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# Renny Pritikin Remembers

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by [Julia Couzens](#)

For nearly 40 years, beginning in the late 1970s, Renny Pritikin broke curatorial ground with pioneering exhibitions throughout the greater Bay Area – at 80 Langton (later New Langton Arts), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), Richard L. Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and, finally, the Contemporary Jewish Museum from which he retired in 2018. His newly released memoir, *At Third and Mission: A Life Among Artists*, maneuvers us through his storied life with a poet's compass.

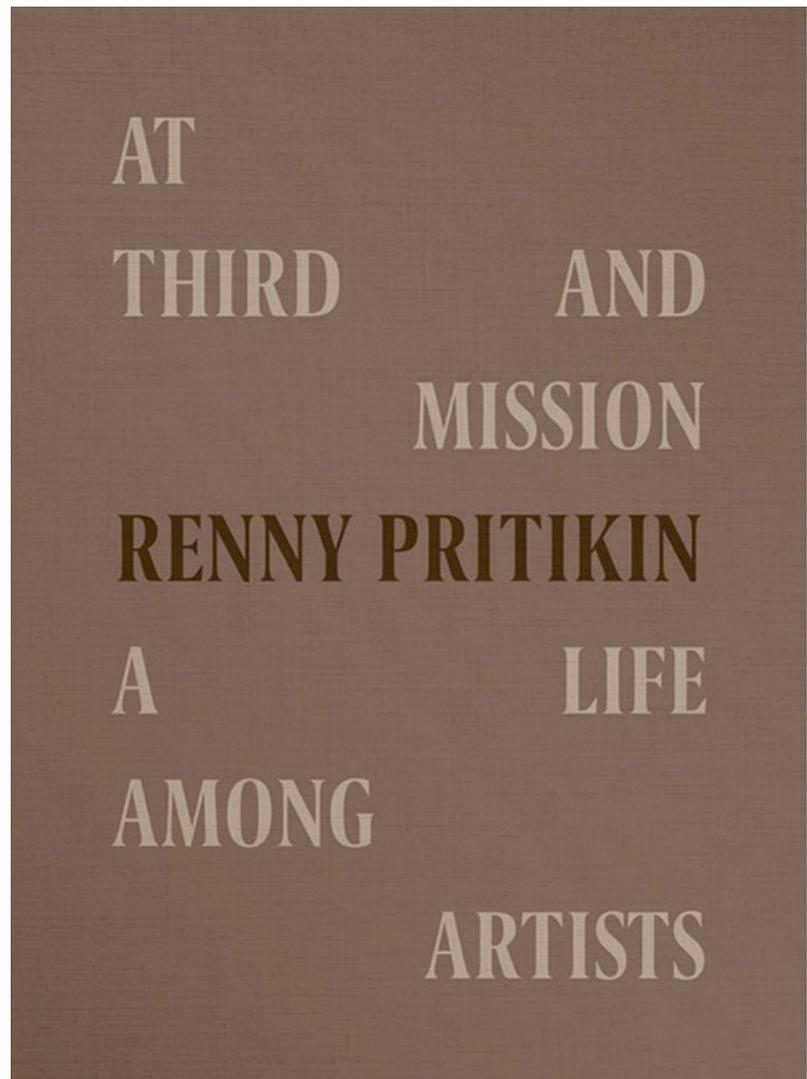
This astute, polished, sometimes wryly self-effacing and straightforward account of his professional triumphs and regrets, fortuitous encounters, wrong turns, enchantments, and lodestone lessons is an honest, unaffected, lively and companionable page-turner. It divides more or less evenly between anecdotes involving legendary figures (Allen Ginsberg, David Hammons, John Cage, John Zorn, Roz Chast, Wayne Thiebaud, George Lucas) and lesser-known (but no less worthy) artists, many remembered

today only by the cognoscenti. Pritikin, a natural storyteller and frequent contributor to Squarecylinder, brings them all to life.

Pritikin first visited the Bay Area in 1965 when he was 16, arriving from Brooklyn under the aegis of the Ethical Culture Society, whose goal "was to take this group of kids and make them into future leaders of an imagined progressive movement in America."

What ensued was a whirlwind tour through

emblems and legends of Beat-era San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore, a reading by Allen Ginsberg, a party hosted by the Sexual Freedom League and much else. In many respects, his story is about being in the right place at the right time. But it's also about nerve and instinct, perhaps best exemplified when he and his wife, Judy Moran, New Langton's co-directors, provided exhibition space and funding to many artists involved in the then-emerging fields of performance and video art.





Renny Pritikin discussing art with SFPD and fire fighters at Mark Pauline/Survival Research Lab performance circa 1985

Some of it, like the exploits of Mark Pauline and Survival Research Labs, bordered dangerously on anarchy. For one such event, Pritikin remembers, "Mark had invented a machine that shot fluorescent tubes at least a hundred yards, sometimes farther. This lot was conveniently near the Bay Bridge bus ramps, and somebody started pointing the gun at the buses on the ramp, which admittedly did move just like targets in a carnival shooting range. At the height of the carnage, multiple sculptures were on fire, and a two-story walking machine with a heavy mallet at the end of a swinging arm was smashing everything in sight." At the end of the evening, hours before he boarded a flight to Washington, DC, to serve on an NEA panel, "I was alone with one push broom and an acre-size city block covered with broken fluorescent tubes and other detritus. I had promised the bus company we

would leave the lot as though the event had never happened. As I swept, I noticed dozens of holes in the asphalt left by the hammer-wielding robot.”

Elsewhere, we ride shotgun as Pritikin grants us unfiltered access to his off-road research forays, such as his memorable project with Santa Cruz artist/chef/surfer/model Jim Denevan's half-mile long line drawings in sand. To see them, Pritikin begins high atop a cliff and ends in a cave 25 yards from the Pacific Ocean, dining on exquisite food by candlelight. He shares his mind and awe in descriptions of extraordinary objects and phenomena. One was his unforgettable experience with Maria Nordman's confounding conceptual painting installation that taught him art's power to engender wonder. Challenging professional duties, he recollects in behind-the-scenes tidbits as when he and Moran found themselves in an alley at 3 a.m. waiting to take delivery of Nancy Rubin's deconstructed house trailers, holding hundreds of dollars in cash to pay long-haul truckers.



Jim Denevan, Santa Cruz beach drawing, 2010. Photo: Chesley Chen

In homage to his friend, Ricky Jay, the great magician and unparalleled master of sleight of hand, Pritikin composes the book in 52 chapters, akin to a deck of cards. The chapters fan back and forth through time in a witty shuffle of history. From his 1977 request to lead 80 Langton – at the time an endangered artist-run space – endearingly confessing his initial shyness in stepping up to direct, he moves to a mesmerizing and acutely privileged moment in 2018 at the archives of Levi Strauss & Co., taking in Einstein's circa 1938 leather jacket – still permeated with the smell of pipe tobacco – to being subjected to curatorial arm twisting by apparatchiks from the Chinese consulate who Pritikin was trying to persuade to fund a show of their country's contemporary art. “I remember their chilling response word for word twenty-five years later. Pointing to the photos they'd brought, one said, ‘You can show whatever you like, Mr. Pritikin, but we suggest you show this work.’ With that, they excused themselves and left. I was deeply shaken by this confrontation with raw totalitarian hostility, knowing that if circumstances were different, had they the power, they would not have hesitated to make me pay a steep price for my audacity.”

Pritikin weaves his visionary curatorial philosophy throughout the chapters, returning to its themes from different viewpoints. He developed his principles and ideas in tandem with his roles at YBCA, first as founding visual arts director and then chief curator. His vision was interdisciplinary and collaborative, cross-pollinating themes across departments. His approach became associative, seeking lateral connections with forms and ideas beyond fine art's traditional white-wall approach. Deploying the museum as an inclusive, generative operation rather than a collecting institution, Pritikin invigorated its mission by commissioning artists to create work within open studios while building healthy reciprocal relationships with nonprofessionals and larger social communities.

Barry McGee, perhaps the best-known artist to have benefited from Pritikin's curatorial vision, is but one example. “During McGee's first exhibition,” writes



Sign posted outside YBCA during Barry McGee's outdoor installation of a smoke-emitting van

the author, "I got a practical lesson in expanding museum constituency. I got a call from the front desk with a story they thought I'd like to hear. It seems that every day since the opening, a steady stream of wide-eyed young teenage boys—with skateboards and holding their pants up with one hand—were coming in and asking with disbelief if there was a show by Twist in the gallery. I told the receptionist that Twist was McGee's street name and to let the boys in."

The art world continues to function in loops of ideological shuffling. Niche communities develop, co-mingle, divide and

dissolve. Pritikin's memoir teaches us that crafting innovative exhibitions requires mental stamina, nimble political skills and collaborative leadership. In its way, it's also an homage to friendship, generosity, and simple kindness. Thus, it's no surprise that both independent and institutional curators frequently cultivate a practiced reserve. Facing the gaping maw of artist hunger while grappling with budgets and contested demographics, holding one's cards close may come with the job. Here, Pritikin is an open book. In generously sharing his on-the-job lessons, his misses and awkward blurts, as well as his victories and successes, he demonstrates, with singular grace, why his particular artistic and political strategies were such assets, and why they are now sorely missed.

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Book release events:

**October 26 | 6 p.m.** [Verge Center for the Arts Gallery](#), Sacramento

**October 28 | 3:30 p.m.** [Catharine Clark Gallery](#), San Francisco

**November 14 | 6 p.m.** [James Cohan Gallery](#), New York

**November 18 | 2:30 p.m.** [Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive](#)

Book purchase: [rennypritikin.com](http://rennypritikin.com)

**About the author:** [Julia Couzens](#) has exhibited drawings and textile constructions throughout the United States and internationally. Her work has been recognized with a Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowship, the Roswell Art-in-Residence grant, and twice nominated for the SFMOMA SECA award. Public collections include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, BAMPFA, Crocker Art Museum, Manetti-Shrem Museum, Weatherspoon Art Museum, and Yale University. She lives and works on the Sacramento River Delta and is represented by Patricia Sweetow Gallery in Los Angeles.

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