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## **And The Beat Goes On: An Exhibit of Charles Brittin's Work Opens in L.A.**

by Antonina Jedrzejczak, April 2011



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Kristine McKenna, the curator of “Charles Brittin: West & South,” a retrospective of more than 100 of Brittin’s photographs opening April 16 at the Michael Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles, first found herself at the artist’s house in Venice Beach for the same reason many of his subjects ended up there in the 1950s and 60s—she was following the seminal leader of the California Beat community, Wallace Berman. “I initially went to see Charles because the Kohn Gallery represents the Wallace Berman estate. Charles was the only one that really photographed Wallace, and Wallace would bring a lot of the people who hung out at Charles’s place,” McKenna explains.

While Berman became a de facto usher for many of California’s most iconic Beat artists—actors Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell, curator Walter Hopps, and poet and musician David Meltzer among them—Brittin, who passed away in January 2011, served as their dedicated chronicler and host.

“When I met Charles in 1998, he was elderly and in bad health. He didn’t have any children, and his house was just filled with contact sheets, negatives, and prints,” McKenna says. After seven years spent archiving and organizing the photographer’s images, the gallery offers the most comprehensive show of Brittin’s work to date, documenting both the art scene that evolved around Berman in the 50s, and the civil rights movement that he documented in Southern California in the 60s.

Orbiting around his uniquely relaxed yet immediate aesthetic, Brittin’s photos capture Venice Beach—the small, sleepy, ghost town of the 50s that became a drug-infused hippie hangout in the 60s—as both subject and blue screen, with only the effortlessly stylish female competing for Brittin’s lens. “Charles loved women, and he photographed them really beautifully. His pictures from the 50s are candid and unposed; they’re really romantic without being self-consciously romantic,” McKenna says. “And in the 60s he was actually participating in a lot of the anti-segregationist movements so he was right in the fray and got some pretty dramatic action pictures.”

Unified by his ability to document unhurried time and the captivating ease and beauty of bohemian life, Brittin’s photographs capture two crucial periods of social revolution and reveal an artist whose unique vision left behind a California made richer by the existence of his work. “Charles wasn’t an ambitious person,” McKenna explains. “He never would have initiated doing a book or an exhibition on his own. Maybe he’s about to become more mainstream—he certainly deserves it.”

“Charles Brittin: West & South” is on view at Michael Kohn Gallery from April 16 to May 16; [kohngallery.com](http://kohngallery.com).