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The Beat of the Beach

CHARLES BRITTIN'S MID-CENTURY IMAGES RECALL A SIMPLE, MORE POETIC ERA

by Kristine McKenna

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Throughout the 1950s, Charles Brittin was the unofficial house photographer for the Beat community that coalesced around seminal artist Wallace Berman, who lived with his family in Beverly Glen. While his friends were scattered about the city, it was to Brittin's apartment in Venice Beach that they gravitated.

"Venice felt like the end of the world then and was as far away from Los Angeles as you could get," recalled Brittin, whose work will be exhibited at the Michael Kohn Gallery from April 16 through May 14. "It had the mood of a deserted colony, and there was a quality of remoteness to Venice that drew people whose chances were running out, or were just about to begin."

In 1951 the Iowa native had dropped out of UCLA and moved into a modest Venice beach shack where he maintained an open-door policy: Friends were welcome around the clock, and among those who turned up were actors Dean Stockwell—best known for his brilliantly bizarre cameo in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*; Dennis Hopper; several people associated with L.A.’s legendary Ferus Gallery—including John Alton, Walter Hopps and Bob Alexander; poet David Meltzer; and quite a few stunning women.



Venice Beach was astonishingly beautiful, too. Working as a mailman, the self-taught lensman spent much of his free time wandering Venice with a camera. He came to know the quiet, sleepy community intimately well. Back then, it was largely the province of artists, the poor and various sorts of social outcasts, and Brittin’s pictures of the town are freighted with a hushed beauty and forlorn charm. Although Brittin became a staff photographer for the Eames Office in the late 1960s, he was neither exhibiting nor selling his photographs during the 1950s; he took them to share with his friends and for no other reason.

“Everyone in our circle was alienated from conventional society, and we formed a community that revolved around our rejection of traditional values,” Brittin explained. “We weren’t interested in having careers and simply wanted to enjoy our lives and be with sweet people. None of us had upward aspirations, and our needs were very basic. We had simple entertainments—there was beer, marijuana, lots of music, nature and art books, and we were happy to sit on the floor. We weren’t aware of how great the riches were that we were bringing to each other.”



While he is the subject of a comprehensive monograph—*Charles Brittin: West and South*, out at the end of the month by Cantz/Foggy Notion Books—Brittin died in January of this year following a long illness. Los Angeles has lost one of its great visual poets with his passing. •

Images in order of appearance:

Beverly Walsh, 1958. PHOTO: Charles Brittin © The Getty Research Institute, J. Paul Getty Trust

Suzi Hicks, with signage from L.A.'s electric transit system, c.1956. PHOTO: PHOTO: Charles Brittin © The Getty Research Institute, J. Paul Getty Trust

Actor Dean Stockwell and Wallace Berman at Stone Brothers Printing, West Los Angeles, 1957. PHOTO: PHOTO: Charles Brittin © The Getty Research Institute, J. Paul Getty Trust

Bob Alexander, John Reed, Wallace Berman, Juanita Dixon and Walter Hopps outside the Ferus Gallery, 1957. PHOTO: Charles Brittin © The Getty Research Institute, J. Paul Getty Trust