

Marin artist's career thrives after death

By Dan Fost

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Clayton Lewis is making a comeback.

The artist, fisherman and raconteur, who died in 1995 at 80, has a show of his works on display at the Bradford Gallery in San Anselmo.

In addition, a move to preserve his home at an isolated Tomales Bay beach has picked up steam.

"His after-life career is really going well," says his son, Peter Lewis of San Francisco.

"I get phone calls all the time from people interested in his art. It's actually very exciting what's happening."

Peter Lewis heads a group of Clayton's friends and survivors that incorporated as the Clayton Lewis Institute for Art and Ecology. The group is working with the National Park Service to preserve the artist's funky array of buildings at Laird's Landing, on the south shore of Tomales Bay.

"As his reputation as a painter prospers, posthumously unfortunately, it has an influence on Laird's Landing," says Richard Kirschman of Dogtown, an institute board member.

Although the Point Reyes National Seashore appeared ready to tear down the buildings last year in a bid to return the site to nature, park officials are now giving the site a second look.

"We've done some additional evaluation of the buildings," says Don Neubacher, national seashore superintendent. "We're also trying to get some funds to-



PUPPETEER: Peter Lewis displays puppets his father made for him in the 1950s. The elder Lewis also painted, sculpted and made jewelry.

gether to do some pest work on the buildings.

"We're not pondering tearing down any of the buildings at this time."

Some of the buildings were first occupied by Coast Miwok Indians who worked on a nearby dairy ranch in the 19th century. Lewis built or restored other buildings on the site, and his handiwork was featured in a book, "Handmade Houses: The Woodbutchers' Art."

Lewis also was a sculptor and a jewelry-maker, and he painted in various media, but his most famous works are his envelopes.

With no telephone at Laird's Landing, Lewis relied on the mail. In later years, he rowed across Tomales Bay to Marshall each day to mail his mother in Port Townsend, Wash., a letter, always enclosing it in an envelope painted with a whimsical watercolor scene.

Many of the envelopes, along

with other paintings and sculptures, are on display until Oct. 19 at the Bradford Gallery at 237 San Anselmo Ave.

Gallery owner Robin Bradford hopes to turn the envelopes, and the contents of the letters, into a book.

"The letters are compelling to read," Bradford says. "You get such a sense of the life he lived out there at Laird's Landing. . . . He created a life few people have experienced."