

Community News



Bay Area sculptor, musician Cyrus Tilton dies of cancer at 39



Sculptor and musician Cyrus J. Tilton, who lived in the Temescal neighborhood, died of cancer in late March at the age of 39. Photo courtesy of Vessel Gallery

By **MARK HEDIN** | mhedin@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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OAKLAND — Cyrus James Tilton, one of the bright lights of Oakland's art and music scene, has died of esophageal cancer, his gallery announced. The sculptor and musician was 39.

The Alaska native arrived in the Bay Area in the late 1990s.

Work with film special-effects artist Phil Tippett in Berkeley ("The Empire Strikes Back," "Jurassic Park") on the movie "The Haunting" in 1999 led him to a collaboration with Ron Holthuysen's [Scientific Art Studio](#) in Richmond.

Working with Scientific Art Studio on that film project, he never left, Holthuysen said. Tilton went from lead sculptor to becoming the studio's art director in 2009.

"Cyrus and I worked very closely together; we liked each other so much that he never left. This was an amazing person words cannot describe. For me, it was a once-in-a-lifetime relationship," Holthuysen said.

An early project was the creation of the giant baseball glove perched above the left-field bleacher seats at AT&T Park. Tilton went on to create California sea lion sculptures for the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito and displays on sea lions and their food web at the Bay Area Discovery Museum.

Tilton was one of the first artists shown at Davies Symphony Hall in a show curated in 2013 by Lonnie Lee, of Oakland's Vessel Gallery on 25th Street in Uptown.

Lee, who went on to represent him and staged five solo exhibitions of his work, said in an interview she was so impressed by Tilton's talent that she purchased a sculpture from him when she encountered his work for the first time.

"I was immediately drawn to his work and asked to see more and thought it was very high-caliber creatively. He struck me immediately as someone who really cared about his art and took it very seriously in the most perfect way. I really wanted to work with this person," she said. In addition to hosting exhibitions of Tilton's work at her gallery, she began representing him.

"He was clearly much more mature than his young age. Very seasoned eyes would say 'I thought he was at least 60 or 70.' He put in the hours of practice," she said.

Tilton was one of the first artists to participate in the First Friday Oakland Art Murmur 10 years ago. Tilton "showed the extremely high level of art that was happening here in our city. Work like his shown at [Vessel Gallery](#) helped put the Oakland art scene on the international map. People from other countries now know Oakland to be this fertile epicenter for creative art production," Lee said.

"You can really trace the growth and the maturity of the Oakland art scene by examining his work," Lee said.

Tilton's work was emblematic of a maturation in Oakland's art scene, she said.

“It was no longer DIY; it was high-level in creativity, expression and technical execution. This is museum-quality work,” Lee said.

Sacramento’s Crocker Art Museum is planning to stage Tilton’s first major museum exhibition in 2018, after acquiring for its permanent collection his “Lovers,” a giant sculpture of two mating locusts, made of muslin and beeswax on a steel frame, that was part of his exhibition [“The Cycle”](#) at Vessel in 2011.

That exhibition, which also included depictions of eggs in the ground and a swarm of hundreds of smaller locusts in motion that Tilton made and suspended from the gallery’s ceiling, reflected his concerns for the environment and fears and anxiety over population growth, Lee said.

“Our consumption habits are exponentially ceaseless and unrelenting,” Tilton said in a statement about the exhibit.

Besides his work as a sculptor and illustrator, his work on guitar and synthesizers and as a composer in the bands NED and [Mwahaha](#) brought him respect in the underground music world.

Spin magazine in 2011 described the band’s multilayered sound as “a cleverly plotted head trip disguised as a ramshackle mess.”

Mwahaha was featured on National Public Radio’s “All Songs Considered” and earned comparisons to artists ranging from David Bowie to Pink Floyd, Depeche Mode, the Flaming Lips and TV on the Radio.

“His art production was so masterful. It’s sad that he had to leave us so soon. It’s very hard,” Lee said.

Tilton, who lived in the Temescal neighborhood, died there March 28. He is survived by his wife, Lisa Tilton; his parents, Sally Lynne and Pat Tilton; and his brother, Nathan Tilton. Memorial services are pending.

A crowd-sourced [funding campaign](#) (<http://bit.ly/2omIKZi>) raised more than \$30,000 toward his medical expenses. [Another](#) (<http://bit.ly/2hnRYCp>) raised more than \$20,000 to help fund the Crocker Art Museum’s acquisition of “Lovers.”

Former UC Berkeley art history professor and Berkeley Art Museum founding director Peter Selz, who curated a traveling exhibition of Tilton’s work, said in a statement, “I was grieved to learn of Cyrus’ passing at so young an age. Cyrus Tilton was a remarkable artist, combining innovative inspiration with superb skill.”

Contact Mark Hedin at 510-293-2452, 408-759-2132 or mhedin@bayareanewsgroup.com