

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

BIOGRAPHY

- 1903 Calvin was born in Tennessee.
- 1913 Ruby was born in Georgia.
- 1916 -18 At age 13 Calvin left school to raise his brothers and sisters. He taught himself to read from the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogue. At age 15, Calvin won a competition for singing in a woman's voice (at the age of 17 according to LA Times 1 1986).
Calvin spent 10 years in the circus.
- 1933 Calvin and Ruby met in Georgia and were married (cf. Pioneers catalogue).
Calvin panned gold in California.
Calvin and Ruby lived in northern California and Los Angeles before moving to Yermo.
- 1953 (1956 according to Kirsch 1978) Calvin and Ruby Black moved from Redding to Yermo in the Mojave desert (12 miles from Barstow). They bought their land sight unseen from a magazine advertisement for \$25 down and \$10 a month. They named their property Possum Trot before they saw it.
Calvin began carving wooden dolls which Ruby dressed. Over 80 near life size wooden dolls were created, each with a personality, function and costume of its own. Many represented Lilly Langtree and her contemporaries.
When Highway 15 was constructed to Calico Ghost Town, Calvin and Ruby started a Rock Shop to take advantage of the traffic that passed by their house. Ruby sold polished rocks and postcards to tourists. Cecil Drennan, a friend, helped Calvin build his own 100 yard roadside show which included a train, stage coaches and merry-go-rounds with windmills. The materials came from Barstow dump. Calvin built the Bird Cage Theatre for the Fantasy Dolls Show. The dolls perform and sing in men's, women's and children's voices, all recorded by Calvin.
- 1969 The Birdcage Theatre was completed. Admission to the Shows was 50 cents.
- 1972 On March 2 Calvin died.
- 1974 Allie Light first saw Possum Trot. With Irving Saraf she made the film " Possum Trot: The Life and Work of Calvin Black". This was the first film in the series Vision of Paradise: Contemporary Folk Artists of the United States. The film was a finalist at the American film Festival and was shown at the Mannheim Film Festival.
- 1976 -77 The Blacks' work was featured "In Celebration of Ourselves", S F Mus of Modern Art
- 1979 The Blacks' work was featured "In Celebration of Ourselves" Calif. Living Books
- 1980 In June Ruby died, after having carefully tended the dolls during the years since Calvin died. In the same year Whiteley (at whose gallery many of the dolls were eventually sold) visited Possum Trot (cf. Brown 1982).

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

BIOGRAPHY

- 1903 Calvin was born in Tennessee.
- 1913 Ruby was born in Georgia.
- 1916 -18 At age 13 Calvin left school to raise his brothers and sisters. He taught himself to read from the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogue. At age 15, Calvin won a competition for singing in a woman's voice (*at the age of 17 according to LA Times 1 1986*).
- Calvin spent 10 years in the circus.
- 1933 Calvin and Ruby met in Georgia and were married (cf. Pioneers catalogue).
- Calvin panned gold in California.
- Calvin and Ruby lived in northern California and Los Angeles before moving to Yermo.
- 1953 (*1956 according to Kirsch 1978*) Calvin and Ruby Black moved from Redding to Yermo in the Mojave desert (12 miles from Barstow). They bought their land sight unseen from a magazine advertisement for \$25 down and \$10 a month. They named their property Possum Trot before they saw it.
- Calvin began carving wooden dolls which Ruby dressed. Over 80 near life size wooden dolls were created, each with a personality, function and costume of its own. Many represented Lilly Langtree and her contemporaries.
- When Highway 15 was constructed to Calico Ghost Town, Calvin and Ruby started a Rock Shop to take advantage of the traffic that passed by their house. Ruby sold polished rocks and postcards to tourists. Cecil Drennan, a friend, helped Calvin build his own 100 yard roadside show which included a train, stage coaches and merry-go-rounds with windmills. The materials came from Barstow dump. Calvin built the Bird Cage Theatre for the Fantasy Dolls Show. The dolls perform and sing in men's, women's and children's voices , all recorded by Calvin.
- 1969 The Birdcage Theatre was completed. Admission to the Shows was 50 cents.
- 1972 On March 2 Calvin died.
- 1974 Allie Light first saw Possum Trot. With Irving Saraf she made the film " Possum Trot: The Life and Work of Calvin Black". This was the first film in the series Vision of Paradise: Contemporary Folk Artists of the United States. The film was a finalist at the American film Festival and was shown at the Mannheim Film Festival.
- 1976 -77 The Blacks' work was featured "In Celebration of Ourselves", S F Mus of Modern Art
- 1979 The Blacks' work was featured "In Celebration of Ourselves" Calif. Living Books
- 1980 In June Ruby died, after having carefully tended the dolls during the years since Calvin died. In the same year Whiteley (at whose gallery many of the dolls were eventually sold) visited Possum Trot (cf. Brown 1982).

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALBERTS, Ulvis

1981 "Possum Trot and the Fantasy Doll Show". 19 Magazine. (May).

BISHOP, Robert

1974 American Folk Art Sculpture. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.

BROWN, Susan

1982 "Possum Trot". Connoisseur, v. 211, no. 847, pp. 8-12.*

FLETCHER, Nina

1957 The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Collection. Boston: Little Brown and Co.

GIBBS, Jocelyn

1986 "Visions of Home". The Whole Earth Review, pp. 106-112 *

1987 "Strange Poems in the Landscape: Folk Art Environments"
Sculpture, Sept/Oct, pp. 30-33.

HEMPHILL, Herbert W. and Julia Weissman.

1974 Twentieth Century American Folk Art and Artists. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. *

JACKSON, Louise and Seymour Rosen

1986 "Folk Art Environments in California", The Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall,
Oakland Art Museum. *

JAPENGA, Ann

1986 "The Reincarnation of Possum Trot Theater" LA Times, Dec. 7.*

JONES, Tamara

1981 "Possum Trot's 'Orphans' Find Home at Gallery". Los Angeles Times. (February 1). *

KIRSCH, Jonathan.

1978 "Four California Visionaries: Lost and Found Art". New West. (May 8). *

LARSEN-MARTIN, Susan and Lauri Robert Martin

1984 Pioneers in Paradise: Folk and Outsider Artists of the West Coast,
Long Beach Museum of Art.

LAWRENCE, Jeanne C

"Possum Trot: Folk Art, Fluke or Art Brut. An examination of perspectives toward
non-traditional art in the twentieth century and their application to Calvin and Ruby Black's
"folk art environment". Unpublished paper.*

LOYE, Kathryn

1981 "Possum Trot: A Folk Art Environment by Calvin and Ruby Black". Photo
Bulletin (G.Ray Hawkins Gallery, Vol.14. No.8). *

ROSEN, Seymour

1979 In Celebration of Ourselves. San Francisco: California Living Books. *

STERN, Jane and Michael

1977 Amazing America. New York: Random House.*

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

THOLLANDER, Earl

1971 Backroads to California (sketches and trip notes). Sunset Books. *

VAN DER ELSKEN, Ed

early 1960's Sweet Life. Harry Abrams. *

WARD, Daniel Franklin

1984 Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Art Environments Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press. *

WEISSMAN, Julia

1982/1983 "Environmental Folk Art: an Ancient Tradition in a Modern World". The Clarion, pp. 32-37. *

WILSON, Jane

1971 "Possum Trot". West Magazine. (June 20).

1986 The Ties that Bind: Folk Art in Contemporary American Culture. The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio. *

(* - references in SPACES archives)

EXHIBITS

"In Celebration of Ourselves", San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Dec 3, 1976 - Jan 23, 77
Curated & Photographed by Seymour Rosen

G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, Dec. 15, 1981-Jan. 23, 1982

"The Dreambuilders of California ", Photographs of Possum Trot, The Chevron Gallery, San Francisco, April 9-May 25, 1984.

"Pioneers in Paradise: Folk and Outsider Artists of the West Coast", Long Beach Museum of Art travelling exhibit, November 25, 1984-January 20, 1985.

Whiteley Gallery, American Folk Art, 1985

"Divine Disorder: Folk Art Environments of California", Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, October 26-December 1, 1985

New York Museum of American Folk Art, 1986

"Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture", Oakland Museum of Art, March 22-August 3, 1986

"The Ties that Bind: Folk Art in Contemporary American Culture", the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 21, 1986-January 10, 1987

"Different Drummers," Park Avenue Atrium Gallery, December 1, 1986-January 23, 1987.
Curator Ludwig Datene. 74 works from the Museum of American Folk Art collection including works by Sam Doyle, David Butler, etc.

Folk Art exhibit, Orange Coast College Art Gallery, April 4-May 2, ?

Louise Jackson

3

August 9, 1985

revised by C. Pansing

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

SOURCES

Barstow Desert Dispatch.
130 Coolwater Lane,
Barstow, California
256-2254

Barstow Library

Allie Light and Irving Saraf
131 Concord Street
San Francisco, CA
(415)584 -3521
(415)549-2500 (W)

Wynona Kenyon (identified and wrote a description of each doll)
Mohave River Valley Museum Association
P.O. Box 1282
Barstow, California 92311
(714) 257-3553 (H)
217 E. Elizabeth Street
Barstow, California 92311

Dolores Griffin (Administrator Ruby Black Estate)

Larry Whitely, Kathryn Loye. (Whitely Gallery has Possum Trot tapes).

Inez Storer (involved in film)
Lester Gallery
Inverness
669-1536

Pat Farraro (involved in early stages of film)

Dr. Wikke van Bonin (?)
Westdeutscher Rundfunk Koln
S Koln 1 - Postfach 101950

SEE ME FOR NEW NAMES