



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

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CARLOS J. PALACIOS, COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



PRESS RELEASE

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County Arts Commission Names Stephen Kessler Artist of the Year

Profile Performance: May 20, 2023 7-9 p.m. at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center

Writer and translator Stephen Kessler has been named 2023 Artist of the Year by the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission. The Artist of the Year award is presented to local artists for outstanding achievement in the discipline of performing, visual, or literary arts who have also made a substantial contribution to the cultural enrichment of Santa Cruz County.

Stephen Kessler has distinguished himself over the last 50 years as one of his generation's most versatile and prolific writers, author of a dozen volumes of original poetry, 16 books of literary translation, three collections of essays, and a novel, "The Mental Traveler" (Greenhouse Review Press, 2009). He has edited numerous literary journals and community newspapers and is the editor and principal translator of *The Sonnets* by Jorge Luis Borges (Penguin Classics, 2010). Locally in recent years he is best known as a wide-ranging and freethinking opinion columnist in the Santa Cruz Sentinel.

Kessler arrived in Santa Cruz in 1968 on a Regents Fellowship to study with the first group of graduate students in UCSC's doctoral program in literature. A personal crisis the following year set him on a path away from academia and eventually into journalism in local underground and alternative newspapers. After writing for *Sundaze* and the Santa Cruz Independent through the 1970s, he was a founding associate editor and writer with the Santa Cruz Express (1981-86) and the founding editor and publisher of *The Sun* (1986-89), another newsweekly, which was put out of business by the Loma Prieta earthquake — but not before its final issue chronicled that watershed event.

During most of the 1970s and '80s he was also active as an organizer of and advocate for the Santa Cruz poetry community, putting on readings, writing reviews and essays in the local weeklies, cohosting with Gary Young *The Poetry Show* and *Bards After Dark* on KUSP radio, and serving as an intellectual and journalistic bridge between the literary minority and the general population. In his journalism he infused the newspapers he wrote for with a poetic sensibility not usually found in that medium but taking inspiration from such exponents of The



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New Journalism as Joan Didion and Norman Mailer, politically engaged poets like Amiri Baraka and Denise Levertov, and independent-minded essayists like Kenneth Rexroth and James Baldwin.

Since then, he has published hundreds of essays, features, reviews, interviews, and columns in dozens of periodicals including, among others, Poetry Flash, Exquisite Corpse, San Francisco Review of Books, East Bay Express, Los Angeles Review of Books, North Bay Bohemian, and The Redwood Coast Review (1999–2014), for which he received four times, as editor, the California Library Association’s PR Excellence Award. Writing about Kessler’s book *Moving Targets: On Poets*, Poetry & Translation (El León Literary Arts, 2008), Lawrence Ferlinghetti called him “certainly the best poetry critic in sight.”

Stephen Kessler is best known nationally and internationally as a translator of modern Spanish and Latin American poets including the Argentine master Borges, Nobel laureates Vicente Aleixandre and Pablo Neruda, the exiled Spaniard Luis Cernuda, and the Argentine expatriate Julio Cortázar. His three Cernuda books—*Written in Water* (City Lights Books, 2004), *Desolation of the Chimera* (White Pine Press, 2009), and *Forbidden Pleasures* (Black Widow Press, 2015)—have received, respectively, a Lambda Literary Award, the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets, and the PEN Center USA Translation Award. His version of Cortázar’s selected poems, *Save Twilight* (City Lights, 2016), received a Northern California Book Award.

Publishing his poems for half a century mostly in the independent literary press—from his first collection, *Nostalgia of the Fortuneteller* (1975), issued by George Hitchcock’s Kayak Books, through the prose poems of *Where Was I?* (2015) from Gary Young’s Greenhouse Review Press, to *Last Call* (2021) from Black Widow Press in Boston—Stephen has produced a steady stream of constantly evolving lyric poetry characterized by its musical yet conversational style and a sensibility influenced by a diverse range of predecessors, from Emily Dickinson to Charles Bukowski, Gerard Manley Hopkins to William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay to Frank O’Hara, integrating a spontaneous sense of improvisation with a seemingly casual yet rigorous formal control.

He speaks of his “heteroformalism,” his practice in various forms and genres, as a way of regularly refreshing his imagination, the poetry, essays, and translations feeding and informing one another in mutual cross-fertilization that keeps him engaged, surprised, and venturing into new realms of discovery.

Over the last 37 years, the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission has selected outstanding artists nominated by the public and has honored them through the Artist of the Year Award. Nominees must be a resident of Santa Cruz County, must have a national or international reputation, must have contributed to the cultural enrichment of the local community, and must have created or presented work in Santa Cruz County.

A free Profile Performance will be held in May 2023, 7–9 p.m., at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center. Check the Parks Department website in early spring 2023 for more information: www.scparks.com.



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