

STEPHEN LYNCH: 1958-2015

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# The Tannery's true believer dies at 56

By Wallace Baine

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Back in the fall of 2008, you could find artist Stephen Lynch among those camped out in line to claim one of the new apartments in the yet-to-be-opened Tannery Lofts on the grounds of the former Salz Tannery. As a result, he was among the first to move into the new loft apartments a few months later.

Two weeks ago, Lynch died in that same apartment, of a heart attack, a few weeks shy of his 57th birthday.

In between, he became a true believer in the implicit ideal that the Tannery is a noble experiment in community building, a rare convergence of working artists living and working together for the enrichment of them as individuals and for the city they called home.

"Stephen was a perfect person for the Tannery," said his friend and co-Tannery artist Margaret Niven, "and the Tannery was a perfect place for him."

For three years, Lynch and Niven collaborated to run the Tannery Arts Lecture Series, a concrete expression of Lynch's belief in fostering community. Taking charge of things such as the Lecture Series was a challenge, given that Lynch was hardly a

social butterfly.

"He was always interested in being part of a community of artists to support and critique each other," said Cathleen O'Connell, Lynch's life partner for 10 years, well before he came to the Tannery. "But being an introvert, he could get overwhelmed sometimes."

Lynch was a found object/assemblage artist whose work was concerned about using both natural and industrial materials in new ways. He was interested in found objects as both symbols and as material. In recent years, he had been especially interested in working with the lead foil wrappers which were until recently used as seals around the mouths of wine bottles.

"He was a very contemplative, introspective artist," said his friend and fellow Tannery artist Kirby Scudder. "He really thought things through. He had a very metaphorical way of looking at things, and his work utilized metaphor very well."

"He was analytical about things in a way that I was not," said O'Connell. "He was always looking out for symbols and possible meanings in everything. He liked concepts and ideas. He loved reading about the symbols that other cultures used."

Like most assemblage artists, Lynch lived with

huge caches of objects that he was planning to use in his art. "You wouldn't believe the stuff he had," said Scudder. "Animal skulls, wood, machinery. I mean, you could barely get in there."

"I found eight things (after his death) that he was in the middle of," said O'Connell. "He tended to work on many things at once."

"Stephen had an incredible gift for composition," said Ann Hazels, the curator at the Radius Gallery at the Tannery. The Radius will feature Lynch's art this month as a tribute to him, and are even inviting people to make art with some of the materials that he left behind.

Lynch grew up in the Midwest from a fundamentalist Christian background, and lived in Boise, Idaho and Fresno before settling in San Francisco, and later Santa Cruz. His commitment to Christianity, said O'Connell, gradually moved to a commitment to artistic expression.

He adopted the raven as a kind of spirit animal, said his friends. He called his apartment "Ravensloft" and even his outgoing phone message said, "The Raven is out, but please leave a message."

O'Connell said that Lynch's art would sometimes contain symbols and allusions that would elude most people, but he never found the need to

## STEPHEN LYNCH

**Born:** April 23, 1958, St. Charles, Missouri.

**Died:** March 28, 2015, Santa Cruz.

**Education:** Studied art and geology at the University of Idaho, Boise.

**Occupation:** Worked for years at Bay Photo in Santa Cruz, also worked in various jobs as a picture framer.

**Art:** Lynch was an assemblage artist, who worked with found materials. Heavily influenced by Robert Rauschenberg, Lynch wrote on his website, "I have always found iconography fascinating, but disliked what I saw as hierarchical use of materials & subject matter. I have preferred the circle to the ladder."

**Information:** The Radius Gallery at the Tannery will have Lynch's art on display through May 24, and will feature his art during the First Friday event on May 1.

**Details:** [www.facebook.com/radius.gallery](http://www.facebook.com/radius.gallery) or [zen-beetle.daportfolio.com](http://zen-beetle.daportfolio.com).

explain his art to others. "At his shows, I always noticed that people would be engaged in his art, but a lot of people looking at it would never guess at the symbolic depth at. And I was always suggesting he posted a little card or something on the wall, but he felt that was way too prescriptive. He wanted people to interact with his art in the way they felt comfortable with."