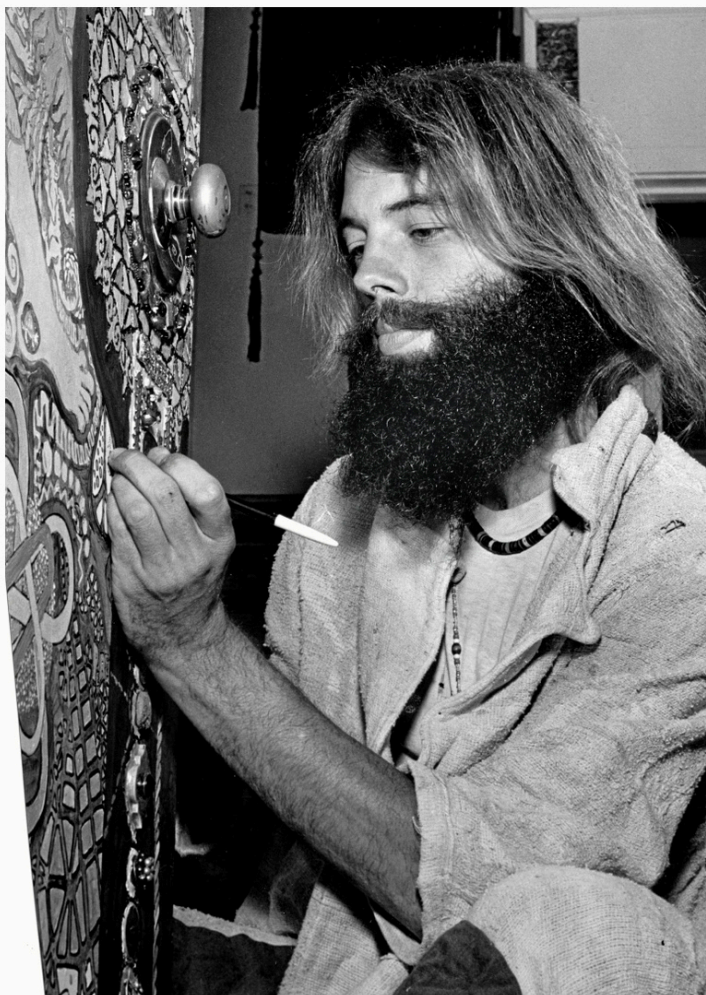


Marin hippie art legend returns from 36-year exile



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Dickens 44 Bascom works at his studio in Larkspur in 1970. "He was like the Pied Piper of Larkspur Canyon," a former neighbor says. (Marin IJ archive)

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After living in Asia and Central America for four decades as an expat American artist, Dickens 44 Bascom, one of the hippie characters whose “glue art” creations made him a counterculture celebrity in the 1960s and '70s, is being welcomed back to Marin County after all those years abroad with a show of his work at Marin Center’s new Bartolini gallery.

Many of Bascom’s pieces, part of a group exhibit called “Found in Our Own Backyard” that opens on Feb. 8, are stuffed floor-to-ceiling in a warehouse he rents in a light industrial section of Novato.

“I’m perplexed,” he said one morning last week, strolling among a clutter of paintings and assemblages he describes as “re-psychedelic.” “I have hundreds and hundreds of my pieces here, and nobody has seen them. That’s because I’m no good at selling them. I’d rather take my artwork to children’s hospitals and places like that.”

Then he laughs and adds: “Or just put it out for people to see and have a cup for donations saying, ‘\$100 bills only, please.’”

When Bascom left Marin in 1981 to escape the clutches of the hard drugs that gripped many alternative lifestylers at the dawn of the Reagan era, he was a 37-year-old self-described “Marin type” with long dark hair and a bushy brown beard. He had gained considerable attention as the creator of a kitsch-encrusted 1961 Ford Falcon with “relics of our civilization” glued over every square inch of it.

Bascom would tool around in his head-turning car with his girlfriend, an angelic blonde singer-songwriter named Laura Allan (who died of cancer in 2008), and her equally blonde and beautiful mentor, the future superstar Joni Mitchell.

“She was the one true girlfriend of my life,” he says of Allan. “We did everything together.”

Thirty-six years after he fled to a new life, first in the Philippines and then in other exotic tropical locales, Bascom returns as a 73-year-old '60s generation survivor with a spare gray moustache, a soul patch and wisps of white hair under a day glow painter’s cap. Describing himself as homeless, he’s been staying in a motel on Lincoln Avenue in San Rafael since he arrived in August after eight years in Panama’s Bocas del Toro (Mouths of the Bull), a lush Caribbean archipelago bordering Costa Rica.

“My house was a shack on a dock,” he says. “I dove, swam, exercised, got my personal life together and made art, which is my refuge. I had a couple of art shows there. But I had no friends and I was very unhappy. I was getting suicidal, and my friends in Marin told me, ‘You’ve got to come back.’”

Marin roots

Coming back to Marin meant returning to the place where he grew up, the son of a father who was a successful advertising agency executive. His parents gave him 44 as a middle name, his father told him, because he was born 44 minutes after 4 o'clock on Feb. 13, 44 days after the new year.

His parents sent him to San Rafael Military Academy, where he lasted three years before running away to work as a fruit picker and then as a cook in a Sausalito restaurant before finding his calling as a hippie artist in the psychedelic ferment of the '60s counterculture.

"Those times suited him, the '60s and '70s," says Belle Marko, a 61-year-old San Anselmo artist who was one of the close friends who coaxed him back to Marin. "It was the zenith of awesomeness. It touched his soul. And then everything changed in the '80s and '90s. It went in the opposite direction. It became all about computer technology and money, and it got further and further away from what's in his soul. I think he feels hurt by that."

In 1974, the Independent Journal ran a front page feature on Bascom's plans to turn his Marin home into what he described as "something people need — A Disneyland castle built strictly for beauty." For several years, he lived deep in the redwoods of Larkspur in an elaborately decorated house with six spider monkeys that would swing wildly in the trees while he'd sit up in the branches tooting on a saxophone. Marko, who lived next door with her family, was one of the neighborhood kids who thought of Bascom's lair as an unofficial youth center, clubhouse and hangout.

"He was like the Pied Piper of Larkspur Canyon," she remembers. "He's been very influential in my life not to mention everybody else's in the canyon. I'd go over to his house every day after school with all my friends and he would let us glue things and paint and just do art. I ended up with an art degree and now I'm an artist, and I have this whacky sensibility that I think came with growing up around him. And every canyon kid feels the same way."

Tsunami survival

Bascom made brief visits to Marin over the years, but only one other serious attempt at re-establishing himself here 13 years ago. He had been living in an upper floor of a hotel on a beach in Thailand and survived the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake that triggered devastating tsunamis 100 feet high that killed as many as 280,000 people in 14 countries, making it one of the deadliest disasters in recorded history.

In his storage space, he has a painting he did of a monster wave towering over a little Thai village in that instant before what must have felt like the end of the world.

“I remember walking down the beach alone because there was no one left around,” he recalls, still sounding dazed by the experience. “I have amnesia for a lot of whatever happened during the tsunami, but it changed my life. It was like everyone had been kidnapped by aliens. It was beyond description.”

After that, his old life in Marin County looked pretty good to him.

“I wanted to come back to my home, the home of the hippies and the Sleeping Lady,” he says in mock wistfulness. “I actually thought it was still here, so I came back and said, ‘What?’ It wasn’t here. It was gone.”

After a couple of years in Santa Venetia, his art career was going nowhere, and he felt like he no longer belonged in a place where he’d once been young and productive and recognized as someone special.

“I couldn’t connect with anybody socially back here,” he recalls. “After 2 and a half years, I said, ‘I’ve gotta bail out. I’m gonna go to Central America.’ My target destination was Costa Rica but I stopped off in Panama and ended up staying there.”

Back to reality

Now that he's back again, he doesn't have any illusions "about finding hippies or hippie artifacts in the dirt," as he puts it, and his friends are praying that he's here for good.

"He's been in the tropics, where it's all 'la la la la la,' and coming back to this fast pace is freaking him out," Marko says. "He's having dental problems, and he's trying to find a place to live. That's all stressful."

She and another friend, Donna Ewald Huggins, are helping him re-orient himself, putting prices on the pieces in the Marin Center show.

"To me, his work is a combination of outsider art, recycled art and tramp art," Huggins says. "Whatever you want to call it, I respond to it."

Bascom is most proud of a new piece he started after he arrived five months ago. He calls it the "The Wall," and sees it as a positive response to the negativity of President Trump's pet project. It's studded with stuff like a replica of Woody from "Toy Story," a tub stopper, a Grateful Dead "stealie" and a Florida ashtray with an alligator in it.

"It will attract people rather than keeping them out," he says, asking for people to send him trinkets to include in the work. A sign on it seems to convey the open-hearted approach he's always taken, for better or worse, in his life and his art. It says, "Created by everyone that comes from everywhere for everybody to enjoy."



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