

Betsy Goldman around Venice Gates of Venice — 60 photos on display

Have you ever walked around Venice and been so completely intrigued by what you see?

I enjoy the curbside gardens. The patterns, colors and shapes of the plants bring so much interest to what is ordinarily a drab streetscape. (See this column in The Argonaut, June 1st last year.) It's fun to watch the gardens

On this year's Venice Garden Tour, Argonaut editor and publisher Carol Hector was impressed by the fountains of Venice. (See Hector's photo page in The Argonaut May 24th this year.)

"It was my first garden tour and I loved it," Hector said. "In many cases the fountains were what first caught my eye, surrounded by impossibly perfect gardens, obviously someone's pride and joy.

"My favorites were the round or urn-shaped ones where the water just gently overflowed without making a big scene. How relaxing it would be to have morning coffee next to one of

"My compliments to all those who offered their gardens for the tour. They were amazing."

Susan Rennie brings another aspect of walking Venice - the gates. Her interest in photography started in the '60s when she spent summers in the Rocky Mountains and started shooting with a Pentax. Then she got serious about her hobby and purchased a Nikon and an enlarger

"I set up my own darkroom and was off and running," she says.

Between that time and retirement as a long-distance Ph.D.



VENICE GATES — Skis cover a gate of the home of ski buff Meghan McLeod. (Photo by Susan Rennie)

professor in graduate studies at Vermont College of the Union Institute and University two years ago, Susan honed her craft. The first time she did something more than being an amateur was when the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased her photographs of people looking at the art for their 1970 annual report.

She then took a master's class with Lisette Model, whose most famous student was Diane Arbus and whose work is in major art institutions including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Lisette recognized Susan's talent but warned her that photography "is a brutal way to make a living." Especially in the '70s when women where relegated to being an assistant long before they were able to get where they wanted to go.

"So, I took her advice," says Susan.

Interest in feminism took Susan around the country documenting the feminist movement. Along with her friend Kristen Grimstead, they published the New Women's Survival Catalogue that made The New York Times best-seller list.

In 1976 Susan moved to Los Angeles to start a feminist journal, called Chrysalis, for the Woman's Building, a nonprofit public art and educational center focused on showcasing women's art and culture that opened in

At that time Susan moved to Venice, where she found a rental for \$200 a month. It reminded her of the New York neighborhood that she left.

'It was very diverse and funky, with little cafés that you could walk to," she says. "It's



GATE at the entrance to another Venice home. (Photo by Susan Rennie)

turned out to be exactly the place that I wanted, even though the community is now changing rapidly."

It's that change that was the impetus for Susan to capture and get a photographic record of Venice at this point in time. She got a street map and set out to cover every street. That's how she discovered the gates.

"I was astounded," she says. "I said to myself, "This is so amazing.' It's so representative of what I see as characteristic of Venice — people being creative the gates being beautiful, being funky, being bizarre, being whimsical.

"A lot of the houses are new and affluent. A lot of the houses are old and funky. I haven't encountered anything like this in other neighborhoods and I've done a lot of traveling."

Susan ended up photographing 90 gates that she felt were out of the ordinary. She has already noticed several that are no longer in the same condition as when they were photographed. One is looking dilapidated, another was vandalized and hanging off the hinges. One gate is on a property that was recently purchased and the cut-out was filled in for privacy.

"That's another reason to document these gates," she says.

Sixty photographs were chosen for a show at the Venice Arts gallery. The show will continue until July 31st. It's a snapshot into the inventiveness of Venice residents.

"I was very pleased that I could have this first show at Venice Arts because it's such an integral part of the community," she says. "They do such good things with the kids."

One of the most fascinating gates is at the home of Loren Grossman and Paul Levine. Four years ago their former 1926 Spanish house was transformed into high-tech with a second story topped with a corrugated metal roof and a cladding of asphalt shingles and decorative façade of corrugated metal that Loren calls the favella look, a name given to the slums in Rio de Janiero. To Loren and Paul their entrance is meant as a welcome gate.

Loren enlisted the services of Gonzalo Duran, whose home, the Mosaic Tile House, you may have seen on the Venice Garden Tour, to do something wacky. Following through with the industrial theme, a chain link fence was added. And, giving true meaning to the notion that one person's trash is another person's treasure, the sculptural design of castoffs above the gate was intuitively put together by Gonzalo. It truly is an eye-stopper.

Another conversation piece is the "ski" gate that is actually on an alley. The current owner, Meghan McLeod, bought the home from a young romantic couple who liked to skinny dip in the backyard hot tub and wanted a higher fence for privacy. Meghan happens to be a ski buff so she was excited when she saw

"It's also a piece of art and a good marker for first-time visitors," she says.

Susan currently has a portfolio of the boardwalk, which she calls "a photographer's dream," and she is currently working on a project called "Venice in Color."

"Sitting in Venice" is a group of porches that she may do for another show next year.

"Again showing the incredible diversity of Venice - funky, rich, poor, elegant - and the wonderful chairs," she says. "It's not just documenting architecture per se but the styles are represented by the people who live in Venice. It's very unusual to find a community that has these ranges. Maybe in five years there won't be the funky porches or people. They'll be sold.

"So, here you have people who have lived in their home for 30 years and are retired and living next to someone who just paid \$1.3 million for the lot and another million for the house. I don't mind these big houses coming in as long as they don't overwhelm. I'm just keen that we'll keep the heterogeneity mixture which is so marvelous about this community."

Susan plans to have her photographs exhibited on a virtual art gallery by the end of August. In the meantime, stop by Venice Arts at 1809 Lincoln Blvd. to see the show. For hours, call (310) 822-8533.