

Susan Subtle, former Chronicle columnist who saw the future, dies at 78

Local // Bay Area & State



In 1974, when tennis great Billie Jean King launched a pioneering magazine called WomenSports, it needed a correspondent who could deliver stories that were smart and outrageous, and that correspondent was Susan Subtle. Her article on the high-diving horses of Atlantic City initiated a career which took Subtle through the cultural touchstone that was New West magazine and on to a long and popular run as a quirky consumer columnist for The Chronicle in the 1980s.

“Her ideas were so far ahead of where almost everybody else on Earth was,” said Rosalie Wright Pakenham, Subtle’s longtime editor and close friend. Subtle, which was a pen name to replace the last name Dintenfass, died May

11 at her longtime home in the Berkeley hills. She was 78. The cause of death was a stroke, said her brother Andrew Dintenfass, a retired cinematographer now living in New York City.

At once both retro and visionary, Subtle had too many interests and hunches to stay on the printed page. She was an early champion of art made from recycled products. She introduced the genre at the Oakland Museum of California and was working on a follow-up show for a museum in Texas at the time of her death.

It was to be the culmination of a lifelong fixation on folk art and odd objects that was given a platform on June 9, 1983, when Subtle launched a feature called "Please Mr. Postman" in the This World section of the Sunday Examiner & Chronicle. The idea was to trace all of the weird and unexpected things one could order through the mail. The first item was a telephone in the shape of a fish that had a gurgling sound for a ringtone. This led to a second column called "The Subtle Shopper," which ran in the People section of the daily Chronicle. Both columns presaged by several decades where we are now, with every product you can imagine delivered to your door.

"Susan looked forward 40 years with an amazing eye for fashion and a wonderful sense of fun," said Wright, who was the assistant managing editor for features at The Chronicle who hired Subtle. "She was just phenomenal."

Susan Kline Dintenfass was born Dec. 30, 1941, in Philadelphia. Her father was a physician in the Army, and the family lived mostly in Atlantic City, N.J. She played trombone in the marching band at Atlantic City High School, "and was proud to be a Jersey girl," said her brother.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, she married Stephen Schiffer and they moved to Oxford, England before he got a job teaching philosophy at UC Berkeley in the mid-1960s. They lived in a ramshackle rooming house that was among those demolished by the university leading to the People's Park insurrection. The marriage did not last past the People's Park

riots either.

Charles Denson, a longtime friend who worked as an art director at New West magazine, said Subtle found her style by participating in "mail art" and by writing letters and postcards to friends that were fanciful works of art, on stationery from some long-gone hotel.

"You'd never know what you were going to find in the envelope," Denson said. "The envelope would be decorated, the letters would be decorated, there could be clippings from all different publications and old photos inside."

She adopted the name Subtle by saying "that's what I'm not." She was also not a magazine writer in the traditional sense, said her brother. She was a conceptualizer who relied on great editors to help translate her ideas into words on a page. Among these were Jon Carroll and Wright.

Wright had been hired by King's foundation to start WomenSports and met Subtle through Carroll. Subtle arrived in San Mateo for the interview in an elegant 1940s wool suit with a pinched waist. "She had such wit and imagination," recalled Wright, who took Subtle with her when she was hired to replace Carroll as executive editor of New West.

The column "Best Bets" was cribbed from its sister publication New York, but Subtle put her distinctive stamp on it. "Susan would write a funny little quip about each item," Wright said. "It was not Consumer Reports."

In 1981, New West was sold and Wright was hired by The Chronicle. Soon enough, Subtle had a column there, too, "Please Mr. Postman."

Subtle typed her copy and brought it to The Chronicle, where she made an immediate impression in leopard spots, prints with polka dots and a combination of antique jewelry and stuff she got from Berkeley street artists. But the greatest impression came when she spoke.

"She was absolutely brilliant," said Leah Garchik, the editor of This World

when Subtle was a Chronicle columnist. "She could express 12 ideas at once about people she wanted you to meet and about projects she was excited about."

Soon enough Garchik became more of a friend than an editor and was invited to one of her dinner parties, at her home on Panoramic Way overlooking the bay. But it was her collections that stuck. She would have a wall covered with the cut glass flower vases used in limousines of the 1920s, and there admiring them might be Ruth Reichl, the food writer; screenwriter Charlie Haas and his wife, writer B.K. Moran; artists Roy De Forrest, Clayton Bailey and Mildred Howard; and fashion designer Koos Van Den Akker. She also traveled in a jazz circle that included Ornette Coleman.

"She knew fantastically interesting people and loved introducing them to one another," Garchik said. Added her brother, "Her great skill was as a facilitator. She would unite and tie pieces together. It was just an endless stream."

Subtle was always interested in stuff that could be construed as art, either high or low. Her mother, Terry Dintenfass, ran an art gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan and she was educated in that milieu. But she was never snobby about it.

"She never seemed to distinguish between craft and art," said Garchik. "She just appreciated and applauded anything created by someone's imagination."

Her last Chronicle byline was Nov. 27, 1988, and 10 years later she curated the exhibition "Hello Again! A New Wave of Recycled Art and Design" at the Oakland Museum of California, which introduced items like a wedding dress made of men's cotton underwear and a dog bed made of shredded shoes in a gallery setting.

She also veered into product design, with eyeglass holders called Subtles. "You'd have these strange sculptural objects like fish or giraffes hanging from your neck," said Denson. "They weren't very practical but they were fun."

Her last exhibition was to be called "Hello Again! Again" and was being planned for the summer of 2021 at the Five Points Museum of Contemporary Art in Victoria, Texas. Among the items is a sculpture in the shape of a house made of 500 to 1,000 discarded glass in-flight liquor bottles by Mildred Howard, one in a long line of 50-year friendships.

"Susan had a great sense of bringing an eclectic group of people together and a great sense of humor," said Howard. "She was brilliant and loved polka dots."

Survivors include her brothers Andrew and John Dintenfass, both of New York City, nephews William and Matthew Dintenfass, both of Brooklyn, and niece Aviva Dintenfass of Greensboro, N.C. A memorial in Berkeley is pending until the end of sheltering-in-place.

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