

HELEN RAE: REST IN PEACE AND POWER

BY JANICE
ESTRADA AND
THE TIERRA
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Helen Rae, a contemporary artist who broke down barriers in art, age and accessibility, died February 12, 2021, in Southern California, at age 83. This visual artist, who was inspired by couture photography, transformed the simple materials of graphite, colored pencil and paper into intricate forms and figures.

Rae grew up in Claremont, Calif., where her father was a professor at one of the Claremont Colleges, a unified group of seven institutions of higher learning. She was deaf and nonverbal, and she learned sign language and other methods of communication. Even more important, she learned visual art.

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1938-2021



Untitled (February 13, 2020), 2020, by Helen Rae

Helen Rae



Photographs courtesy the Tierra del Sol Group.

When she was 50 years old, Helen Rae was enrolled by her mother in what is now the Tierra del Sol Studio Art Program in Los Angeles, Calif. There she discovered her own expressive language, making ceramic masks, sculpture, water color and colored pencil drawings that became her stylistic medium known and appreciated around the world.

Creating art in a program for people with cognitive disabilities could have kept Helen Rae's art in obscure venues and categorized as "outsider art" – a term that until recently was broadly applied to those artists outside of and uninfluenced by the art world. However, with the encouragement of Rebecca Hamm, her teacher at Tierra del Sol, and the tenacity of Good Luck Gallery Director Paige Wery, Rae's work transcended traditional categories.

In 2015, when Rae was 77 years old, Wery initiated the artist's first solo exhibition at Good Luck Gallery. "I had a visceral reaction the first time I saw Helen's drawings," Wery said. "Her colors, intense mark making, unseen proportions, her subject's stare – it all packed a powerful punch. Then I found out she was in her 70s and had never had a solo show. I've learned to trust those gut feelings much more now, but at the time, I had no idea if other people would react similarly toward Helen's work. I gave her a solo show, and it was so successful that every work was acquired opening night."

Rae drew inspiration from fashion magazines that often have a central figure modeling designer clothes, glasses, jewelry and handbags. Rae pored over these images, selecting a range that covered brightly colored, patterned ensembles to subdued hues and poses, and then set to work on the details that resonated with her own vision. The results were profound and captivating.

David Pagel wrote, in the *Los Angeles Times*, a review of her first solo exhibition: "Her laser focus is vivid in the abundance of detail, particularly in the complex patterns of the fabrics she selects and edits, judiciously simplifying some elements and making others more complex, irregular, mind-blowing."

Rae's meteoric rise in the art world started in L.A.'s Chinatown. Her work traveled with Wery to New York and Paris to be exhibited in the Outsider Art Fairs



and other venues. Rae's art was featured in *Vogue* magazine, which illustrated Rae's artworks alongside its own fashion spreads. References to her age and her disabilities were mentioned, but the focus and interest was on her artistic style.

Rae pushed boundaries in her visual language by using pencil to create vividly dense textures, abstracting figures and patterns into imagery that was resolutely "of the moment." She was unique in the contemporary art world because she seemed uninterested in the accolades she earned. However she was generous with her many fans and collectors, happily posing for photos next to her work. She seemed more concerned and driven by the exercise of making and expanding her perspective and subject matter.

Rae's final solo exhibition, at Tierra del Sol Gallery, September 4–October 23, 2020, was titled *The Evolution of Helen Rae*, and it showcased the artist's use of portraiture as an emerging facet of her practice. At 83, she was still in pursuit of the imagery that enabled her to break free of the limitations the world had tried to impose on her.

Helen Rae is survived by her brother, her many Claremont church friends, the household where she lived, and the Tierra del Sol community that had become her extended family. Rebecca Hamm, who worked with Helen for 31 years, offered this fitting tribute, "Helen inspired hundreds of artists

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she worked with in the studios, and before that, her early teachers who broadened her world with sign language. Her courageous life, joyful persistence and intensely creative work will live forever." 📌

▲ Works by Helen Rae at the Outsider Art Fair, NY, 2016

TIERRA DEL SOL FOUNDATION is a non-profit art center established in 1971 for developmentally disabled adults. The Tierra del Sol Gallery, at 945 Chung King Road (Chinatown), Los Angeles, CA 90012, focuses on showing the works created by these artists in Tierra del Sol's progressive studios. This article was a group effort directed by Janice Estrada, Manager of Marketing and Communications. More information can be found on the center's website: www.tierradelsol.org.