Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Beyond Baroque – 50 Years of Literary Life in Venice, California

Rex Weiner · Wednesday, October 25th, 2017

When Abbot Kinney, an eccentric developer and conservationist, created the city of Venice, California in 1905, with a system of canals complete with gondolas and gondoliers brought in from Venice, Italy, he was inspired by the art, architecture, poetry and literary life he'd experience during a Grand Tour of Europe.

Today, the smooth design and commercialized culture of a rapidly gentrifying Venice overlies whatever remains of the authentic seaside neighborhood of about 40,000 inhabitants just south of Santa Monica, which has been part of the City of Los Angeles since 1926. The canals are still there (sans gondolas), and along Abbot Kinney Boulevard, a mile-long strip of galleries, fashion outlets like Rag & Bone and Shinola, and crowded chic-cuisine eateries, there's some hint of the style and flair that used to be. But with an invasion of high tech companies like Snapchat and the inevitable erosion of character brought on by soaring rents, Venice struggles to retain the reputation for creativity and intellectual ferment intended by its founder.

One outpost of authenticity in Venice, however, is the renowned Beyond Baroque literary arts center, now gearing up for its 50th anniversary. Housed in the original Venice City Hall and "dedicated to the possibilities of language," Beyond Baroque is the hub of a bustling arts complex that includes a theater complex and what used to be the Venice city jail (now headquarters for SPARC, the city's mural arts organization). The nonprofit public space is devoted to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction.

Beyond Baroque's bookstore has an unusual selection of poetry books as well as fiction, art books and magazines.

Founded as a newsletter by poet George Drury Smith in 1968, the oddly-named organization first occupied a storefront during the days of the Venice Beats, a literary offshoot of the San Francisco literary scene. Over the years it has become one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of the literary arts, shaping the early careers of noted wordsmiths such as Tom Waits and Wanda Coleman, among others. Literary luminaries passing through have included Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, Patti Smith and supporters have included Hollywood celebrities such as Anjelica Huston, Dennis Hopper and Viggo Mortenson.

Beyond Baroque currently offers a fascinating variety of literary and arts programming, including

readings by poets and touring authors, workshops, art exhibits, and youth education. The building also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery (endowed by the late artist) which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and an invaluable archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and across the country.

Beyond Baroque's theater hosts events for literary magazines such as *The Paris Review*

On any given night, visitors to Beyond Baroque will find nationally known poets reading their work such as Christopher Merrill, director of the Iowa University International Writing Program, or a host of well-known Hollywood actors, as part of Eve Brandstein's long-running Poetry In Motion series, such as Judd Nelson, Sally Kirkland, and Christine Lahti indulging their poetic sides before audiences in the center's intimate 60-seat theater. Beyond Baroque has hosted events by some of the nation's premiere literary journals such as *The Paris Review* and *Poets & Writers*, as well as youth outreach programs such as GetLit!

As the organization prepares for a city-wide celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2018, it is reaching out to LA's diverse communities to create a rich mix of literary traditions. With a significant grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, and currently assembling an array of corporate and private sponsors, Beyond Baroque is busy commissioning new works and creating a program of performances and workshops that will mark the center's half-century point.

"Beyond Baroque has an incredible record of cultivating some of the most innovative and widely influential literature and art to come out of Los Angeles over the past 50 years," says Beyond Baroque's director Richard Modiano. "We aim to nurture the next 50 years of cutting-edge Los Angeles poetry, literature, and art."

LA Poet Laureate Luis J. Rodriguez reads his work at Beyond Baroque's theater

This entry was posted on Wednesday, October 25th, 2017 at 5:45 pm and is filed under Fiction, Poetry, Visual Art
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.