

Financial Times

The countercultural cool of Marin County

By Maria Shollenbarger, February 24, 2023.



Observer of the Objective, by Zio Ziegler © Dan Bradica.
Courtesy of Almine Rech

Artists of all stripes are still trading urban life for Marin's wide vistas and locals-only beaches. The county's progressive liberalism has always played a role in its allure, as has the legacy of the 20th-century counterculture that proliferated across the Bay Area. When not ensconced at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other Beat luminaries would roam or write on Mount Tam's slopes. The Grateful Dead's Bob Weir still lives (and sometimes gigs) in Marin. Poet communities have thrived in the coastal towns of western Marin since the '60s; countless acclaimed novelists, from Anne Lamott to Dave Eggers, have called it home.

"The Bay Area does have this incredible legacy of being a wild place of expression, of cultural rebellion," says artist Zio Ziegler, when we meet at his studio high up a residential Mill Valley road. Ziegler, 35, was raised in the city by journalist parents who later founded Banana Republic. While he avoids the gentrification conversation, he admits "having friends with good jobs, who can't live here". He spent a year in New York and travelled to Europe for work after design school; his art, influenced by mural traditions, notably the urban-folkloric ones of San Francisco, garnered him a following among collectors and institutions. Last year, Paris-based dealer Almine Rech began representing him worldwide.

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He left LA in 2019 to move home to this slightly ramshackle bungalow, not far from a trailhead that leads up onto Mount Tam. Barely a day goes by that he doesn't go for a long mountain-bike ride on it. "Removing context altogether is an interesting thought experiment from an art-making point of view," Ziegler says. Alone on the mountain, "the connection with the land, that grounding, loosens all of the bolts that society and cities and formal training tightened. I see more clearly all the vicissitudes of [those things] against what I guess I'd call the low frequency of this place.

"Here, I'm more readily aware of and focused on a tree that has fallen on the mountain than I am on what the new trend in painting is on the Lower East Side [of Manhattan]."

Nature as psychic alembic: you hear variations on this theme from a lot of people in Marin, whether artist, curator, mechanic or bartender. Nature is the Marin plumb line. If you Waze your route carefully, a half-hour's drive from San Francisco's Union Square can get you onto near-empty two-lane roads that lead into miles of low, open, rolling hills and shadowy forest. Along the coast, cypresses bend backward and wild grass lies flat, supplicants to the offshore wind that presides here at the westernmost edge of the North American continent. The light is extraordinarily changeable: one day hard as diamonds, exquisitely pure; the next thick with fog you could almost grab handfuls of. Sometimes both, in the space of two hours.