

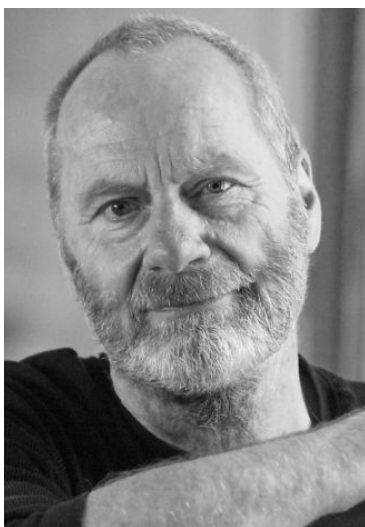
San Francisco Chronicle Bay Area Arts News

Bay Area arts news, Aug. 22

Jesse Hamlin



Ward Schumaker's "Helen of Genoa," painted in 2012, was triggered by feelings about death.



Ward Schumaker

[Ward Schumaker](#), the noted San Francisco artist who makes vital Expressionist paintings and mixed-media pieces when he's not drawing illustrations for Hermes, Kronenbourg beer or various books, woke up from a dream a few years ago with the word **Milarepa** on his mind.

Schumaker had meditated for 35 years but had never heard of the Tibetan Buddhist yogi who'd spent 12 years sitting in a cave, meditating. Reading up on Milarepa, he came across the famous story about the monk baring his calloused behind to a departing student eager for one final lesson. "Just do it!" the master called out, or words to that effect, a thousand years before Nike copped the phrase.

"I thought that was so funny," says Schumaker, 70, whose response to the story was to skip meditating for a spell, at least not while sitting on his butt. "I painted these paintings, which were sort of my meditations," he says, standing among the spacious abstract pictures in his "[Milarepa Series](#)," with their black calligraphic swirls and brushy patches of white, blues and grays, in a gallery at [Dominican University](#) in San Rafael.

Those and other works - including rich mixed-media images inspired by **Hector Berlioz**, [Karlheinz Stockhausen](#) and other composers whose stencil-cut names appear and vanish in these many-layered pictures, and big acrylic paintings steeped in Schumaker's love of **Willem de Kooning** - are in the college library's airy gallery through Wednesday.

Some of these works will be in the solo Schumaker show opening the **Jack Fischer** Gallery's new Potrero Street home Sept. 7, when the neighborhood celebrates the opening of several galleries that have migrated to Potrero Hill from high-rent downtown.

Schumaker's show will include recent wood-and-gesso versions of the "dumb" cardboard boxes he began making when he moved here from his native Nebraska in 1966. He'd decided to become an Abstract Expressionist painter at 6 after seeing [Jackson Pollock](#)'s splatter pictures in **Life** magazine.

He was a semester shy of graduating from the University of Omaha (now the [University of Nebraska Omaha](#)) when he entered a statewide painting contest to earn the \$400 he needed for tuition. Figuring the single-color abstractions he was doing at the time wouldn't fly, he painted a loose Pop version of **Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam."** The out-of-state judges gave it first prize. But the locals apparently saw some kind of three-way perversion in the picture and offered Schumaker a deal: take \$400 plus an extra \$200 and quietly withdraw the painting - or possibly face a pornography charge.

"I took the money," says the buoyant, gray-bearded artist, laughing. "I came accidentally to San Francisco and stayed for 45 years." Schumaker, who lives on Potrero Hill with his second wife, artist and illustrator [Vivienne Flesher](#), began showing his personal work a decade ago, when he started crafting big handmade books whose images he painted with paste mixed with pigment. He made some of these works that way.

"It gives you this weird surface that's very hard and really resilient. I love its transparency, the kind of sheen it gets sometimes. You can't tell what it's going to look like dry. So you don't have control. And for me, that's a really good thing."

Earning his living drawing images for Hermes or logos like the prize-winner he did for Moose's restaurant years ago, Schumaker rarely puts recognizable images in his paintings or on the wall. "I get bored with them. They're tellin' me too much. These things don't do that to me, although once in a while I'll stick a little something in there."

He describes his process: "You show up, go to work and hope that something will take over, and at some point tell you, 'paint this blue, paint this red, stop, start, fold it up.' You're waiting for that moment when the thing takes over. You go to work everyday and pray it's going to happen."

For more information, go to www.dominican.edu or www.jackfischergallery.com.