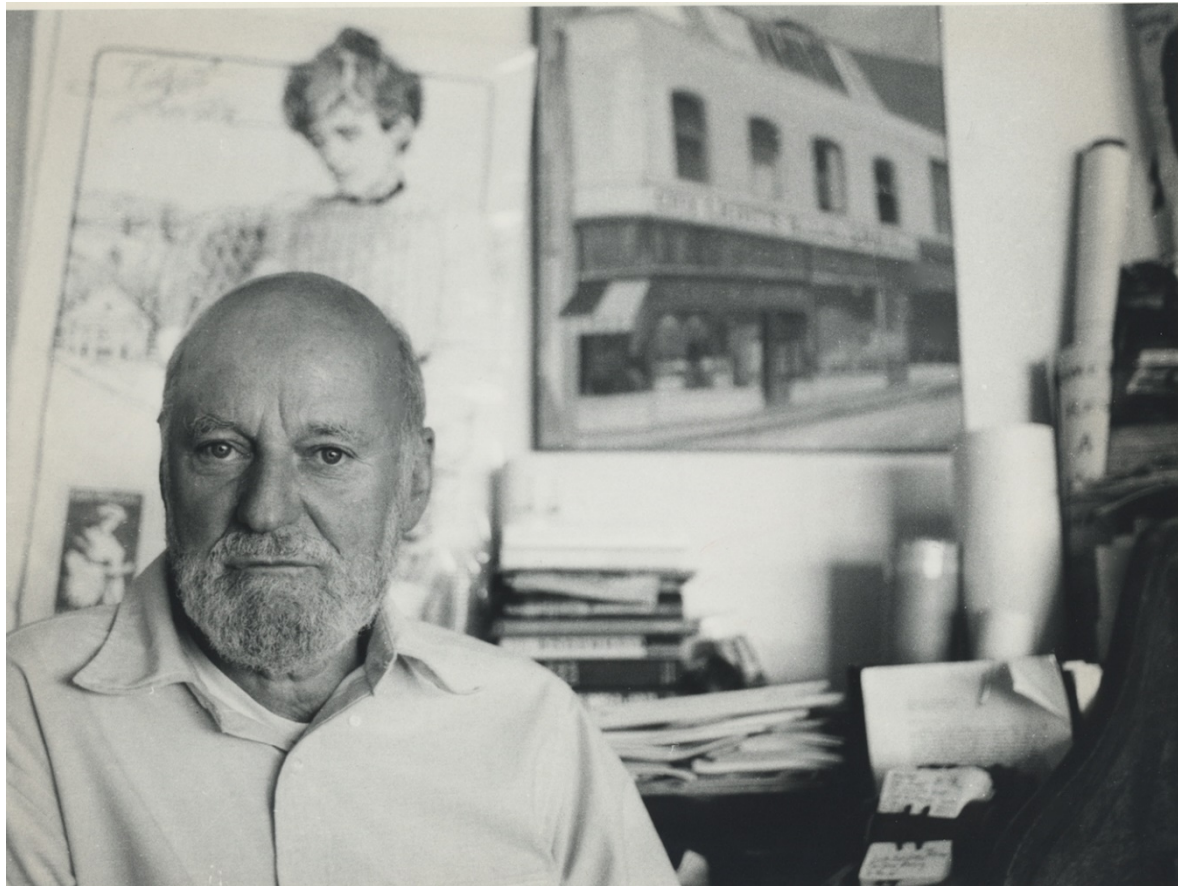


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

A Poet's Paintings, In and Out of the Void

by [Tim Keane](#) on August 6, 2016



Lawrence Ferlinghetti (c.1970s) (photo by Gregory Tozian, © Gregory Tozian, courtesy City Lights Books)

SAN FRANCISCO — “I never wanted to be a poet,” says the famously prolific poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in “More Light” (2012), an autobiographical essay about his first ambitions as a painter.

Ferlinghetti’s output as a painter will probably never match his reputation as a poet, let alone approach his international standing as the insurgent publisher who has overseen City Lights Books for sixty years.

But [*Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Love & War*](#), an exhibition here at Rena Bransten Gallery mitigates the relative obscurity of the writer's visual art by positioning it at the intersection between poetry and protest, that juncture most associated with Ferlinghetti.

Ferlinghetti's gravitational pull toward a cultural viewpoint that blends art and politics started from the existential terror unleashed by the bloodbaths of the Second World War. The gloomy shadows of manmade violence haunt many of the most effective paintings in this exhibition, somber and sometimes wry pictures that offer up another side of Ferlinghetti's vision — ashen tones and bleak narratives marking a creative departure from his poetry's polychromatic moods.

Born in 1919 in Bronxville, New York, the well-educated Ferlinghetti was raised in a milieu that was equal parts privilege and privation. His immigrant father died not long after his birth and his mother was institutionalized when he was very young, leaving him in the care of a French aunt, who took him to live for five years in Strasbourg, France.

After Pearl Harbor he joined the Navy, participating in the Normandy Invasion and later serving in the Pacific theater, where he entered Nagasaki not long after the United States had dropped an atomic bomb on the city, instantaneously killing about 74,000 Japanese civilians and injuring upwards of 76,000 others.

Such wartime horrors bolstered his pacifism and anti-war activism, which are well-documented in the exhibition by a vitrine filled with newspaper and magazine clippings from those periods of Ferlinghetti's career.

Although Ferlinghetti went on to publish seminal volumes of poetry, his role as a groundbreaking publisher during the culture wars of the 1950s often overshadows his own writing.



SHOPKEEPER-WRITER Lawrence Ferlinghetti reads his "London" while Mrs. Florence Allen does a mock striptease for the Poets' Follies rehearsal.

I ran out across the court
but then when the model started taking off
her clothes there was nothing underneath

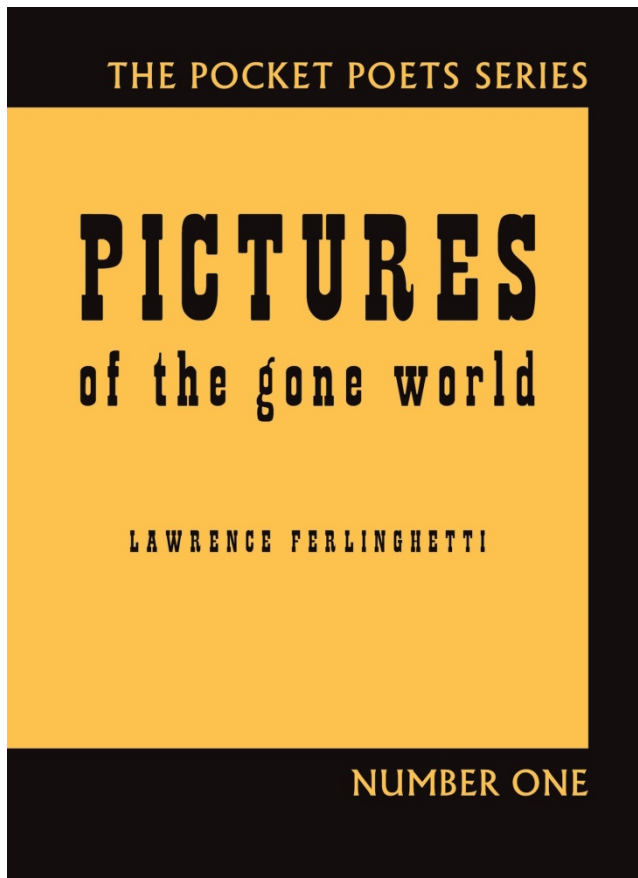
Photo of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Florence Allen in rehearsal from Life magazine September 9, 1957, "Big Day for Bards at Bay: San Francisco Muse Thrives in Face of Trial Over Books." The article discusses the burgeoning poetry scene and contains a photo portfolio from the Howl obscenity trial along with photos of many Bay-area poets like Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson, and Michael McClure (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

It is a gripping story that itself seems from a vanished world in which books more urgently mattered. In June of 1957, City Lights Bookstore manager Shigeyoshi Muraowas was arrested after selling a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) to an undercover police officer. Ferlinghetti was subsequently arrested as well and the ensuing obscenity trial and the publisher's court victory over state censorship solidified the stature of both the publishing

venture and the bookstore – and emboldened other publishers like Grove Press who were also pushing back against US censorship.

Both City Lights institutions have survived the ongoing corporatization and digitalization of the book publishing business and remain as sources for writers and readers seeking vanguard American literature packed with subversive energy.

The habit of radical gusto and the act of bearing witness that built City Lights characterize Ferlinghetti's poetry, too. His recently republished, quite influential first collection, *Pictures of the Gone World* (City Lights 1955/1995/2015) is an important milestone in this regard, as it showcases his role in shaping a certain arc in postwar American poetry.



(© City Lights Books)

Though coming out of the milieu of postwar Paris, Ferlinghetti's plain-speaking poetry is set apart from many of his contemporaries, even many of his so-called "Beat Generation" peers, by its egalitarian objectives. Although he absorbed the visually oriented Imagist techniques of forebears like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Ferlinghetti updated that spare, graphical style into a less compressed and more embodied, spoken-word poetics which he dubbed "wide-open" poetry, after a remark on his work by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

Within that Whitmanesque openness, Ferlinghetti's poetry mounts an assault on the hierarchies of the American 20th century. In one poem the speaker's rereading of William Butler Yeats carries him not to Ireland but back to his New York City roots. In the opening poem of *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), scenes from a Francisco Goya painting conjure up the landscapes and roads of a deadening suburbanized America.

"Truth is not a secret of the few," Ferlinghetti writes in an oft-quoted poem in *Pictures of the Gone World*, "yet/you would maybe think so/the way some/librarians/and cultural ambassadors and/museum directors/act."

In his poetry, communication and connection are guiding principles. Though suffering and death figure regularly, they do so within multicolored, fluid and changing spaces often charged by epiphanies and other unexpected moments of liberation.

In contrast, at least based on the sixteen works on view in *Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Love & War*, his paintings are less buoyant and less "wide open" than his poetry. Instead, making visual art seems to have provided Ferlinghetti with a medium in which to give freer rein to his eye for dream-like atmospheres and psychic pain.

However, in terms of style, his paintings parallel the crossbred aesthetics that shaped his poetry. Heavily influenced by the moody tones and wide brushstrokes of the German Expressionists, the paintings nevertheless have a spontaneous, quickly produced spirit more aligned with the ephemeral effects of street art and agitprop than with canonical art movements.

And there's much more "war" than "love" on display here, a testament to Ferlinghetti's sustained critique of America's perpetual state of violence and war, dating from the late 1970s and on into the 1990s and early 2000s. But some works respond to violence and dread more interestingly than others.

"Howl" (2003/2013) directly references both Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream" (1893) and Allen Ginsberg's epic poem, and ultimately that overload of allusions collapses on its own weight.

But most of the more dread-filled paintings succeed through Ferlinghetti's balance of free association and pointed allegory. For instance, "War" (1993) recasts the myth of Zeus and Leda in a black, gray, and white composition wherein a black, fantastical swan-like bird of prey, whose wingspan contains the word "WAR," carries off a female nude whose lifeless body dangles helplessly from its talons.



Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Before the Revolution" (1979), oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 x 36 inches (courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery)

Similarly evocative of male-driven destructiveness is the oil-and-acrylic painting "Before the Revolution" (1979). A Picasso-esque blue nude is surrounded by two ogling businessmen in hats and suits. The picture can be read as an open-ended fable about patriarchal privilege and sexualized power. Or it might be read, as per its title, in terms of political ideology, a

commentary on capitalism's trampling of democratic principles, with the nude woman representing an ideal republic whose integrity is compromised by CIA operatives.

Most surprising for a painter who has enjoyed a very public and gregarious career in American counterculture, there are devastating notes of exile and loneliness to many of Ferlinghetti's images.

Being lost at sea is a recurring theme. One wonders what has happened to the solitary possibly suicidal figure lying prostrate in an oar-less and unanchored boat in "Provincetown" (1995).

The most compelling and fully realized painting is "Boat People" (2006). It features semi-abstract silhouettes in a frail and nearly capsizing boat on a stormy sea. Beneath the green hull, ghostly corpses float among icy gray and blue waves.



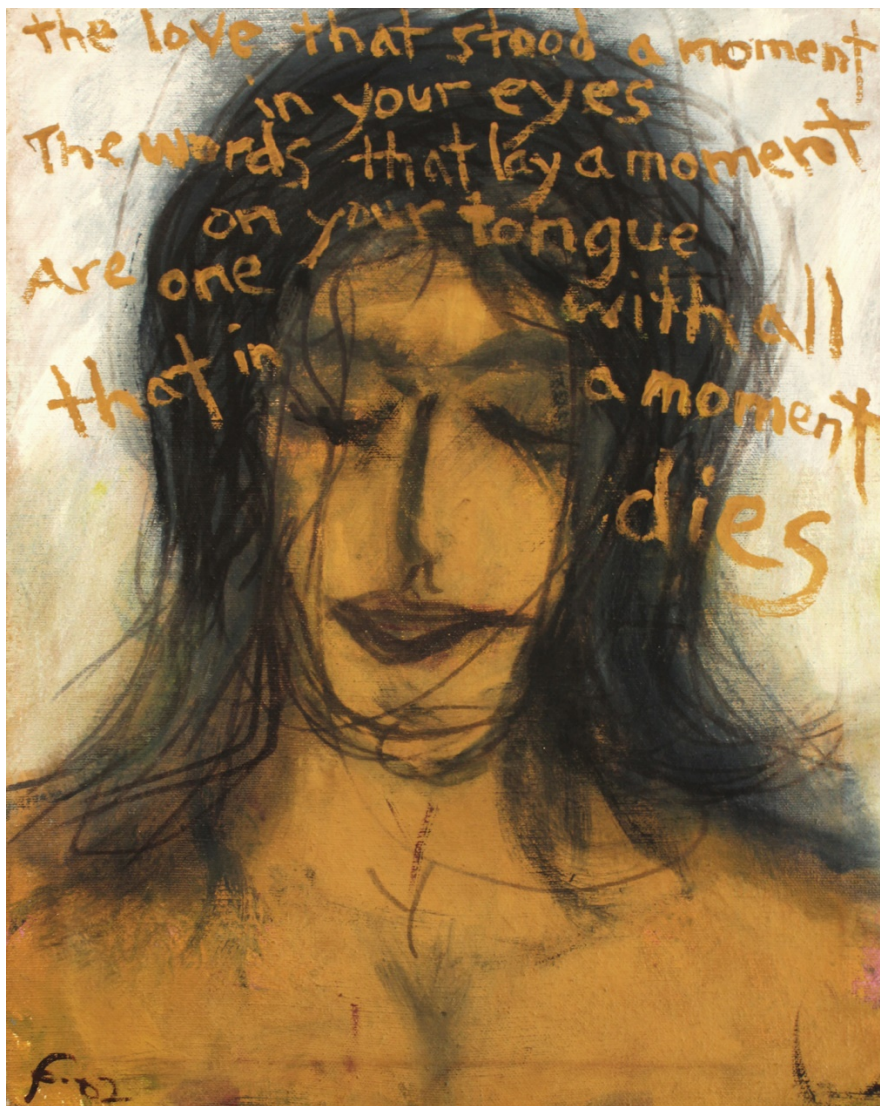
Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Boat People" (2006), oil on canvas 60 x 84 inches (courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery)

Yet, as the man sang, "War is not the answer," so some of Ferlinghetti's paintings position poets and poetry as a spiritual antidote, leading the visitor to conclude, from the exhibition's title, that Ferlinghetti thinks of poetry as a form of love.

But even poetic endeavor has its dark edges, as evidenced in the blue and white diptych “Vivienne Eliot in 1915 Upon Marriage to T.S. Eliot and in 1938 Upon Entering an Asylum” (2009)..

As indicated by the picture’s baggy title, the first portrait depicts her before her marriage, in which she looks luminescent and youthful. The second shows her face almost dissolving, disconsolate and disheveled, shedding red tears. The diptych’s ambiguity is compelling. Is the painting, per the view of certain Eliot biographies, an implicit criticism of the poet’s treatment of his wife? Or is it merely a testimony to mental illness? Or both?

“After Millay” (2002), is a far more optimistic painting about poetry. It is a portrait of a copper-colored nude with eyes closed in meditation, with the white backdrop and the woman’s long, dark hair overlain with Millay verses painted the same copper color as her skin.



Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “After Millay” (2002), oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 11 7/8 inches (courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery)

The painted words are lifted from Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet, "I Shall Go Back Again to the Bleak Shore" (1923), and they imbue the image with an arresting melancholy as the painter rearranges the poem's original phrasing to suit his expressive space: "the love that stood a moment/in your eyes/ The words that lay a moment/on your tongue;/Are one with all/that in a moment/dies."

Judging from these paintings, the invincible force of time is very much on Ferlinghetti's mind. Time is almost redemptive in his large allegory "The Hours Rise Up (e.e.cummings Suite #1)" (2002-06) in which a nude figure floats up along the edges of a green cityscape, propelled by cumming's poem, rearranged to match the cascading imagery: "the hours rise up/ putting off stars/And it is/dawn/Into the street of the sky/Light walks/scattering poems."

Like the poem itself, in which an urban scene is a tranquil setting for death, Ferlinghetti's "The Hours Rise Up" presents poetry as an echo of the once-living and a natural force equal to expiring light of sunset and the gradual creep of darkness.

Certainly there is space cleared for playfulness, too. "Godot" (2008) is Ferlinghetti's red and black abstract portrait of Samuel Beckett's perpetually delayed arriver, and the small-scale "Wooden Novel" (2001) is a painted woodblock sculpture shaped like a hardcover book, sending up the limited emotional and intellectual range of midlist novels.

Mostly this exhibition showcases a sometime painter drawn to the medium in order to explore the struggle of light and dark, or, as he puts it in "More Light," the way in which "images appear and disappear in poetry and painting, out of a dark void and into it again."

These paintings suggest the void has the upper hand. In contrast, in Ferlinghetti's best poetry the upbeat and downbeat of jazz are translated into language providing promise beside the pain. His poetry trades in more complexities and paradoxes of human experience than do his nevertheless affective paintings.

Ultimately Ferlinghetti's poetry maintains an unusual sort of guarded exaltation against the darkness that decides, "The world is a beautiful place/to be born into/if you don't mind happiness/not being so very much fun/if you don't mind a touch of hell/now and then/just when everything is fine."

[Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Love & War](#) continues at *Rena Bransten Gallery (1275 Minnesota Street, San Francisco, California) through August 20.*