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Best of 2011 in Art: Christopher Knight

The Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative may be a mixed blessing in ambition and largesse, but the focus on regional art history is sure to have a lasting effect.

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Pacific Standard Time catalogs. (Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times / December 12, 2011)

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By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
December 18, 2011

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The Getty Foundation announced three years ago that its research project to archive material related to Los Angeles art made between the end of World War II and 1980, before it was lost to indifference or time's vagaries, would be expanded to support a series of exhibitions. It seemed a worthy goal. The story of L.A. art's meteoric rise and temporary stumble, before it helped lead the global art explosion of the 1980s, had only been sketchily told.

Grants totaling \$2.8 million would be made to 15 Southern

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struck by how many first-rate works of art have been lent not by museums but by galleries or, even more often, the artists themselves. Are collectors, both personal and institutional, paying attention? If so, a guide to assembling major postwar L.A. art collections has been handed to them on a silver platter.

Call the other long-term aspect "what goes around, comes around." The Getty's PST initiative began as an archival research program, gathering information. When the exhibitions are over, however, some three dozen new books chronicling and interpreting the foundations of L.A.'s art scene will have been published. I dare say that's more texts on the subject than had been cumulatively published before 2011. After the shows close, those books will keep on giving.

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California institutions to help underwrite shows, targeted to open in 2011. Pacific Standard Time, as the batch of exhibitions was collectively dubbed, would begin to fill in big gaps.

PST made 2011 an unprecedented launching pad for L.A. art history. Now that we're more than halfway through the program, which will continue into the spring, a few things are clear. One is that the Getty could not restrain itself: The announced plan for 15 grants quickly ballooned, with more than 60 institutions among the final participants. When all is said and done, the total PST expenditure will reach around \$10 million.

Together, the ambition and largesse proved to be a mixed blessing. It did fuel a perception that a mega-event was unfurling, which helped propel Pacific Standard Time into public consciousness. That might not have happened with a more modest event — assuming that 15 simultaneous exhibitions focused on just 35 years of art can be described as modest. The unprecedented initiative created a festive atmosphere and garnered wide publicity.

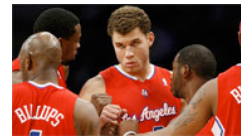
Nooks and crannies of regional art history that might have gone overlooked also found platforms, even if too few shows tackled in-depth analysis of critically important individuals and too many seemed more focused on celebrating the institutional histories of schools and museums rather than art and artists. Shows of '60s and '70s work far outpaced shows of '40s and '50s work. A recurrent worry that PST might be too much of a good thing was also hard to avoid, as exhibitions piled on exhibitions from one end of Southern California to the other, generating a gnawing sense of obligation to see it all — obligation being the last attribute one wants in the vicinity of art.

Still, several important exhibitions have opened, and a few are among the best shows I saw anywhere this year. Their serendipitous collision also clarified some previously hazy notions, such as the way the absence of a mighty institutional infrastructure from the 1940s through the 1970s had a powerful — and beneficial — effect on the kinds of innovative art that got made, as well as how Abstract Expressionism had only an indirect effect. Finally, while the event focuses on the past, two aspects of PST are worth noting for what they might portend for the future.

One is what I think of as the inadvertent shopping list. While visiting PST exhibitions at venues large and small, I've been



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billwray at 7:57 PM December 17, 2011

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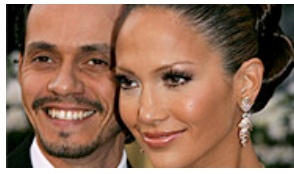
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