

An Artistic Vision Quest: The New Work of Kurt Edward Fishback

by Michael R. Gorman

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There is a moment of critical decision that faces every artist of any kind at some time in his mature years, a moment that affects the legacy of that artist, and very often also affects such temporal issues as income and reputation. It is the time when a creative person experiences a profound change in thinking and understanding, a time of soul searching and transition that marks a person questing for enlightenment, and that births a surge of personal growth. Everyone agrees in the abstract that growth is good, wisdom is a worthy goal, and change is healthy, but that sentiment often clouds a bit, becomes murky, if that artist has gained fame and fortune based on an older understanding of the world and now wishes his art to reflect both his history and a new and broader understanding, a new direction. From the patronized artists of the Renaissance to the best-selling authors of today, weaving a new thread into a comfortable reputation butts up against the surety of financial and critical success born of a revered body of work already established. It's the same phenomenon that makes an audience at a concert reject the "new sound" of a favorite band or singer. We want our artists to remain fresh and vital and provocative . . . sort of.

Some performers flaunt the changes, or even manufacture them. (Think Madonna.) Others run from change into the secure arms of the tried and true . . . and the profitable. The truly great artists, the artists with the most integrity and courage and vision, simply surge ahead with the same enthusiasm to speak their truth as they had when they started as unknowns. Such an artist is Kurt Edward Fishback.

Fishback has a heritage of creativity as the son of photographer Glen Fishback. He grew up in the fertile artistic community of Northern California in the 1940's and 50's. Photographer Edward Weston was a good friend of his father's and the source of Kurt's middle name. Ansel Adams was no stranger to the Fishback home, and he shared that honor with many talented artists and photographers of the time. Young Kurt grew up in this atmosphere of creative California bohemia, and though he would later gain fame as an artistic portrait photographer, his initial artistic focus was sculpture.

He began his formal training at Sacramento City College, and also studied at The San Francisco Art Institute and the University of California, Davis. He began photographing sculptors he worked with in school as a kind of photographic journal of his studies, and ten years later when he went to teach at his father's school, The Glen Fishback School of Photography, he began to expand his photographic images of artists and others, a change of focus that led to fame as a photographic artist and chronicler of the arts crowd with whom he grew up. That fame continued with a one man exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and put him in the permanent collection of the Crocker Museum and in public and private collections around the world.

No one could accuse Kurt Fishback of being static or conventional. From teaching at an all Black college in North Carolina, to teaching at the college of the Siskiyou in Weed California, to becoming an instructor at his father's school of photography, to running a commercial photographic studio, to a five year stint in Utah, Kurt's journey has been a peripatetic one that might have left a lesser artist fragmented in his vision, but he cherished and nurtured each thread of his weaving, undaunted by what others might consider too many colored strands, too much diversity. This skill would become even more integral to his life and work in later years.

As for his art, Fishback's early work in sculpture was whimsical in temperament, colorful, and abstract, yet seductive as well, and imbued with a kind of satiric edge that cautions the viewers to not be so quick to find comfort in the abstract shapes before them, like children's fairy tales with archetypal rumblings below the anthropomorphic fun. Some images, like the ropes tying the earth in place below the cloudy sky in the piece called "Earth Bound" or the house inside a pie crust in "Home Made Pie" or the kid's alphabet building blocks

arrayed across a road in “Road Block” might elicit a chuckle at the initial pun, but upon further observation create a dissonance not so easily dismissed. In some of his work, like the brown gauze covered form in “Mummified Cloud” present the dissonance more directly. “Mummified Cloud” is an early work, but in this age of global warming, it might just be more powerful now than it ever was. His drawings during this time carried the same sensibility, though perhaps in more muted tones.

Kurt’s photographic portraiture is a veritable pantheon of artistic genius of the past fifty years or so, but these are not images of fickle, manipulative, or angry gods. His lens reveals a familial bond in his revered subjects that most people can only feel vicariously in the works created by the likes of Ansel Adams, Fred Dalkey, Robert Maplethorpe, Julia Couzens, Annie Murphy-Robinson, Stan Padilla, and so many others. In a Fishback photographic portrait, the art and the artist converge into a beloved relative you want to sit with and whose stories you want to hear, or rather, see. The artists themselves become art.

Examples of Fishback’s work can be seen on his web site at <http://www.fishbackphotography.com>.

Of all the stages of Fishback’s artistic life, the photographic period is the one with which most people are familiar. These portraits define him in the minds of many. Indeed the skill and brilliance of the images seem to be the culmination of his years of training and experience, a body of work the likes of which any artist would be proud. These might have been, in a lesser man, the deserved laurels upon which to sit for the duration. Kurt is rightfully proud of his extensive body of work, but he is not at all ready to finish the journey. You see it in the sparkle of his eyes when he speaks of the possibilities yet to come. The surety of age and the excitement of youth are side by side there in his artist’s eye.

Fame has a way of locking an artist into the kind of work for which he gained fame. Life has a way of shaking up such surety. Three years ago his beloved wife and companion for decades passed away. As so often happens when tragedy strikes, Kurt began to ask some of the big questions about meaning and the realm of spirit and his place in the world given what he knew and where he had been. How was he to weave such a profound loss into his life and art? He had always been drawn to the nature based spirituality of Native Americans, and his healing journey took him to places associated with those ancient paths. At one such place he met the woman, Cassie, who would become his second wife.

As with a Native seeker on a vision quest, Fishback was no casual observer of the ancient beliefs and philosophy, but rather an active participant who requested to whomever might be listening to be given a fuller vision of his identity and his direction. He dreamed one night of a Miwok woman who called herself *Two Crows Woman*, and she told him that in another incarnation he had been her brother, a Miwok known as *He Who Wonders Well*. It was then that the crow and the crow’s larger cousin the raven began to find their way into his artwork. Both Crow and Raven are seen in many indigenous cultures to be guardians and messengers between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The Raven quickly became the central symbol for Kurt of the need to integrate in his art and his life, an understanding of the relationship between life and death, joy and sorrow, light and shadow. It was then also that the inclusiveness of the circle began to displace the line as a symbol of his own belief and philosophy. A third element, the quest, the journey, also became central to his new and deeper understanding of his place in the world.

As Kurt’s newfound spiritual exploration began to inform his art, he circled back around to his artistic roots in the colorful and abstract, but with elements of the representational as well. He found himself using the circular form of the mandala to express the quest he was on, the circle being a symbol of the nature of life in almost all early agrarian cultures.

“The last three years have been a journey back to wholeness,” Fishback explains. What better image of that wholeness than the circle?

Not everyone in the arts understood the transformation in Fishback. As he put it:

“When you do 250 portraits of artists over 30 years that becomes who you are to the public. They don’t know you for anything else, and that’s been difficult.”

But the seeds of this growth were always there inside him waiting for the spring rain that follows winter to quicken them into sprouting.

“I’ve always been willing to change and shift.”

By way of example, he explained that he was offered a studio in Manhattan in 1968 as a grad student in sculpture, and a chance to be introduced to major players in the art world, and though he knew it was a great

compliment and an incredible opportunity, something didn't feel right, so he came back to UC Davis to try and find out what it meant. Looking back, Kurt can see so much that led him to this stage in his life, and though the implications of his decisions, like not staying in New York, were hidden at the time. Looking back, he can see the elegance of the pathways that led him to today.

In our conversation about his past work and his present passion, Kurt revealed that the Smithsonian National Museum has requested his old photographic negatives and the papers associated with his work, now that digital photography has replaced most film photography. The museum wants to guarantee that this behind the scenes process that led to his great works will be preserved.

Although he was honored by the national museum's interest in his "papers," Kurt pondered whether accepting The Smithsonian invitation would be tantamount to accepting his art as history and the doorway to a comfortable and settled retirement, but as we talked, writer to artist, and both with a vision of the circle and the cycles of life, he realized that shedding of the autumnal leaves may be an ending, but it also clears room for beginnings in new growth of springtimes still ahead, and while the leaves of yesterday crumble and fade into the soil, or are pressed, framed, and stored in a museum vault, they are reborn as the sustenance of the bright new leaves of vernal inspiration. Perhaps the letting go of remnants of the past might be the best avenue toward truly incorporating them into something new. That is the promise of a life that honors all of the seasons of the year, and all of the seasons of our lives. Would that the baby boom generations had more such artists. They have much to teach us about the joy and promise of our mature years, about the weaving together of wisdom and vision that is possible only after decades of living with eyes wide open.

As for the new art that is erupting from Fishback's three years of transformation: his "Nature Spirit Mandalas" are visual mantras, as simple as a child's kaleidoscope image, as profound and luminescent as a high church stained glass window, as intricate as a Celtic knot. His "Raven Mandalas" are all of this and more. These are not the ravens of a biology textbook, but rather the Raven of a shaman's dreamscape. These are the totem birds of the ancients, spinning at the threshold of life and death, darkness and light. These are the dream weavers. These are the carrion birds who pick away at the bones of our linear consciousness then take wing into the great circle of life. Always the circle.

These new visions are no departure from the Kurt Fishback whom so many have come to know, admire, and love through one or another season of his art making. These are the weavings of a mature artist who knows that, while media and imagery may change, nothing is lost in the ever-changing landscape of a journey well traveled, only transformed, only brought back around to the beginnings and at the same time imbued with the greater consciousness born of the journey. In the vibrant color, abstract whimsy, and searching consciousness of Kurt Fishback's early sculptural work, a careful observer can see foreshadowing of his recent work, work that has spiraled back around in his own personal circle of life, back to his beginnings yet somehow greater, higher in the spiral of his growth as a man and as an artist. Any child who has sat at the knee of a beloved grandparent knows that whimsy and wisdom are wonderfully compatible, two sides of a single, shining, gold coin of elderhood. And when they meet in the great circle that is life, then magic is afoot. And what is art if not magic?

This writer would encourage all lovers of art to find a show of Kurt Fishback's newest work. Check his web site for dates. Go. Observe. Remember. One day critics and academics will look back and see the magnificence of Kurt Fishback's Raven Years, or Circle Years, and ask, "How did he know? Where did he find the vision?" And you will be able to say, "Yes, I was there. Many who were uncomfortable with change were skeptical, but I had the joy of seeing at its inception a visionary growth of a great American artist. For a moment I flew in the spiraling flight of the Raven, and I knew that the journey into today would be good."

And for Kurt Fishback, the here and now is a new territory that should be exciting to anyone familiar with his past work. Those who have known him before will best appreciate the new dimensions to his art. Those who are just meeting him will have layer upon layer to explore and enjoy, works of technical maturity yet sparked with excitement as if he were newly graduated from art school. The man is a vibrant testament to life and art forever renewed.

The lovers of art who truly understand the artistic process as it is played out over an artist's lifetime are the people who leave their favorite artists free to move into new artistic territory. The rest will find themselves slapping their foreheads years after the visionary artist is gone. No artist ever loses anything of his soul and passion by reinventing his medium or exploring new styles and subjects. The careful observer, the wise

observer of a Kurt Fishback Raven Mandala can see in the colorful depths of the work a profound history that a casual observer never has the privilege of experiencing. Look into the shining eyes of the Raven, that most enigmatic, archetypal creature flying between the world of light and dark, embodying chiaroscuro even among the bright leaves of autumn, and you will find there a love of artists photographed that stretches over a lifetime of love for art and its practitioners. You will see a soul unwilling to accept any limitations to his passion to see, even the limitations of his own success. You will find Kurt Fishback.