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# A New Pin on the Art Map

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

LOS ANGELES — The postwar art of Southern California is a house with many mansions, a great number of which are now open for viewing. I refer of course to the cacophonous, synergistic, sometimes bizarre colossus of exhibitions known as “[Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980](#),” which is rampant throughout the Los Angeles region.

It sharply divides our knowledge of postwar art — not just Californian but American — into two periods: before and after “Pacific Standard Time.” Before, we knew a lot, and that lot tended to greatly favor New York. A few Los Angeles artists were highly visible and unanimously revered, namely Ed Ruscha and other denizens of the Ferus Gallery, that supercool locus of the Los Angeles art scene in the 1960s, plus Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden, but that was about it. After, we know a whole lot more, and the balance is much more even. One of the many messages delivered by this profusion of what will eventually be nearly 70 museum exhibitions is that New York did not act alone in the postwar era. And neither did those fabulous Ferus boys.

Los Angeles may have entered the postwar years with little to speak of in the way of a contemporary art world, but within a decade it was more than making up for lost time. The oft-cited litany of factors contributing to this explosion of art making includes the region’s light, the spaciousness, the cheap rents, Hollywood, the aerospace industry, the car culture, a handful of groundbreaking exhibitions in the ’60s at the Pasadena Art Museum, and the increasingly influential art schools. (There were also the harsh, sometimes galvanizing inequities of the city, especially as experienced by those living in the ghettos and barrios of South Central and East Los Angeles.)

Today Los Angeles has museums and galleries galore, and generations of artistic talent to showcase. And above all — and above it all — it has the Getty Center, on its Brentwood hilltop, which underwrote the project to the tune of about \$10 million. Parceled out, the Getty’s largess enabled scores of institutions to mount exhibitions excavating and retrieving one portion or another of the area’s rich recent cultural past.

During my 5 days here I crammed in about 10 days’ worth of art viewing, with visits to some 35 shows in museums, alternative spaces and a few of the commercial galleries that joined the fray.

It was like moving among linked sites on a real-world information superhighway. Exhibitions veered from dense displays of archival documents to elegantly spacious presentations of artworks, all complementing, amplifying and contradicting one another, highlighting the contributions of African-American and Mexican-American artists, the effects of feminism and the proliferation of art forms like assemblage, ceramics and photography. Certain artists and events put in repeat appearances, seen from new angles or within different narratives. And amid it all, a few overarching ideas emerged.

## **THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD**

The great thing about “Pacific Standard Time” is that as more and more institutions got involved, the Getty loosened its grip, and the project morphed into something whose revelations no one could have predicted. But both the older, neater version of Los Angeles’s postwar art history and hints of the messier one emerging from the surrounding shows are encapsulated in the Getty’s own [“Pacific Standard Time: Crossevents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture 1950-1970.”](#) In a highly compressed fashion (read: crowded, too small and weirdly canonical), the show rehearses the well-known (read: too white and too male) ’60s narrative of found-object assemblage, sleek, abstract Finish Fetish sculpture painting, Pop Art and illusionistic Light and Space work, adding some new twists to the story.

In the first gallery the narrative backs up to the late 1950s, reviewing the alacrity with which ceramics artists like John Mason, Peter Voukos, Ken Price and Henry Takemoto responded to the liberating scale and gesture of Abstract Expressionism in aggressive, often monumental clay sculptures and reliefs, even as some painters, like John McLaughlin, emphatically ignored it, fashioning pristine atmospheric geometries that set the stage for the Light and Space generation.

The show goes on to establish that assemblage was, from the start, a mixed-race endeavor, pursued by white artists like Ed Kienholz, Wallace Berman and Lynn Foulkes, but also by black ones like Melvin Edwards, Ed Bernal, Noah Purifoy and Betye Saar (as well as the Japanese-American Ron Miyashiro). Next the Finish Fetish section includes a decoratively painted car hood from 1964 by the feminist pioneer Judy Chicago. The show continues to the brink of Conceptual Art with a painted word painting from the late 1960s by John Baldessari and concludes with a photograph of Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers, whose mosaic-covered spires are a monumental ode to outsider art and assemblage.

For an illuminating footnote to the Getty show, [“Artistic Evolution: Southern California Artists at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1945-1963,”](#) a small exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Exposition Park, celebrates the annual juried art shows for local artists held there starting in the 1940s. Just about everyone who became anyone submitted work; the sampling here includes little-known early Abstract Expressionist paintings by

Robert Irwin and Mr. Baldessari.

## DEEPER AND WIDER

Other shows enlarge upon the different aspects of the Getty show with visionary force. Distributed among the three sites of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the impeccable “[Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface,](#)” traces the dematerialization of Finish Fetish sculpture into the perceptual etherealities of Light and Space art. It includes a capsule survey of Larry Bell’s early progress from geometric painting to glass-box sculptures, as well as the luminous paintings and installations of Douglas Wheeler and Mary Corse and the translucent resin sculptures of Helen Pashgian and DeWain Valentine. And, in a narrow corridor piece by Mr. Nauman, light and space turn psychological and claustrophobic. It certainly doesn’t hurt that the museum’s main building, in La Jolla, sits on the edge of the light and space of the Pacific.

A visionary power of a gritty, urban sort permeates “[Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980,](#)” a beautiful show at the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. This exhibition examines the rich art scene that emerged in the early 1960s in South Central, revealing how a host of mostly but not always black artists explored assemblage’s special capacities to fuse medium and message, in some cases inspired by the trauma of the 1965 Watts riots.

Mr. Edwards’s fierce welded scrap assemblage-sculptures are seen again here, as are Ms. Saar’s poetic recyclings of image and object, joined by the efforts of a dozen or so more artists, including the macabre doll-like sculptures of John Outterbridge, and the brooding reliefs of Alonzo Davis. The exhibition also reveals how assemblage was further transformed in the early 1970s by performance-oriented installations of found objects by Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger and David Hammons.

The Hammer show is itself placed in even broader context by “[Places of Validation,: Art and Progression,](#)” at the California African American Museum, back in Exposition Park. Its nearly 90 artists include half of those at the Hammer, with especially impressive pieces by Mr. Hammons and Mr. Purifoy.

(An apotheosis of assemblage as medium and message is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in Kienholz’s wrenching, incendiary “Five-Car Stud” made from 1969 to ’72. The stark nighttime tableau of life-size figures and real cars, which depicts the castration of a black man by six white men while Delta blues plays on the radio of the victim’s pickup truck and, inside it, his white female companion looks on in horror. The piece was exhibited previously only once, at the 1972 “Documenta 5” in Germany.)

Southern California is showcased as an epicenter of feminist art in “[Doin’ It in Public: Feminism](#)

and Art at the Woman's Building" in a cavernous gallery at the Otis College of Art and Design near Los Angeles Airport. A deluge of mostly archival material — pamphlets, broadsheets, posters, documents, photographs, videos — with only occasional artworks, its main focus is the evolution of consciousness and collective spaces that culminated in the Woman's Building, founded in Los Angeles in 1973 by Judy Chicago, the designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and the art historian Arlene Raven. That, and the array of further activism, feminist art and outreach programs that the Woman's Building fostered during its 18-year existence. This is the kind of show that I once would have said would make a better book than exhibition, and it comes with two very fine volumes. But nothing beats wading through the array of documentary evidence for a visceral sense of the passions, hard work, ingenuity, commitment and very real changes that these women wrought.

## FORM AND FUNCTION

While prominently placed at the Getty, ceramics had only a few echoes among the "Pacific Standard Time" shows that I saw — but that will soon change. "Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California, 1945-1975," opening on Saturday at the American Museum of Ceramics Art in Pomona, with some 300 variously functional, abstract and decorative works by around 50 artists. And among the second wave of shows opening in January is the more focused "Clay's Tectonic Shift: Peter Voulkos, John Mason and Ken Price" at Scripps College in Claremont, accompanied by a catalog that traces the Ferus Gallery's often ignored promotion of ceramic artists like Mason in the late '50s.

Ceramics do have one stunning moment in the current lineup: the survey of the potter Beatrice Wood (1893-1998) at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. A confidante of Marcel Duchamp during his New York Dada days in the late 1910s, Wood moved to Los Angeles in 1928 and gravitated slowly to clay. In an instance of late blooming that more or less coincided with the growth of studio ceramics in Southern California, she became a potter of distinction, reaching maturity in the 1960s with clunky lusterware chalices and goblets. Their brash yet subtle iridescent surfaces look spectacular beneath the Santa Monica museum's skylights. Wood's indifference to the niceties of craft give her forms a roguish humor and sculptural force comparable to those of the Italian modernist Lucio Fontana's (quite different) works in clay. Meanwhile functional ceramics as well as the sculptural kind are plentiful in "California Design 1930-1965: 'Living in a Modern Way'" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where a wall label notes Voulkos's influential (and controversial) pronouncement in the 1950s that his efforts were art, not craft. The design-theme equivalent of the Getty show, this dense, meandering homage to California's considerable influence on American lifestyle also encompasses furniture, textiles, fashion, industrial and graphic design as well as the emblematic living room of Charles and Ray Eames, available in its entirety because the Eames house-museum in Pacific Palisades is undergoing restoration.

The onslaught of the county museum show finds a highly focused counterpoint in “[Eames Words](#)” at the fledgling Architecture and Design Museum, in a climate-control-free storefront across the street. All but devoid of art, the show succeeds on sheer curatorial imagination. With quotations from the Eameses displayed across walls, a few films and some alluring displays of everyday objects and raw materials, it is like being inside the designers’ heads.

## VIVA MÉXICO

Five eye-opening exhibitions that together highlight the work of Mexican-Americans — as well as the Mexican influence on the region’s visual culture — suggest that one of the richest veins running through postwar Southern California art is the Mexican-American one. And still these shows leave you with the suspicion that the surface has barely been scratched.

At the Autry National Center in Griffiths Park, “[Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation](#)” is devoted to mostly realist painting and sculpture by six Angeleno artists (from three generations, actually). The works range in date from 1906 to the 1970s, with high points including the beautifully reserved still lifes of Eduardo Carrillo (1937-1997).

At the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, the photographs of Oscar Castillo offer a stirring photojournalistic account of Mexican-American life in Los Angeles in the 1970s, while “[Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement](#)” sweeps through paintings, drawings, mural art, political posters and punk music. It also includes Asco, the subversive Chicano collective of the 1970s, whose founding members — Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Gronk and Patssi Valdez — dissented from the more decorous and familiar forms of Chicano art with openly rebellious hit-and-run street performances and other actions.

Asco really gets its due in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s “[Asco: The Elite of the Obscure](#),” where its combination of incisive satire, attitude and style is preserved in images that presage post modern set-up photography and appropriation art. And the artists of Asco also figure, both collectively and individually, in the amazing if disjointed “[MEX/L.A.: ‘Mexican’ Modernism\(s\) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985](#)” at the Museum of Latin American Art, which was established 15 years ago in a former bowling alley in Long Beach. Opening with a fabulously customized lowrider from 1970 by Jesse Valdez Jr., this exhibition reaches back to before World War II with drawings by Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Its wide net includes all kinds of artists influenced by Mexican culture (Frank Lloyd Wright, the Eameses, Walt Disney), and encompasses the photographer Graciela Iturbide, the great outsider Martin Ramirez and recent Conceptualists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña. One telling resurrection is Alfredo Ramos Martínez (1871-1946), whose politically pointed paintings from the late ’30s of rope-bound Mexicans were executed on pages taken from newspapers, a strategy that presages



similar works by Adrian Piper 30 years later. Among the most exciting, open-ended achievements of “Pacific Standard Time,” this rambunctious show should inspire a larger, even more omnivorous one.

## **THE PHOTO-CONCEPTUAL EXPLOSION**

Another insistent strain in much of “Pacific Standard Time” is photography and its constantly mutating role in Conceptual Art starting in the early ’70s. Among the several worthy gallery shows up during my visit, the most impressive was the near total re-creation, at Cherry and Martin, a gallery on La Cienega Boulevard, of “Photography into Sculpture,” a 1970 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that included numerous Los Angeles artists who were exploring three-dimensional uses of photographs. (Two early innovators in this area are the subject of their own show, [“Speaking in Tongues: The Art of Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken”](#) at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena.)

The metastasizing of photography (and also video) is a central component in two immense exhibitions, which also go beyond the Southern California focus of “Pacific Standard Time” to address the perennial art historical imbalance between Los Angeles and San Francisco. In Newport Beach, the Orange County Museum of Art’s [“State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970”](#) is a dense, seemingly encyclopedic presentation of Conceptual Art from up and down the coast, shot through with various forms of satire, political fury and emotional vulnerability. Organized with the Berkeley Art Museum, where it will open in late February, it presents works by some 50 artists and artist collectives and resurrects numerous forgotten talents while deepening appreciation of more familiar ones.

An interesting minor sidebar to this exhibition — and also to the women’s show at Otis — is [“She Accepts the Proposition: Women Gallerists and the Redefinition of Art in Los Angeles, 1967-1978”](#) at the Crossroads School in Santa Monica. Conceived as a corrective to the view that male curators and art dealers did all the heavy lifting in Los Angeles, it centers on five female art dealers who mounted pioneering shows of installation, conceptual and video art. The Getty should offer grant support for a catalog for this show, which is a gem.

The other immense show that is rife with (although hardly limited to) photo-based work is the baleful, ambitious [“Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981,”](#) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles organized by Paul Schimmel, its chief curator.

An instance of curatorial imperiousness that makes few concessions to viewer stamina, it represent some 140 artists with nearly 500 artworks, spanning the years between two Californian presidencies — from Richard M. Nixon’s resignation to the inauguration of Ronald Reagan — and charting what might be called the beginning of the breakdown of the American Dream that owed so

much to California.

It opens with a haunting juxtaposition of Robert Arneson's monumental 1981 bust of San Francisco's assassinated mayor, George Moscone, and several paintings by Mr. Foulkes that riff with Baconesque defacements on official, implicitly presidential portraiture. In effect this exhibition "samples" work from almost every other show in "Pacific Standard Time." It contains paintings by Mr. Ruscha, Chicano posters and mural drawings, one of Mr. Outterbridge's wicked dolls and just about every artist, it sometimes seems, in the "State of Mind" show. Its breadth of vision is breathtaking, but it also flattens the art. One can't help but feel that the "big black sun" may be Mr. Schimmel himself.

## **EXPLODING ART HISTORY**

"Pacific Standard Time" has been touted as rewriting history. It seems equally plausible to say that it simply explodes it, revealing the immensity of art before the narrowing and ordering of the historicizing process. Taken together, its shows may be the next best thing to being there the first time around, or maybe even better: they surely reveal more than any single individual living through these times could have seen or known about.

To a great extent this epic of exhibitions reflect our moment's broader historical attitude, which might be characterized as No Artist Left Behind. Anyone who made art at a given moment is eligible to be part of the history of that moment. It's expansive and inclusive and also reminds of me of Lewis Carroll's imaginary full-scale map, which was meant to be as large as the area it charted.

"Pacific Standard Time" is a great argument for museums concentrating first and foremost on local history, for a kind of cosmopolitan regionalism, if you will. It sets an example that other curators in other cities should follow, beginning in my mind with Chicago and San Francisco. If America has more than one art capital, it probably has more than two.



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