

Helen Rae

February 25, 2021



Helen Rae, the contemporary artist who broke down barriers in art, age and accessibility has died at 83.

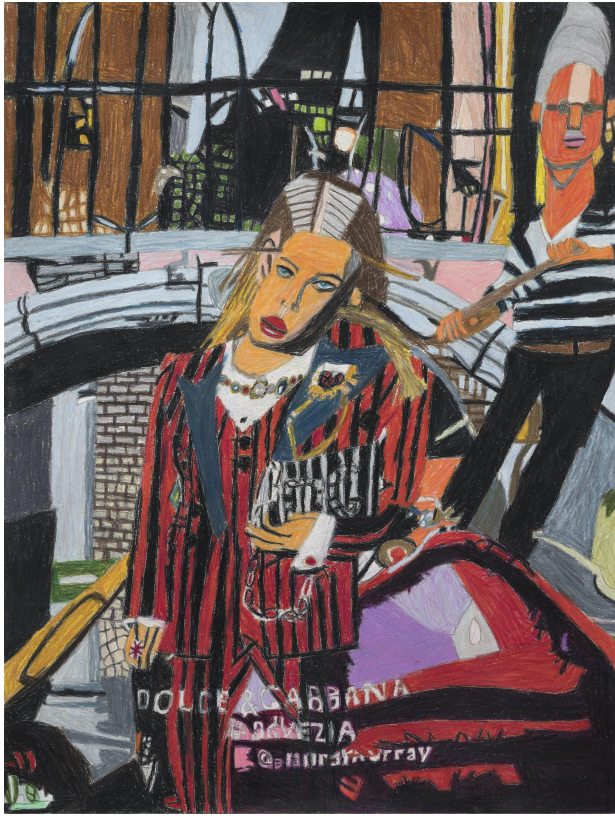
Ms. Rae, a visual artist who was inspired by couture photography, transformed simple materials of graphite, colored pencil and paper into intricate forms and figures, died Thursday, February 12, in Southern California.

She grew up in Claremont, where her father was a professor at one of the Claremont Colleges. She was deaf and nonverbal, and learned sign language and other methods of communication, most importantly visual art.

At 50 years old, her mother enrolled her in what is now the Tierra Del Sol Studio Art Program, where she discovered her own expressive language making ceramic masks, sculpture, watercolor and colored pencil drawings that became her stylistic medium known around the world.

Creating art in a program for people with cognitive disabilities could have kept Ms. Rae's art in obscure venues and categorized as "outsider art"—a term that until recently was broadly applied to those artists outside of and uninfluenced by the art world. However, with the encouragement of her teacher Rebecca Hamm at Tierra Del Sol and the tenacity of The Good Luck Gallery principal Paige Wery, her work transcended traditional naming.

Ms. Wery gave Ms. Rae her first solo exhibition in 2015 when the artist was 77 years old.



Helen Rae, Untitled, 2019, color pencil and graphite on paper, 24 x 18 inches

"I had a visceral reaction the first time I saw Helen's drawings; her colors, intense mark making, unseen proportions, her subject's stare, it all packed a powerful punch," Ms. Wery remembered. "Then I found out she was in her seventies and had never had a solo show. I've learned to trust those gut feelings much more now but at the time, I had no idea if other people would react similarly towards Helen's work. I gave her a solo show and it was so successful that every work was acquired opening night."

Ms. Rae drew inspiration from fashion magazines that often have a central figure modeling designer clothes, glasses, jewelry and handbags. She pored over these images, selecting a range of brightly colored, patterned ensembles to subdued hues and poses, then set to work on the details that resonated in her own aesthetic vision. The results were profound and captivating.

David Pagel of the Los Angeles Times noted in his review of her first solo show, "Her laser focus is vivid in the abundance of detail, particularly in the complex patterns of the fabrics she selects and edits, judiciously simplifying some elements and making others more complex, irregular, mind-blowing."

Ms. Rae's meteoric rise in the art world started in L.A.'s Chinatown and traveled with Ms. Wery to New York and Paris in outsider art fairs and other venues, as well as through publications, including Vogue magazine, which featured her artworks alongside their own fashion spreads. There were references to her age and her abilities, but the focus and interest was on her artistic style.

"Helen Rae pushed boundaries in her visual language by using pencil to create vividly dense texture, abstracting figures and patterns into sublime imagery that was resolutely of the moment," Ms. Hamm said. "She was unique in the contemporary art world because she was uninterested in the accolades she earned, although she was generous with her growing fans and collectors, happily posing for photos next to her work. But she was most concerned and driven by the exercise of making and expanding her perspective and subject matter."

Her final solo exhibition, at Tierra Del Sol Gallery in 2020, was titled "The Evolution of Helen Rae." It showcased Ms. Rae's portraiture as an emerging facet of her practice. At 83, she was always in pursuit of the visual imagery that enabled her to break free of the limitations the world tried to impose on her.

She is survived by her brother; many Claremont church friends; the household where she lived; and the Tierra Del Sol community that was like her extended family.

Ms. Hamm, who worked with Ms. Rae for 31 years, offered this fitting tribute: "Helen inspired hundreds of artists she worked with in the studios and, before that, her early teachers who broadened her world with sign language. Her courageous life, joyful persistence and intensely creative work will live forever."