

## RALPH JOACHIM

*The Big Bang!*  
(stage one of the  
creation series), 2015  
Acrylic on Canvas, 120 x 48 in



COURTESY R. BLITZER GALLERY

## MAGGIE PAUL

# Poetry, Paradise, and Ecstasy

An Interview with  
former California Poet  
Laureate Al Young

**F**or poet, novelist, musician, and teacher Al Young, words and music come together in an alchemy of truth, song, vision, and delight. Regarded as “a man of belle lettres” by the late poet, teacher, and friend Morton Marcus, former California Poet Laureate Young has a list of honors and awards that leaves one breathless. They include a Guggenheim, the Wallace Stegner, a Fulbright, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, the PEN-Library of Congress Award for Short Fiction, the PEN Center USA Award for Nonfiction, two American Book Awards, and two New York Times Notable Book of the Year citations. He is coauthor of several volumes of literature on California and has written film scripts for such notable actors as Richard Pryor. Young’s signature writing styles are as varied and multilayered as the fields of poetry and music themselves. Words are notes and one can (as he sometimes does) sing them off the page. Drawing from the conventions and techniques of poetry and song, Young’s unique voice can best be described as a synthesis of sound and sense that crosses boundaries of history, race, culture, and ethnicity. A citizen of the world, Young speaks to readers of all backgrounds directly from the heart.

*Al Young’s connection to the Central Coast of California runs deep. Following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, he addressed the effects of the tragedy on the Mexican immigrant population, the families of farmworkers who grow our food and keep the agriculture industry one of the most productive in the world:*

### Watsonville After the Quake

On Central Coast radio KOM blasts  
Eddie Rabbitt thru waves of air the sea  
surrounds, & all the other country stars  
come out (Claude King, Tammy Wynette, Shelley  
West) & spread themselves in droplets.  
The sacred moisture of their song is skin  
to seal a pain that quavers in this ash blue night  
coming on just now like a downcast motel date,  
who’s warned you from in front that she’ll be coming  
‘round the mountain when she comes.

Whose tents are these? What’s with these shot  
parking lot & alleyway families peeping around  
the raggedy backs of undemolished fronts?  
That brownskin kid on a grassy patch along Main,  
catching a football & falling with joy  
on the run, is his family up from Mazatlán,  
up from Baja or Celaya— or edges of eternity?

Network tv didn’t do this news up right.  
For all their huff & puff & blow your house down,  
the mediators of disaster and distress  
didn’t find this sickly devastation sexy.  
Besides, who’s going to cry or lose sleep  
over a spaced out, tar papered, toppled down town  
by the sea, brown now with alien debris?

*To do justice in one interview to the wide body of work (and play) of Young’s poems is, in a beautiful sense, impossible. Peering through two very different lenses, the poet asks us to consider the wide lens of the cosmos and the zoomed-in lens of the particular. His visionary poem “The Alchemy of Destiny” reaches out to our humanity from before we were marked with “ancestral codes” and acknowledges our lives*