## Beat artist Koci recalls early days before it was SoMa

➤ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

houses with at least three or four bootleggers on every block. Every pool hall, every skid row had its characters. They were recognized for their eccentricity or fighting ability or how much wine they could drink or how many times they'd been in jail.

I came here with a shirt and a pair of pants, and it was so goddamn cold here, you know, a typical San Francisco summer. I looked for work, but I only picked up a day's work here and there, mostly as a day laborer where you wait for the truck driver to come over when he needs extra help. Or I'd get a day or two on banana boats, the boats that came in at what we call Shit Creek [Islais Creek] — yeah, that's where they pulled the switch. And the life of the working man was the shits. Excuse the language. Then I left San Francisco again. You always leave. I started out to become a hobo and I finally succeeded. I bummed across the country working, but I was a hobo — a guy that travels and picks up work here and there. Hobos even had an organization and the hobo paper.

#### Were there a lot of people South of Market when you came in '23?

Yeah, lots of people. San Francisco is where you either come to finish off the end of the route — or to begin. I remember over on Howard Street, where there's nothing standing now, there were 39 restaurants on one block.

### Did they cater to low-income people?

Boy, this language. If anyone back then had asked, "Do you cater to low-income people?" they'd have said, "What the hell does that mean?" Look, this was a place of cheap restaurants where you could get four eggs and a fried potato, two pieces of toast and some coffee for 10¢ or 15¢. During the Depression, it got even cheaper. On the corner over there was the Niagara Hotel, run by Germans. It had a saloon, probably a bootlegger and maybe a bookie there, too. And there was an employment office on the corner.

There were about 10 employment offices around here, but mostly they'd ship you out to jobs away from San Francisco. When you'd come out here, you'd find there weren't any jobs anyhow, so they'd ship you wherever they'd like, to lumber camps and ranches. Guys would use it as free transportation. Then, in wintertime, this place would fill up with lumberjacks and whistle punks [water boys], mule skinners and ranch hands and people who work in camps or Hetch Hetchy in Southern California. Around November, they'd all flock here and take all these cheap rooms. They had silver dollars in their pockets and they'd rattle them. They'd see a guy real hungry and they'd get their jollies shaking their pockets in front of him — well, it's the nature of the beast.

### How did Los Angeles compare to San Francisco at that time?

When you were broke in Los Angeles, you could hit every restaurant and they wouldn't give you anything. I came here and the first restaurant I went to, Gough Bay City Grill, they said, "Sit down, son."The guy who called me son was two years younger than me, but he



Frank Koci in front of Clementina Towers in South of Market, where he lived on the seventh floor in a \$225-a-month apartment — complete with a balcony.

"When I came up to San Francisco in 1923, I really didn't live anywhere, just bummed around. But I do remember South of Market then, all small, ramshackle, broken-down rooming houses with at least three or four bootleggers on every block."

Frank Koci, South of Market Beat artist (1904–1983)

gave me a big bowl of minestrone soup and all the French bread I could eat and wouldn't let me pay. I said, "This is my

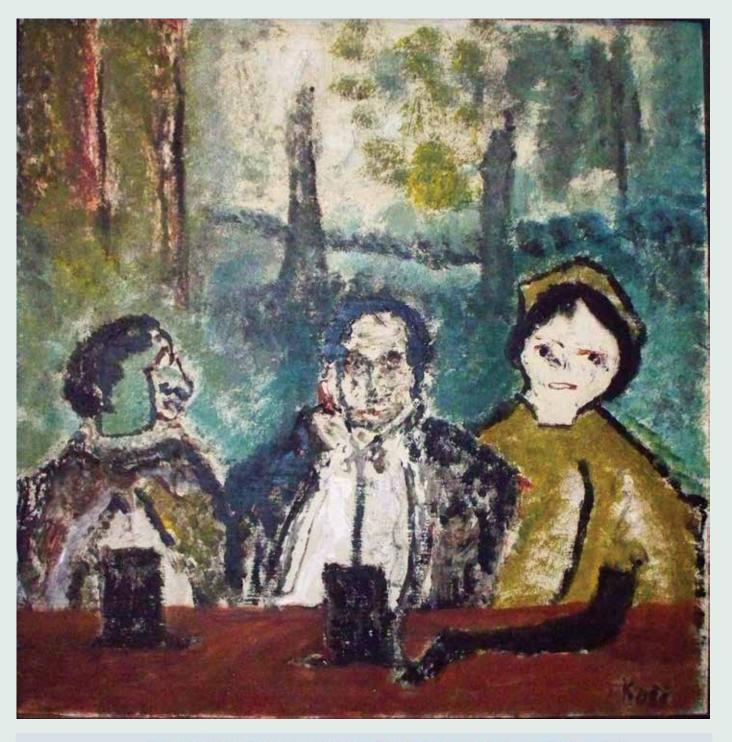
### And now? Anything wrong with San

There's nothin' wrong with San Francisco. You move 4,000 miles east to New Hampshire and you get the same things, the same hot dogs, the same pizza parlors, the same punks on the street. the boys come back and work from — the little cable cars will shoot you up to the stars — but the morning fog television going it was so loud. And its movie stars and back East they have n-roll music. They have a place across the prize fighters and here we got the the street where they teach that stuff. Living here, South of Market, the most agonizing part is the noise — it's just part of the scenery and they keep push-

What is the noise? Does it have to do with clearing the land for Yerba

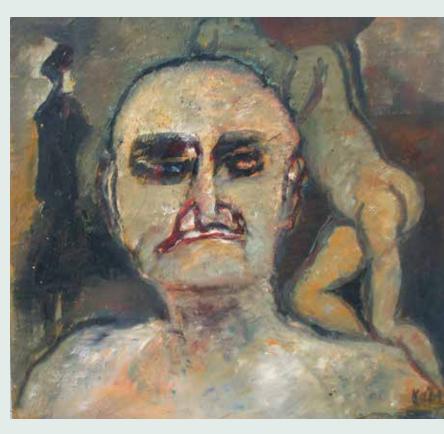
They've been down there, right there on that corner since January 18, but this corner has nothing to do with Yerba Buena. The workmen just enjoy the tearing down. They're the most sadistic bunch of city employees. They work two shifts. At 6 p.m., they change shifts when the ninnies go home — all the guys with their insurance papers and their portfolio baskets, running around to catch the train. After they clear out, Some people think we got magic here 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. I had a half pound of cotton in my ears and my radio and will kill you it's so cold. Hollywood has now we have another thing: the rockgripmen on the cable cars. But wrong? I'm surprised they teach it — it comes natural to monkeys. The minute these boys over there find out that the short hairs like me are goin' to bed, they open ing and pushing, doing it since I moved up, and go on to midnight. Once, when there wasn't too much complaining, they went until 7 a.m. People stay here for a while and they say, "How can you

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 7









These paintings are from the collection of John Burks who supplied the photos, titles and interpretive captions. All are signed "Koci," none is dated. They almost certainly were painted in South of Market during the late Fifties and early Sixties.

# Koci — a Beat marching to his own bold beat — sold his paintings cheap to pay the rent

BY JOHN BURKS

HE GUY AT THE CASH REGISTER looks like Popeye's pissed-off older born Frantisek (Frank) Koci, an ex-merchant seaman, ex-actor, ex-cowboy who brother. He speaks in a Count Dracula accent so gruff, so thick, I assume gallery a few doors down from City Lights Bookstore, serving up salty insights concerning Beatnik art and Beat philosophy to gawking tourists.

Popeye's rant is multidirectional — he speaks against God, against the feds, WWI and WWII, always returning to the deplorable quality of the art he is selling and the fools who buy it. "But anyway," he cackles, "it's cheap; we don't commit extortion, just theft." The pricetags run \$3.28, \$12.99, \$4.44, \$5, priced according to the size of each painting, cheap even by early Sixties' standards.

"Vot are you doing looking at dat monstrosity?" Popeye shouts from across the room. "Utter shit." Next painting: "Keep moving, don't look! Idiot, idiot! Dat

Only when my gaze falls upon a work signed "Koci" does he shut up. These the coast. Kocis are, to my eye, remarkable and totally unlike anything else in sight: hints of Rousseau, Matisse, Roualt, screwy angularities in the dense, cartoonish tracings, vivid splotches of sunshine, lots of people. All kinds of people — peasants, pimps, killers, bishops, big money guys, dried-up crones, juicy nurses — all headed for cosmic collision.

After a few visits, I make the connection: "Popeye" is in fact Koci ... Czechthe very next frame. In the best Kocis, the tension is palpable. ■

washed upon The City's shores determined to become an artist. This South it's a joke until I discover it isn't. Popeye presides at a North Beach of Market denizen, whose early paintings did sell for as little as \$3.28 and \$5, would live to see his work featured in several galleries and museums, selling for thousands

> To this day, there are said to be competing collectors who have stashed away hundreds of Kocis hoping to reap zillions, should a Koci Revival ever occur. No sign of such a revival has yet appeared.

> At his peak, Koci painted as fast as he could. His small South of Market apartment was jammed with dozens of partially completed paintings. He raided dumpsters all over town, seeking anything he could paint on: plywood, tiles, crating, siding. He had no choice but to work cheap. Nobody was going to pay \$250 for an individual painting by an unknown Beat artist. But they'd happily lay out \$7.29 for a piece of Beatnik art commemorating their trip to

> All Koci had to do was sell 30 such paintings to cover that month's rent. In broad terms, you can describe Koci's paintings as a series of "peoplescapes," wherein people are shown having relationships (some fleeting, some enduring) with fellow humans. A better term is probably "preludes" — wherein each painting sets the stage for something momentous that will occur in

PHOTOS BY JOHN BURKS

Clockwise from upper left:

### PICNIC

Sunlight streams across picnic table in forest. Who sits? (a) Doctor, plutocrat, nurse? (b) Son, corpse, assassin? (c) Assassin, dad, mom? What next?

24 x 24 inches, oil on plywood

### **REVOLT**

Two top-hat guys enter a mottled, motley street throng, will big baldy and the Long Faces let them pass? Who owns this street? 26 x 7 inches, oil on crate

Self-portrait of the artist as an old man? His naked lover flees. The shadowy citizen over his right shoulder — ready, waiting,

15 x 18 inches, oil on siding

### **REPLAY**

She stares death in the eye. On her mind, her lover. At her side, her mate. Referee studies replay before making the call. 16 x 16 inches, oil on plywood

CENTRAL CITY EXTRA / MARCH 2013 **5** 4 CENTRAL CITY EXTRA / MARCH 2013