

Using what she calls a triage system of selecting shows for review, Larson chooses exhibitions that address issues of interest to her and, she hopes, her readers. "I look for art that understands fully what it's doing," she says. "That can happen on any number of levels, from conscious to unconscious." Her initial forays into new art, however, are always noninterpretive.

"I start by confronting the work at the most direct level possible—suspending language and removing barriers. It's hard, and it's scary—you keep wanting to rush back in with judgments and opinions, but you've got to push yourself back and be *with* the work. Once you've had the encounter, you can try to figure out how to explain it, and there are many ways to take off—through sociology, history, theory, standard criticism, or description."

Larson teaches her look-now, judge-later philosophy in an undergraduate course in contemporary art at New York University. She begins by asking students to describe an artwork, which, she points out, they rarely do without interpreting, then she conducts "excursions through various writers," including Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty ("on Cézanne and phenomenology"), Immanuel Kant, Robert Morris, Susan Sontag ("Against Interpretation is a perfect example of the mood of the early '60s"), and David Wojnarowicz, an artist who recently died of AIDS ("to show the roots of multiculturalism"). "What I want them to do is look," she says, emphasizing that her class is not intended to be a course in criticism.

"Criticism lately has broken down into two extreme positions," says Larson. "The consensus is that we're in the midst of Postmodernism, which means the end of the belief in the infinite perfectibility of art. The early modernists believed they were creating a new perceptual apparatus, a more direct way to view existence, which got codified and ended up in the reduction of art to pure phenomena, as in Minimalism. But the momentum of that utopian modernist impulse has continued in criticism without a corresponding substance; the belief in modernism has ended. So one extreme of criticism finds itself articulating a theoretical position. The other is the 'I like it—I don't like it' school.

"I find myself in the middle," she continues. "I try to straddle as much of the territory as I can, and what fascinates me is that the condition of criticism mirrors the political condition in the United States right now. The center isn't holding any longer—everyone's out to find their own little niche and defend it for all it's worth."

Though she calls herself a centrist, Larson's opinions are hardly neutral. Lately she has found herself alone in her endorsement of the newly expanded Guggenheim Museum, which she calls "the smartest museum in town" because "they are rethinking the museum from top to bottom." Com-

menting on the controversy, she attributes the widespread disapproval for the museum to a rising tide of cynicism, generated by what she calls "the hype machine."

"I think the media-conscious artists have pushed everyone else into a corner, and they've made everyone think a philosophy structured around ironic commentary is the true avant-garde position," says Larson. "I just don't buy it; it's a hall of mirrors. You see it in the division of attention that somebody like Jeff Koons gets versus an artist like Pat Steir, who is doing good centrist work that isn't part of the hype machine."

Larson's convictions aren't so willful that she hasn't, she confesses, reversed her opinion on occasion. With a knowing smile, she declines to cite examples. "A foolish consistency," she responds instead, "is the hobgoblin of little minds."

—Margot Mifflin

## CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

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never talk to an artist about the work until I've written something because it only confuses me," says Christopher Knight. "I don't see myself as being a translator of the artist's intentions to the public. A work of art speaks for itself, and I speak for myself, so the two of us have a conversation."

Those conversations have made Knight the most influential art critic on the West Coast. His columns, which have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* since 1989, have become indispensable reading for the informed art world of Southern California. A selection of his writings, *Last Chance for Eden*, will be published next year by the University of California Press.

Patrician in appearance, Knight, 42, looks like the upper-middle-class New England lawyer his parents hoped he would become—except for the platinum highlights in his dark blond hair and his long sideburns.

He grew up in Westfield, Massachusetts, where his interest in art arose at an early age. "It was a 1957 TV show," he says. "I think it was called 'Learn to Draw with John Nagy.' So I learned that art was something you saw on TV, which is why I moved to Southern California." Later, at Hartford College in Oneonta, New York, he took studio art courses, although he had no interest in being an artist, because he was curious about how art was made. He says the training has been useful to him as a critic. "It gives you an idea of how impossible it is to make a convincing work of art."

Knight was at the State University of New York at Binghamton, preparing to write a dissertation on Robert Smithson, when he was offered a curatorship by the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (now the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art). Three years later, in 1979, he left the museum to write criticism. "The reason I got interested in a career in art in the first place is to be around art and artists," he says. "I found that in museums you spend most of your time around trustees and paperwork."

Knight explains his evolution from curator to critic w

*"I start by confronting the work at the most direct level—suspending language and removing barriers. It's scary—you keep wanting to rush back in with opinions, but you've got to be with the work"*

characteristic dry humor. "The only person I know who set out to become an art critic at an early age is John Baldessari," he laughs. Asked about the state of art criticism, he answers, "I think it's grim. I don't read that much criticism any more. It's just as impossible and weird to make criticism as art."

Knight's museum experience enriched his commentaries on a decade that saw three new contemporary art museums and dozens of galleries opening in Los Angeles. "The most significant development of the '80s was the decentralization of the art world, which money helped to fuel," he says. California—and especially Los Angeles—was one of the chief beneficiaries. "For L.A.," he continues, "the biggest result of that—and Mike Kelley is the best example—is that artists did not have to move away to have a career. Kelley developed first here in L.A., and then a national reputation and an international reputation followed. That's never happened before, but there's no reason to believe that it will change with artists in the future." Knight's support has been important to Kelley, and to other Los Angeles artists: Alexis Smith, Lari Pittman, John Baldessari, and Ed Ruscha.

Asked about the dominant trends in art making in Los Angeles today, Knight laughs but is absolutely serious when he answers, "Immature, adolescent art, what is being called 'Patheticism.'" He is referring to many of the artists featured in the Museum of Contemporary Art's "Helter Skelter" exhibition and to a host of others whose work incorporates cartoons or doodles or looks unfinished, reflecting a fascination with imperfection or process. The term comes from a show called "Just Pathetic," organized by critic Ralph Rugoff at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in 1990.

"It's not unlike Impressionism in its revolt against the academy," says Knight. "In order to distinguish itself from the highly finished work of academicians, Impressionists went in the other direction and in their loose brushwork became 'unfinished.' Patheticism is principally done by artists who were schooled in academic settings by first-generation, hard-core Conceptual artists. Their work is a kind of unfinished intellectualism. At the same time, it makes fun of a longstanding tradition of California art, which is the anti-intellectualism of the Venice beach boys of the 1960s.

"L.A. is creating its own history," he continues. "We are now at the point where at least three generations of significant artists who have had international recognition coexist side by side. This hasn't happened before in California."

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Another conspicuous trend is the growth of social consciousness. Knight has written extensively on the relationship between politics and art.

"Guernica is a painting with a political agenda," he says. "Whether or not it's a good painting is a separate question

from what its political agenda is. The same is true of art today. The question of power is the question of who gets to speak. For a very long time, not a lot of different people had the wherewithal to speak. It's imperative that that circle be widened. What those individuals have to say is a separate matter. It may be worth hearing or it may not be, but the platform must be broadened for different kinds of voices to be heard."

As a former panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts, and as one of the last recipients of a fellowship in art criticism before the program was discontinued, Knight has strong feelings about the agency's current crisis. "The NEA is a signpost of the almost total collapse of the U.S. as a coherent place," he says. "Among the federal agencies, here

is one that with meager resources did a phenomenally successful job." Now, the agency is "being destroyed by hatemongers and quislings."

But "ultimately, it doesn't matter for art," he adds. "Art will continue."  
—Hunter Drohojowski

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Christopher Knight: The state of criticism today is "grim."

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