

KALI



Kali, Kali Self-Portrait with her Polaroid camera, Palm Springs, CA, 1969, vintage Polaroid print in custom frame, 10 1/4 x 12 inches framed, estate of the artist, L2023.42.61.

In 1962, Long Island housewife Joan Archibald upended her life by fleeing to Southern California where she reinvented herself as a photographer and took the name “Kali.” She soon moved to Palm Springs and spent the following decades experimenting with photography—while becoming increasingly withdrawn and eccentric. It was only after her death in 2019 when a trove

of images were discovered by her daughter Susan that Kali became recognized as a significant innovator in alternative photography. Adam Lerner spoke with Susan about her mother’s extraordinary work and life.

EXHIBITION

KALI, ARTOGRAPHER, 1932-2019

NOVEMBER 19, 2023 – APRIL 8, 2024

What are your most prominent memories of your mother as an artist?

I couldn't go swimming in the pool many days because my mom would be washing her prints in the pool. My mother moved to Malibu first and my grandmother said, "You know, this is not a place to raise your children." So, she scooted down to Palm Springs, found a cool house, and set up a black-and-white darkroom because she hand-colored her prints. She would dry the prints on the deck of the pool. Then she would take her dyes and it was like she was dancing around her prints. When I was a teenager, my mom used to have me sit and mark her slides. She would have me stamp her prints: "No reproduction without written permission." It was the three women: my grandmother, my mom, and me.

Could you share with me some stories about the people she photographed?

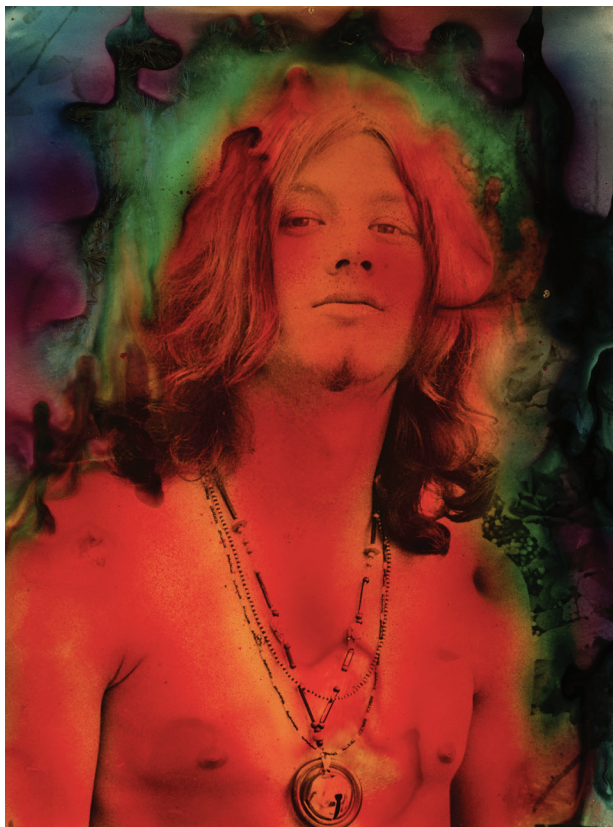
Oh, they were my friends: my girlfriend Margie, Cindy, and her sister Debbie. My mom would stick a wig on me. She'd put a wig on Cindy or maybe plant flowers in Margie's hair. We'd be in this "abstract shoot" because we didn't know what we were getting into. We were just kids, and my mom was playing director and we just said, "Okay!" My mom socialized with a few people. They were attractive and they ended up being models for her. Or, it might have been the mailman. There was this one guy whose name we don't mention. I found a picture of him and went, "Oh, how did *he* get there?" I think maybe my mom photographed people when I was away at school.

Was there an art community in Palm Springs that your mother was a part of?

Oh, no. My mom mostly spent her days at her house, which was about a half a mile from the museum. She did go to College of the Desert where her teacher told her, "This is really amazing stuff, don't give up on it."

Her works strike me as very psychedelic, connected to the spirit of the sixties and seventies. Would you say that your mother was a part of the counterculture?

I don't know how to answer that. My mom was just a beauty—blonde, wispy hair. She looked like a movie star. She could have probably been one. Anywhere she went, she attracted attention. I'll never forget, she put a wig on me and brought me to Jilly's in Palm Springs, where Frank Sinatra used to hang out. And, there was Frank Sinatra and his goons. I'll always remember her washed-out blue jeans and a very cool top. She was very classy, but she had a little, I'm going to call it, Bohemian flair.



Kali, Paul, *Light My Fire*, Palm Springs, CA, 1968, vintage hand-colored gelatin silver print in custom frame, 20 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches framed, estate of the artist, L2023.42.4.

Did she circulate with the celebrity crowd in Palm Springs?

She would bring me to the Racket Club, which was for the rich and famous. I would see Paul Newman or any number of other stars there, but she always said to me, "These are just people who have different professions." My mom would mostly stay home because she was raising her kids, predominantly me, because I lived in Palm Springs.

What did you discover about your mother's art after she had passed?

Hundreds and hundreds of photographs. I found suitcases and suitcases in her closets. There was a small amount that she published but mostly she kept it very hidden.

So, you discovered work that you had never seen before, which you didn't know existed. Why do you think she hid them?

My mom was so much into doing her work that she just kept putting it away. She probably kept her work hidden because she didn't want anybody copying her. I know she was supposed to go to New York for an exhibition, but she wouldn't get on a plane.

So, she lived out her days in Palm Springs?

She loved Palm Springs. The midnight rides: Wow! We used to drive down to Indio. In those days, Indio and didn't have much more than power lines. And my mother would say, "There's a UFO! There's a sighting!" I'll never forget one time my mom called someone and was adamant about what she saw, and nobody would speak with her.

What do you make of her UFO sightings?

I think they're extraordinary. It's a world that I don't really understand, but there's a lot in this world we don't understand. She set up her cameras on the house and she used to wake me up and go, "Look at this! Look at this!" And, you know how things looked: like a big butterfly. I would say, "Oh my gosh, what is that?" These things were on her screens, coming through her cameras.

When I look at your mother's art, I see a combination of happy California optimism alongside a sense of darkness. Do you see it that way?

My mom was two-sided. If my mother was all bubbly, then the pictures would've been all bubbly, but she was also very deep. Maybe a little bit of darkness, but you mostly see brightness. There's a black-and-white photograph of my mom's that she added butterflies to. I have it next to my bed. I always believed in my mother's art, and when she passed away, the only thing I wanted was to try to bring her legacy alive.

You must be pleased to know that you've succeeded in doing that.

Who would've known that I'd be the person to bring all of this forward and get my mom's work out there?