

Charles Brittin

Throughout the 1950s, Charles Brittin was the unofficial house photographer for the Beat community that coalesced around seminal Los Angeles artist Wallace Berman. Berman and his family lived in Beverly Glen, and his friends were scattered throughout the city, but it was to Brittin's apartment on Venice Beach that they gravitated. "Venice felt like the end of the world then, and was as far away from Los Angeles as you could get," recalled Brittin, whose work can be seen in an exhibition at the Michael Kohn Gallery from April 16 through May 14. "It had the mood of a deserted colony, and there was a quality of remoteness to Venice that drew people whose chances were running out, or were just about to begin."

Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1928, Brittin attended UCLA during the late 1940s, and it was during that period that he taught himself how to take photographs. In 1951 he dropped out of college and moved into a modest Venice beach shack where he maintained an open door policy: friends were welcome around the clock, and among those who turned up were actors Dean Stockwell – best known for his brilliantly bizarre cameo performance in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* -- Dennis Hopper, several people associated with L.A.'s legendary Ferus Gallery, including John Altoon, Walter Hopps and Bob Alexander, poet David Meltzer, and quite a few beautiful women. As can be seen in the accompanying photographs, the women of Los Angeles' Beat generation were stunning.

Venice Beach was astonishingly beautiful then, too. Working as a mailman at the time, Brittin spent much of his free time wandering Venice with a camera, and he came to know the quiet, sleepy beach community intimately well. At the time, Venice was largely the province of artists, the poor, and various sorts of social outcasts, and Brittin's pictures of the town are freighted with a hushed beauty and forlorn sweetness. Although Brittin went on to work as a staff photographer for the Eames Office in the late 1960s, he was neither exhibiting nor selling his photographs during the 1950s; he took them to share with his friends, and for no other reason. "Everyone in our circle was alienated from conventional society, and we formed a community that revolved around our rejection of traditional values," Brittin explained. "We weren't interested in having careers, and simply wanted to enjoy our lives and be with sweet people. None of us had upward aspirations, and our needs were very basic. We had simple entertainments – there was beer, marijuana, lots of music, nature, and art books, and we were happy to sit on the floor. We weren't aware of how great the riches were that we were bringing to each other."

The subject of a comprehensive monograph, *Charles Brittin: West & South*, recently published by Cantz/Foggy Notion Books, Brittin died in January of this year following a long illness: Los Angeles has lost one of its great visual poets with his passing.