



REX RAY: *ETERNAL*

JANUARY 31 - MARCH 21, 2025

OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 6-9 PM

This February marks ten years since artist Rex Ray (1958-2015) passed away at the age of 58. In celebration and memory of his remarkable life, we are presenting a selection of original Rex Ray works in a career-spanning exhibition, *Rex Ray: Eternal*. The show will open to the public on January 31-March 21.

Rex was a beloved, iconic artist and major cultural force in the Bay Area. He was recognized worldwide for his distinct compositions, saturated colors and dizzying handmade collage process that was without precedent. His career blossomed in San Francisco in the late 1980s, where he was a significant voice in the art, literary, and activist communities.

“I was lucky enough to get to San Francisco in 1981, about five minutes before AIDS took over and changed everything so profoundly. But I felt that San Francisco was where I was meant to be. It wasn’t until people started getting healthy and surviving AIDS that I was able to let all of my color burst out. It was that abrupt. Like queer lives blooming in the face of adversity.”

Artist and novelist Douglas Coupland wrote, “Rex’s art correlates closely to that of other artists who seemingly cross over from design or pop art graphics, such as Takashi Murakami or Ryan McGinness. From the colliding worlds of art, design, media culture, fashion, and street culture, Rex has created work utterly of the moment, yet utterly eternal.”

He became involved in the political and creative gay community surrounding civil rights, supporting ACT UP, the Frameline Film Festival, and Visual Aid. His book cover designs for *City Lights* and *High Risk* offer a brief history of LGBTQ+ literature. He designed books for William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, John Giorno, and Rebecca Solnit. Solnit wrote, “He made ‘high’ art as well as design, and then they merged into something gorgeous and extravagant and joyous and very colorful.”

By the mid-1990s, Rex, like many who toil before a computer screen, began to covet the analog. Fatigued with the digital and feeling a sense of rebellion against his design success, Rex created an outpouring of artwork using the simplest of tools: scissors and glue. His complex canvases and collages were made from layers upon layers of handpainted paper, precisely cut by hand with scissors and X-Acto blades. This unique process was invented by the artist as a reaction to the hours spent on his computer.

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“As my graphic design business grew, my clients got bigger and the money they offered rose in direct proportion to the decline in creativity they required. The collage was my rebellion against that. I began by turning off the computers, unplugging the phones, sitting down and making collage. I’d do them to silence that internal critic we all have — the inner voice that judges, raves and berates us. I wanted to get back to that magic of making something out of nothing.”

Gallery 16’s first exhibition with Rex was in 1996, which began a friendship that lasted until his death. Since his passing, our commitment to his work has continued. Since 2015, his work has been presented in museum and gallery exhibitions and is the subject of two books about the artist. In 2021 Griff Williams produced the book *Rex Ray* published by Chronicle Books.