

Pro-MO LA.

by Hunter Drohojowsk



It's a mad, mad, Post-Modern world. In Los Angeles, as elsewhere, there is a generation of artists who were weaned on Conceptual art. Their work now evidences styles drawn from the mass-media, movies, t.v., advertising and animation as well as the fine art sources of Modernism, especially Minimalism and Pop art as well as Pre-Modern art.

Yes, it's a wacky pro-mo work and it's up to them to create a dialog within it, not try to carve an identity separate from it. These artists are not in opposition to the mainstream culture. That posture is associated with the avant garde and Modernism. Instead, they are in collusion, at least in terms of their visual vocabulary.

This is not unique to L.A.—the tendencies are to be found from New York to Cologne. But this is the first time in the history of L.A. that three generations of significant artists have been working simultaneously and producing a critical mass of important ideas and work.

When Conceptual and Pop art predecessors like John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha began their careers in the early '60s, they developed in a vacuum of critical response. There were few artists, fewer galleries and the L.A. County Museum of Art was busy trying to ignore their efforts. But these artists saw L.A. in terms of culture, not nature.

Leo Steinberg characterized post-modernism as 'the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.' But that shift was scarcely traumatic to artists in L.A., a place where nature was never good enough, where everything from the lawns to the biceps has been artificially enhanced.

Culture in L.A. was always the mass media i.e. the movies. So it was a small leap for the artists here in the 1960s to produce art out of popular culture. Baldessari coated canvases with photographic emulsion, projected negatives onto them and developed paintings made from photographs. Ruscha used commercial art techniques to paint graphics of words, evoking better than anybody the dominance of culture over nature in his many renditions of the Hollywood sign.

But the next generations grew up in the '60s and '70s and in L.A. as elsewhere got as much of their information from TV as from nature or culture. The ideas that germinated with these artists have pollinated and spread. Many are products of California Institute of the Art in 1971. The focus on a conceptual basis for making art affected many artists who have remained in L.A. The strong feminist agenda that was implemented there and at other schools in the '70s, including Otis, strongly affected the inquiry surrounding the role of gender in art production.

One of the principles of Post-Modernism is the rearrangement of the hierarchies of media. So we see decoration, sensuality, and a reworking of 19th century motifs. Others use deconstruction, taking preexisting images out of context and placing them in a new context to understand their meanings in a new light. Many of the artists have been borrowing imagery from cartoons, comics, graffiti and tattoo art, all sources that were reviled in the mid to late '50s. This farrago of visual style uses the easily read imagery of cliché to convey a complicated analysis of late Modernism as well as social and political issues. It's a Pro-MO world after all and it's all over L.A.

