



Courtesy of NUMU

Wild Bunch

MOUNTAIN WOMAN Anne Brigman explored feminine identity in work such as this 1912 photogravure, 'Finis.'

Anne Brigman and her artist circle were pioneers a century ago

BY GARY SINGH

BORN NEAR HONOLULU in 1869, Anne Brigman photographed nude women merging with nature in mystical, atmospheric settings. In her images, women are not posing for the male gaze. Instead, their unaffected female forms tend to fuse with trees, hillsides and cliffs in dramatic fashion, almost representing archetypes rather than humans.

By focusing on the female body

amid rugged landscapes along the California coast or the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Brigman developed new ways of exploring feminine identity. She achieved early success as a Pictorialist, infiltrating the Camera Club of San Francisco and the Photo-Secession group, led by Alfred Stieglitz in New York. Her photographs were poetic, pioneering and pagan. Even better, she spent her teenage years in Los Gatos.

That last fact was enough for Marianne McGrath to curate a small exhibit in the Spotlight Gallery at New Museum Los Gatos (NUMU), *In the Heart of the Wild: Anne Brigman and her Circle*, opening July 15. The Spotlight Gallery focuses on history, ideas and interesting characters with a

connection to Los Gatos. In the show, we see Brigman's photos along with contemporaries like Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. Most of the pieces came from private collectors. The show testifies to Brigman's creative spirit.

"She was a trailblazer," McGrath says. "She loved to hike, and go up into the mountains, and was really an outdoorswoman in an era when many women were not. It was the turn of the century, and it wasn't really considered a 'proper' thing for a woman to do, to put on pants and go hiking into the mountains."

Brigman was married for a time but didn't want to start a family. She was devoted to her art and her career at a time when women weren't supposed to do such things.

"In that sense, she was an early feminist," McGrath says. "She was a very unique individual and very interesting to share with the rest of the Los Gatos community."

In addition to exploring visual atmospherics—literally and figuratively unfamiliar to many women of her time—Brigman held an active social life. After moving to the East Bay, she ran with everyone from Jack London to Dorothea Lange and Charles Keeler. She operated a teaching studio, delivered lectures and staged artist salons where photographers, poets, painters and other aesthetes and raconteurs of the day all sat around, drank tea and traded ideas. It was precisely the type of cross-disciplinary, earth-centric bohemianism so desperately missing in today's artist circles.

Brigman was also a huge influence on the photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895-1989), who pioneered what came to be known as environmental fashion photography. Known primarily for her work in publications like *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, Dahl-Wolfe was the first to stage fashion model shoots outside the studio, setting up scenes in naturally lit locales, a revolutionary concept for the era. Dahl-Wolfe often cited Brigman as an inspiration and it was quite possibly a visit to the latter's studio that prompted Dahl-Wolfe to try photography in the first place. Dahl-Wolfe's 1947 photo in *Harper's Bazaar*, "Revival of the Basque," is even included in the exhibit.

In her later years, Brigman began to write poetry that seemed inseparable from her images, resulting in an obscure book, *Songs of a Pagan*, published in 1949, a year before she died. If one can track down a copy, the book juxtaposes her own words against the photographs, all couched in pagan antiquity, with titles like "Solstice," "Pan," and "The Dryad." That last one is included in the show at NUMU. Brigman dedicated the book to several people, including Alfred Stieglitz, who she said was a deep-hearted friend, a fierce but fair critic, and a "pillar of fire in the wilderness of the early days of pictorial photography, here in America and in England."

"She was proud to be herself," McGrath says. "She never compromised. She was dedicated to her art and she was passionate about nature."

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<http://www.numulosgatos.org>