

# The Artists Who Matter: L.A.'s New Scene Makes History

If L.A. Continues to Demonstrate its Faith, the Art Scene will have Arrived at Last

by Hunter Drohojowska

Photographs by Peter Kredenser/Shooting Star

ROGER HERMAN LOOKED AT ME INcredulously and said, "Another article on the emerging Los Angeles art scene! That's just like this town. You emerge for five years and then what happens? Maybe no one will want to have anything to do with you."

Herman is a German artist, painting in a Neo-Expressionist style, whose work has garnered plenty of attention as interest swells in Los Angeles' burgeoning art scene. It all seemed too good to be true. But Herman's fears are unfounded. After decades of emerging—like Atlantis rising?—La Los Angeles has arrived. She may be a parvenu adolescent, with more energy than tact, but there is clearly an audience for her ingenuity and her cache.

Last winter, what had once seemed impossible, took place. Thousands of art-knowledgeable New Yorkers and Europeans trekked to mellow, sun-washed Southern California for the much publicized openings of two museums: the Museum of Contemporary Art and the new addition to the L.A. County Museum of Art. Many had only seen the city as a backdrop for Hollywood movies and admitted astonishment at the relentless chic and determined sophistication. They dined next to Harry Dean Stanton at the Caribbean restaurant Cha Cha Cha; they spotted Bette Midler at the Saturday night club, Power Tools.

Amidst the roiling gossip, they heard about the Lannan Foundation, relocated in L.A. from West Palm Beach, and ready to spend some \$5 million a year on contemporary art. (J. Patrick Lannan, Jr., President of the Board, explained the westward move by saying that taking the foundation to New York would have been like "bringing coals to Newcastle.")

At the peak of the early December celebrations, it was announced that the ever acquisitive J. Paul Getty trust had bought a remarkable library of 20th century art—particularly strong in German expressionism—for \$1.8 million from lawyer and scholar, Dr. Wilhelm F. Arntz. When considered with the

Robert Gore Rifkind library acquired by LACMA in 1983, the purchase weirdly establishes L.A. as the world center for the study of German Expressionist art. By mid-December, it was learned that LACMA was given Proctor Stafford's esteemed collection of Pre-Columbian art and ten Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings from the estate of Hal Wallis. Meanwhile, MoCA repaired its strained relationship with trustee Count Giuseppe Panza de Biumo, and the purchase of his collection continues on schedule.

Amidst all of this hoopla over institutions and purchases, however, there came a special reward—a subtle acknowledgment of L.A.'s talented younger artists by curators, dealers and collectors from around the world. At MoCA's exhibition "Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986," they saw that L.A. artists like Alexis Smith, Michael Kelley and Robert Therrien could hold their own with the most innovative European and East Coast talents, whether that meant German painter Sigmar Polke, American conceptualist Robert Barry or sculptor Joel Shapiro.

Smith melds writings by sundry authors with found objects and snippets of popular culture in collage/paintings that send you reeling among the simultaneous possibilities of fiction, perception, imagination and reality. At MoCA, her collages included eclectic quotations from Dos Passos' *USA*, from Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, and from Jim Morrison's *The End*. A simple wooden chair in a corner was silkscreened with the quote: *All the simple old-fashioned charm of a cop beating up a drunk*. The references to the Daily Planet, newspaper journalism, and cliché sensationalism were mounted on walls painted with giant produce logos, like *Topless Vegetables*.

In an adjacent installation, Kelley's allegorical drawings and paintings from his 1983 performance *Monkey Island* combines his quasi-philosophical musings with dirty jokes and scatological Americana. A rubber bladder

hangs from the ceiling, and simple blank ink drawings of insects and monkeys conjure the obscene, the transcendent, and the bizarre in a matrix of visual and literal meaning.

Robert Therrien works at the more formal end of the spectrum, creating sculpture and paintings that radiate with an immanent physical poetry. His vocabulary of forms includes church steeples and doors, minarets, or shapes that symbolically allude to the human presence. A blue straw boater, cast in bronze and perched rakishly atop a white pillar, is a particularly poignant piece.

With art like this, L.A. no longer looks like a promising regional development but finds itself sitting tall in the saddle of post-modernist concerns. L.A.'s new breed of artists are informed, tied to an international dialog, and conscious of their place in art history. They find their antecedents (and their peers) among European and New York artists, not among their local predecessors. The best and the brightest have turned their backs on provincial West Coast traditions.

Lari Pittman explained, "For myself, and others I think, there is more of an historical and sociological take on things, as opposed to simply taking information from the culture and leaving it at that."

These artists are bored by two decades of concentration on the seductive Southern California light, the funk heritage of assemblage, and the fascination with unconventional materials whether it be molded fiberglass, handmade paper, or tie-dyed gum-wrappers. L.A. isn't just emerging, it is growing up.

This is not to dismiss L.A.'s rich heritage of the 60s in the work of Bruce Nauman, Robert Irwin, Ed Moses, Ed Ruscha, Tony Berlant, Doug Wheeler, Jim Turrell, Sam Francis, Richard Diebenkorn, Charles Garabedian and Vija Celmins, all of whom looked startlingly fresh at MoCA's opening exhibition. But apart from such talent, L.A. has often been rightly regarded



Roger Herman



Michael Kelley



David Amico

as an outpost for insipid photorealism, beach-inspired abstraction, and art that is cloying, cornball or cutesy.

The increased respect awarded L.A.'s younger artists is evidenced by the number of museum curators from the golden corridor of the East Coast who are not only exhibiting, but are buying work by the new breed. The Whitney Biennial was attentive to L.A. artists last year, including Jill Giegerich, Robert Therrien, John Baldessari, Charles Garabedian, Michael Kelley, Kim McConnell (who is from San Diego), and video artists Bill Viola, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. This year, a reduced biennial shows Lari Pittman and Ed Ruscha.

L.A.'s first international arts fair, modeled after those held in Chicago and Basel, was held the first week of December, and brought out heavyweight dealers and collectors from Europe and New York. Although many complained that business was not what they had hoped—L.A. collectors and writers being busy with all the museum parties—sales were paradoxically good for L.A.'s own artists. The



Lari Pittman

city's dealers ecstatically reported selling works by Smith, Giegerich and others to East Coast collectors.

Just ten years ago, this would not have been the case. There was a third the number of galleries, critics, curators, arts institutions, restaurants and clubs. But if you had to point to a single factor in the accelerated sophistication of L.A.'s art scene, it would have to be the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia.

This avant-garde school for the visual and performing arts was founded in 1970 with funds donated by Walt Disney. Improbably, it became home to the nascent Conceptual art movement with professors like John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler, and a distinctly post-structuralist, pro-Marxist theoretical bent. The school not only graduated artists now prominent in New York such as David Salle, Erika Beckman, and Ashley Bickerton, it spawned and supported an entire movement of thoughtful artists and dealers in Los Angeles. Lari Pittman, Jim Isermann, Marc Pally, Mitchell Syrop, Tim Ebner, Michael Kelley and Jill



Constance Malinson



## Jill Giegerich

*Giegerich* are a few examples, all creating a fashion of conceptually influenced art that has become uniquely their own.

CalArts doesn't beget a style so much as it teaches its art students to think. Baldessari, the paterfamilias, stresses that art is about challenging assumptions, the real challenge lying in the assumptions you can't even think of. In such a dialectical atmosphere, artist found themselves more easily plugged into the questions that were being asked internationally and they chafed at L.A.'s provincialism.

This knowledge also divided them from the gang of artists who had held sway in Los Angeles since the late 1960s—the old guard described by one artist as having this anti-intellectual attitude that you can't talk about art. I think they are afraid that, with their art, there is nothing to say.

Among the artists who've gained prominence since 1979, Pittman, Pally and Ebner all paint in a way that "deconstructs" or breaks down the historical language of painting. Like their peers in Europe or on the East Coast, they

have returned to the past to examine the present. Pittman borrows from the biomorphic shapes of Abstract Surrealism and outmoded design motifs to question the nature of representation in painting; in Pally's pictures, organic and constructed forms co-exist in a dense atmosphere created out of the dissolving matter of the forms themselves; Ebner composes grids with Minimalist panels of artificial color and photo-enlarged images of big gestural brush strokes.

Syrop combines advertising photographs

John Baldessari





## Mitchell Syrop

with slogans and idiomatic expressions in posters that superficially examine manipulation by the mass media and may prompt more existential questions. For example, one photograph of a man's hand holding a woman's, is captioned *Make. Be. Leave.* Giegerich combines construction material such as plywood, tar and sandpaper in Cubo-Constructivist sculptural reliefs that simultaneously refer to social issues and the artist's interior yearnings. Isermann recycles Surrealist biomorphism by recreating the curvilinear fur-

niture of the late 50s and the early 60s in bright day-glo colors.

These artists have distanced themselves from the emotional, or the purely formal, in favor of a more ambitious critical relationship to art history. Yet artists who never attended CalArts embrace similar attitudes. Roger Herman employs hotly expressionist, gestural brushstrokes to build cold, distanced paintings based on photographs, again as a deconstruction of art historical preconceptions. Constance Mallison composes landscapes and figures from

pastiches of cliched photographs of scenery drawn from postcards and travel advertisements. Peter Shelton abstracts his body into sculptural parts which are cast in iron and bronze, and creates complex, massive installations involving architecture and human form as metaphor. David Amico's pictures raise the issue of man's role in a large, inhospitable world, referring to the tradition of Northern Romantic painting. Jeffrey Vallance travels to remote areas of the world and translates his experiences into drawings and sculptures that in-



## Peter Shelton

*tegrate* American cultural influence with the mythology of such exotic areas as Iceland and Rarotonga.

While these artists hardly constitute any sort of stylistic movement, they represent a common hope that they can live in Los Angeles without being brain dead. Instead, they hope to find an individual niche in the historical continuum and to gain international acceptance.

Although a few of these artists sell enough work to make ends meet, many of city's art collectors have been hesitant to support younger

artists and still want to play it safe, buying the de rigueur lithograph by a blue chip artist. Exasperated dealers complain about the bias in their own town, and are bitter towards collectors who fly to galleries in New York to buy the works of L.A., as well as East Coast, artists. The imprimature of Manhattan's authority still survives. "They like to get together and talk about who has the newest Frank Stella," joked Roger Herman.

Will this improve as L.A.'s new generation assumes the mantle? Marc Pally insisted "I'm

optimistic, I think the quality of art produced here has gotten so good, people will want to possess it. The exposure to all this new art, the many galleries that are opening, it all should help."

Lari Pittman must concur. Last February his show at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery sold out before it opened. Most of the major paintings were purchased by museums. If L.A. continues to demonstrate its faith with financial clout, as well as the many good words, the city's art scene will have arrived at last. □