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**March 18, 2010****MUSEUMS SPECIAL SECTION**

# Unearthing Lost Treasures in California

**By JORI FINKEL**

WHEN the Watts riots swept Los Angeles in 1965, Noah Purifoy, an artist who was in the thick of things as the director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, quickly took to the streets with a friend. Their mission was to gather debris — charred railroad ties, wood from burned-out houses, melted scraps of neon signs and other wreckage that could serve as raw material for sculpture. The resulting artworks soon went on tour throughout the country in a group show, “66 Signs of Neon.”

For years this work was thought to have been destroyed or trashed, “returned to its origins as junk,” in the poetic phrasing of Abby Wasserman in a museum essay written a few years before the artist’s death in 2004. But Andrew Perchuk, who is organizing a 2011 show for the Getty Museum on painting and sculpture in Los Angeles from 1945 to 1970, has a surprise. He plans to include a Watts riot sculpture by Purifoy in his exhibition — an assemblage rescued last year from a private owner in Las Vegas.

“It’s a very powerful, visceral — also melancholy — piece because of the burnt materials,” said Mr. Perchuk, who is deputy director of the Getty Research Institute. “And its whereabouts were completely unknown since the 1960s.”

This Purifoy assemblage is just one of a number of scholarly discoveries being made during the preparation of “Pacific Standard Time,” a set of exhibitions in and about Southern California opening in the fall of 2011. The Getty Foundation, which is organizing the initiative, has granted \$6.7 million to nearly 30 institutions, from small university galleries to major art museums. Each is focusing on a different slice of California art history, from World War II to 1980.

“Most people think of L.A. as a major art center beginning around 1980, but there was a lot happening here beforehand,” said Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation. And a lot, she added, was in danger of being lost. “We were losing artists, losing people, losing historical records.” This led to the idea for “Pacific Standard Time” and two rounds of financing, starting with research grants in 2008.

One result, curators say, is they have the time to dig a bit deeper than usual and bring artworks long thought lost or destroyed — or pieces that even experts did not know existed — to light.

“As a small museum, we’re pulled from pillar to post just keeping the exhibitions going,” said Hugh Davies, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. “Without the grants, we would have never had the luxury to do such focused research.”

For “Phenomenal: California Light and Space,” his 2011 survey of artists like Robert Irwin and [James Turrell](#), Mr. Davies has found a pioneering work by Douglas Wheeler that he believes has not been documented in the literature on the Light and Space movement.

It is a large, seemingly white (but actually subtly hued) canvas that, backlit by neon tubing, appears to float off the wall. “He had made the work in 1965 and it never left his studio,” said Mr. Davies. “It’s the first time that he combined neon light with a canvas — so it’s a transitional moment between being a painter and sculptor.”

At the Pomona College Museum of Art, the curator, Rebecca McGrew, has discovered early, formative pieces for her show — a three-part exhibition on artwork made or shown at the college from 1969 to 1973. One is student work by the artist Chris Burden that is still in his possession — a small bronze from 1966 intended to be both aesthetic and functional.

“It’s a round bronze that seems like a sculpture by Henry Moore, but he planned to make a slot where you can install a blade to use it as a knife,” said Ms. McGrew. She is working with the artist to recreate a large-scale Minimalist sculpture from 1967 — a yellow cubelike contraption — that he once installed on the campus quad.

Meanwhile, Prof. Chon Noriega of [U.C.L.A.](#), who is curating three different “Pacific Standard Time” shows, has unearthed what he describes as “one of the first Chicano murals in Los Angeles,” a collaboration by nearly a dozen artists that presided over the doorway to the Goetz Art Gallery in East Los Angeles in the early 1970s. The gallery owners tracked down the piece, consisting of wood panels, in storage. “It is in much better shape than we expected, given its exposure to the elements and then long period of storage,” Professor Noriega wrote in an e-mail message.

“We’ll do some conservation work, but even now the piece gives a palpable sense of how Chicano artists were changing the visual culture of an urban environment that had been neglected,” Professor Noriega added. He plans to install it as the “entranceway” to his show on Chicano arts organizations for the Fowler Museum at U.C.L.A.

And at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the director, Elsa Longhauser, plans to exhibit some diaries by the legendary Beatrice Wood, who lived from 1893 to 1998 and kept daily journals for

85 years. The entries are “enigmatic,” said Ms. Longhauser. “But I think they will be revealing, going beyond the myth of Beatrice Wood to show the real artist and thinker.”

In this case, the Dada expert Francis Naumann brought the existence of the journals to the museum’s attention (he is annotating excerpts for the exhibition and publication). Mr. Perchuk, who learned about the survival of the Purifoy work — and several other pieces by Purifoy as well — through what he calls “incredible primary research” by Yael Lipschutz, a doctoral student at the [University of Southern California](#), explained that this kind of outside contribution is typical of “Pacific Standard Time.”

Along with putting out informal inquiries, most participating museums have created small advisory boards, he said, to bring art historians like Mr. Naumann on board. It makes for a large network of experts, especially if you consider “Pacific Standard Time” to be one vast many-armed show.

“Even a major [MoMA](#) show might have only five or six scholars,” said Mr. Perchuk. “Through the Getty research grants there are now 120 scholars around the country looking at Southern California art of this period very intensively at the same time. This is completely unprecedented.”

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