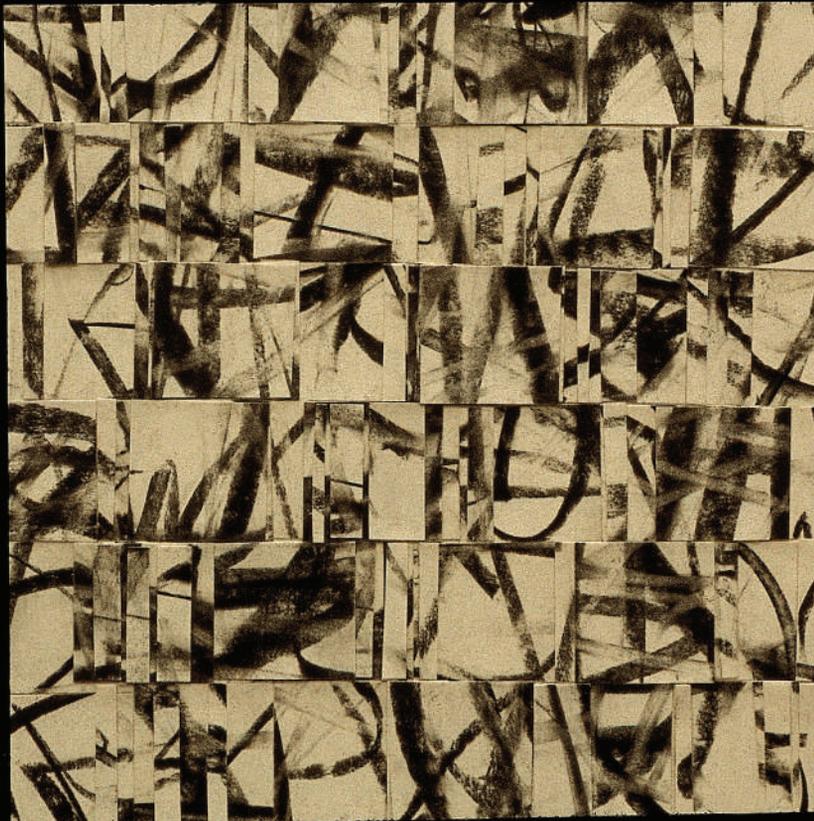


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A Study in Contrast

Artist **Judith Foosaner** may have colorful clients (like **George Michael**), but it's writers like **Jane Austen** that keep her seeing the world in black and white
by **David M. Roth**

Many visual artists talk about how they're influenced by literature, dance or music. But for Judith Foosaner—a one-time *San Francisco Chronicle* book reviewer whose paintings and drawings go on view September 5 at JayJay—painting and books are inseparable. “I’m always communing” (with the likes of Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James) “and coming across parallels between their work and mine,” says Foosaner. ▶



▶ Judith Foosaner's *Legacy #23*, owned by her friend, novelist Maxine Hong Kingston

Novelist Maxine Hong Kingston, a U.C. Berkeley classmate who owns three Foosaner pieces, confirms the impact of literature on her close friend's art. "You can see it in the titles of her paintings," says the Oakland writer. "They're musical and literary and also about dance." (*Rainmaker's Daughter*, *Dance with a Stranger*, and *Thieves' Paradise*, to name a few.) In fact, Hong Kingston even borrowed the phrase "Ugly Red" from Foosaner for her 2003 novel *The Fifth Book of Peace* to describe the 1991 Oakland Hills fire.

For Foosaner—a slim, articulate, sparkly-eyed one-time English major with snow-white hair and a quick smile—this literature-informed method of art making has served her well. It's produced gallery and museum shows across the U.S., teaching stints at the California College of the Arts (CCA), U.C. Berkeley and the Wimbledon School of Art in London and, more recently, sales to Ralph Lauren, singer George Michael, and, closer to home, *Sacramento Bee* publisher Janis Heaphy. Outside Sacramento, Foosaner shows at high-profile galleries in New York, Los Angeles, La Jolla and Palm Springs. And while she can't claim blue-chip status yet, prices for her work have gone up substantially in recent years—to \$8,500 for large drawings and \$15,000 for her biggest canvases.

Says Hong Kingston: "Her painting makes me very excited because she's getting to some essence. She's always looking at people and looking at life and seeing truly."

At JayJay, viewers will see representative samples from Foosaner's oeuvre: frenzied, gestural charcoal drawings; lyrical oil paintings populated by floral and figurative forms; blurry graphite drawings that read like wisps of smoke; and collages built from scraps of line drawings that, when pieced together, exude an almost electrical charge. Nearly all are executed in black and white—and with little prior planning. "I'm not a thinker as a painter," Foosaner says about her commitment to spontaneous gesture, the production method favored by abstract expressionists. "What mind there is gets left behind

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▶ The singer George Michael bought this Foosner work, titled *Persuasion*.

about five minutes into the painting."

Ask why she eschews color and she'll tell you, "I am in love with the world of shadow." Foosaner traces her obsession with shadow and light to childhood when her mother—a cash-strapped R.N. abandoned by her husband—invented games to entertain her daughters. "When all else failed my mother would position us facing a wall in the garden or in the house, and our assignment was to watch the shadows and make up stories." The family's economic situation also left Foosaner with a highly developed work ethic and an inner toughness that friends say helped her succeed in a business known for savaging delicate egos.

Born in Sacramento in 1940, Foosaner spent her teenage years immersed in books, and after graduating from McClatchy High in 1958 she left Sacramento to attend U.C. Berkeley, earning degrees in both English and art. It was a golden era for art and art education. California was pumping its budget surpluses into the U.C. system. Tuition was practically free. And the Berkeley art department sported a star-studded faculty (Elmer Bischoff, David Simpson, Robert Hartman) which it supplemented with visiting artists of even greater stature, including Mark Rothko and R.B. Kitaj—both of whom Foosaner studied with before graduating with a masters degree in 1968.

Foosaner spent the next 33 years teaching and making art and garnering positive notices, mostly from West Coast reviewers. But in 2001—before retiring from CCA in 2004—she began to feel isolated living in Point Richmond (on the water northwest of Berkeley) and "wanted a change." So she visited Sacramento for a high school reunion, and got lured back to Sacramento by the same force that pulled her to Berkeley: books.

"Somebody told me about Richard Press's art book store [at 19th and F streets], and when I saw it, I said to myself, 'I can do this.'" The move certainly hasn't slowed her career. Says Foosaner: "I've had stronger sales in the six years I've been here than at any other time in my life."

Long-time friends like Frances McCormack, a prominent Bay Area artist who teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute, say the payoff is well-deserved. "Her range is extraordinary. Her paintings are like those of a great calligrapher. They have a combination of drawing and painting that really expose her spirit and her aliveness. They convey the physical joy of drawing and painting." **S**

Judith Foosaner at JayJay. Sept. 5 to Oct. 20. Reception: Sept. 8, 7-9 p.m. 5520 Elvas Ave., Sacramento. 453-2999. jayjayart.com.