

Richard Peterson and the Art of a Warrior Tribe

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By curator Adam Lerner, Director and Chief Animator MCA Denver

Richard Peterson's photographs from the Search & Destroy years capture the habitat that nurtured the brief existence of a tribe. He is interested in much more than rockers on a stage. He captures the scene, the world that surrounds the musicians, with an eye to what made it enchanting.

Some of Peterson's images look very punk, giving us a taste of the theatricality that we folks who weren't there have come to expect from the movement. When he shows us Iggy Pop on stage, eyes bulging, we get the feeling of seeing the highest level of intensity a human can muster. When he shows us the screaming face of Tomata du Plenty of the Screamers we feel the raw energy of punk.

In part, it is a world populated by people willing to make themselves look outrageous, if not ridiculous. It includes promoter Dirk Dirkson at his desk wearing money on his face and Mark Mothersbaugh in a crib with a mask over his head. Peterson is drawn to people doing something different.

But Peterson doesn't just present the scene at its most expressive moments. He doesn't present the scene as the world expects it.

Some of his characters look downright professorial. There are people in collared shirts and blazers.

His photograph of Dix Denney of the Weirdos, smiling with a cigar in his mouth, is simply sweet.

He also portrays introspective, tender and human elements. Contrary to the stereotype of punk exuberance, there is a sense of quietness to many of Peterson's images. Some of that silence is the stillness of complete expenditure or the calmness of the dust settling. But much of it is the hush that goes along with someone expressing something tender and poignant. There is a moodiness to much of Peterson's photographs – like Nico singing "All Tomorrow's Parties."

As a whole, Peterson shows us not just screamers but also lovers and thinkers.

More than anything else, though, Peterson is drawn to persona. While he sometimes portrays environments, it is the people that interest him. He is not exactly interested in personality, an individual's underlying qualities. Rather, he is captivated by public image, the way that characters present themselves to the world. And many of his most tender photographs present people still struggling to arrive at their public personas.

Peterson's works are paired with a selection of artworks made by the people in the scene that he photographed.

There are common elements to those works. There is the persistence of collage: the use of found materials. These works often demonstrate the same DIY qualities of the music. They are not about the virtuosity or craftsmanship of the artist. They are about the expression of a sentiment.

There are several works that do show remarkable technical skill. The fantastical drawings of Deborah Valentine, for example, show great precision.

Though, there are many things that look like junk – in the good sense, in the sense that it's not trying too hard to be

precious. Fritz Fox, of the Mutants, mounts an old suit to a sheet of cardboard. Moritz Reichelt of the band Der Plan creates his collages on the pages of an ordinary calendar.

Many of the works have a surrealist quality to them. Penelope Houston of the Avengers pairs penis drawings with sweetheart candies. David J presents a hand-made surrealism in the original pages from an early zine he created while he was playing with the band Bauhaus 1919 (which was before the band dropped the year from its name).

Though there are threads of commonality that run throughout the exhibition, the artists were not selected because of those affinities. They were selected because they were part of the tribe.

And the tribe has one crucial quality. It is not rebelliousness or deviance, as punk clichés would have it. The one thing that all of these individuals share is the belief that being an artist is not something you do through a specific activity, like painting or sculpture. It is something you do in general. There is no real distinction between being a musician and being any other kind of artist. If you play in a band, you make art. You draw. You make magazines. You make collages with magazines you find in dumpsters.

Or, in the case of Richard Peterson, you make photographs that capture the mishmash of the world around you.

About Richard Peterson

Richard Peterson is an American photographer born in 1951 in California. He began photographing at an early age. Artists' portraits, punk rock era portraits of musicians, nudes, dark nature shots, and surrealist photographs make up his broad oeuvre. Surrounded by the Beat Generation, Punk rock, and the underground scene since the 1960s, his extensive archive of photographs spans nearly five decades. He also has a large collection of collaborations, where his photographs are put into fabric, collage and other mixed media.

In the 1960s, he worked for a radio station photographing entertainers such as Buffalo Springfield, Turtles, Byrds, Standells, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Cream and Mothers of Invention. In the early 1970s, he wrote a political-satire column and record reviews, and photographed for an underground publication called "The Door" in San Diego alongside writers such as Lester Bangs, Cameron Crowe, and Mick Garris.

In the later 1970s, after moving to the San Francisco area to continue his studies in photojournalism, Peterson became the "Aerial Photographer" for a publication initially financed by Allen Ginsburg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti called "Search & Destroy." During this period he worked with bands such as Devo, Talking Heads, Iggy Pop, Nico, Blondie, Pere Ubu, Weirdos, Screamers, Dead Kennedys and the Ramones. He also opened his first studio in San Francisco in 1978, next door to a fledgling new company called Victoria's Secret that became his first commercial client.

In 1981, Peterson moved to San Diego where he opened Pink & Pearl Gallery and his second studio. The gallery showcased his outrageous underground friends from the punk-art world and received wide attention. He continued to create fine-art photography while being supported by his photography for commercial clients.

In 1987, Peterson moved to Colorado to work as a fashion photographer for the French-based Printemps, and to open his third studio on Wewatta Street in Lower Downtown Denver.

In 2000, after developers razed his building to build loft spaces, Peterson moved his studio to Indian Hills where he works 150 feet from his house in a dense forest on a mountaintop. He currently teaches and helps organize events at Working With Artists, and has taught at Grant Gallery, Denver Darkroom and Illuminate Workshops.

Although he mainly considers himself an art photographer greatly influenced by Surrealist thought, he works commercially as a fashion and portrait photographer, and is a museum specialist photographing events, art, artist portraits, and installations. Peterson also runs a progressive contemporary-art photo group called Heads of Hydra, a group of rebellious and freethinking photo-artists.