



Opposite: Hannah Gartside, *Joy Girl*, 2017, digital photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

Above: View looking west from the Princess studio, with Mt Tamalpais in the background. Photo: Erea Azurmendi

Art is a way of life

Claire Ulenberg reports from a floating residency in California where, though living among contemporary artists, she couldn't escape the echoes, stories and collaborations of the past.

“You don't choose the boat, the boat chooses you.” Earlier this year I was invited to spend the summer of 2017 – the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love – in Sausalito, California, living and working on the gracious vessel the *Vallejo* houseboat as a guest of the Varda Artists Residency Program. The programme had an incredibly immersive atmosphere – residents on the boat had the feeling of being a world away from mainstream life.

The retired ferry has been in its current Sausalito location since 1948, when she was rescued from demolition by avant-garde Greek-French artist Jean Yanko Varda (1893–1971). In Europe, Varda had been a child prodigy and was a companion of Picasso and Braque. He visited Big Sur in California in 1939, then moved there permanently, making friends with writers Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. They wrote

about Varda in their novels and diaries and spent time on the *Vallejo*, as have many other brilliant minds: Maya Angelou, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Mark Tobey, Grace McCann Morley and Ruth Asawa.

During the 1950s and 1960s Sausalito became a colony of artists, writers, musicians and philosophers living on improvised boats, a floating community nicknamed the ‘Sausalito Bargeoisie’. Varda’s transformation of the *Vallejo* laid the foundations for this colourful, water-dwelling hipster scene, offering a meeting place and source of inspiration for Beat artists and bohemians. He turned the *Vallejo* into a 1960s version of Gertrude Stein’s Paris salons of the 1920s and threw wild costume parties with performances, dancing, masques, wine, music and rituals in the manner of the surrealists. He believed in art as a way of life, bringing it out of the institutional boundaries of the

gallery and museum to spaces of creative living. Varda was also a fabulous cook, enthraling guests with his dinner-party stories. This was a pivotal time in American history – these creative minds, social activists and visionaries from all fields congregating together were the forerunners of the Summer of Love’s ‘flower children’.

The *Vallejo* today is alive with the past; she groans and creaks. In the 1980s she was bought by a person sensitive to heritage, with foresight and practical carpentry skills, a kaitiaki. She has lost her steam and her giant paddles, her hull was remade in the 2000s and most of her sidewalls have been patiently rebuilt. But she continues to offer a countercultural space of creation and nourishment – we all felt protected and inspired while on board, and this was reflected in the art produced. There are usually four to six artists living on the boat, along with the owners, and much interaction among them. We cooked and ate together, visited each other’s studios, gave feedback on work. The artists’ bedrooms and studios were accessed by ladders, some very steep. Our rooms all opened onto the top deck so we could walk to each other’s rooms, avoiding the warren below.

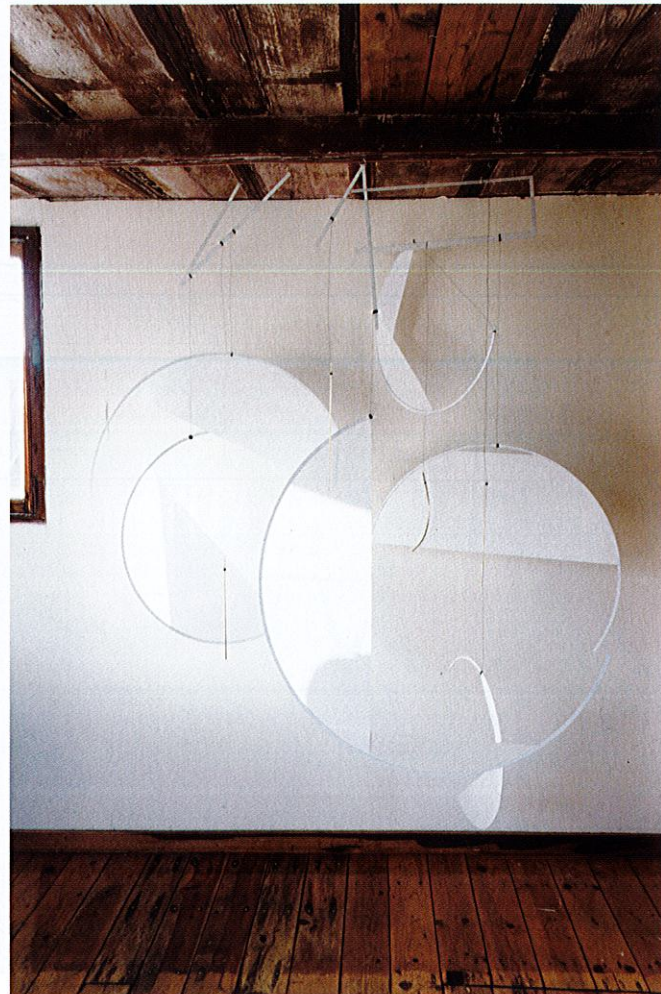
One of the artists on board with me was Hannah Gartside – English-born, Melbourne-based. She stayed in the Princess

studio (the studios have been given names over the years by the artists who have been on board), with its classic porthole and views towards the west, Mount Tamalpais and the Pacific Ocean lying behind. Gartside’s is an expanded sculptural practice: she creates intricately designed and sewn quilts and objects, alongside drawing, sculpture, performance, film and photography. While on board she made a short film, *Joy Girl*, and also documented the San Francisco dance and movement artist Sophia Wang dancing on the top deck of the *Vallejo*, an offering to the sea siren.

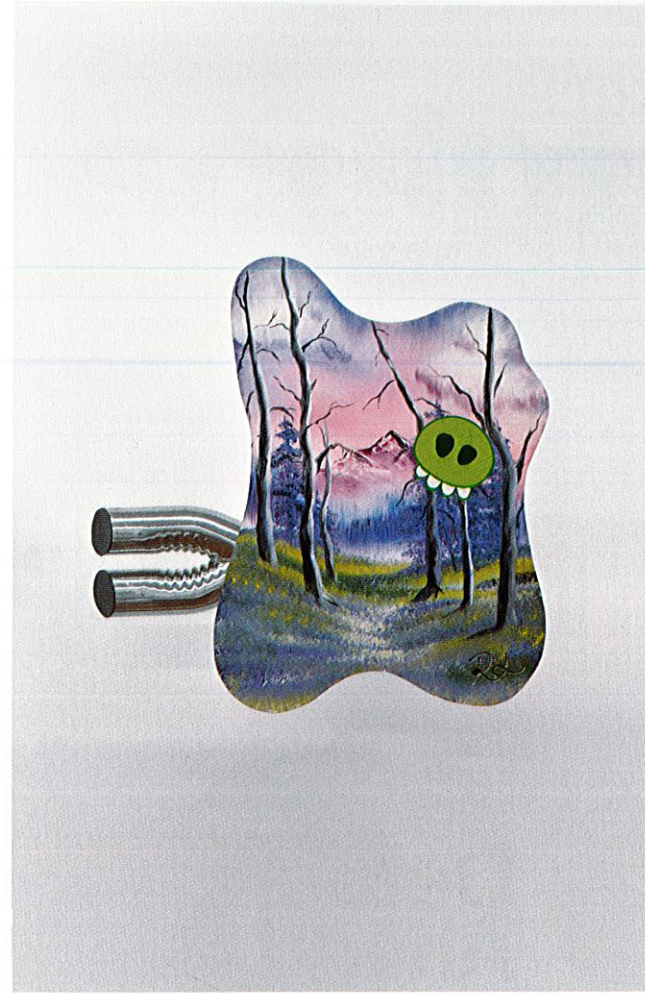
We both admire British artist Sarah Lucas so were fortunate to find her exhibiting at the French neoclassical Legion of Honor Museum. In *Good Muse*, Lucas’s bulbous meaty stuffed stocking sculptures were strategically placed and draped around the Auguste Rodins marking the 100th anniversary of the sculptor’s death, poking fun at the great legacy of a traditional patriarchal institution and disarming the male gaze. *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*, an exhibition by four generations of African-American women from Alabama, on at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), was closer to Gartside’s work than the 1960s psychedelic costumes on display at the de Young Museum’s commercialised blockbuster, *The Summer of*



Marta Cascales Alimbau composing in her studio on board the *Vallejo*, 2017. Photo: Carla Cascales



Carla Cascales Alimbau and Marta Cascales Alimbau, *Lighthouse*, 2017. aluminium, wood, rice paper and brass sculpture series, hand molded, accompanied by Marta Cascales music composition. Courtesy of the artists



Rachel Lord, *Angry Birds SFX: Pig Days*, 2017 (detail), chrome pipes, motor, sound, acrylic paint on board. Installation detail, In Lieu Gallery, Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artist



The Hikari studio where Ulenberg stayed. Photo: Erea Azurmendi

Love Experience: Art, Fashion, and Rock & Roll. For me the highlight of the latter exhibition was an abundance of trippy, handmade band posters by different artists from 1967.

Washington DC-born, Sausalito-based artist Rachel Lord was also on the *Vallejo* while I was there. She is a painter, surfer, tarot reader and talented musician. Lord interrogates traditional landscape painting; she implants a tech nerd element by superimposing characters from popular video games, such as *Angry Birds*, onto 1970s-esque simulated Fantasia woodland environments. Her recent work – such as *Angry Birds SFX: Pig Days*, exhibited in September at In Lieu Gallery, Los Angeles, and created on board the *Vallejo* – employs motorised chrome exhaust pipes which are sound-activated and sit behind the shaped panel.

Sculptor and designer Carla Cascales Alimbau and her sister Marta Cascales Alimbau, a concert pianist and composer, joined us in August. During the residency, their home, Barcelona, suffered a terrorist attack. This tragedy thrust the sisters into their work. They collaborated and made two elegant, cathartic installations. Carla made mobiles while Marta composed music to accompany them. The sisters were also inspired after visiting the *Soundtracks* exhibition at SFMOMA, a large-scale group exhibition which focused on the role of sound in contemporary art. Their first mobile sculpture series, *Lighthouse*, made from rice

paper with brass and accompanied by Marta's composition, reflected the gentle changing of light and how each day was different. *Tide* was their second series, a meditation on another constant of our daily houseboat life: the movements of the tide. For the residents on the boat, the lighthouse became symbolic of the Bay area, daily guiding ships through the infamous San Francisco fog, through the mouth of the Golden Gate and around Alcatraz.

We moved studios if we were on board longer than a month. I started in the Hikari studio – 'hikari' means light in Japanese (as my own name does in European languages). It had all-day light and panoramic views towards the Golden Gate and the skyscrapers of San Francisco on the distant horizon. In August, I moved to the Pilot studio where the steering wheel used to be: a little cabin where the wind howls through the floorboards and walls, generating an energy which propels one to create. The overused quote attributed to Mark Twain about how the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco rang true again on a breezy evening.

The Pilot studio was where the Zen Buddhist Alan Watts lived and worked from 1961. When the boat got too busy with hippies and beatniks visiting, he would retreat to the more remote Druid Heights in Muir Woods, Marin County, where another artistic community lived. Established in

the 1940s by the poet Elsa Gidlow, whose book *On A Grey Thread* (1923) was the first openly lesbian book of poems published in America, Druid Heights was a counterculture community of free-spirited political activists. Gidlow and Watts established the Society for Comparative Philosophy there in 1962. They popularised Eastern Zen Buddhism to Americans. Gidlow associated with many famous artists and radical thinkers of different disciplines, such as Ansel Adams, Gary Snyder, Dizzy Gillespie, Neil Young, Tom Robbins and Margo St. James among others. Sadly this community fell into ruins after Watts and Elsa passed away.

The Varda residency too offers an opportunity for artists to create continuity between disparate disciplines. Painting, sculpting, sewing, photography, film, writing, music and dance are often interchanged there to communicate intention and ideas. If, as Varda believed, "art is a way of life", then the residency offers a space for unities to form between creative people living together. Chronological history does not matter; like-minded people span time and geographical boundaries.

History has abundant examples of artists removing themselves from mainstream society and being associated with separate cultural movements – we cannot ignore the importance of these communities. Peter Coyote, a social activist from the 1960s Haight-Ashbury-based performance

artist group the Diggers, said he realised as a student fasting in protest of nuclear testing outside the White House in 1961 that they needed an army to change politics in America, they needed 'raw power'. He believed the counterculture movement would be that army. Fifty years on from the Summer of Love, some of the social and political changes he supported have come to pass, others have not.

I am so glad the *Vallejo* houseboat 'chose me' this summer. After living with artists, I have a deeper understanding of daily rituals they practise as part of the work. Artists take risks, make mistakes and sacrifices for their work – much is formed through that process. My role as a curator is often as a friend and mediator and maintaining a daily practice is necessary as a meditative tool. Building foundations between interdisciplinary artists from around the world also offers the potential for future collaboration and connection.

In 1967 Jean Varda's niece, the French New Wave filmmaker Agnès Varda, tracked down the uncle she had never met to make a documentary, *Uncle Yanco*, about Varda and the *Vallejo*. She puts the power of living on the water poetically: "It is important to always be by the sea. / The sea is the element of Love." It's an apt and true testament to the Summer of Love, but also to my summer spent on the boat.