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Through the Lenses

Photographer Mark Robert Halper focuses his camera on Santa Barbara County with his new book "Between Seer and Seen," bottom left, which poetically documents 71 regional artists.

Photographer offers view of SB County artists

By **BRETT LEIGH DICKS**
 NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

When portrait photographer Mark Robert Halper set out on his latest photographic study, a poetic expose examining Santa Barbara County artists, he had visions of paint-splattered subjects working in cavernous lofts filled with eccentric curiosities. Having resided in a succession of artist loft complexes in and around downtown Los Angeles in his formative years, he photographed his creative neighbors and friends. When it came time to turn his creative attention to a new project, Mr. Halper wanted to undertake an expanded study of artists. And having been introduced to Santa Barbara County through his previous wine-industry-focused book, "Sunlight and Water," he thought the area's thriving artistic community would offer the perfect muse.

Please see **HALPER** on **D11**



Helsenrott Hochhauser

Intimate, graceful, soft-focus portraits

■ HALPER

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What he found wasn't a collective of bohemian artists toiling away in eclectic studios, but rather a community of everyday day people working in paint, sculpture, assemblage, mostly in their homes or garden studios. It was a surprising revelation, one that he says injected a much deeper level of personal revelation to the unfolding project on both sides of the camera.

"The first dozen or so years of my career I spent in downtown Los Angeles living in a few different loft buildings with other artists," Mr. Halper, 48, recently told the News-Press from his Los Angeles home. "I pictured all the interesting faces and fascinating work spaces so I thought it would be a rich visual opportunity."

"But the irony was I didn't find anything like that. I expected people to be working in all these odd places, and there were a few of those, but mostly I found everyday people living in nice homes painting in their spare bedroom of homes that looked like every other home in the area. That creatively really forced me to look deeper. The location wasn't doing the work for me so I really had to work harder and find them in the portrait."

The result is "Between Seer and Seen," a black-and-white monograph featuring intimate and graceful soft focus portraits of 71 Santa Barbara County artists. The 188-page book, which has recently been released through Late Harvest Editions, is a follow-up to Mr. Halper's 2010 release, "Sunlight and Water," which introduced the photographer to the region.

"After doing the book on the winemakers, my wife and I decided to spend more time in the area so we rented a house in Santa Ynez," Mr. Halper explained. "I then started photographing local families, doing family portraits in the Santa Ynez Valley, and through that really got to know much more of the local community. So when the time came to do another project, I really wanted to do it there."

The groundwork for "Between Seer and Seen" was laid through the connection Mr. Halper initially made with the artwork rather than the artist. After investigating the work of local artists online, he then started visiting galleries and exhibitions to experience their work firsthand.

It was only then that he reached out to a diverse collection of artists that included the likes of Nancy Gifford, Dane Goodman, Zoe Nathan and Barry Spacks.

"The artists in this book were invited to be a part of it because their work resonated with me at some level," Mr. Halper said. "I ignored everything except the art. I very deliberately did not weight success, gallery shows, politics, or artistic standing in the decision-making process. I didn't want it to be the best of Santa Barbara artists, I wanted it to be something personal."

Photography has always been a very personal mission for Mr. Halper and portraiture has been the cornerstone of both his commercial and fine-art pursuits since first entering the field in 1989.

Born in San Francisco and raised in the San Fernando Valley, Mr. Halper was first introduced to photography through a high school interest in filmmaking in the mid 1980s. After taking a photography class while studying International Relations and Political Science at University of Southern California in Los Angeles, he realized that the medium was his true calling.

"I liked the immediacy of it," Mr. Halper said. "In filmmaking you are working on one piece of art for years, requiring huge numbers of people and great complexity. I like things I can do in a day or a few hours. I love being able to walk in to photograph someone not even knowing what the person is going to look like or what the location is going to give me and in about two hours do the very best work I can."

So it was with "Between Seer and Seen." Having selected the artists based on their work, Mr. Halper made seven trips, usually of three or four days each, last year to photograph the artists. The first time he met many of his subjects was when he walked through their front door with his camera.

"When you are an artist, you are not used to being the model," said Santa Barbara-based painter Leslie Lewis Sigler, 30. "There were a few moments where I couldn't keep a pose and started laughing at myself. And in the end the photograph Mark ended up using of me was one he took in between formal takes. It was an outtake to some extent and a surprise, a very happy surprise."

Establishing a rapport with his subjects that entices them to open up in a two-hour session is not always an easy task for the photographer. But he said a large part of that comes through simply keeping his eyes open.

"I am always looking," Mr. Halper explained of how he goes about capturing the essence of his subjects. "I am looking at how they stand and what they're doing with their hands. I am looking at their natural body language. And I always have my camera in hand, I never put it down."

One of the reasons for that is Mr. Halper is acutely aware that some of the most revealing moments quite often shine through when the photographer's back is turned, much like the image of Mrs. Sigler.

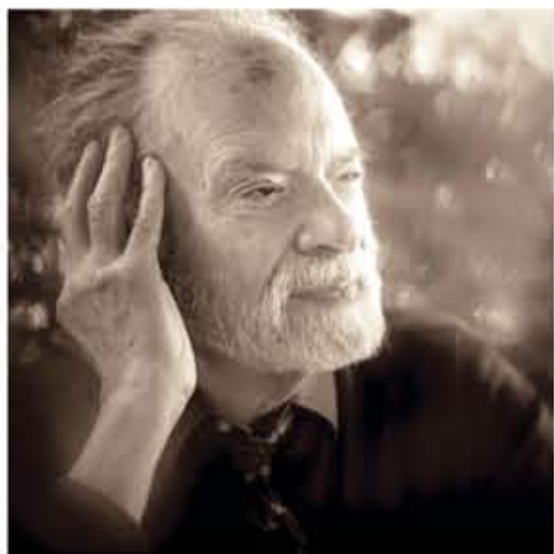
"When people are being photographed, they often put a face on," Mr. Halper said. "There's a tendency to be self-conscious of what they're doing. A lot of the time the best photographs come when my back is turned. So you always have to be ready and open to anything."

There is no better example of being open to anything than the photograph Mr. Halper made of Henry Rasmussen.

"I did all sorts of things with him," Mr. Halper recalled. "Things like resting on his hands and sitting in a chair, trying to be interesting. One of the first things I did was a number of photographs of him just standing in front of the gray walls of his studio. Straight to the camera and very simple—bang, bang, bang. And despite all those other interesting ideas I had, the image that captured him best was simply the one in front of the wall looking straight at the camera."

"I thought I knew what to expect with this project, but this really pushed me as an artist. I had to really work at times, but the image was always there, somewhere between the seer and seen."

email: life@newspress.com



Mark Robert Halper selected his subjects based on their art, never meeting the artists themselves until he walked through the door with his camera. Clockwise from top left, Barry Spacks, Henry Rasmussen, Nicholas Coroneos and Wayne J. Hoffman.

FYI

Mark Robert Halper's "Between Seer and Seen" is available in hard cover through Late Harvest Editions and retails for \$45. It is available locally in Santa Barbara at The Arts Fund, The Book Den, Chaucer's Bookstore and Santa Barbara Arts; in Caprieneria at Curious Cup Bookstore; and in Solvang at The Book Loft and Elverhøj Museum. For more information please visit www.studiomark.com



Mark Robert Halper

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