

ART WALL

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon

August 15, 2018–March 3, 2019

Land(e)scape 2018—the fifth in a series of temporary, site-specific works commissioned for the Art Wall—is inspired by the architectural phenomenon known as Supergraphics, pioneered by San Francisco–based artist, graphic and landscape designer, and writer Barbara Stauffacher Solomon.

There is no single definition of Supergraphics—oversize, informational, and/or aesthetic graphics that enliven architecture or architectural spaces. Both scale and artistic quality are key to identifying Supergraphics, which developed around the mid-1960s. Robert Venturi’s sign for Guild House (1963), for example, was big, but aesthetically inert. In contrast, the exterior and interior signage for Venturi’s renovation of Grand’s Restaurant with William H. Short (about 1962) was oversize, integrated with the architecture, and aesthetically effective—qualities associated with Supergraphics.

Another Supergraphics pioneer was Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, who was the only woman on landscape architect Lawrence Halprin’s design team for The Sea Ranch (founded 1964), an environmentally aware development on the rugged Northern California coast. Solomon designed The Sea Ranch logo and other graphics, but the aesthetic decision to paint the logo oversize on The Sea Ranch entrance shed was made by Halprin’s client, architect and developer Al Boeke. (Solomon continues to maintain that at The Sea Ranch, Supergraphics should not compete with nature.)

Boeke had hired Halprin to lead a planning team that included Joseph Esherick and the Berkeley-based architecture firm MLTW, composed of Charles W. Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull Jr., and Richard Whitaker. MLTW designed The Sea Ranch’s iconic Condominium 1, finished in 1965; that same year, Solomon created an overscale graphic for the interior of Charles Moore’s Unit 9 in Condominium 1.¹ Her creative breakthrough came in 1966, when commercial sign painters helped paint the interiors of the women’s and men’s locker rooms at the development’s Moonraker Recreation Center²—Solomon’s Supergraphic masterpiece. The works were modified without Solomon’s permission when Moonraker was reconfigured in the mid-1970s, but The Sea Ranch has recently commissioned her to create new Supergraphics for the space, work that is scheduled to be completed in October 2018.

Solomon’s Supergraphics “made” Moonraker, and helped put The Sea Ranch on the map, with a spread in *Life* magazine and other national and international

publications.³ Yet, writing in 1967, architecture critic C. Ray Smith credited male architects—Hugh Hardy, Doug Michels, and David Sellers—with the origin of Supergraphics, while assigning Solomon a mere supporting role: “Barbara Stauffacher Solomon’s large-scale graphics at The Sea Ranch did much to encourage interest,” Smith wrote.⁴ *Ramparts* magazine editor Dugald Stermer, however, asserted in 1971 that the painted designs dubbed “supergraphics” by Smith “undoubtedly originated with Mrs. Solomon.”⁵ Stermer was not only an editor, he was also a graphic designer, which may have affected his conclusion that supergraphics as a “thing” had originated with a graphic designer working with architects at The Sea Ranch.

Solomon’s own early definition of Supergraphics reads: “Supergraphics are different from the old, two-dimensional graphics, and they’re more helpful to architects. I don’t do them to create cute chaos. They are a reinforcement of architecture: You reinforce traffic patterns; it’s an aid to circulation. I’m paid by my clients to solve their problems, not to amuse myself. The purpose of my work is to clarify, not confuse.”⁶ She thus differentiated her work from that of other architects and artists working in this vein, such Doug Michels,⁷ whose Supergraphics were more freeform than Solomon’s energetic but rigorous approach.

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon’s work does more than reinforce architecture. It creates its own energy field that transforms architecture into something more like sculpture, while transforming occupants into participants. Donlyn Lyndon, one of the original Sea Ranch architects, considers Solomon’s work important “precisely because it expanded rather than decorated the experience of the spaces.”⁸ Solomon reflects, “I combined the super-sized enthusiasm of California Abstract Expressionism with hard-edge Swiss graphics and ended up with, however superfluous and superficial, supergraphics.”⁹ She is not inclined to theorize, but *Land(e)scape 2018*, Solomon’s title for the BAMPFA project, invites a glimpse into her motivations. Escape to nature, escape to art, escape to ourselves: this is the impulse behind Supergraphics.

Where and when Supergraphics originated depends on how you define Supergraphics. What matters in the end is that California inspired Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, while her design brilliance helped secure a place for California in architecture and design history.

Jacquelynn Baas
BAMPFA Director Emeritus

Biography

Born in 1928 in San Francisco, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon was first trained as a dancer, then studied painting and sculpture as a scholarship student at the San Francisco Art Institute. When her first husband, experimental filmmaker Frank Stauffacher (1917–1955), died at age 39 from a brain tumor, Stauffacher Solomon needed a reliable source of income to support herself and their young daughter. She turned to graphic design, moving to Switzerland with her mother and daughter in 1956 to study with Armin Hofmann, head of the graphic design department at the Basel School of Design. Hofmann was central to the development of the bold, precise design that came to be known as the Swiss Style. (Stauffacher Solomon would later earn a master’s degree in architecture at the University of California, Berkeley.)

After two years of rigorous training in Basel, Stauffacher Solomon returned to San Francisco, where she began designing the monthly program guides for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and rented office space from landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, with whom she would work on The Sea Ranch. She received marquee credit as graphic designer for Halprin’s redevelopment of Ghirardelli Square, the first successful adaptive reuse project in the United States (1962).

Perhaps best known for her Supergraphics and her *Ribbon of Light* installation on the Embarcadero Promenade in San Francisco (1996, with Vito Acconci and Stanley Saitowitz), Stauffacher Solomon brilliantly integrated Swiss Modernism with West Coast styles from Abstract Expressionism to “fetish finish,” and pioneered the look of California Cool—an important moment in graphic design history.

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Further Reading

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, *Why? Why Not?: 80 Years of Art & Design in Pix & Prose, Juxtaposed*. San Francisco: Fun Fog Press, 2013.

Donlyn Lyndon and Jim Alinder, *The Sea Ranch: Fifty Years of Architecture, Landscape, Place, and Community on the Northern California Coast*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, revised edition, 2014.

Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher and Joseph Becker, *The Sea Ranch: Architecture, Environment and Idealism*. Munich, New York, London: Prestel, 2018.

Alison Isenberg, *Designing San Francisco: Art, Land, and Urban Renewal in the City by the Bay*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Notes

1. See Lyndon and Alinder, 42.
2. See Lyndon and Alinder, 66–69.
3. Publicity genius Marion Conrad, whom Stauffacher Solomon introduced to The Sea Ranch planning and design team (TSR’s capital-T “The” was Conrad’s doing), promoted Supergraphics along with The Sea Ranch. E.g., Maude Door, “Bathhouse Graphics,” *Progressive Architecture* (March 1967).
4. C. Ray Smith, *Supermannerism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), 295.
5. Dugald Stermer, “No, kid, make it happy!,” *Print*, volume 13, number 3 (1971), 47; excerpts reprinted in Louise Sandhaus, ed., *Earthquakes, Mudslides, Fires & Riots: California & Graphic Design 1936–1986* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2014), 328–331.
6. C. Ray Smith, “Supergraphics,” *Progressive Architecture* (October 1968), 156.
7. Doug Michaels, a graduate student of Charles Moore’s at Yale, would go on to cofound the Bay Area artist collective Ant Farm, the subject of a BAMPFA exhibition in 2004.
8. Personal communication to Jacquelynn Baas, October 16, 2017.
9. Stauffacher Solomon, 77.

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon: *Land(e)scape 2018*, 2018; latex paint on wall.
Photo: JKA Photography.



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