

R.J. Jenks had been cleaning the streets of San Francisco, California for close to half a century. He had started with a cart, a barrel and push-broom, then a drag behind scoop setup and then finally the spraying, brushing and vacuuming contraption we see nowadays. He called his rig Elinor after the best woman ever. She had been his companion for nearly 55 years and not until he finally sprinkled her ashes off the wharf near Crissy Field, did he accept she was finally gone.

When R.J. went to work for the last time, when they forcibly retired him, after he had watched the last piece of trash wash off the curb, the last trickle of water go down the gutter and he had “brushed” up against the last European import parked too close to the NO PARKING sign, he had planned on finishing out his days with Elinor. She messed that up, she got sick and left him for good, alone. Before that she had kept him in check-- his drinking, his negative thoughts and after she was gone, he was ok for a bit.

He went back to working in clay, to try to keep sober, making cups and bowls and nonsense for his neighbors. He joined a North Beach clay co-op run by the Reductionists, doing all his work there. He told me the fountains were all about water being wasted and squandered by the City.

The first fountain of his I saw was hanging in the bathroom of Caffè Trieste on the corner of Vallejo and Green in North Beach. It was one of the ones that he made using the impression of the water utility covers in the streets. He must have seen, driven over and thought about those covers a million times on his travels up and down the streets of SF. When I expressed an interest in the piece to the barista, he put me in touch with R.J. I wanted to see if he would maybe sell me a piece.

When I got to his place, he showed me more pieces and said I could take pictures of them, but they were not for sale. He was saving them, for what, he would not say. We spent the afternoon together drinking Chianti and gnawing on salami ends and sourdough. He was easy to talk to. I guess all those years watching water wasted down gutters would give you some stored up conversation.

We wrapped up the afternoon with him saying he was going to visit his sister in Fresno and he would give me a call on his return and we could pick up where we left off. He said he was working on an idea to make totem poles out of old utility poles. That sounded interesting and I wanted to see that process from the beginning. Weeks passed and he never called. I tried his number, to no avail. I decided to stop by and check to see if he lost my number. When I got to his place, I let myself

in by the gate on the side yard. I found this pile and a simple note.



“Sorry... things changed. RJ”

I guess I should not have been surprised, yet I was. Then again, I wonder how I thought I could make any assessment... I didn't know the guy. Anyway, I was wrong.

When I had finished taking my pictures, I should have looked him in the eye, as carefully as I was looking at his pieces, and I didn't. I was so interested in the pieces, the work, the things, that I neglected to see where and who they came from. So all we have are the pictures. A simple record of one man's expression.