

L.A. RAW

"Helter Skelter," a controversial show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, makes its bid to redefine what California art is all about. Sex, violence, and rebellion are the dominant themes

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

BEAMS OF COLORED laser lights raked the cold mist formed by a hidden fog machine. The industrial rock of Ethyl Meatplow pummeled an audience of thousands, mostly young people wearing the postpunk uniform of black leather motorcycle jacket, T-shirt, and jeans. A few well-dressed, older patrons found themselves pushed up against a glass wall by the entrance, where a uniformed guard let the crowds enter at a slow drip. Was this the frenzy of a Guns N' Roses concert? No, it was the opening night party for "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s" at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The L.A. Police Department estimates that 8,200 people attended the museum that night, though not all of them wound up seeing the show. Art world regulars refused to wait in line, among them such artists as Chris Burden and Nancy Rubins, whose works are in the exhibition, as well as Kirk Varnedoe, the director of the department of painting and sculpture of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and such Hollywood denizens as directors Tim Burton and Paul



Bartel. Actress and rock singer Ann Magnuson, who was at the opening with artist Brad Dunning, said: "The whole insane atmosphere reminded me of the New York art events of the early '80s. All that was missing was Andy Warhol."

The show, dominated by images of violence, sex, and black humor, completely fills the Temporary Contemporary, the 45,000-square-foot warehouse exhibition space that is nearby MoCA's main building. And it has turned "Helter Skelter," the debut exhibition of Chief Curator Paul Schimmel, who came to the museum two years ago, into a succès de scandale. While the gay-activist group Queer Nation has protested the small number of women and homosexuals represented, and a local coalition called P.I.G.s.—Politically In-

three-painting installation. In the first painting, he presents a Minimalist white grid with tiny comics panels. In the second painting, the comics tell the story of three characters, written by Benjamin Weissman from Shaw's suggestions, each representing an L.A. industry consumed by *horror vacui*. For example, there's a real-estate agent and serial killer who murders his clients in order to systematically fill up the pages of an L.A. map with notations of the bodies. The third painting is entirely black, the result of each of the cartoon panels being reproduced, one atop the other, so that all the white space—the vacuum—is eliminated. Shaw and Weissman, like many of the other artists in the exhibition, harness the forms of Pop and Minimalism to a more frankly cynical content.

Six artists in the show, in fact, use cartoons to illustrate their lurid tales, including Raymond Pettibon, who first gained recognition on the punk scene for his drawings on album covers for the rock group Black Flag. His overwhelming installation, *A Yarn Spun to No Mend*, fills an entire room as well as the rear wall of the museum with drawings in styles ranging from the look of the animated-cartoon character Gumby to that of the early-20th-century American Ashcan school. These are paired with unrelated quotations

from the 19th-century writings of John Ruskin, hard-boiled slang from pulp fiction, and a host of other sources. The result is a brilliant cacophony of voices and pictures embodying the hopes and disappointments of 20th-century American culture.

In Megan Williams' drawings, the slippery, pratfall humor of animated cartoons is caught suspended in space, including a cartoon couple copulating on stage before a large, expressionless audience. The whirlwinds in these drawings seem to come to life in her installation—a loony tornado of pink and white styrofoam puffs. Occasionally, the seductive quality of her work drowns out its message of tension between the sexes.

Llyn Foulkes' deranged cartoon-style paintings here culminate in the installation *Pop*. In a darkened room, with a soundtrack of Foulkes singing "America, the Beautiful," there is a wall-size painting of a man, probably "Pop," in an armchair. Under his open-collared shirt, one can see the border of a Superman suit. His eyes bulge out of his face in three-dimensional relief. He has a vise grip on a can of soda pop. A barely visible gun is in a holster at his hip. Two children appear to be soothing him. The painting is electrically wired to produce incandescent light from the lamps and TV. Actual wood paneling and blinds lend a weird, homey surrealism to a picture that feels like it's about to detonate.

Paul Schimmel, curator of "Helter Skelter": "I'm interested in art that is going to be right in your face."

Robert Williams is a master of bawdiness and has been an active underground artist for decades—he cofounded Zap Comix in 1968. The painting that the activists of Queer Nation protested is *Oscar Wilde in Leadville April 13th 1882*. It depicts the writer's lecture on esthetics to an unappreciative

audience of miners. Williams portrays a polka-dotted cartoon fairy with wings being shot by one of the thugs. His subtitle for the piece refers to Wilde as a "sodomite" and "syphilitic."

"The titles are in the lingo of the trial transcripts of the 1890s," Williams says. "I'm guilty of stirring people up but not guilty of being antihomosexual."

The pornography and violence of his underground comics were the target of right-wing Christian fundamentalists throughout the 1970s. Williams finds it ironic that his scantily clad sci-fi women are the target of protests today. "I've been active in the fight against censorship since the late '60s," says Williams. "I was getting pressure from the right-wing fundamentalists. Now I'm getting it from the left wing."

Asked about the protests, Schimmel replies in an even-handed way that denies none of the basically perverse character of his show: "There are equally demeaning depictions of men in the exhibition," he says. "So in that respect, it's a balanced view."

Mike Kelley uses the most banal of cartoons to address the disparity between the decor of an ad agency's conference room and its photocopying room. On minimalist white walls, Kelley reproduces such office one-liners as "What part of NO don't you understand?" and "The floggings will continue until morale improves." Some of these jokes undermine the swagger of corporate power, while others deal with ribald sexual innuendo. He plays on the notion of the wall-size heroic mural as "workers' art" by enlarging to monumental proportions these bits of blue-collar humor and cartooning. In the process, he subversively celebrates low-level images and juvenile wit.

In the exhibition catalogue, Relyea talks about the spirit of this teenage wasteland re-created by adult artists: "The adolescent sensibility that pervades this show seems significant not only for what it conjures—dispossession, anti-social behavior, susceptibility—but also for what it sets itself against, namely leadership and expertise . . ." A number of installations in "Helter Skelter" illustrate Relyea's point.

Significantly, Chris Burden has made the confrontation with authority a perennial theme. Burden's *Medusa's Head*, 14 feet in circumference, is a depopulated, deforested planet completely overrun with toy trains. According to the artist, it represents a common fear in the 19th century that trains would destroy the landscape; but what once was terrifying is seen today as romantic. Meanwhile, Nancy Rubins' staggering pile of trailers and hot-water heaters makes a poignant observation about domestic life and mobility that what might



Nancy Rubins' *Trailers, Drawings, and Hot Water Heaters*, 1991, comments on domestic life and relationships that can wind up as trash.



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PAULA GOLDMAN/COURTESY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

eroticism. The piece isn't only a raw onanistic joke. It's about man raping the earth—literally.

It is a measure of the topsy-turvy character of "Helter Skelter" as a whole that the steamy paintings of Lari Pittman look like dazzling decorations. Paeans to the physical and spiritual love between men, these recent pictures focus on vaginal openings set into the bodies of owls, and include swollen ovaries, necklaces of sperm, intricately wrought renditions of the number 69, and burning candles oozing thick puddles of viscous, white wax. The layered references to life, death, afterlife, human yearning, wisdom, and painful loss are echoed in such titles as *Ameliorative and Needy* and *Miraculous and Needy*. Pittman explains, "The first word of each title is about some sort of positive projection, philosophical healthiness. The word 'needy' makes it clear that the proposal is intrinsically flawed."

Many critics have argued that the show itself is intrinsically flawed. Among the cries of misogyny, homophobia, and sexism, general questions of political correctness have emerged. In the *L.A. Weekly*, for example, Ralph Rugoff chides: "'Helter Skelter' avoids more issues than it confronts head on, and neglects the politics and aesthetics

of race and class that might have really made the show 'potentially controversial.'"

Yet Manuel Ocampo's artificially aged paintings on themes of colonialism and the oppression of the Philippines by Europe and America, which are a little too obvious, are further evidence to the contrary. While the exhibition does not do well if reviewed on the merit of quotas filled, that was not the goal, according to Schimmel. "I was not striving to do a politically correct show," he says bluntly. And Chris Burden, one of the show's most political artists, adds: "The criticisms sound great on paper. It's fine if you are not trying to make a quality art show. If being politically correct is your only agenda, then this show is a failure. But if you are trying to talk about what quality is, then you have to make decisions."

have seemed romantic—or at least comforting—is, in fact, terrifying: an alienating world in which relationships too often wind up as trash.

Meg Cranston's row of royal blue canvases lettered with pale pink statistics ("5'3" 124 lbs; 5'7" 128 lbs"), titled *Jane and John Does*, is no less bleak. The work "represents the heights and weights of unidentified corpses cremated in the City of L.A. in a typical one month period," according to the work's subtitle. In a companion videotape, a genie is nodding off to such Muzak tunes as "Up, Up, and Away," which are laced with naive New Age affirmations like "Breathe in peace, breathe out fear." The piece is a sly critique of the optimistic outlook associated with L.A. And not far from Cranston's installation, Victor Estrada makes a literally enormous impression with *Baby/Baby*, a 30-foot-long iridescent foam sculpture of two babies, one smiling, one frowning, that both face a gargantuan phallus. A Spanish greeting card in adoration of "La Madre" is framed and hung on the lurid purple wall of the gallery. The whole thing is a droll yet frightening statement about idealized relations between parents and children—and their often truly oppressive reality.

In the end, "Helter Skelter" is about a changing Los Angeles. Visitors are coming to the exhibition in droves. As this issue went to press, the total number surged over 32,000, making it one of the most highly attended shows in the museum's nine-year history.

Perhaps they are drawn by the sensationalist aspects of the title. Maybe they come to see the place that L.A. has become. As Los Angeles has matured, nature has given way to culture. What has been termed the "dark side" of L.A. is in fact its urban side. One could find similar concerns in New York or Cologne. But because it breaks L.A.'s sun-and-fun stereotype, this show must be viewed as some sort of uneasy proof that L.A. is coming of age as a city. And as it does so, it produces art that is emphatically not about sunsets or suntans. A better title for this exhibition would have been "Paradise Lost."

Perhaps the most striking installation in the show is Paul McCarthy's *Garden*. An idyllic setting of artificial grass, boulders, and tree trunks is disrupted by a pair of mechanical naked men. One, expressionless, with pants around his ankles, is copulating with a tree; the other, pants hastily discarded, his face averted, is thrusting himself into the ground. You have to peer through the bushes to see them, a creepily voyeuristic experience on a par with Marcel Duchamp's notorious *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas* (1946-66) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, but devoid of

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