

# A Ceramic Mosaic Edifice

*David L Hume visits  
the extraordinary  
home of Liz Breger,  
aka Beth Pewther*

**A**RTIST LIZ BREGER'S, (aka Beth Pewther), creative career can be traced back to the Wichata Vortex group of the late 1950s – early 1960s, that came to prominence through the beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg (Johnson 2011). As part of the second wave – The Magic Locals, Breger (then known as Beth Pewther) relocated to San Francisco, with husband Bob Branaman, where she absorbed the influences of other creative Kansans, such as Mike McClure and Bruce Conner. Unsettled on the West Coast, she spent time back in Kansas and then New York, where she separated from Branaman, took up with Greenwich Village notable Reuben Greenspan, experimented with spirituality and psychedelics, before returning to what she came to recognise as her spiritual home of San Francisco. There, in 1970, she met her soul mate, the artist Leonard Breger and the subject matter of her practice expanded, from Christian and spiritual themes, as she explored feminist and other issues arising from creative tumult of the burgeoning counter culture (Breger 2010).

Like many artists of the era her artistic expression was not limited and, while grounded in painting, she embraced collage, textiles, super 8 film and tile mosaic.

*Facing page: Beth Pewther (aka Liz Breger). House with ceramic facade: entry steps. c 1970. Coloured ceramic tiles. San Francisco, California. Right: Alcove (Detail).*





*Street view.*

Today she maintains an exploratory practice engaging in photo-collage. Although most of her works demonstrate her skill with the softer more transportable mediums it is her rare foray into the ceramic mosaic medium that is most accessible and, not withstanding the tectonic vagaries of the region, possibly the most enduring.

The exterior of Breger's home in Bernal Heights's San Francisco is an immense work of ceramic collage, covering the entire facade, garage alcove and steep, narrow entry steps of her modest home. It is difficult to take in the entire work as a single entity and likewise a challenge to capture its magnificence with my own modest photographic skills.

A studied contemplation of this work reveals a complex perspective, skilfully realised. Abstract elements abound from a middle ground perspective, while close inspection exposes to the eye cameo figurative scenes, cityscapes and faces conjured from urban grids. It is from a distance and, perhaps, with the aid of photographic documentation that the whole is revealed and order discovered.

The upper level, constructed of sky blue, grey and white tiles, appears as a plan map

of a coastal urban centre, square city blocks delineated and augmented with winding streets or waterways and parkland lead the eye to navigate this fantastical space. This pattern is continued in the lower level where swirling elements, in ochre and brown tones, become dominant and play well beneath the dappled shadows of the morning light. Beneath the shade of a small tree is an isolated urban settlement, bounded by a dusty red desert, beyond which a large winding river, harnessed to bring sustenance to the isolated city, may be conceived. Complementary planters bulge and hang from this section, providing an element of relief and suggesting a green shaded metropolis.

The recessed alcove integrates deeper hues of blue with the predominantly tan palette, highlighted with dashes of vibrant red. Here bolder geometric shapes, suggestive of figurative form, meet with the winding organic patterns, alluding to the Art Nouveau influence so prominent during the period (Gontar 2006).

It is along the rising narrow entry way where all of these components come together. This is also the most difficult section to view. Being denied a distant perspective the viewer is forced to become wall eyed, scanning its entirety from an uncomfortably close vantage point. But it is here that the work is most complete. Small figurative motifs of fauna and flora decorate the cartographic elements, much in the way that ancient maps were drafted, in seeking not only to provide a representation of space but also the society that inhabited the space. Compositionally this section



*Entry steps, wall detail.*

is at one with the facade, as the palette shifts from deep blue through parched brown and on to pale blue and white as one ascends the steps.

From a more distant view it is clear that, in executing this work, the artist did not forget the integrity of the canvass on which she was working and has married a painterly composition to architectural constraints. The darker tones at the base ground the building with the earthen hues of the street, before graduating to more ethereal tones that reflect the San Francisco Bay area view as it meets the firmament, thus situating viewer and the field of view.

This considerable mosaic, made during the period when the city was at the forefront of the late 1960s – early 1970s counter culture movement, stands as a significant, if under appreciated, art work of the period. It is of immense value to scholars and students of the ceramic mosaic medium, as well as a significant work of a female artist from a period dominated by the masculine eye, and can be viewed at 80 Bronte Street, Bernal Heights, San Francisco.

#### REFERENCES

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