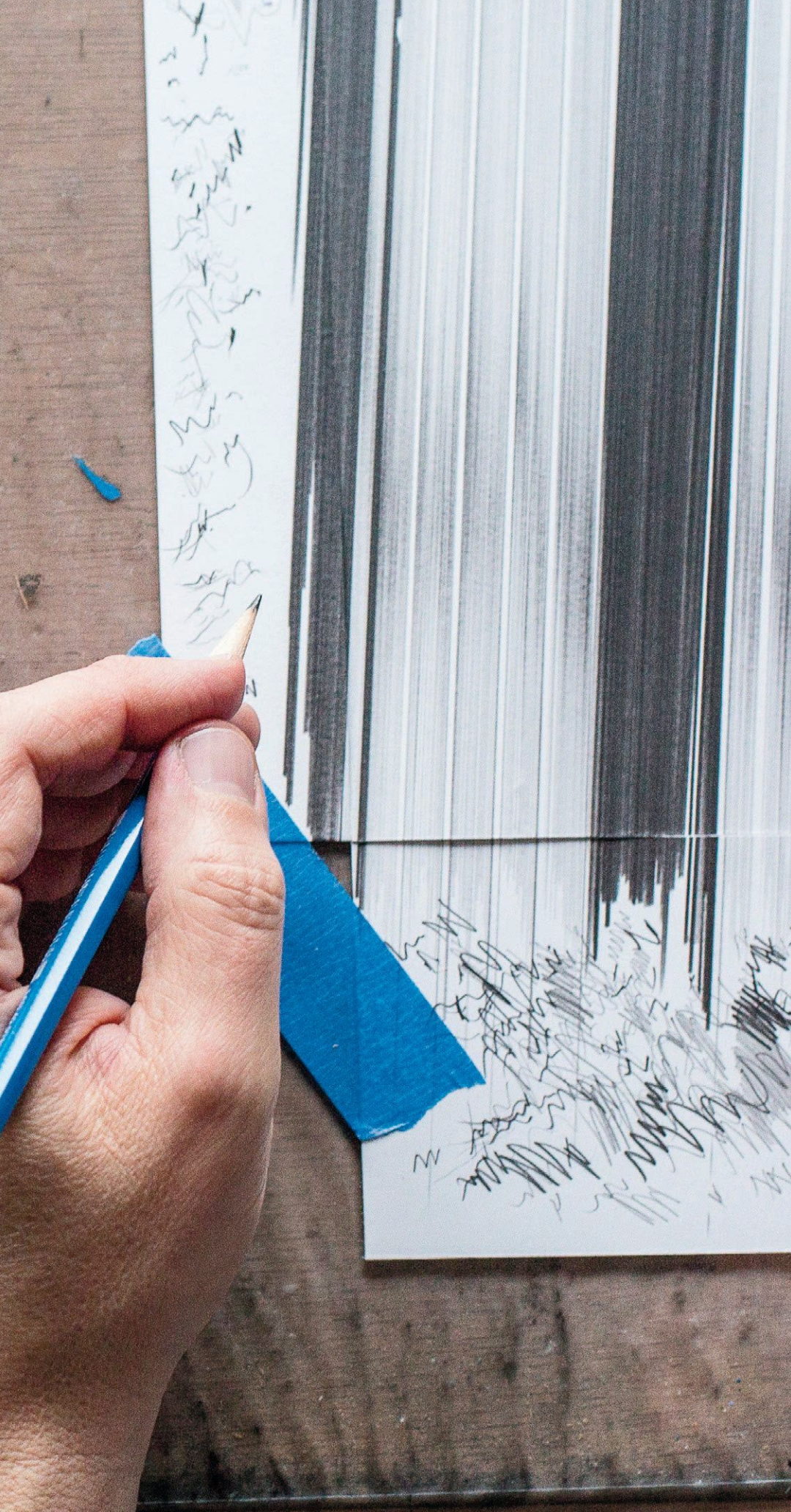
A top-down photograph of various drawing tools on a wooden surface. The tools include several blue Staedtler Mars Lumograph pencils, some sharpened and some in their original packaging. There are also black and blue pens, a pencil sharpener, and a piece of blue eraser. A hand is visible on the right side, holding one of the blue pencils. The text 'Art's Not Dead' is written in orange, and the rest of the headline is in white. The author and photographer credits are at the bottom in white.

Art's Not Dead. Discover two East Bay artists—and one elusive virtuoso—whose work helped cement the Bay Area's rebellious place in the art world.

BY ROBERT BURNSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICO OVIED



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Artists, poets, writers, radicals. They love San Francisco. Always have.

Mark Twain came in the 1860s. The Beats in the 1950s. The hippies a decade later.

And then in the 1990s, a loosely connected group of artists took up residence in and around the Mission, and without realizing it, created what would later be dubbed the “Mission School,” and deemed the most significant art movement to emerge in San Francisco in the late 20th century.

Heady stuff.

But don’t get the wrong idea.

“They were just these punk kids who went to art school,” says René de Guzman, one of the curators of the *Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California* exhibit at Oakland Museum of California, which has a section devoted to the Mission scene.

The Mission artists drew inspiration from a wide variety of sources: graffiti (many of them were graffiti artists); punk (many had their own punk bands); skate culture; and comic books. They favored handmade over digital, found over store bought, careless over careful. It was art that you didn’t need an advanced degree to understand.

“It’s not like we thought we were doing anything better than anybody else,” says Alicia McCarthy, one of the group’s central figures. “We were just out there doing it.”

But within a few years, the art world took notice, and the group’s legend and marketability took hold.

These days, few of the original artists remain in the Mission. Some were driven away by the high rents that accompanied the second dot-com boom. A few, like Barry McGee and Chris Johanson, became international art stars, touring the world’s art capitals with personal assistants at their sides. Others, including the artists featured in this article, moved to Oakland, where they continue to work.

If you get a chance to see *Fertile Ground* (through April 12), give yourself time to soak in the accompanying cultural artifacts. They help put the work in context.

And don’t be surprised if on the way out, you’re ready to kick yourself, thinking, Why wasn’t I living in the Mission in those wild and wonderful times?

Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California, September 20–April 12, jointly organized by the Oakland Museum of California and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; museumca.org.



Jeff Morris: Art That Sticks

Remember Bob Licky?

You might if you spent time in San Francisco in the '90s.

Bob Licky was everywhere. On lampposts, street signs, newspaper dispensers (remember those?), and just about anything else that stood upright.

It was just the name, Bob Licky, in all capital letters, always serving as the last line of a cryptic three-line epigram.

YOUR FEARS
HAVE A NAME
BOB LICKY

MAKE \$
FROM ¢
BOB LICKY

LOOK OUT
LADIES, IT'S
BOB LICKY

People loved the stickers. There was something delightfully subversive about them—maybe the way they lampooned the assertive, self-serving catchphrases of advertising.

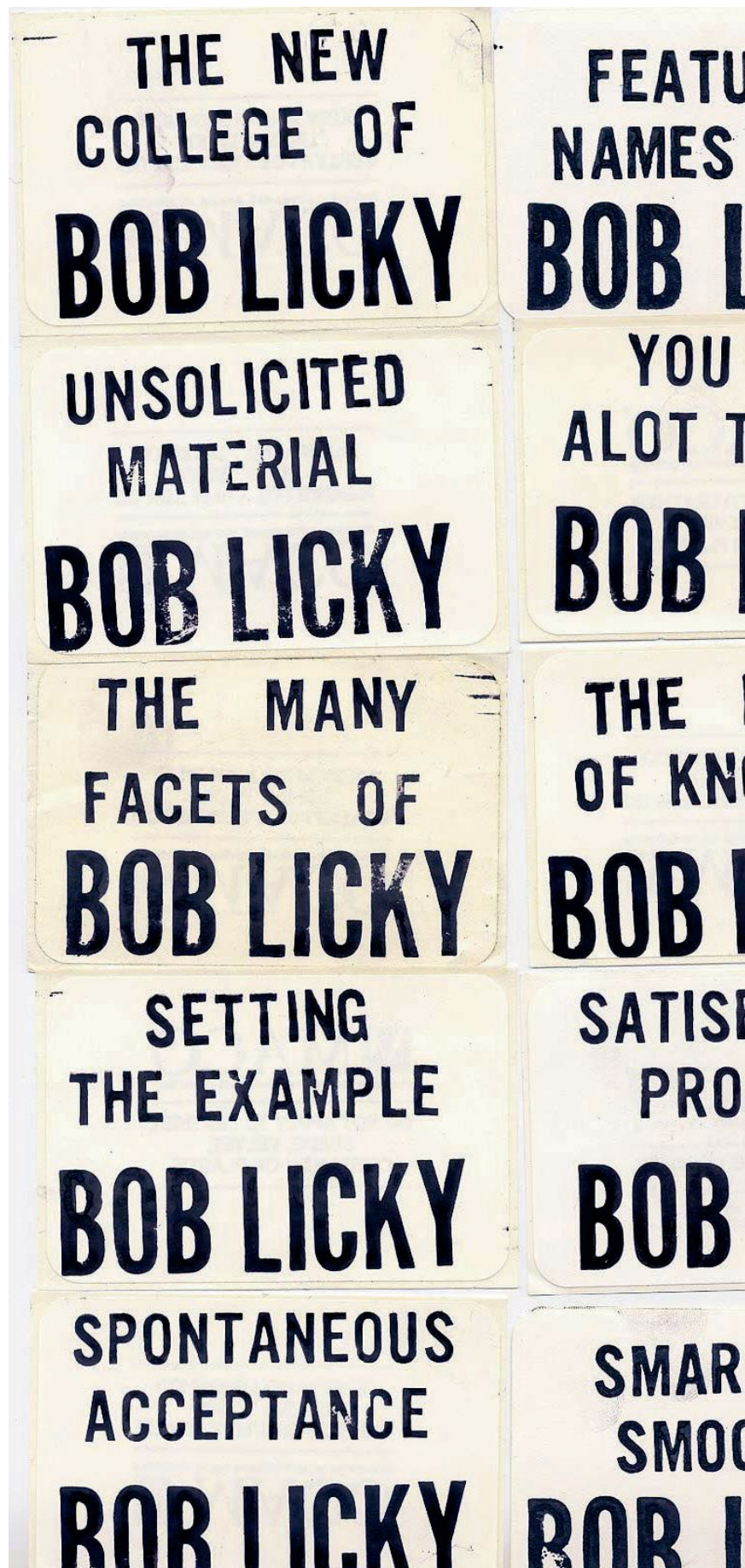
Bob Licky was the work of Jeff Morris, a young art student from Orange County who lived with roommates in a dilapidated house in the Sunset and was part of the outer circle of Mission School artists.

Morris printed the Bob Licky stickers by hand, using rubber stamps he shoplifted from stationery stores. "Then I would get on my bike and put them up all over the city," he says.

He became one of the best-known street artists in San Francisco; and even today, 20 years later, his stickers—though long gone—are not forgotten. "Bob Licky stickers are legendary," a graffiti artist proclaims on the site for Obey stickers, which have been spread with similar pervasiveness in recent years.

Morris enjoyed his sticker fame; it helped him get shows for his more serious art. But so far, his studio work hasn't proven as popular as his stickers.

Morris works mostly with found objects. One of his earlier pieces was a





LEFT: BOB LICKY, 1999 COURTESY OF JEFF MORRIS; RIGHT: UNTITLED (SELF-PORTRAIT), CIRCA 2002-2005 BY FOX REDBONE, COURTESY OF OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA



LATELY, I'VE BEEN COLLECTING BROKEN U-LOCKS FROM STOLEN BICYCLES... I AM STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO WITH THEM."

sculpture of blinking Christmas lights, tiles, and plywood. Later, he became fascinated with plastic sheeting. This led to a series of works made of plastic bags glued to plywood. Next came pencil drawings in which he meticulously reproduced the striations of stretched plastic.

He also makes art from the things he finds on the street. A few years ago, he made a series of sculptures by stringing together pieces of shattered taillights left behind after car crashes.

In 2002, he moved to Oakland, and he and his girlfriend share a home in Rockridge. His studio is in the spare bedroom. "It's a general mess," he says.

At this point, his art doesn't pay the bills, so he commutes into San Francisco and works at a design firm, where he makes patterns for things like Cookie Monster pajamas. But he hasn't stopped turning to found objects for inspiration.

"Lately, I've been collecting broken U-locks from stolen bicycles. I have them in the corner. I am still trying to figure out what to do with them."

Stormy Henry Knight: Where is Fox Redbone?

Call me a rube, but one of my favorite pieces in the *Fertile Ground* show is Fox Redbone's *Untitled* (self-portrait).

The work consists of gnarled pieces of tin can—one with a partial label—and a hand-scrawled note that reads:

ABOUT THE ARTIST: REDBONE

REDBONE (b. 1997) works in mixed media with mostly found and recycled materials.

These works are his self portraits taken from his tin can period (2002-2005) where he had an astonishing output of 25 tin can pieces. Unfortunately, he had to stop working with this medium due to flattened teeth.



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These works are his self portraits taken from his tin can period (2002-2005) where he had an astonishing output of 25 tin can pieces. Unfortunately, he had to stop working with this medium due to flattened teeth.

Yes, Redbone is a dog.

But I couldn't help thinking his work compared favorably with the other found art objects in the show. And one thing you could say for old Redbone: He sure didn't take himself too seriously. No musing about "techniques of confabulation," "mainstream appropriations," and other indigestible word sandwiches.

Here was an artist I could understand, one who chewed on life and spit it out.

I wanted an interview. At least, I wanted to talk to the guy who held Redbone's leash.

The wall placard listed Stormy Henry Knight as the person who loaned the piece. I recognized the name. Knight lived in the Mission in the '90s and had been a member of Alicia McCarthy's punk band.

I looked him up online and found a website devoted to home remodeling. I sent an e-mail.

A few days later, I got a reply from a guy named David Lee. He said he knew the artist behind Fox Redbone.

I replied with some questions but got no response.

I asked the museum for help. "Turns out that Stormy Henry Knight is the same person whose website you found," a spokeswoman informed me. "However, our curatorial department has let us know that he was unresponsive to e-mails regarding his work."

I sent Lee another e-mail.

He called me a day later.

I told him I wanted to interview Stormy Henry Knight.

"He's pretty hard to reach," he said.

I could see I was getting nowhere.

"Is Redbone still around?" I asked.

I figured he'd be 17 years old by now.

"Oh, yeah," Lee said.

I was glad to hear it.

The artist lives!

Even if he can no longer chew Milk-Bones.

Alicia McCarthy: Graffiti Grows Up

Alicia McCarthy remembers the moment she got bitten by the art bug. She was sitting in homeroom at the all-girl Carondelet High in Concord. The student in front of her was wearing a Slayer jacket emblazoned with the heavy metal band's emblem: an eagle crossed by swords, with Slayer spelled out in slash letters.

"I just started copying it, and that was the moment when something inside me clicked," she says. "It wasn't that I knew I



“IT WASN'T THAT I KNEW I WANTED TO BE AN ARTIST. IT WAS MORE LIKE, I LIKE THIS. I WANT TO DO MORE OF THIS.”

wanted to be an artist. It was more like, I like this. I want to do more of this.”

She's been at it ever since.

A pottery class at Carondelet led to art classes at Humboldt State. Next came the San Francisco Art Institute and her move to the Mission district. There, she set up a studio in an abandoned building and became part of the community's rowdy art scene.

At the Art Institute, she shared a studio with Ruby Neri, daughter of noted artist Manuel Neri. One day, they decided to paint farm animals on the lockers.

"We were just bratty kids," says McCarthy, sitting in the corner of a shared studio in a dingy building in downtown Oakland. "We didn't think we were doing anything wrong."

But school administrators thought otherwise, especially when a wave of graffiti spread through campus and the surrounding neighborhood.

The dean of students sent McCarthy a letter threatening expulsion and complaining about the cost of removing the graffiti from the school. "Why not just leave it?" he asked. "The short answer is that it looks like shit. If those anonymous graffiti artists delude themselves that this is art, they are mistaken."

Time proved him wrong. These days, most art critics have nothing but praise for the Mission School style of graffiti, now mostly gone.

McCarthy escaped expulsion but in the years that followed was arrested several times for decorating—police called it "defacing"—public and private property with graffiti.

Her last arrest was 15 years ago. She and a friend vaulted a fence and climbed some crates next to a wall covered with graffiti. Her friend wrote his graffiti name: Heart101. (Hers was Probe.) "And that's when the police showed up," she says, "like four squad cars."

Her friend ran. But McCarthy put her hands up and surrendered. It took the cops half an hour to get the gate open; all the while they insisted she keep her hands up and lectured her about the evils of graffiti. "I thought, Really? Is this such a terrible thing?"

As far as McCarthy is concerned, graffiti gives voice to the invisible. "On the other hand, I feel like advertising is absolutely destructive."

Despite her nocturnal graffiti adventures, McCarthy remained a serious art student. She earned degrees at the Art Institute and UC Berkeley. And all the while, she stayed busy in the Mission, organizing street festivals and playing in an art band named the Corner Tour. "If I slept six hours a night, it was unheard of," she says. "Sleep just felt like a waste of time."

As an artist, McCarthy developed a style that featured colorful patterns—sometimes with an enigmatic word or phrase—on found wood. Last summer, while teaching at UC Berkeley, she spotted a pile of specimen drawers discarded by the anthropology department. She lugged them to her studio and started using them as canvases. "I use whatever works or whatever is around," she says. "I'm not the person who likes to buy new things."

Of the dozens of artists who worked in the Mission in the 1990s, five have gained wide acclaim. McCarthy is one of them. The others are Ruby Neri, Barry McGee, Chris Johanson, and the late Margaret Kilgallen, who died of breast cancer in 2001.

McCarthy is not one to blow her own horn. "I know 30 other artists who work just as hard, with just as much integrity, who don't get shows," she says.

She's also not entirely comfortable with questions about the Mission School.

"I don't want to sound ungrateful," she says. "But it becomes difficult to talk about something that is frozen in time. We are all still working—together and separately—and the community is still spreading, and with the Internet, it's spreading even further." ■

