Barratt Stauffacher Solomon

August 15, 2018–March 9, 2019

Landeskap 2018—the fifth in a series of extraordinary, 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 during the mid-1960s. Robert Venturi’s famed “Golden Goose” (1966), for example, was big, but aesthetically inert. In contrast, the exterior and interior signage for Venturi’s and Moore’s Unit 9 in Condominium 1.1 Her creative breakthrough came in 1966, the same year, Solomon created an overscale graphic for the interior 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 work is to clarify, not confuse.”

Supergraphics were more freeform than Solomon’s energetic but rigorous Supergraphics. What matters in the end is that California inspired Barbara Stauffacher Solomon’s large-scale graphics at The Sea Ranch did much to animate the architecture. You reinforce traffic patterns; it’s an aid to circulation. I’m paid to solve problems, not to amuse myself. The purpose of my work is to clarify, not to confuse.”

Supergraphics are different from the old, two-dimensional graphics, and they’re more helpful to landscape design than architecture: You reinforce traffic patterns; it’s an aid to circulation. I’m paid to solve problems, not to amuse myself. The purpose of my work is to clarify, not to confuse.” She thus differentiated her work from that of other architects and artists working in this vein, such Doug Michels, 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 new.

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 24 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 1955 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 typeface 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. She art directed office space from landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, with whom she would work on the Sea Ranch. She received marquise credit as design architect for Halprin’s redevelopment of Ghirardelli Square, the first successful adaptive reuse project in the United States (1962).

In 1965, Halprin hired Stauffacher Solomon to help him and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin prepare a site plan for the Embarkadero Promenade in San Francisco (1964, with Vito Acconci and Stanley Saitowitz). Stauffacher Solomon brilliantly integrated Swiss Modernism with West Coast style from her graphic design practice to create the impetus behind nineteenth-century modernism.

Perhaps best known for her Supergraphics and her Coconut Grove installation on the Embarcadero Promenade in San Francisco (1996, with Vito Acconci and Stanley Saitowitz), Stauffacher Solomon worked closely with architect Lawrence Halprin on the Sea Ranch, which she co-founded with the architects. They designed the Sea Ranch’s iconic Condominium 1, finished in 1965; that work is to clarify, not confuse.”

Stauffacher Solomon’s title for the Bar 10 installation on the Embarcadero Promenade in San Francisco (1996, with Vito Acconci and Stanley Saitowitz) was “Supermannerism.”

Where and when Supergraphics originated depends on how you define Supergraphics. Various matters in the end is that California inspired Barbara Stauffacher Solomon’s work does more than reinforce architecture.

The Art Wall is commissioned by BAMPFA and made possible by major funding from Frances Hellman and Warren Brocks. Additional support is provided by Hertzog+Hoffman.

Further Reading


UC BERKELEY ART MUSEUM, PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

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