



IN MEMORIAM

Roy De Forest
Professor of Art, Emeritus
UC Davis
1930 – 2007

Roy De Forest, one of the most prolific and imaginative artists of his generation, died unexpectedly at Kaiser Permanente, Vallejo Medical Center on May 18, 2007 after a brief illness. He was 77. He is survived by his wife of 34 years, Gloria, two children: son, Pascal, and daughter, Oriana, both of Concord; and three sisters: Beth Jacobs of San Leandro, Beverly Lagiss of Livermore and Lynn Robie of Sacramento.

De Forest had his home and studio in the small town of Port Costa, California. That location offered him a unique confluence of advantages: he was personally surrounded by the rural fields, cattle, birds, and dogs that so populated his imagery mind, while still located at the center of the vibrant San Francisco Bay area art community.

Born in North Platte, Nebraska to a farm worker family during the Great Depression, De Forest grew up in Nebraska, Colorado, and eastern Washington State - where he took his associate degree in math and humanities from Yakima Junior College in 1950. He then spent a number of years studying art before attending the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (now known as the San Francisco Art Institute.) He ended his formal education by taking his bachelor's and, after service in the Army, his master's degrees from San Francisco State University.

By the time De Forest joined the nascent UC Davis Art Department as a Lecturer in 1965, he had already well begun his national reputation as a painter (he became an assistant professor in 1967, rose to full professor in 1974, and retired in 1992). Roy was one of the "founding fathers" of an Art Department that was to quickly realize a national and international reputation for the singular qualities of its faculty, the cumulative breath of their artistic concerns, and the unique Master of Fine Arts degree program that was the Art faculty's equally shared obligation and responsibility.

De Forest's remarkable artistic production of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and folk objects continued uninterrupted throughout his long career. His artworks are to be found in many, many private art collections (to the continuing pure delight of their owners), and some of the most well respected public art collections, such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Crocker Art Museum of Sacramento, the Hirshhorn Museum of Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C, and many others. A "Roy De Forest Retrospective Exhibition" originated in 1974 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City the following year. His complete list of public exhibitions is in the hundreds and his continuous and unabated prolific artistic production can serve as a model for any fully engaged young artist.

To know and understand Roy's artwork is to know and understand Roy. He was human imagination incarnate. His artworks are populated with a menagerie of creatures – some identifiably of this world, others

inhabitants of some purely imaginary land, all living narrative lives in some unbounded territory between reality and magic. In addition to the wonder and joy of his imagery, Roy was known as an artist's artist. He constantly found new ways to apply paint/ pigment/ mark to paper/ canvas/ wood. To view one of his paintings or drawings is to enlarge one's understanding of the fundamental act of artistic mark-making. A line traced along a French curve becomes a canoe; a series of squiggly black crayon marks on a yellow field above a silhouette of a face becomes a 1920's flapper hairdo in a lithograph. Roy took great delight in artmaking – in the power of images and in the nature of artistic creation. That delight and totally artistic engagement is present in his work as whimsy bonded to meaning created in joy.

In his last New York exhibition, at the George Adams Gallery in 2005, the New York Times art critic, Roberta Smith said: "At 75, Mr. De Forest is painting pretty much what he has painted for years: dogs, men in hats or headdresses, and supernatural beings against a flattened terrain. Angular, masklike, brusquely rendered, they all seem shamanistic and slightly crazed; their bright, staring eyes imply the ingestion of hallucinatory substances." And "His new works have become slightly more structured: compartmentalized into patchworks of portraits, friezes and pictures within pictures, as if the artist had a new appreciation for classic American folk art. They are also more inventive and sensuous in their handling of paint. The bristling textures have diversified -- new additions include mosaiclike sections of dried acrylic paint -- and the clearer composition increases their impact. These works have a blatant, consummate ease. If Mr. De Forest's goal is to transfer the ecstatic experience of the world from his creature- subjects to his creature- viewers, it has never been more clearly or radiantly stated."

To personally encounter Roy was - not unlike viewing his artwork - a unique experience - always surprising, always amazing. He had a gentle demeanor coupled to an incisive intelligence; a great generosity of spirit matched by an amazing capacity for spontaneity, and a warm open smile that hinted at untold imaginative secrets. He was a wonderful artist, a giving teacher, a truly genuine colleague, and an American original.

Mike Henderson
Harvey Himelfarb
Gina Werfel