

**BICYCLING TO MONGOLIA:
FREDRIC FIERSTEIN
AND *GUARDIAN***
— Richard Whittaker

In which:

- *we learn something about the origins of a mysterious and powerful public sculpture, reminiscent of an ancient Mongolian shaman/archer*
 - *take a brief detour for commentary on puff-piece journalism*
 - *meet a clear-eyed artist too self-possessed to waste time struggling for artworld recognition*
 - *spend a little time with primitive Buddhist temple kung-fu in the far reaches of Malaysia*
 - *contemplate a moment of revelation at the unlikely juncture of West Coast sophistication and the ancient life of a hill tribe poppy farmer*
 - *consider some reflections on the vicissitudes of public art*
 - *hear how one artist's resourcefulness, creativity and the democratic process thwarted the inertia, opposition and ill will of bureaucrats*
 - *ponder the difficulty of poetry and celebrate the discovery of hidden practitioners, visionaries and unsung heroes.*
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The Thing Itself and Some Unlikely Associations

Exploring the East Bay shoreline one day, I found myself at the foot of University Avenue near the Berkeley pier. That's where I saw it, a fierce warrior, bow drawn, astride a mythical beast like a huge Chinese fu dog. The sculpture stands over fifteen feet high. Immediately I remembered having stumbled upon it years earlier when its squat magnitude had first mesmerized me.

But this time, I gazed upon it with new eyes having just read an advance copy of Peter Kingsley's astonishing book, *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*. Kingsley argues that a mysterious figure mentioned in ancient Greek texts was a shaman who traveled all

the way from Mongolia to Greece where he met with Pythagoras to help the Greeks with his knowledge. Travel between Mongolia and Greece in that era was considered impossible, and what to make of the idea that the Greek *logos* might have been nurtured by the mysticism of Mongolian shamanism?

With such ideas fresh in mind, I laid my bicycle down and walked over to take a closer look at the statue. A bronze plaque installed at its base read: *Guardian*, Fredric Fierstein—*To Protect the Life Spirit*.

Goodness! Kingsley's Mongolian shaman might have put it the same way. And the archer had a definite Mongolian flavor, it seemed to me. Suddenly, I wanted to find this Fierstein. Without a doubt, it would be worth the effort. How could such a potent work have been born from a vacuum? It couldn't have.

Plop Art and Puff-Pieces

As soon as I got home I googled Fierstein. What I found were some photos of the statue and a few brief references to a scandal. For example: January 15, *SF Chronicle*, "In 1986 sculptor Fred Fierstein dumped a statue called *The Guardian* at the Berkeley Marina."

Dumped? I'd noticed that the four feet of the statue sat nicely on concrete pads. The writer continued, "In a city vote, fans supported the statue and the term 'plop art' was coined."

Can we digress a moment? I recall encountering that term around 1992, soon after I began publishing an art magazine. A young man (his name long forgotten), on fire with enthusiasm, had contacted me. He was a practitioner, he declared, of "plop art." Several disconnected flush toilets sat in the vicinity of Telegraph Avenue thanks to his efforts, as I recall. He thrust a folder of newspaper clippings into my hands, some perhaps even referring to Fierstein's *Guardian*. Always willing to find the hidden glitter of a diamond in the rough, I tried to see what was interesting in this young man's *oeuvre*—and came up empty-handed. He was attuned with the phrase, though. But to associate Fierstein's statue with "plop art" is just another example of a writer's tin ear. *Guardian* was not dumped nor was it plopped. And it seems the unfortunate phrase itself has disappeared.

Finding Fierstein

Google was no help in finding the statue's creator and I was temporarily at a loss. But what about the City of Berkeley? When inquiries there led to a name and

phone number, I was excited. On my first try a man answered and after introducing myself, I asked, “Ever heard of Fredric Fierstein?”

“You mean Fred of Fredric’s Electric?”

Fighting off the feeling I’d entered some comic skit, I pressed on, “Is he the one who made the statue down by the Berkeley pier?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

And that’s how I found the artist—in the Yellow Pages under electricians.

Truth is, I only got his voicemail. But now I also had a street address. And given the state my fantasies had already generated, the allure of driving right over was too much to resist. Even if the artist/electrician wasn’t at home, just seeing his place would be revealing. What would it look like?

The streets in the Berkeley hills can be tricky, but I finally found the address. A well-preserved panel truck from the early 1950s sat in the driveway, “Fredric’s Electric” painted across its sides. Indeed, this was the place! The house was an older, two-story, brown-shingle wood frame house tucked in behind an imposing screen of vegetation. Then this first impression, *brown shingle*, was compromised a split-second later. Wasn’t that an *Asian temple entrance* in front? Sure enough. The tiled roof with turned-up eaves was trimmed out with a couple of ornate ceramic dragons. And the entry walkway was paved with a mosaic of blue and white hand-painted, glazed tile. It had to be the work of *Guardian’s* maker, the mysterious electrician himself!

Looking around with tempered delight, I wondered what more would be revealed when I finally met the man. It took a couple of weeks.

On the appointed morning I returned to North Berkeley with the anticipation and nervousness of meeting, not just someone new, but a stranger wrapped in free-floating clouds of expectation.

The man who answered the door was maybe five foot six or seven, his age hard to determine, broad-shouldered and fit. He was wearing an astrakhan hat. Looking at me forthrightly, he welcomed me and asked me to take off my shoes. I followed him through dimly lit rooms decorated with exotic works of art to a small table where we took seats across from each other.

In the north light falling through the window I got my first good look at him. It was something of a shock. How to describe why? First of all, looking at him, my Mongolian fantasy did not evaporate at all. His was a

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face I might describe as having a timeless, masculine, non-specific Asiatic beauty.

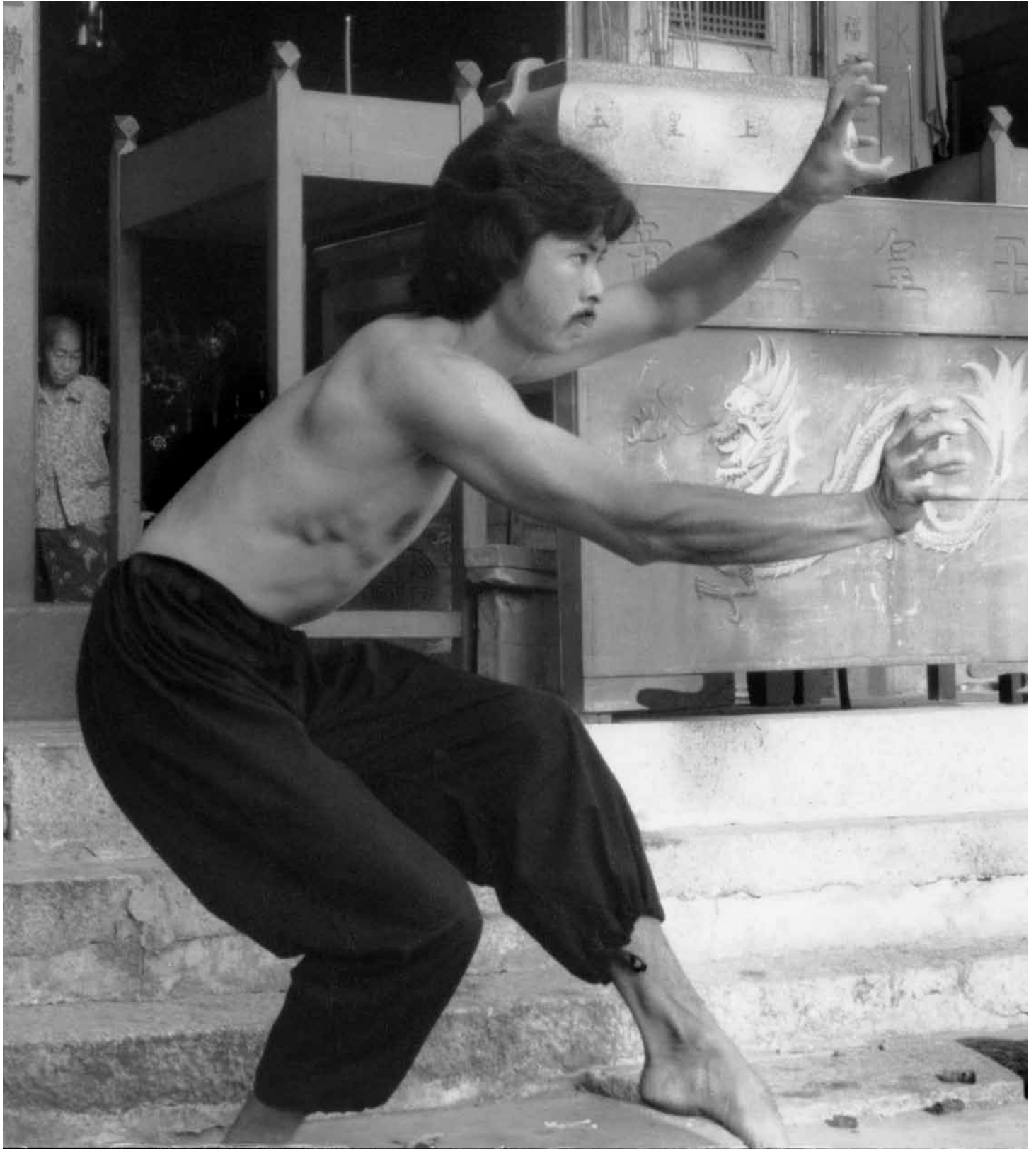
Usually such moments sink quickly beneath the sweep of ordinary life and as I write, having become acquainted with the artist in a more ordinary way, that moment has faded some. But all my intuitions, as I’d stood looking at the statue at the foot of the Berkeley pier, have been richly confirmed. Whatever it was I saw in his face sitting across the table in that first moment remains as something from another order—whether it’s one that’s more real or less is hard to say.

And sitting there, in addition to Fierstein’s creativity made visible in different ways everywhere I looked, there was something else I was not yet fully aware of,

FACING PAGE: *GUARDIAN*, 1985, FERROCONCRETE







KUNG FU DEMONSTRATION BY THIRD SON OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE, PHOTO FREDRIC FIERSTEIN

“The old master had eight sons. He divided his teachings among them. To one, he gave the iron palm; to another, something else. Fierstein was taught first by the third son and then, as he got better, the first. And the first son was a shaman, too, I think.”

a palpable physical aura quietly radiating from the man himself. It had to be connected with his long practice of the martial arts. Of that I learned little, although enough to sense its place of importance in his life. A couple of times, I was able to draw out a glimpse of a startling fierceness not too far below the surface—not unlike what one sees in *Guardian*. And as a matter of fact, *Guardian* sits at the foot of University Avenue in Berkeley, California in large part because of the artist’s devotion to the martial arts.

Kung Fu Buddhist Temple Art and a Fundamental Moment

It was in Penang in a Buddhist temple that Fierstein first saw it (a temple managed by his Kung Fu master). It was about six inches tall. The little figure stood out from the other temple statuary. “I had been to so many temples, but this one seemed made by a person who had been inspired. I was attracted by its shape. I thought wouldn’t it be nice if this was larger in order to be able to look up at it.”

Fierstein had practiced kung fu with other schools, he told me, but he liked this particular school because *it was primitive*. Those were his words. It was hidden away. There was an old kung fu master there—and here the story gets hazy. The old master had eight sons. He divided his teachings among them. To one, he gave the iron palm; to another, something else. Fierstein was taught first by the third son and then, as he got better,

the first. And the first son was a shaman, too, I think. The local people would go to the temple to contact their dearly departed. The first son would put one of the younger sons into a trance, and a connection was made with the other world.

What was it about the primitive that was so appealing? I asked Fierstein.

“Oh, listen,” he said. “*You can’t find these people anymore*. There’s a certain soul there, and honesty. And they’re not corrupted, polluted, by parking tickets, by a lot of things that we have to deal with.” These were people you could talk with, he explained. First of all, as he put it, *they were friendly*. They accepted themselves. That’s why he returned for several years to his Kung Fu teachers at that same out-of-the-way place. (In fact, he was going there again in a few weeks!)

Then, on a trek even further into the mountains, he described meeting a man tending poppy fields—not the kind of fields one thinks of. All the rocks were still there. It was up and down. The field-tender’s teeth were stained red and black from chewing betel nut. He lived in the ancient way in a hut about the size of a bathroom. Fierstein told me he looked into the hut. There wasn’t much in there. Then the field-tender looked into Fierstein’s bag. Fair’s fair.

The trekking guide, who spoke Thai and a few local dialects, didn’t know this man’s hill tribe language. But Fredric connected with him anyway, through sign language. He found out they were the same age. And a revelation followed: “*I realized that guy could have been me and I could have been him*.” Fierstein went on, “I was who I was from the fact that I came from one place, and he was who he was because he came from another place. But in a sense, we’re all the same. It’s just the way the world is. It was beautiful to see that we’re all equal.” The sense of that connection was fulfilling. It was “like a religion.”

But also, from this encounter, he saw that most people are more products of their society than “of something inside making them who they are. They’re not products of themselves, in a sense,” as he put it. *Not products of themselves*. I think this gets close to something I felt in meeting the man in the astrakhan hat who presents himself to the world as Fredric of Fredric’s Electric: *this disconnect has not been his fate*. Both of his parents were artists. He grew up in New York in an atmosphere of creative ferment, inquiry and the affirmation of the resources always available via thinking for oneself, seeing for oneself.



FREDRIC FIERSTEIN, PLATE, PIGMENTED CLAY, 1978

Art

Sitting at that table, as mentioned, everywhere I looked there was evidence of the artist's creative interventions. These took the form of carvings, paintings, various *objets d'art* collected in his travels and all kinds of creative improvements made to the house—windows, cabinets, counters and so on. Taking it all in, I asked him what his art background was. He'd studied animation at SF State, he told me. His first films had gotten more prizes than had his teachers' films. But he realized he lacked the financial resources to continue. He took up ceramics. "One of my teapots is over there," he said, pointing. I got up and retrieved it. It was good. Better than good, it was a treat to behold. A good San Francisco gallery used to carry his work some 30 years earlier. (I discovered this because in the two manila envelopes he entrusted to me with old slides and whatnot, there was a yellowed receipt from the gallery for several of his ceramic cups.) Meier, Breier, Weiss was a pretty cool place back then.

One of the things I noticed about Fredric Fierstein pretty quickly was that, first of all, he was a realist.

And second, I noticed he wasn't overly encumbered by conventional thinking. For example, after having seen several more of his artworks, I asked, "Why don't you have an art career?"

"Art career?" he said. "There's no such thing as an art career in this culture."

Now strictly speaking, this isn't true. There are curators, assistant curators, conservators, art writers, gallerists, art guards, publicists, administrators, art professors and whatnot galore. However, when it comes to career artists, in essence there's more truth to this statement than falsehood. Just ask an artist about his or her career.

At one point, he told me, he'd taken up watercolors. "I make art for the pleasures of doing it, not for any other reason. And I don't want to have to fit myself into a mold. In the art world, they don't like that." An artist is expected to develop a recognizable look in one medium or maybe two. That's what gallery owners want. It makes promotion and sales a lot easier. Talking about all this, the artist's face took on



FREDRIC FIERSTEIN, CERAMIC ROOF DRAGON

an expression of distaste. "I didn't want to prostitute myself," he said.

I think what I'm trying to get at in relating these fragments has to do with an impression this artist made on me. I'm reminded of something Terry Riley said in a radio interview several years ago: "I'm sure there are lots of better musicians than me out there and we will never hear about them." Hearing him say that made me like Terry Riley even more than I already did. Switch the word musician to artist and he could have been talking about Fierstein. I felt this strongly, especially as I looked at his ceramic work. He's one of those artists.

Unauthorized Art

But let's get back to *Guardian*, the artist's monumental copy of that six-inch statue from the hidden temple. At first he considered making it in clay and firing it in place. But there were too many ways that could go wrong. What about ferroconcrete, the way they make boats? That seemed more feasible even without any experience in the medium. (In passing, let me note

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that one of the pleasures of meeting this artist was spending a little time in the orbit of a man confident in his capacities to make things, to figure out methods, to shape and craft materials, to trust in his hands and natural intelligence. This orientation towards the world must have been, and still be in many places, far more common than it is now. And no doubt many other artists still feel a measure of this.)

When he finished *Guardian*, it stood in his driveway between houses. The impulse had been to build it. He would worry about what to do with it later. And then that later arrived. Apparently Berkeley had just created an art commission, and so he took photos to the commissioners. "This was the first piece to be offered to them," he told me. He kept checking to find out what was happening and then, after about six months, the art commissioners told him they didn't want it.

Here we arrive again at a part of the narrative where my own information is scanty. I imagine that during the months of waiting to hear from the art commission Fierstein looked around for locations that might be propitious sites for his sculpture. And he found the perfect spot, which is where the piece sits today. The course it took in getting there, however, was via uncharted territory.

Put an artist with the qualities I've already described together with most art professionals, and what you'll usually get is a failure to communicate, or so it seems to me. This is a situation preprogrammed for problems.

As Fierstein put it, he and his friends talked it over and "it was decided that the piece would end up *where I wanted it to be. We decided to just put it there.*" Now I guess the rights and wrongs of such an approach are debatable. On the other hand, I suspect that many artists, those same struggling individuals who have persisted against all odds trying to eke out some sort of *career path* as artists, that this group would find what followed a deeply satisfying tale.

From the moment of the commissioners' rejection,

the history of *Guardian*—an unauthorized piece of public art—was to follow its own path. It was far too powerful and poetic a piece to survive any other way. Which leads me to wonder, is the source of poetry always located somewhere outside of the box?

Blindsided

The man who gave me the lead to the artist happened to be a Berkeley art commissioner, David Snippen. A few weeks later I ran into him at an opening at the Berkeley Arts Center. I learned he's an architect and also serves on the art center's board of directors. We had a very pleasant conversation.

"Did you find Fierstein?" he asked.

"Not only that, but I've interviewed him and he's amazing."

"The whole *Guardian* episode took place before my time," he said, "but the arts commission was blindsided by that thing"

Several days later, I found myself idly thinking about those words—the art commission had been *blindsided*—when suddenly the phrase lit up. *Public art*. Maybe "blindsided" and "public art" have something in common. The process through which public art becomes public is bound to cramp the vision part. Over the years I've talked with many artists who have been through the peculiar ordeal of creating a public work of art. The tales I've heard feature frustration, absurdity, senseless delay, unreasonable demands, after-the-fact revisions and, ultimately, when a work does become reality, pitiful financial results for the artist. And what does art look like that's been processed by a bureaucratic committee? We know the answer because mostly, that's what's out there. Of course, there are exceptions. In Albany for instance, Carlo Ferretti's piece comes to mind. Its poetry is miraculously intact. But Carlo's tale <http://conversations.org/story.php?sid=621> is almost hilariously absurd.

What had suddenly lit up as I was mulling over the word "blindsided" is that maybe the blind part is just built into the way public art gets done. There's both an *a priori* and, as we know, an *a posteriori*—to embellish the thought with a little Kant.

Pulling It Off

The placing of *Guardian* wasn't exactly a simple thing to pull off. But just as Fierstein was never shy about diving into new mediums—his first ferroconcrete piece, *Guardian*, is over 15' high and weighs in at over 3000

pounds—he was equally inspired by other challenges. A little research revealed that the city of Berkeley didn't own any heavy cranes. All they had were cherry-pickers—good for tree trimming, changing lamp post bulbs and the like. And also, he gained some insight into how things get done through official channels. As he put it, "that meant that the same bureaucracy that kept me from putting the piece down there would now have to trip over its own shoelaces in order to get it removed."

But how to get the piece from his driveway in the Berkeley hills to the marina? The height of the piece would threaten to tear down utility wires. So Fierstein rigged a bamboo pole to his car at that exact height and began a driving survey until he found a viable route down to the marina.

One Sunday Fierstein and a friend went down to the marina to prepare the spot they'd chosen. Working quietly, they weren't questioned as they placed *Guardian's* four steel-reinforced, concrete footings at the foot of University Avenue in an open space facing across the bay to the Golden Gate Bridge. Then they let a week pass before the next step. No ripples.

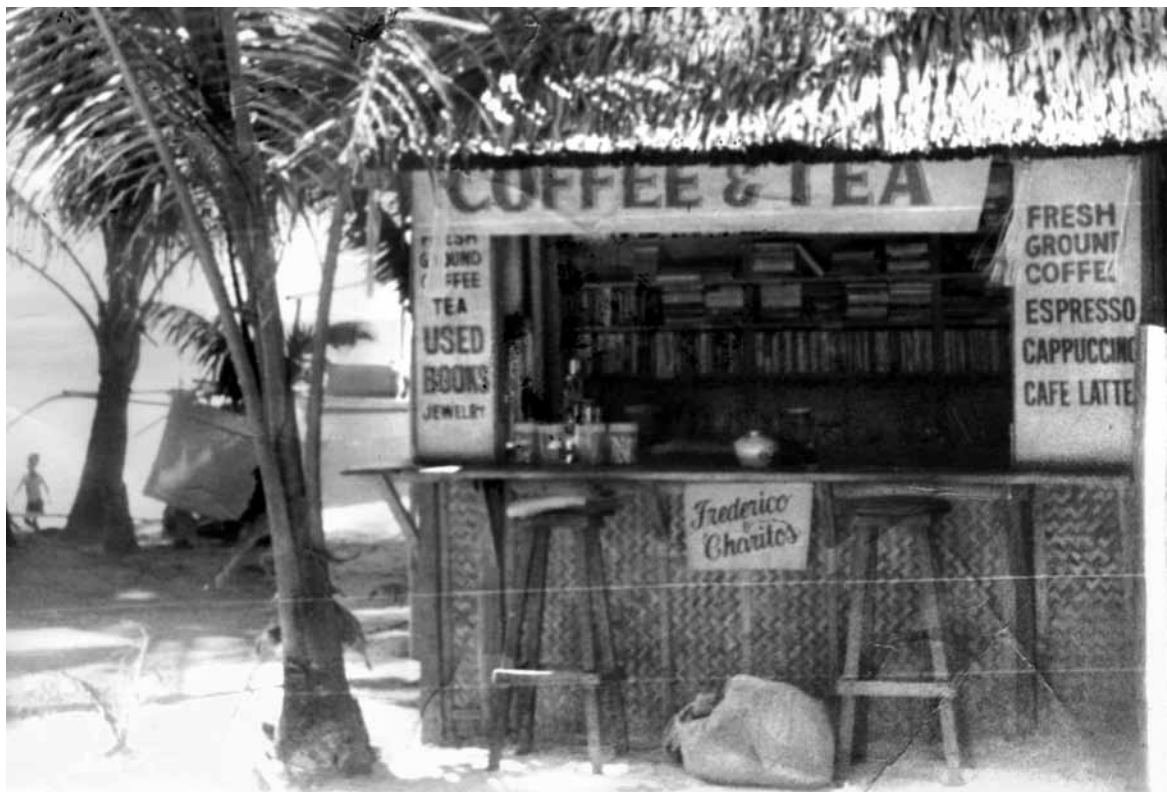
On a Monday morning, they loaded the massive piece in a rented trailer and covered it with tarps. No incidents occurred as they threaded their way down to the marina. They waited nearby in an empty parking lot for the heavy crane they'd hired.

The next steps were straightforward. Move crane in position. Set out the orange cones. Pull the trailer into position. The men strapped the piece, lifted it, and swung it carefully over the footings and lowered it into place. The whole thing took fifteen or twenty minutes, once *Guardian* was unwrapped. Then everyone paused to enjoy the results of their careful work.

Except, Fredric related, at that point there was one little glitch. It was just as they were all admiring *Guardian* in its new venue, that the head of the Berkeley Parks and Recreation Department showed up. It was pure accident.

What the hell was going on? As Fierstein tells it, somehow he happened to have on his person a letter with a City of Berkeley letterhead granting permission for this act. About this detail, Fierstein's recollection was vague. The Parks and Rec man pocketed said letter assuring them he would get to the bottom of it.

After that, the renegade artist and his crew all headed off to a nearby restaurant to celebrate the morning's work over breakfast.



FREDRIC FIERSTEIN'S COFFEE SHOP AND BOOKSTAND, PHILIPPINES

“It was far too powerful and poetic a piece to survive any other way. Which leads me to wonder, is the source of poetry always located somewhere outside the box?”

Art Litter, Campaigning for Art and Falling in Love

As told to me, it wasn't long before the artist received a letter charging him with littering. And thus began the next chapter of this saga. My notes are sketchy. The art commission wanted it gone. Trusting to his calculations about the city's lack of cranes and the bureaucratic delays in getting things done, Fierstein left town for a vacation. A friend was keeping an eye on things just in case. Then, in the middle of his vacation, he got

an urgent letter. It looked like the city might pull it off soon—literally. Fierstein cut his vacation short and returned.

As it happened a citywide election wasn't far off and inspiration struck. What about placing an initiative on the ballot? Let the citizens of Berkeley vote yea or nay about keeping the new statue. Signatures had to be collected ASAP, at least 2400 that could stand up to challenge. Done. And so the course of events, having proceeded thus far outside the box, now came back inside, in a way, but in a larger context: democracy.

As the artist put it, “Posters were made. Speeches were made. There was opposition, which was the art commission.” But lots of people in Berkeley liked the statue. Either that or, as the artist surmises, they “liked the act of placing it the way I did.”

There were those who objected that *it wasn't art*. Fierstein responded, “No, it's just a study of art.” Then others asserted that it would fall over, get rusted. It wasn't right. It wasn't safe. It would be a danger. The fussbudgets. And the art commission intoned, Listen, we can't let this happen because a lot of other people might start doing this.

The artist had an answer for this unlikely danger, “Gee, *wouldn't that be wonderful?*”



MALAYSIA, ORIGINAL STATUE, CLAY AND WOOD, 6" HIGH
THE BOW HAS SLIPPED DOWN IN THE PHOTO

And *Guardian* had something more going for it. Fierstein describes it this way: "If a thing comes out and it breathes, if someone—or if many—get something from it, you know you hit it! Which doesn't happen often. You see something. You get inspired. You do it, right? It's passion. It's not like math, which you can pick up and do the next day. When it comes, you act. Not everything a person makes, including me, is art. There are plenty of failures. They don't sing. That's just the way it is. *It's like falling in love with somebody.*"

The People Say Yes, but the City...

The ballot measure passed. The people of Berkeley voted to keep *Guardian*. But the story wasn't quite over. Behind the scenes there were those who continued to smolder. And a few weeks later Fierstein got a letter from the city attorney. Based on a technicality, the people's vote did not insure against the removal of the statuary. The city attorney notified Fierstein that the city intended to proceed with legal measures to get the piece removed.

"It was beautiful to see that we're all equal. The sense of that connection was fulfilling," he told me. It was "like a religion."

As Fredric tells it, he explained it this way to the city attorney. "As you know, the art commission, in fighting this, has gotten egg all over its face. I will fight this all the way down the line. I'll go to the county. I'll go to the state. And I'll go as far as I can take this. So if you want the City of Berkeley to get egg all over its face, too, go right ahead." Nothing further was heard from the city. That was over twenty years ago.

About Invisible Things

What I'm trying to get at, I think, in relating these fragments has to do with an impression this artist made on me. It has to do with how many remarkable things there are that we can't or won't see. There must be so much that's hidden and, with our passive addiction to the media circus, it's hard even to imagine what we're missing. As Terry Riley said, there must be exquisite music out there we'll never hear. But the music is just part of what we miss.

A little thought experiment comes to mind. Imagine for a moment being caught up in Facebook or an HBO program, a Google search or some other familiar media experience. Reflect upon the ubiquity of such media and how much time one spends engrossed in one or another media stream.

Now imagine turning off the tv or shutting down the computer, iPod, smart phone—whatever it was you were involved with. It's off. Now what? Just stay there for a while in that silence of disconnect from a media stream.

What is it like for you, being in that space?

The thought experiment can be extended, if you wish. I imagined opening the door and walking outside. It's evening. The silent world stretches away from my doorstep across the street, into the hills and beyond. I noticed that the silence shocked me, in a way, having just been a passenger in a media realm



operating at the speed of fantasy. Stepping away from that stream, and back into the actual world, I felt deprived. I was no longer being distracted in the realm of fantasy and it seemed that *nothing was happening*. In that moment, the silent world stretching away from my doorstep felt strange, even foreign. It's something to think about.

The reward for me in tracking down the maker of *Guardian* was in finding one of the hidden ones, as Terry Riley might have said. An exceptional artist unseen in the world except at that magical point at the foot of the Berkeley pier. And his sculpture resonates with a mystery beyond the artist/electrician I met in the Berkeley hills. After all, *Guardian* is a copy of another figure. What hidden story remains untold behind that original little figure only six inches high? Its power sent a stranger from the West Coast on the remarkable journey described here. What generative force echoed in that little figure? Was it meant to carry something via the mystery of form?

Postscript

On a recent visit with Fierstein, I found him playing speed chess on his computer with someone in another country. I'd come over to take a few photos, being dissatisfied with earlier ones I'd taken in low light. Afterwards, a beautiful granite backsplash in his kitchen caught my attention. I noticed the stove was unusual, too—all stretched out in a line so there were four burners divided by a grill in the middle.

"I've never seen a stove like that."

"Oh, I cut it apart and rearranged it," he said. And he had, the entire stove. New and improved, it was perfectly suited to the kitchen space.

More about the artist's martial arts practice and his other journeys off the beaten track will have to wait for another time. He still owns a home he built in the Philippines, I learned. And there's the story of his little island coffee shop and bookstore business.

As I was leaving, happy with the new photos, Fredric stopped me to share an idea he'd been thinking about. There could be a magazine that featured the cartoon drawings of local high school kids. These kids don't get any recognition, he said, and a lot of them actually have talent. He couldn't do the magazine all by himself, but he has a background in animation and a love of cartoons. And he'd love to work with a few people on such a project. ♦

