

The New York Times

Manuel Neri, Figurative Sculptor With a Modern Twist, Dies at 91

Mr. Neri was a stalwart of the Bay Area art scene but exhibited widely, known for mixing artistic mediums and styles.



The artist

Manuel Neri pictured in 1982 with some of his painted statues. Mr. Neri flourished as part of the Bay Area Figurative Movement of artists in the 1950s and '60s. Credit...M. Lee Fatherree

By Annabelle Williams

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Manuel Neri, a noted San Francisco artist whose life-size figurative sculptures, often painted and usually of women, evoked classical statuary while updating it for the 20th century, died on Oct. 18 at his home in Sacramento. He was 91.

His death was confirmed by his daughter, the artist [Ruby Neri](#).

Mr. Neri was a younger presence in the Bay Area Figurative Movement, which encompassed a group of artists in the 1950s and '60s who bucked the trend toward Abstract Expressionism and returned to figure-focused art. Its members included the painters [Richard Diebenkorn](#) and [David Park](#) and the sculptor and ceramicist [Peter Voulkos](#). Mr. Neri studied with Mr. Diebenkorn and Mr. Voulkos, among others in the movement.

In plaster, bronze and other materials, Mr. Neri rendered figures sometimes without heads or arms and painted directly on the casts, incorporating scratched or textured detailing. His oeuvre centered on the female form; the poet [Mary Julia Klimenko](#) was his model for much of his career.



Mary Julia Klimenko served as Mr. Neri's model for much of his career. She was pictured with the artist at his Benicia, Calif., studio in 1985.

Credit...

M. Lee Fatherree

“What distinguishes Mr. Neri's art is the way he has combined the traditional nude figure, executed in plaster, bronze and stone, with the interests — including the color interests — of painting,” the New York Times critic Hilton Kramer [wrote](#) in 1981 on the occasion of Mr. Neri's his first solo exhibition, at the Cowles Gallery in Manhattan. “There is thus an extraordinary tension — or, if you will, a dialectic — built into the very crux of his style,” Mr. Kramer continued. “This gives the work a very individual dynamism, even if at times it also leaves us with the impression of something teetering on the brink of dissolution.”

In a 2008 [oral history](#) with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Mr. Neri said, “I've always been fascinated by body language that people have, what they say with their bodies.”

His sculpture could have a destructive edge, the missing limbs and torsos evoking the remains of Greek and Roman statuary, damaged over time, seen in museums. But textured surfaces and blotches of bright color updated Mr. Neri's work for the 20th century (though the application of color also harked back to the [painted sculpture of antiquity](#)).

Mr. Neri was part of the lively Beat scene in San Francisco in the 1950s and early '60s. In 1954 he and a group of other artists established the Six Gallery, housed in a former automobile repair shop on Fillmore Street. Mr. Neri was the director of the gallery when a landmark poetry reading took place there in 1955: Allen Ginsberg giving the first public recitation of his masterpiece, "Howl."

Mr. Neri was one of the few Latinos in the American mainstream art world of the time. But, as he said in the oral history, he did not necessarily "connect" with the label of Latino art: He situated his work more in the context of the Bay Area, where he made his home.

"I step out of one world into another," he said. "I had to make that change, but that flavoring, that Latino flavoring, will always be with me."



“Carriona Figure No. 1,” marble, 1981.

Credit...

The Manuel Neri Trust

Manuel John Neri Jr. was born in Sanger, Calif., in Fresno County, on April 12, 1930. His father was an agricultural worker. His mother, Guadalupe (Penilla) Neri, also worked in agriculture and was later employed at an electronics factory. Both parents were immigrants from the Mexican state of Jalisco.

Mr. Neri attended Fremont High School and graduated in 1950. He then signed up for classes at San Francisco City College.

“And just out of dumb luck, I decided to take an art class for an easy grade,” he recalled. “And I met a wonderful man who changed my life.” That man was the artist [Roy Walker](#), who introduced him to Mr. Voulkos and gave him entree to the San Francisco art scene.



“Arcos de Geso,” bronze, cast 4 of 4, 1985-2006.

Credit...

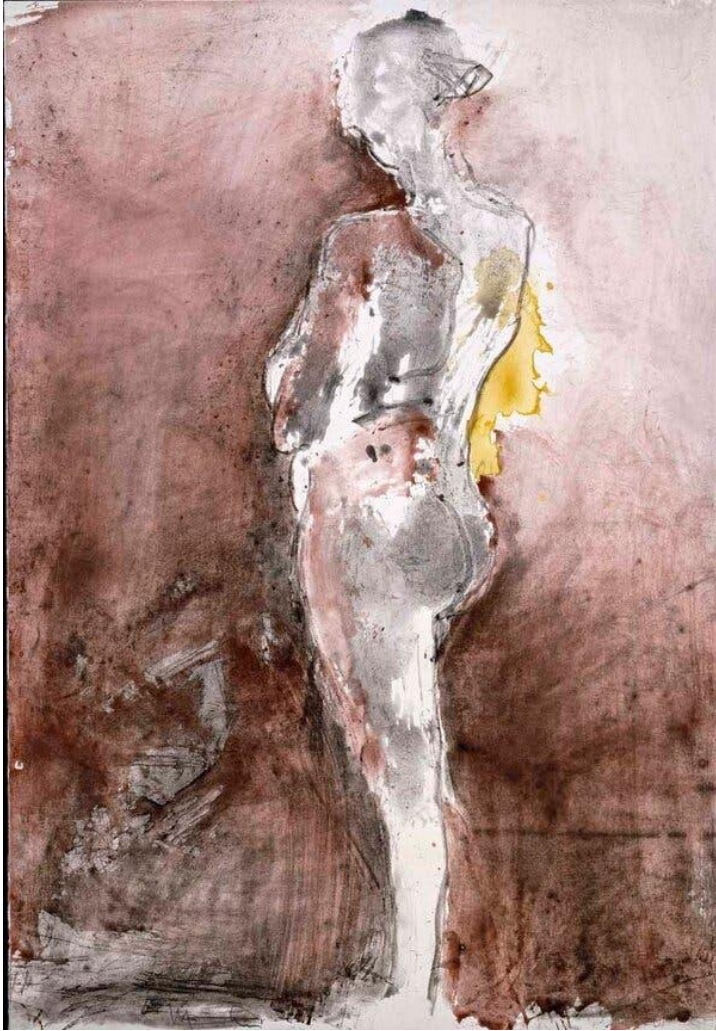
The Manuel Neri Trust

Mr. Neri went on to attend the University of California, Berkeley, and what is now the California College of Arts. He served in the Army in the Korean War and then studied at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) on the G.I. Bill. But he never completed a degree.

From 1959 on, Mr. Neri taught at schools around the Bay Area and later at Berkeley. He joined the art faculty at the University of California, Davis, in 1965 and held a teaching post there until retiring in 1990.

For many years he worked and lived in the Bay Area city of Benicia in a former Unitarian church, which he remodeled into a home and studio.

His marriages to Marilyn Hampton, the artist [Joan Brown](#), Susan Morse and Kate Rohrock ended in divorce.



“Untitled VI,” mixed media on paper, 1998.

Credit...

The Manuel Neri Trust

Mr. Neri received numerous accolades for his work, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center in Hamilton, N.J., in 2006. His works are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

He is survived by his sister, Maria Clowser; his caretaker, Maria Elisa Cantu; his children Raoul Neri, Laticia Souter, Noel Neri, Maximilian Neri, Ruby Neri, Julia Leonard and Gustavo Neri; and seven grandchildren.