

# San Francisco Area Artist Kevin Kearney Lends Paintings and Recollections to the Breaking The Rules Exhibit

*Dedicated to the work of William Theophilus Brown and Paul Wonner, the art exhibition explores two leading artists of the Bay Area Figurative Movement.*

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*Kevin Kearney*

Bay Area artist [Kevin Kearney](#) didn't hesitate when he was contacted to lend his paintings and cherished memories to the "Breaking The Rules" exhibition. Dedicated to the work of [William Theophilus Brown and Paul Wonner](#), leading artists of the Bay Area Figurative Movement, the exhibition is the first major showing of their works. A moment that's long overdue in Kearney's opinion.

"The exhibition was comprehensive. It was beautiful. And the strength of both their works together was terrific, and seeing their works together was one of those bittersweet

moments," Kearney explained. "I think if they could have seen that, I think that would have really made Bill and Paul happy."

A close friend of the couple for more than 30 years, Kearney first met Brown, whom he called "Bill," while completing his MFA at UC Davis. He shared studio space with Brown and Wonner in San Francisco for almost 20 years. "I was slightly closer to Bill, because Bill was a little more outrageous and Paul was more insular," says Kearney.

Kearney would go on to become like a family member to the couple and frequent guest at dinner parties hosted at their Noe Valley home. There Kearney mixed with Bill Brown and Paul Wonner's circle of bold-faced name friends like Richard Diebenkorn, and heard stories of Brown's close friendships with legends like Igor Stravinsky and Willem De Kooning.

Kearney's part in their story is well documented in their art. Brown painted a portrait entitled "Kevin Kearney," which is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Paul Wonner created a painting that includes a note to Kearney entitled "Still Life with Flowers and a Note to KMK" (1992), which is part of the "Breaking The Rules" show. Both Brown and Wonner

would go on to gift Kearney more than 17 drawings and paintings throughout their 30-year relationship.

Seeing his friends receive this level of recognition is long past due for Kearney. Wonner had a retrospective of his work at the SFMOMA in 1981, but Brown's work was never recognized with a museum show of that magnitude during his lifetime.

"A lot of the earlier works from the 1960s, I had never seen them except occasionally. Maybe you'd see one in a show or something. Some of these paintings are just strikingly beautiful," exclaimed Kearney. "I've been very familiar with their work for almost 40 years, and I was totally blown away by this exhibit."

"One thing that really struck me was the curating of it and hanging of the exhibit, which is as good as I've seen anywhere," said Kearney.

"Scott Shields, Associate Director and Chief Curator of the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California, who organized the show did an amazing job." Shields led the exhibition and wrote an accompanying book to the show, which he co-authored with Matt Gonzalez. "I mean, this show is just really beautiful. As someone who's viewed art all over the world, I can say it's simply one of the best shows I've ever seen," said Kearney.

Amidst the resurgence of interest in Brown and Wonner's work, Kearney enjoys sharing his personal recollections and front-row seat to an important chapter in art history. Brown and Wonner were luminaries in the Bay Area Figurative Movement, which notably included Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud. Kearney also worked for Thiebaud as his studio assistant for two years. And he met many of the masters of the California art world through his mentors, including Elmer Bischoff and Nathan Oliveira.

Kearney feels a duty to help ensure his beloved friends' legacy. He was instrumental in placing their works in the Crocker Art Museum's permanent collection after their deaths. Kearney donated his own painting "White Dog Girl Leading The Horse" (1989) by Brown to the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis.

"Most of the people that I met from that time are dead. So I mean, I'm probably one of the last people that had a really close relationship with Bill and Paul," said Kearney. "They didn't have any kids, and we were pretty close for a long time. They really considered me a son."

Organized by the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, "Breaking The Rules" is at the Laguna Art Museum from October 14, 2023–January 7, 2024. The exhibition will be at the Dixon Gallery & Gardens, Memphis, Tennessee, from January 28–March 30, 2024.

Kevin M. Kearney is an internationally collected artist based in the San Francisco Bay Area who heads a construction legal consulting firm in historic Petaluma, California. A graduate of

Maryland Institute College of Art in 1974, he graduated magna cum laude from UC Davis with an MFA. Kearney's paintings can be viewed at the Private Galerie of Marlene Porsche in Luzern, Switzerland. He currently has a screenplay entitled "Girl With Lizard" in development that was co-written with Bernhard Schlink, author of the "The Reader," the book the Academy-Award winning movie is based on.

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