

Renaissance Man Royce Vaughn

By Larry Beresford

At 65 years young, Royce Harris Vaughn is still a work in progress.

Painter, sculptor, photographer, commercial artist, filmmaker, educator, entrepreneur, and publisher, he struggles to find the time to pursue all of his various interests, when other people might be settling into retirement.

"I'm not retired, and I don't expect to do that. There are so many things left to do," Vaughn explains. "Since people are living longer these days, when you get to be 65, you could be looking forward to 20 more years of life. Right now I run, play basketball... I feel like a bandit."

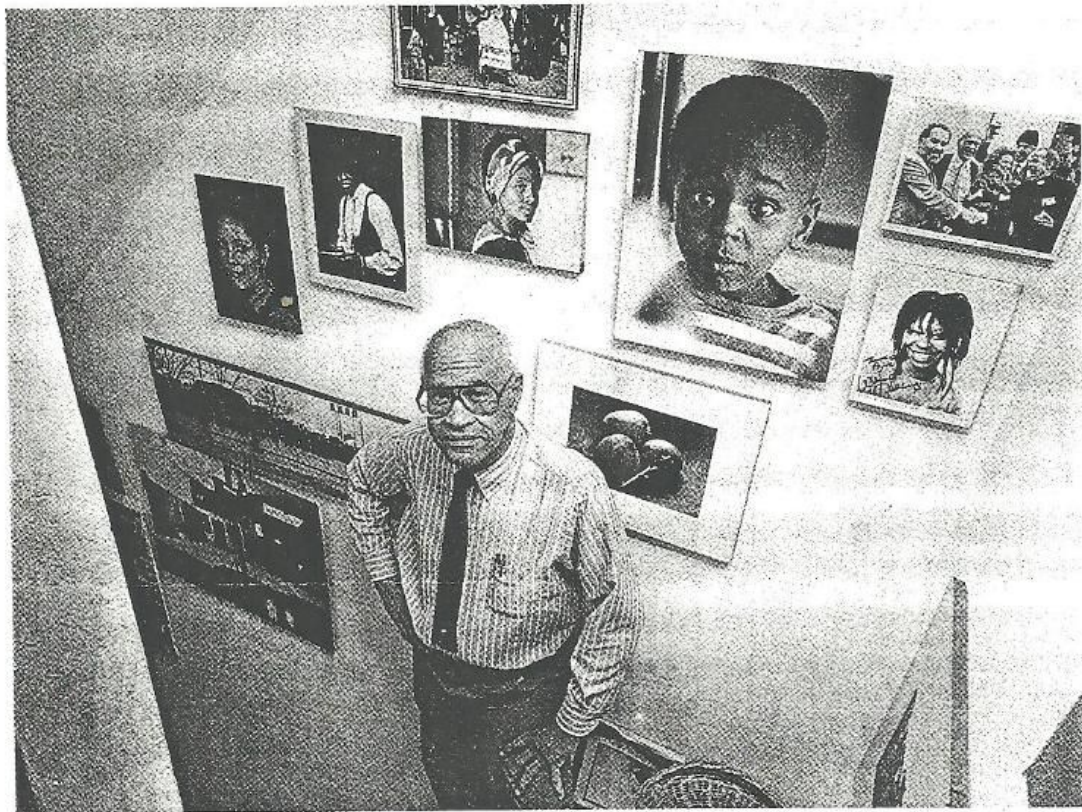
Vaughn is best known in this neighborhood for his note cards—reproductions of his watercolor paintings and photos depicting scenes of San Francisco. (The cards, published under the title *California Collectors' Series*, are available at Colorcrane on 24th Street and Art Garden on Cesar Chavez.)

But Vaughn's life offers even more panoramic vistas, reflecting his diverse experiences and upbeat philosophy. He recently shared some of these views while giving a tour of the Valley Street home where he has lived since 1965 with his wife, Judy, and their four now-grown children.

The house itself is an "unfinished symphony," Vaughn says, with numerous homespun renovations and nooks and crannies for his art projects and electric train kingdom. The walls are covered with his own artwork, vintage photographs, and caricatures of former students drawn by old friend Cal Bailey, who also does celebrity caricatures for Universal Studios.

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Vaughn's paintings aren't limited to those he does for his cards. He does commissioned work (most recently, a painting of St. Paul's Church as seen from Bernal Heights) and has also painted cosmic and astronomical themes, a mural of the heroes of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and a series of what he calls "Afrigrams," Mondrian-like geometric patterns in the five colors of the African flag. "But I'd rather be known as a human



Royce Vaughn has a gallery of photos taken by him and his students in ABLE (Arts and Business Learning Experience). Photo by Charles Kennard

being than as an artist," says Vaughn. "To be an artist, you must first be a human being, and know about the struggles each of us experiences as we go through this obstacle course of life."

Part of being human, he says, is "learning how to help reduce the struggle and pain experienced by others."

Vaughn was born in Cleveland, Ohio, to parents from Mississippi. His family, African-American in the segregated Deep South, was "always proud and independent. My mother's father built the town hall, and he didn't say 'Yes, sir' to anybody." Vaughn's father, who was a mechanic, operated his own service station until the business was wiped out in the Great Depression.

"That experience forged a bond between my brothers, my sisters, and me that persists to this day," says Vaughn. "We were fortunate, because we knew all of our lives what we had to do. We were poor economically, but not spiritually or in character."

An encounter with a high school English teacher who strongly challenged him to "think," says Vaughn, provoked him to strive harder in his academic career, leading to scholarship offers from Ivy League colleges. He chose Princeton, where he majored in art history and religion, with minors in Spanish and sculpture.

"At Princeton you studied all the ma-

jor fields of art—painting, sculpture, and architecture—from primitive to modern. My concentration was on the Renaissance and, specifically, on how religion serves as a motivator for art—either as an inspiration or a destroyer, as it was for Botticelli," the 15th-century Italian painter whose career was cut short by pressures from religious forces.

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After college, Vaughn considered entering the priesthood, but the director of New York's Union Theological Seminary told him, "The best thing that could happen to the Christian ministry, Royce, would be for you *not* to enter it."

"He sensed that I was a worldly person," Vaughn says, "and that it was important for me to be a participant in the unfolding drama of life."

Vaughn remained interested in religion, though, and continued "trying to find out what the Confucianists had to say, and the Buddhists and the Baha'ians, and what those who didn't have anything to say had to say," he smiles. But nowadays, "I couldn't tell you what God is, other than that I believe in life."

Graduating during the Korean War, Vaughn applied for and won conscientious objector status. "But then I thought, most people don't want to kill anybody. This isn't really fair. So I renounced my deferment and enlisted in the Army. I spent a year and a half in Germany, and I loved it."

"I was fortunate in that I worked for commanding generals as an artist, doing such things as preparing sketches for briefings. The Army didn't have a school to train illustrators and artists, so if you had such a talent, you were a rare bird. For someone like me, who didn't have to face combat, you could have an awful lot of fun in the Army."

But more than an adventure, the Army was "a real eye-opener and character builder. It's a tremendous democratizing experience—the great leveler. I learned how to live with people. You don't have any idea how varied people are until you are all thrown together."

During Vaughn's last year in the ser-

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Each Day Is a Fresh Canvas for Royce Vaughn

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vice, his division rotated to Ford Ord in California, where he taught art and ran several craft shops on the base. At night he hung out with jazz musicians and their friends in Monterey. Upon discharge, he followed the jazz crowd to Los Angeles, where he ran an art gallery and continued his studies in art history at U.C.L.A.

"Los Angeles is the only place I've ever lived that I hated," he notes. So in 1959 he moved to San Francisco, seeking to break into commercial art. But at the time, he observes, "Even in urbane San Francisco, there was not a single black commercial artist in town."

"Vaughn worked as a sales rep at Flax's art store until he landed a job as an art director at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. There he met his wife, Judy, at the time a feature writer for the Sunday magazine.

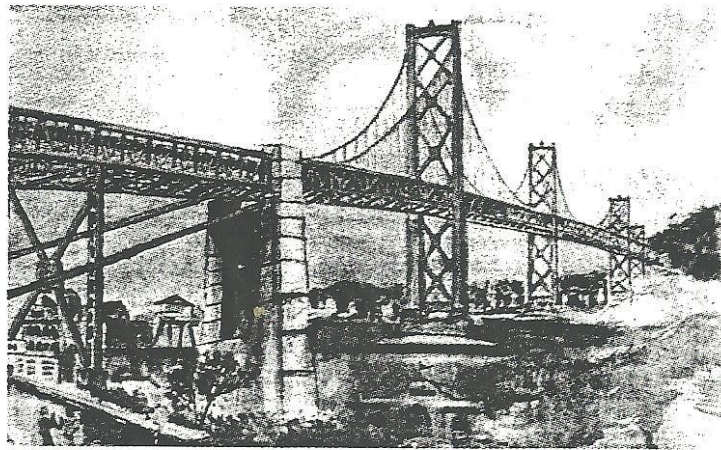
But this was the 1960s, and Vaughn wanted to combine his interest in art with a need to create better educational opportunities for minorities. In 1965 he got a grant to found ABLE, Inc. (Arts and Business Learning Experience), a production studio based at San Francisco State University which trained and placed poor and minority young people in the film, photography, and television industries.

Over the next dozen years, many of those who entered the program "with an aversion to book-learning," Vaughn says, went on to acquire advanced degrees and respected positions in Hollywood and mass communications.

When ABLE closed in 1978, Vaughn launched into a wide range of commercial and consulting work, including a brief stint as director of Community Resources at the Oakland Museum.

At the behest of a friend, he recently took on the editing of a directory called the *Ocean Current* for the Oceanview-Merced-Ingleside District. That job pulled him into the presidency of the neighborhood's merchants association.

"It's a divided community with a big race problem, yet it has enormous potential," Vaughn says. "But I've put every-



Royce Vaughn's 1991 watercolor of the Bay Bridge is part of his California Collectors note card series.

one on notice that I'm only there through 1997. After that, I will devote my time to the California Collectors' Series."

Since 1987, Vaughn has been putting "lots of sweat equity" into his note card business, which grew out of a friend's suggestion to make practical use of the landscape painting he was already doing, of scenes within a three-hour drive of the city. So far, he has 20 imprints in the series, sold in 20 stores, and is working toward national retail distribution.

He has several other projects pending, including painting the city's parks and street scenes of Noe Valley, doing a series featuring prominent Bay Area sports fig-

ures, and painting a series on "heroes of the human rights movement."

When referring to this last project, Vaughn points out that "none of my interests are solely oriented to black people. I think that it was an enormous mistake to allow the perception to develop in this country that black people are interested only in our own struggle and identity, at the exclusion of others'. I don't believe that reflects how the majority of black people think. If we are concerned about our own identity, we should be just as interested in everyone else developing and articulating their identities."

In keeping with that philosophy,

Vaughn goes out of his way to communicate with people from all walks of life. He and Judy are registered with the San Francisco International Visitors Center, which hosts visits from people all over the world. He also knows most of the kids who grew up in his neighborhood, and often has dinner parties with local artists and other creative types.

The architect who is responsible for the ongoing remodeling of the Vaughns' home, Alan Gur-Arye, recently designed a table for the couple. The only requirements were that it fit the living and dining area and that it "foster conversation," says Vaughn.

The result was a uniquely functional work of art, a "double-cantilevered" table resting on two central pillars rather than legs, its surface composed of modular, detachable triangles. Wherever you sit at this magical table, you are directly across from someone else.

"Conversation is a creative exercise that allows us to learn more about the other person," Vaughn says. As for the new table, "We've already had some wonderful conversations at it." □

Royce Vaughn will exhibit his paintings and photographs through May 15 at Home Federal Savings, on Mission between 29th and 30th streets. He invites his Noe Valley friends and neighbors to drop in for the reception May 3. "I'll be there all afternoon."



Royce Vaughn painted "We Shall Overcome" to commemorate the heroes of the civil rights movement. Now he's contemplating a similar series on heroes of the human rights movement.

Photo by Charles Kennard

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