wonderland when you went through the gate. Every afternoon Byron would hold court for the tourists, talking about art and philosophy, always with a cigarette and a drink, and always wearing the same blue smock. I remember him as a very gentle, very compassionate guy." Randall painted as energetically as ever, and a gallery was opened behind the guest house, at what is now 955 Ukiah Street, where the Randall-Packards showed not only their own work but that of other well-known artists, including Ansel Adams.

Byron Randall embraced the wood and linocuts that his wife had become so well known for, as well as painting hundreds of still lifes and nudes during this period. Among Randall's most memorable work was done as part of his "Philo Series," which featured barns and farm implements painted in brilliant oils. He writes in his journals, "These Anderson Valley things would read all right up in Oregon, too, I believe. This one just done is another variation on the same elements: light, sheep fences, and hardscrabble barns. And the hills running up off the top of the painting. This may be the only series of 100 landscape paintings in history that show no sky nowhere. But you see... that is what makes valleys, is hills rising high all around."

Emotions ran high when it came to politics and lifestyle in those days, and the outspoken "newcomers" were targets for some conservative locals, who felt their way of life was being challenged. One day "Commie Rat" was found painted on their doorstep, and they received hate mail and even death threats, some of which is on exhibit at the Kelley House Museum, as anti-war sentiment grew. A Christmas card collage, send out by the Randalls in 1963, states, "NO! We can't say Merry Christmas this year!" as a protest to the killing in Vietnam.

Tensions in the community, Byron Randall's ongoing struggle with substance abuse (he was a chain-smoker and regular drinker), money woes and competitive feelings between him and Emmy Lou began to take their toll on his marriage. Randall's intense feelings about the events of the day are reflected both in his paintings and his writing. In 1962 he wrote, "Emmy Lou and I decided today to do a series of prints on the theme of peace. We will use skeletons as the central element, those being eminently suitable to the present human condition... we want to contribute. Must write a letter to President Kennedy urging not to resume nuclear tests. This would continue the spiral that must certainly at some point result in Doomsday for a great part of humanity!"

Finally Randall retreated to Hawaii, seeking a tranquillity that was proving elusive in Mendocino. When he returned to the mainland, he and Emmy Lou divorced, and he moved to Tomales, where he lived and painted the rest of his life. In the early eighties, he enjoyed a happy but short-lived marriage to Romanian Eve Wienland, who died of cancer after only three years. In 1990, he reestablished a relationship with artist and long-time friend Pele DeLapp, who remained a helpmate to Byron Randall in his final days. The indomitable and passionate Byron Randall died of emphysema in 1999.

Randall often wrote about the struggle to retain his identity as an artist while keeping a roof overhead. "About the best such a hapless fellow [a working artist] can hope to do is to fend off extraneous pressures—questions of the marketplace and such—with one hand while keeping true aim on what seems a worthy target with the other."

Byron Randall's daughter Gale, now living in Scotland, reflects on the life of this complex and prolific man, "You have to be compelled, driven to be an artist. It wasn't a choice. My father felt that the best thing you could do with your life was art. Art was what he most believed in. It was his way of responding to being alive."

Visit the Kelly House Museum this summer through Labor Day to see some of the paintings that Byron Randall created during the Mendocino years, and to get a taste of life and politics in Mendocino in the 1960s. The Kelley House Museum, at 45007 Albion Street in Mendocino, is open from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. every day except Wednesdays. For more information about Byron Randall's life and work, visit www.byron_randall.com.

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