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William Poundstone on Art and Chaos

## William Poundstone's Los Angeles County Museum on Fire

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November 21, 2011, 10:03 am

["Naked Hollywood": Weegee at MOCA](#)



For everyone burnt out on "Pacific Standard Time" sweetness and light—all those underrated minimalists, assemblage geni, and saintly dealers—the tonic might be "Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles" at MOCA Grand Avenue. In 1947 New York tabloid photographer Weegee moved to Los Angeles. That wasn't a Facebook "Like." Weegee's metier was sex, violence, and cheap irony, and he'd concluded that L.A. had more of his material. During his sojourn,

Weegee photographed movie stars and fans, strippers, oddities, and (for old time's sake) the occasional crime. He became a movie actor himself and consulted on film special effects. Then after four years, he decided he and his "elastic lens" had seen enough. Weegee left "Newark, New Jersey, with palm trees" to return to "civilization," the one on the trans-Newark Hudson. The MOCA exhibition fills nine galleries with rarely-shown material created both during and after the artist's time in Los Angeles. Though Weegee must be the *least* characteristic L.A. artist featured under the "Pacific Standard Time" umbrella, this show delves deeply into what it means to make art in Los Angeles. (Pictured, Weegee's *Jayne Mansfield*.)

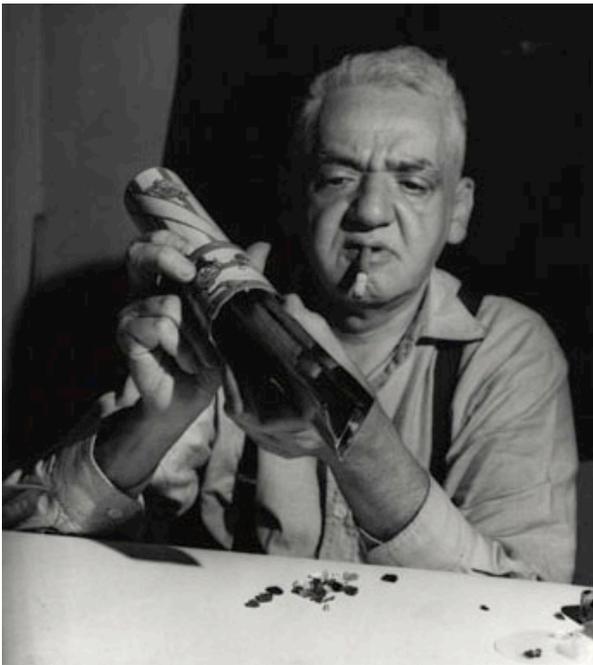


Weegee said of his move to L.A.: "Now I could really photograph the subjects I liked. I was free." Another artist might have used that freedom to move on to something more serious, less commercial. In L.A. Weegee's art became more exploitative, more lowbrow, more gimmicky.

Weegee said drunks made excellent subjects. At movie premieres, he found poetry in the wild, orgasmic expressions of the fans (right, *Hollywood Premiere*). He was a proto-paparazzo, though he wasn't satisfied with bad hair days. Weegee squinched famous faces into monstrous caricatures by his own, proprietary techniques. He claimed his methods were as secret as the atom bomb, a fact that did not inhibit him from revealing them in amateur photography magazines.



Weegee devised analog precursors of dozens of PhotoShop filters. To some extent you're amazed that Weegee's steampunk techniques were such novelties to the 1950s popular press. There is nonetheless a small subset of the "distortions" that stay with you. The freakiest thing in the show is an Eddie Cantor in which the actor's face is transformed into an infinitely repeating, all-over teratoma. In each repeating cell, the mouth is replaced with a third eye. Images such as this were created using a kaleidoscope. The concept was ripped off in the 1958 film *The Fly*, though nothing in that Vincent Price chiller is so disturbing as Weegee's small, B&W picture. Shown next to it is a similar transformation of Jerry Lewis — you'd think that a mugging Jerry Lewis wallpaper would be even more nightmarish, but actually, the Cantor nails it. (Below, not in the MOCA show, a rare shot of Weegee in the act of repurposing a kaleidoscope, and one of Jerry Lewis portraits.)



Weegee's L.A. story is itself a funhouse caricature of L.A. art history—a narrative generally predicated on a lack of history, a shallow and hedonistic citizenry, and a superabundance of popular culture. Call that the noble savage theory of L.A. art. It claims that these factors have counter-intuitively encouraged artistic experimentation. The PST update is that said experimentation, initially considered facile, is now being taken seriously. (Weegee's "elastic lens" was made of plastic, the favored material of 1960s L.A. minimalists. His kaleidoscopy is reprised in another PST show, "[Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza](#)" at LACMA, which also celebrates gritty urbanism, come to think of it [below right].)

Maybe PST was intended to put the noble savage theory to rest. No such luck: "Artists in California were unburdened by tradition," a [Reuters "Pacific Standard Time" overview](#) reported. In a recent [Adam Nagourney's piece in the New York Times](#), L.A. remains a place where "interest in culture starts and ends with movie grosses and who is on the cover of *Vanity Fair*" yet "young artists [are] drawn here by... an atmosphere that encourages experimentation."

That's not a new idea. In the May 1863 issue of *The New Path*, an unsigned editorialist wrote,

*"The artists... are not hampered by many traditions, and they enjoy the almost inestimable advantage of having no past, no masters and no schools. Add, that they work for an unsophisticated, and, as far as Art is concerned, uneducated public..."*

The writer was talking about "American" art, meaning the East Coast. California had only been a state for 13 years. It seems that this talking point arises spontaneously whenever an art community lacks the obvious advantages of history and an appreciative public.

But it doesn't stand up. Unless you're photographing movie premieres, there's no need to live in L.A. to make art about pop culture and vulgarity. What about being able to ignore the art market and focus on one's work? Well you can do that precisely to the degree that you're independently wealthy or, more likely, have a compatible day job such as teaching in an art school.



It remains the easiest thing in the world for an artist to be ignored by the art market, the art press, museums, and everyone else. The one real change in the past generation is that Los Angeles has built up an infrastructure of dealers, collectors, museums, critics, and art historians. If the noble savage theory is right, that should be the death knell of Los Angeles art, but I'd be willing to bet it will be the opposite.

Los Angeles has become an art center for reasons that have little to do with the movie business or freedom from the market. Many people wanted to live in Southern California, and some of those people were artists. Studio rents are less than in New York, so far, and the cost of heating a studio in winter is a lot less. Some great art schools flourished in L.A., and grads often stay on. The real question should be one immaterial to Weegee, the great autodidact: Why are there so many important art schools in L.A.?



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