

Pop Culture Page 4

Will Beavis & Butt-head bring the fall of civilization? Depends on which civilization you're talking about.

Q & A Page 5

Checking in with Rubén Blades about politics and music, before he heads off for Panama.

Movies Page 6

Miss Manners on fish knives, cruets and the taste of forbidden fruit in "The Age of Innocence."

CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES • SEPTEMBER 12, 1993

She Deals in Dangerous Art

Personally, Rosamund Felsen loves edgy art. That's helped her put some of L.A.'s biggest-name artists on the international map. The important phrase to remember about Felsen and her gallery: Locals Only.

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp
Page 8



The Art of the Dealer

Rosamund Felsen's singular style has made international names for some of the best and edgiest of a new generation of L.A. artists

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP

Los Angeles artists, collectors and dealers meet September with a sense of anticipation. The evening air turns slightly cooler, the populace regains a sense of urgency and by mid-month, there are smart turnouts at museum and gallery receptions. The season has begun.

Many of the artists, at least, can talk about their summer shows in Europe at the Venice Biennale, the Basel art fair, the Vienna art museum. Over the last decade, there has been an internationalization of the world of contemporary art, and Los Angeles, to the astonishment of many, is smack in the center.

Never before has there been such lively interest in Southern California artists among museums

and collectors in the major cities of Europe. Los Angeles art dealers have developed relationships with their peers in London, Cologne, Vienna and Milan.

But there is one dealer, in particular, who represents the L.A. artists who have most transformed the image of the city and its artists: Rosamund Felsen.

This month the gallery is showing an installation titled "Paralysis Agitans" by Mitchell Syrop, which includes work using photography and language. Felsen is known for representing art with challenging ideologies, art that can be difficult to sell. The Rosamund Felsen Gallery, a capacious yellow brick building at 8525 Santa Monica Blvd., one block west of La Cienega, has gained a reputation over the last

decade for its roster of tough-minded artists who consider issues of sex and death, religion and politics to be their inevitable fodder.

Last month, for example, Felsen artist Paul McCarthy organized a show of work by artists known for their involvement with performance and process art. He included his own sculpture of twin stuffed skunk toys, each about six feet tall and sporting rubber dildos as sizable erections. A few months before, Jeffrey Vallance showed pseudo-religious shrouds simulating the sacred cloth of Turin, some with the features of Jesus, others with the sweat stains of Elvis.

Lari Pittman's paintings are decorated with effusive displays of sex organs meant to conflate the ecstasy and pain of love and loss. Mike Kelley, who consistently transforms debased subject matter ranging from garbage to cast-off toys, is about to have a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York that will come to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art next summer.

All of these artists now have established careers in Europe. All but Vallance were included in the 1992 controversial "Helter Skelter" exhibition at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art. MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel, who organized the show, saw those artists as challenging the historic image of L.A. as the source of easy-going sunset-hued art for beachfront houses.



JIM MENDENHALL / Los Angeles Times

Rosamund Felsen, above, with two works by Mike Kelley, one of many L.A. artists she has helped cultivate: "Be Mine, #2" and an untitled floor piece. Left: With Robert Rauschenberg, circa 1970.

Schimmel observed: "Rosamund Felsen provides an extraordinarily significant platform for the support and nurturing of some of the best and brightest artists who've come out of L.A. She has dedicated her program to bringing an international perspective to the art of this region."

Other L.A. art galleries—Margot Leavin, L.A. Louver and Burnett Miller, to name a few—also have propelled their artists into the international market, but none have been as exclusively supportive of L.A. artists as Felsen. At one point in the early '80s, Peter Goulds of L.A. Louver says

he proposed a partnership with Felsen. "She has an excellent eye," he said. But he wanted to represent artists from Europe and elsewhere. No deal was struck; she was committed to her L.A. artists, period.

In an art world beleaguered by recession and attempted censor-



ship, art dealers everywhere have tended to be cautious. Exhibitions these days often include works that are scaled to fit an apartment and priced to sell. Felsen, however, has dug in on the front lines in support of the art that she believes in, regardless of its ready appeal to the market. It is a strategy of preposterous idealism, but it seems to work.

New York art critic Peter Schjeldahl has been a regular visitor to the gallery since its opening in the late 1970s. "At Rosamund's there is complete concentration on the art, the art is why you are there and it can't be anything else. Her virtues are liveliness and the long haul. Only good galleries have that long-haul stuff, but they tend to be stuffy. Lively [galleries] tend to be gone a week from Saturday. [To have both] qualities is rare anywhere, really."

In the tortoise-and-hare race among art dealers cashing in on the '80s, Felsen refused to buy into the hype and flash. It was a position that often drove her artists and others wild with frustration. Yet in L.A., more than two dozen galleries, many of which benefited from soaring art prices and investment-oriented collectors, are now out of business. Only a score or so remain to show serious commitment to important art.

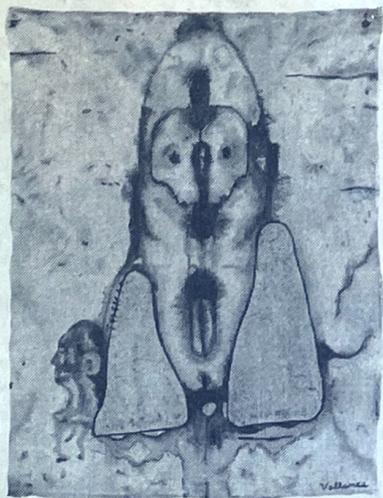
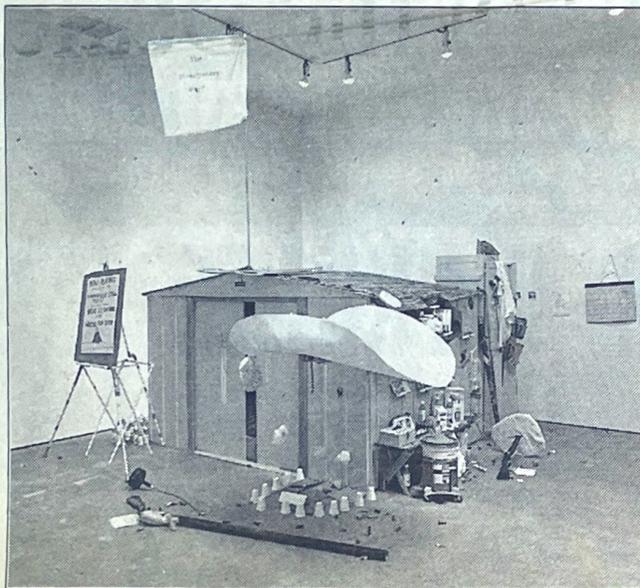
Felsen has consistently put the integrity of art before any other consideration. Although Kelley's major works, for example, now sell for more than \$100,000, Felsen represented him for years when sales were negligible or nonexistent. Schjeldahl points out: "I think she is legendary for faithfulness to her artists, and legendary for being bad-headed at business, which may be inseparable from her virtues." She survived the '80s, that decade of excess, in a powerful position and with her reputation intact.

Asked about the startling success of her artists, Felsen's response befits the characteristic motherly pride often described by her artists: "They did it. I didn't do it. I just liked it."

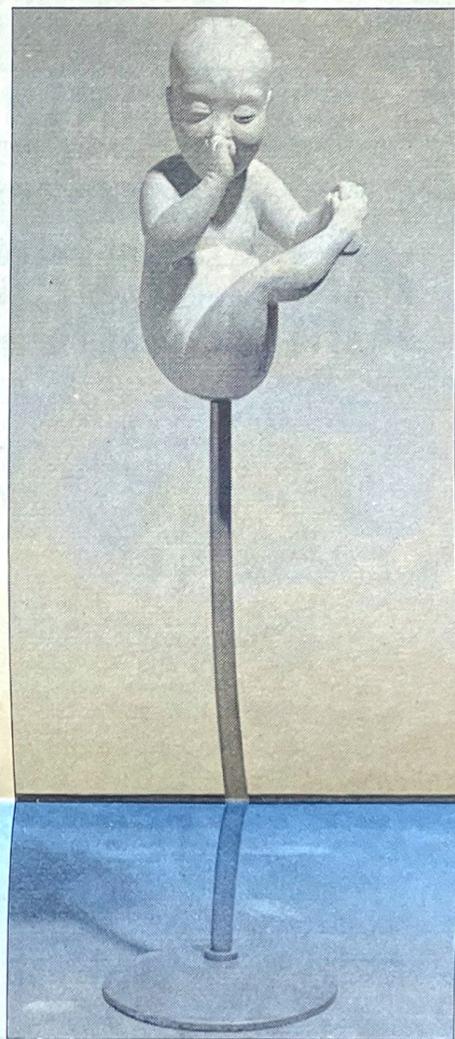
Important art dealers such as New York's Leo Castelli, who discovered artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, contribute to artists' place in history and in the process become significant figures in their own right. Like Castelli did for the Pop artists, Felsen has nurtured a particular generation of artists at a significant moment in time. But, how did Felsen, a young woman from Pasadena with four kids and no college education, produce such an impressive track record—first as a founding partner in Gemini

Please see Page 80

A GALLERY OF DANGEROUS ART



Photos by DOUGLAS M. PARKER
A collection of recent works from the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, clockwise from top left: Jason Rhoades, "Montgomery Ward Clinique Clinic" (1992), Ann Preston, "Baby" (1992-93), Lari Pittman, "Beatific and Needy" (1991), Jeffrey Vallance, "Screaming Sinister Clown," from the series "The Clowns of Turin (details of the Holy Shroud)" (1992) and Tim Ebner, detail of an untitled work (1993).



Felsen

Continued from Page 9

G.E.L., one of the country's foremost publishers of art lithography, then as registrar and curator of prints at the Pasadena Art Museum, and now as proprietor of her own gallery?

Felsen recently moved to a new house, a Moorish folly in Los Feliz designed in 1927 by the same architect who created the Angelus Temple for evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Though architecturally distinct, there is something heavenly about it, particularly when Sunday morning light pours through the arched stained-glass windows. The generous living room is large and minimally furnished with a couple of worn copper-leather sofas and a modern coffee table.

More attention was paid to the display of art: a large self-portrait by Jeffrey Vallance, a collage painting by Roy Dowell and a painting of an equine theme by Tom Knechtle. A massive triptych by Kelley hangs in the vaulted foyer. Works by other artists represented by the gallery are scattered around the house. Upstairs hang works by Gemini G.E.L. artists Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly. It's like being surrounded by her extended family.

Felsen was dressed casually for an interview, in jeans and a loose shirt. Looking more like an artist than a dealer, at 59 she wears very little makeup and her wavy hair hangs chin length and loose. She is lean and her deep-set eyes and high cheek bones impart dramatic sculpted character to her face. Curled up like one of her two cats on the sofa, she seems friendly and self-possessed, answering questions with a serene precision.

She points out that the swanky home is not, as one might think, the palace that art built. The financial resources of photographer Grant Mudford, her companion of 14 years, along with the quick sale of her last house are responsible. "It has nothing to do with the gallery at all," she said. The gallery, it seems, is trying to pull its own weight.

Felsen founded her gallery in 1978 on the belief that there was unrecognized quality among L.A. artists, and they needed a place to be seen. "I made a conscious decision to concentrate on L.A. artists because I grew up here and felt a responsibility to the community," she recalls.

Such an idea was a bit of a joke at the time. It was on the heels of a recession and the prominent museum for contemporary art, the Pasadena Art Museum, had gone bankrupt in 1974. Ferus Gallery, which launched the careers of now-famous L.A. artists such as Ed Ruscha, Edward Kienholz and Robert Irwin, was long gone and subsequent adventuresome galleries run by dealers like Nicholas Wilder and Eugenia Butler had closed. By

the time Felsen opened her first space, critics, curators and collectors in New York and elsewhere were skeptical about L.A. as a serious art center. But Felsen had had a decade of extraordinary experience to bolster her burgeoning faith in the L.A. art scene.

The youngest of three children from what she calls a middle-class Pasadena family, she remembers going to the Huntington Art Gallery and reading about artists when she was young. Yet, she thought her artistic impulses lay elsewhere. "I always thought I'd be in the theater business somehow since I'd directed in high school," she says.

In 1952, she was on the verge of attending UCLA but was missing one necessary class and rather than make it up, she decided to marry. It was a common enough destiny for women in the 1950s. Over the next seven years, she had three children. In 1959, she divorced and a year later she married again, this time to Sid Felsen, with whom she had a fourth child.

Rosamund's aggressive curiosity peaked in the '80s. Her restless inquisitiveness was and is paramount. Any intellectual reserve always has been extended to the edge. She has substituted courage for bravery, or foolishness. She has fun. She knows geography. Compassion is a positive weakness, and that is her success and our future.'

Robert Rauschenberg

"Sid was a practicing accountant. I couldn't understand how anybody could be an accountant. I thought it was boring," she explains mischievously. "He was friends with Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, who had started collecting art. Between 1960 and 1966, we would all go to the openings at the Ferus Gallery and David Stuart on La Cienega. The L.A. County Museum of Art opened in 1965. Sid realized—it had to happen—that he was losing interest in being an accountant."

For 10 years, Sid Felsen had been taking night courses in drawing and painting at Chouinard (which eventually became Cal-Arts) and UCLA. In the process he met and befriended artists such as Peter Voulkos and John Altoon. Soon he was doing their tax returns. "I became more interested in the art world, and I was pleased to see that my wife, who had had very little background, had great sensibilities," he says.

On Christmas Eve, 1965, the Felsens and the Grinsteins invited Ken Tyler, a master printer, to a party and discussed joining forces to publish fine art lithographs. "Within 60 days, Gemini was formed," says Sid, sitting on a couch in the offices of the Gemini studio in West Hollywood.

One of Gemini's first prints was by Robert Rauschenberg and with that, the studio's direction and mission was assured. Rauschenberg was thrilled with his experience at Gemini, and he spread the

word to his friends. Within two years, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and others came to Gemini. "It was an innocent masterpiece of timing," recalls Sid. "The New York scene was exploding and we didn't understand but we joined in, and by 1968, the careers of these artists had really hit it."

All of the artists found themselves working closely with the supportive and inquisitive Rosamund. She handled the paper, helped the artists sign, kept track of the storage and the shipping.

"Through the exposure to artists, we all changed," says Sid. "It was way beyond anything I felt like my life could become. I imagine Rosamund would say something similar."

She remembers it vividly. Twenty-five years later, she recites the lessons of that moment: "Being that close to the artists was an invaluable experience for me. Learning about the creative mind, the process and so forth. [That's how] I learned to select artists for

Museum of American Art in New York. Felsen went on to become Pasadena's curator of prints.

By 1974, the museum had over-extended itself to the point of bankruptcy. Norton Simon stepped in to pay off the museum's debts, then he installed his personal collection of magnificent Old Master works in what is now the Norton Simon Museum—and relegated most of the contemporary art to the basement. The move was devastating to the staff and they left. Felsen went back to Gemini. Her marriage was breaking up, however, and though she and Sid remain friendly, they soon separated and two years later divorced. The return to Gemini was a turning point for Rosamund. She spent the years between 1975 and 1977 reviewing her options, wondering what her next life choice might provide.

The address 669 N. La Cienega Blvd. has its own history in the annals of L.A. art. It was located down a driveway in a small, dark-red building, and for many years consisted of one large gallery and a patio. Felsen rattles off the lineage of prestigious galleries that preceded her first space: "First it was the Esther Robles Gallery, then it was Rolf Nelson's, where I saw my first Georgia O'Keeffe painting, then Eugenia Butler and then Riko Mizuno—that was when Robert Irwin put in the skylights—then Larry Gagosian, then Paula Cooper for a short time, then Timothea Stewart who opened to show Wallace Berman."

It was Stewart who asked for Felsen's help in 1977. "I had never thought of working in a gallery," Felsen says. "After nine months, [Stewart] got tired of it and everyone said, 'Well, you should have a gallery.' So I did. I stayed there 12 years."

None of the artists she opened in 1978 are still with her, though many are well known today, including William Wegman, who now lives in New York and is represented there by Holly Solomon and in L.A. by Linda Cathcart, and Alexis Smith, who now shows at Margo Leavin. Painter Karen Carson joined the gallery in 1979, which gives her the greatest longevity in the gallery.

Carson described a salient aspect of Felsen's personality, one that has affected the tenor of her business. "Rosamund has an uncompromising attitude about art as high-minded phenomena. Even though she supports that pseudo-low art, like Kelley, her mind has the same kind of attitude as any good old Modernist. You buy art for socially heroic reasons, not for decorative or trendy reasons. She thinks of art as an individual journey, as a mythical process. Younger dealers don't present that relationship to art."

The timing was crucial for Felsen. In L.A. as elsewhere the issues of Postmodernism were beginning to push aside the exhausted efforts of Postminimalism. Despite her

Please see Page 82

Felsen

Continued from Page 80

high Modernist heritage, Felsen was able to make the transition to the new vocabularies and new experiences fairly quickly. In 1982, she saw a performance-art piece by then-largely unknown Mike Kelley. She remembers thinking, "This is brilliant." Kelley was already represented by Metro Gallery in New York and in L.A. by Riko Mizuno, but Felsen let him know she was interested. When Mizuno closed, Felsen rearranged her exhibition schedule to accommodate her potential star.

Until the mid-'80s, Felsen devotes like realtor Barry Sloane and real estate investor Robert Rowan spent only \$500 to \$1,000 for Kelley's graphic drawings that combined debased and exalted subject matter to examine the mythologies of modernism, artistic identity and sexuality.

Felsen also met painter Lari Pittman in 1982. "It was a different response," recalls Felsen. "He drove to La Cienega, picked me up, took me to his studio downtown and then drove me back. Nobody had done that before. Or since. I was looking at these odd, energetic, ambitious paintings. It was all so totally unfamiliar that I thought, 'He has to be on to something that has never been done before.'"

Pittman's obsessively embellished canvases in service of eroticism and spirituality were antithetical to the styles of painting that were accepted at that time. People literally could not comprehend such a pictorial vocabulary.

Felsen knew how difficult it would be to sell the early work of artists like Kelley and Pittman. "I was willing to make some sacrifices because I knew this would not be easy. That meant keeping gallery expenses down and keeping my own living expenses down. There were literally times when I didn't have money for a parking meter. And I would have to walk three blocks because of that. I had such belief in these artists that I never doubted they would succeed. It was just a question of time. And if they didn't get recognition in L.A., it would come from Europe and New York. I always felt confident about that."

The '80s were good to Felsen—along with nearly every other contemporary art gallery in Los Angeles. The Museum of Contemporary Art opened its temporary galleries, the County Museum of Art responded with its own wing for new art, and dealers and collectors from around the world discovered L.A. as an alternative to the New York scene. As Felsen points out, New York was becoming too expensive for most artists graduating from L.A.'s important cache of art schools. Many talented young artists were opting for an L.A.-based career. Felsen's gallery and her artists thrived with the help of considerable approval generated by local and national art critics and journalists.

Felsen's transition from the museum to the commercial world, from enchantment with the ideas of art to the grubby business of sales, was troubled, however. "I understood museology so that helped in terms of record keeping. Also, collectors would come in because they were accustomed to going to the space because of its history. The part I never understood was sales," Felsen admits.

Collector Sloane points out, "Rosamund is not a salesperson. Her sales technique is to have no technique at all. It's OK to go there and be naive. But if you go there and boast about your lack of knowledge, she can be unforgiving. She's thrown people out of her gallery."

Pittman points out one quality that separates Felsen from many of her colleagues in the business: "I think Rosamund is both a curator and a dealer. Periodically, she's spotted artists as they started working. Other people might not immediately see merit in the work, but she proves them wrong."

He acknowledges that sales may not be Felsen's primary interest, but he accepts this with philosophical equanimity: "I think there is a price to pay sometimes for such incredible idealism, but I could not be without that quality in a dealer. How could that not be a difficult decision to maintain?" he asks rhetorically. "I've never had to worry about the work being compromised. But it's a difficult position for her to maintain in an art world that is so compromised and corrupt."

Sloane, also an old friend of artist and Felsen companion Grant Mudford, was one of the first to demonstrate faith in Felsen's gallery. He began buying from her in 1980, and at times felt like he alone was keeping the doors open.

"Felsen acted like a guru early on," Sloane recalls. "In about a year, she had educated me on everything that had gone on in the last 30 years in California art. I didn't have a big budget to collect, so I had two criteria—I had to not be able to live without it and it had to be a good investment."

Yet, not all collectors enjoy such warm personal attention from Felsen. Her style differs from that of her good friend Leavin, who is more socially assertive, who represents blue chip as well as younger artists and who is considered another one of the most powerful art dealers and sales people on the West Coast.

The issue of sales, or lack thereof, has been an ongoing concern at the gallery. Felsen heels to the dignified position that good art will sell itself. She rarely participates in the hustle that involves post-opening dinner parties for collectors or flattering phone calls cajoling the ambivalent into buying. Such a low-key approach can discourage the less courageous buyer.

Fortunately, in the 1980s, Felsen's artists sold themselves. As artist Roy Dowell put it, "She's not a salesperson. But she picks artists who are aggressive, hustling

enough to sell their own work. She's in business because she loves artists and what they make."

Clyde Beswick, whose direct-mail advertising business brought him here from New York in the mid-'80s, is now considered to be one of the country's top collectors of contemporary art. He says that his collecting taste was definitely influenced by Felsen but in an indirect manner. "She allowed me to evolve my preferences. I find her not to be a pushy salesperson, which I love. I like it because I don't sense that she's selling commodity. I always felt that she would show the art regardless of whether it is salable. Someone like Paul McCarthy, for instance. I find the work to be aesthetically and intellectually stimulating, I like something that challenges me."

Felsen's financial success in the

\$5,000-\$20,000, depending on the scale and significance of the work. (At the urging of the established artists in her gallery, she recently took on her first young artist in many years: Jason Rhodes, a former graduate student of McCarthy's at UCLA.)

In addition, the traditional ambivalence of L.A.'s collecting community continues to plague all art dealers. "In L.A., many people don't really have a concept of what being a collector is or if they do, they are not interested in becoming one," Felsen says. "Maybe they just want decoration. They are interested in covering their walls, not in the artists' ideas or getting involved in the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of the works."

"Collecting is an addiction of sorts," Felsen continues. "It's caring more about the works than

necessary, I sell my personal assets."

Does that mean that Felsen is running an essentially altruistic enterprise? A Kunsthalle for some of L.A.'s most important artists that is supported by her patronage when sales are slow? To a certain extent. But her artists are not necessarily thrilled with this arrangement.

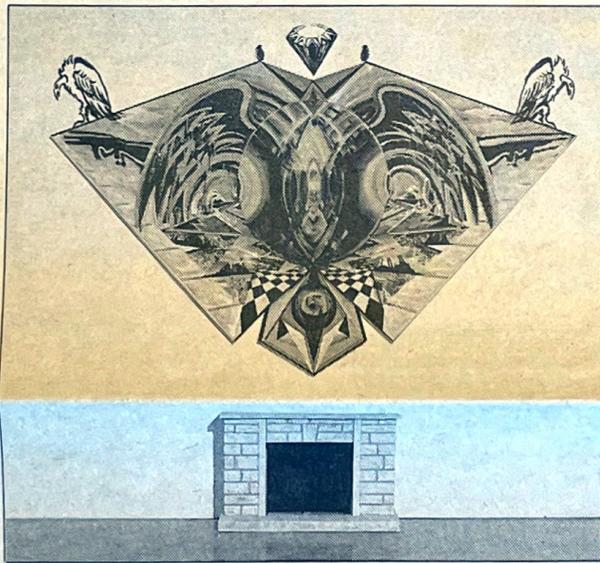
Chris Burden, who came to prominence for his notorious performance activities and installations, was represented by Felsen from 1979 until his nationally touring retrospective in 1988. Although he says he's never formally left the gallery, he now shows with the very aggressive Larry Gagosian in New York. He feels that altruism, lovely though it may be, is not as beneficial as sales. "It's not just the jangle in the artist's pocket," he says. "By and large, art that is remembered is art that is collected, reproduced and shown, and if it isn't worth anything, then that art tends to get forgotten. It's sad, in a way. That's the society we live in. I used to think that good art would always rise to the top, but I don't think the world is that fair."

Kelley agrees: "She's from a different generation. She got into doing gallery stuff out of Conceptualist work, and this kind of hard sell was not a part of that. The art market is so different now. I think a dealer should be hard sell. That's their job. I've heard that hard sell doesn't do any good but I don't believe it. Artists aren't naive and they have to eat like everybody else. The idealism is in showing the work, and after that it's like you stay open or you don't."

Hence, the paradox of the art dealer's life, walking a tightrope between the heights of idealism and the bottom line. Fellow dealer Leavin is initially confused when asked how one juggles between the two. "Everyone finds some way of dealing with it. It might be the first generation providing the wherewithal for the younger artists to be shown. Back room sales provide the means to do exhibitions. You want to show work that you believe in. You know it won't sell but it doesn't prevent you from doing it. Nobody wants to talk about it because it is so frightening."

Asked about sales, Felsen becomes unusually nervous, but the question provokes her to define her calling: "I hate to equate the art with value. Because when it gets down to it, that's what keeps us working at it, but that's not really its function. Art has a function and to me that function is not the commodification of it. That's just a necessity. The transmission of the artists' expression of ideas, philosophically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. That's why I'm here. So they can be placed in the world, so we can all benefit from what the artists have to give to us." □

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis School of Art and Design.



DOUGLAS M. PARKER

Painter Karen Carson, whose "Hearth, Heart, Earth, Art" is from 1992, is the artist with the greatest longevity in the Felsen gallery.

'80s led her to move into her current, larger gallery in 1990, just as business began to slow in response to the recession. Ironically, at the same time the careers of many of her artists were accelerating, which meant unprecedented expenses in shipping works to galleries and museums abroad, as well as increased requests for slides, transparencies, catalogues and other materials. These efforts often have little immediate payoff for the gallery.

For example, Pittman's recent exhibition at the Jay Gorney Gallery in New York yielded many sales, from which Felsen received just 10% of the yield. The artist and Gorney split the rest.

Tension is increased by the fact that on the East Coast and in Europe, dealers are eager to raise her artists' prices. Since Southern California is still suffering from the recession, Felsen believes higher prices would discourage already-hesitant local collectors. Felsen's artists are all considered to be mid-career, which means mid-range prices, usually between

having their names being associated with them, though there is a pride of ownership."

In short, Felsen is impatient with collectors who try to buy for investment before passion or those who try to manipulate a trend, even when her artists are the trend. If a potential collector demonstrates genuine curiosity and concern, however, Felsen is at her best. "It's thrilling for me. I try to make myself available. If collectors ask, I'll call. But I don't woo collectors. It's not part of my personality to be wining and dining them. Although, one of the reasons we got the house was to try and do a bit more of that."

According to one other dealer, who asked not to be named, the very minimum monthly expenses at most major L.A. galleries can run to more than \$20,000 for rent, insurance, shipping, mailing and so forth; Felsen wouldn't say what her overhead is. With recession-bound collectors and increasing expenses, how does Felsen stay in business? Heaving a noticeable sigh, Felsen says, "Well, when