

PHOTOGRAPHY: A Woman with Foresight



COURTESY: MARGARETTA K. MITCHELL

Disciples of Duncan: Margaretta Mitchell's photographs document Berkeley's Temple of Wings where Isadora Duncan's ideas and dance were held sacred.

A Photographic Performance

Margaretta Mitchell's artful camera work preserves the legacy of a Temple dedicated to free spirits. By Kira Albin Halpern

On a recent evening at Zellerbach Hall, Margaretta Mitchell's performance with the Berkeley Symphony was silent and stunning. But, instead of performing on a Steinway, Selmer or Strad, Mitchell soloed with her Hasselblad.

Mitchell's performance has actually taken place over a 20-year period of time, culminating in the photographic portfolio *Dance for Life*, about a little-known piece of Berkeley history: the Temple of

Wings. The Temple, an extraordinary columnated Greek structure high on a Berkeley hillside facing the Golden Gate and the setting sun, was the result of an architectural collaboration that included Bernard Maybeck. Most fascinating, however, is not the building itself but the history it reflected of early twentieth-century California.

The story starts with legendary dancer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) and her childhood friend, Florence Treadwell Boynton. Together they

learned music, gymnastics, dramatics and dance in the tranquil setting of the East Bay, referred to at that time as the "Athens of the Pacific." By the late 1800s, Duncan had moved away, eventually growing into an international success. Still in California, Boynton became a wife and mother, and by 1909 was a vocal proponent of Duncan's dance and dress philosophies and an advocate of healthy outdoor living. During a time when most women wore confining corsets, high collars, fussy

ruffles and lace-up shoes, Boynton went Greek, dressing herself and her family in loose, flowing tunics and sandals, and teaching the dances of Duncan, her liberated childhood friend. Boynton was also influenced by the vision of California as a new Mediterranean culture, a place where "[t]he untrammelled wilderness became a symbolic image of the American experience: freedom of body, freedom of spirit," writes Mitchell, in her portfolio introduction.

Through the influence of these parallel forces, Boynton wanted to create a home in which to express her ideals. She and her family purchased land—adjacent to Bernard Maybeck's property—in a newly organized community whose members sought a domestic utopia symbolized by simple homes designed in harmony with nature. Beginning in 1911 and completed in 1915, here is where the Temple of Wings, designed with open-air living studios, was built. Here, Boynton taught children the legacy of Duncan's dances, a sequence of movements inspired by ancient Greek iconography. In 1923, a fire destroyed the Temple, but it was rebuilt and eventually passed to the Boyntons' daughter, Sulgwynn Quitzow, who carried on the tradition of dance there as her mother aged.

Margaretta Mitchell enters stage left in the early 1960s. From a formal and ritualized New Jersey upbringing, Mitchell came to California with her family so that her husband could complete his U.C. Berkeley doctorate degree. At a friend's recommendation, Mitchell went to see the Temple, took her three daughters there to dance, and began to photograph. "I tried to express the pure joy involved in dance that was expressed for the sake of itself," says Mitchell. "That's why I call the project *Dance for Life*. The whole purpose of Duncan dance was to liberate the body from a convention."

Over 20 years, until Quitzow's death in 1983, Mitchell took thousands of photographs, preserving a historical time and place. With the financial support of five grants she hired an assistant, spent a summer printing negatives and culled 300 images from the collection. In 1985, Mitchell's images were exhibited at the Oakland Museum, and soon after the show she published the *Dance for Life* portfolio—comprised of a historical introduction and 12 of these stunning images reproduced as photogravures, a process in which the photographic image is etched onto a copper plate, inked and transferred to paper.

Several years ago, Mitchell and Berkeley Symphony director and conductor Kent Nagano collaborated on the symphony's graphic expression, and Mitchell's Temple images were incorporated into the Symphony's programs, brochures and other materials. "The images are impressive in terms of the subtlety, detail, dramatic and humanistic depth they communicate. The complicated perspectives resulting from the confrontation of aesthetics and history are extremely provocative—at the same time



ART

Capturing Light

As vast and various as the state itself, photography in California has long played a significant role in our cultural cosmos. From the days of the '49 Gold Rush, which coincided with the introduction of inexpensive daguerreotypes, to the present day, when social realities have irrevocably altered our view of the Golden State, photography has figured prominently in the region's long and colorful history.

Over the years, the Oakland Museum has done an exemplary job of collecting California photography, from work by name photographers to anonymous flea-market finds. This month, the museum draws on its collection of more than a million images with *Capturing Light*, a landmark exhibition of more than 200 works taken in California by some 100 noted American photographers. Familiar names include Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Mybridge, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Robert Frank, Richard Misrach, Carrie Mae Weems, and many others.

In keeping with the museum's penchant for presenting creative work in the context of more prosaic paraphernalia, the show includes



California dreamin': Weston's Nude.

cameras, photo equipment, early catalogs, journals, magazines, advertisements, historical documents and personal memorabilia. A hefty catalog accompanies this overview of a vital photographic tradition.

Capturing Light: Masterpieces of California Photography 1850-2000 is on view from March 3-May 26 at the Oakland Museum of California, Tenth and Oak Streets, Oakland. Open Wednesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. (Sunday from noon). Admission is \$6. For more information call (510) 238-2200.

—Ken Coupland

DANCE

Facing East Dance & Music

Facing East Dance & Music (FEDM) is barely a year old but has years of experience behind it. Artistic director Sue Li-Jue has been choreographing for close to a decade; dancer Sharon Sato's work goes back to the late '80s; dancer/writer Vivien Dai previously studied with Li-Jue at U.C., while dancer Lily Wang graduated with a degree in dance from Stanford almost 10 years ago. When the right people find each other, sparks turn into fire. That's what happened with FEDM's first production, *Rice*, which premiered in San Francisco last fall.

Rice was a collaboration by the company's dancers, writers, musicians, and set and lighting designers. Together they took an affectionate and humorous look at being Asian, American and female.

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