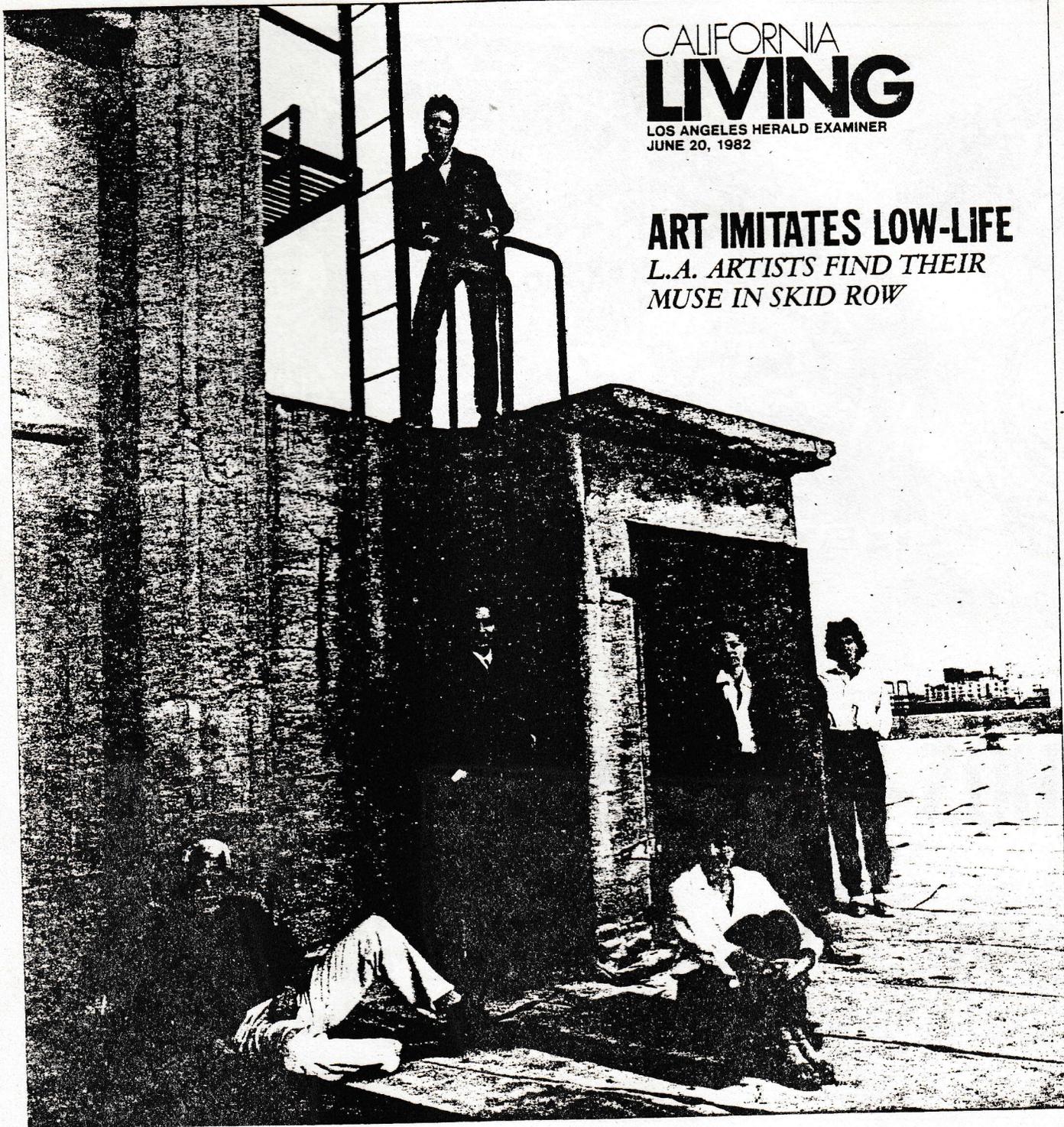
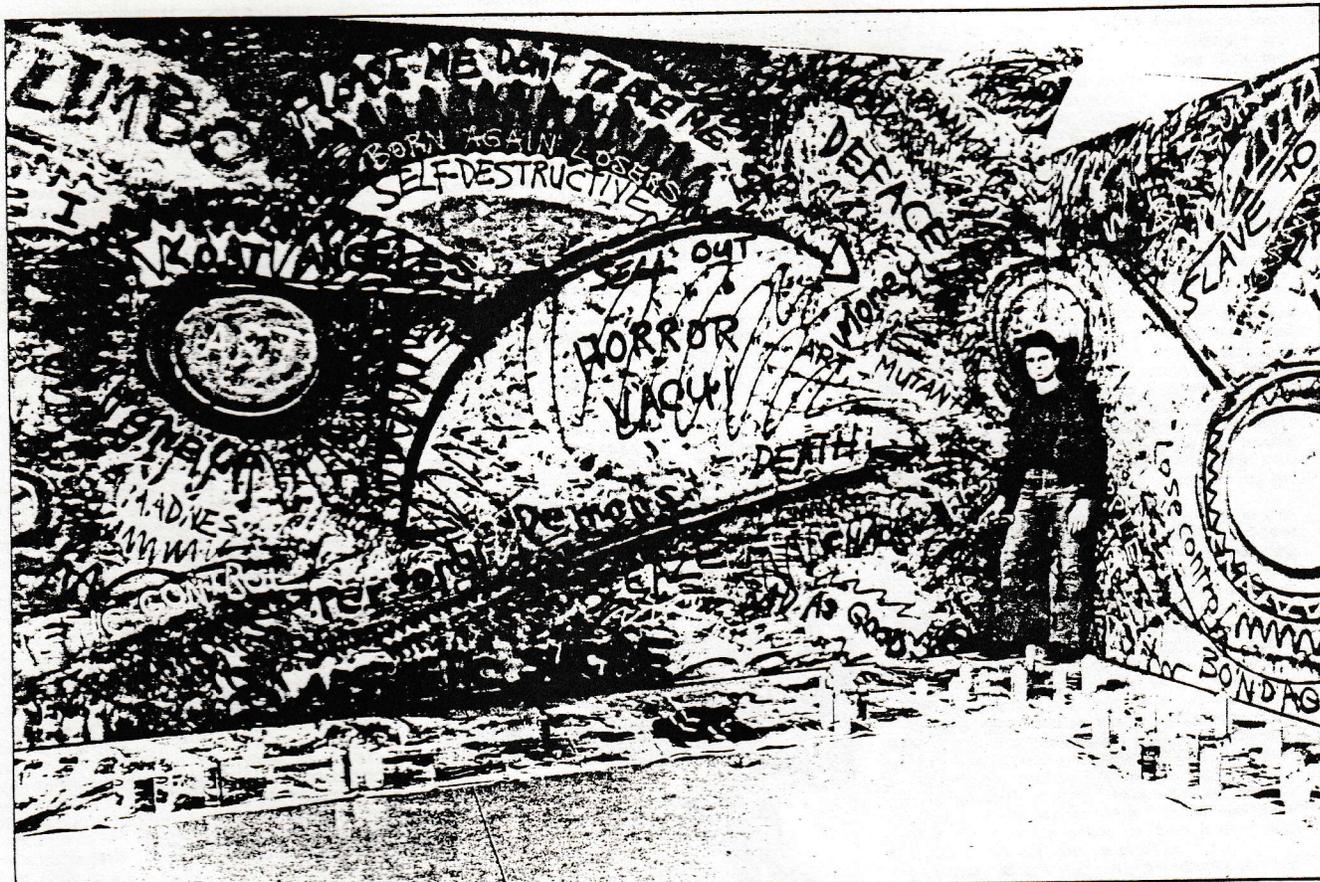


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JUNE 20, 1982

ART IMITATES LOW-LIFE
*L.A. ARTISTS FIND THEIR
MUSE IN SKID ROW*





Barry Fahr with his "Wall of Graffiti," an installation at last month's Fifth Annual Downtown Artists Show.
 "Graffiti is anti-modern, anti-establishment and anti-international style."

MAKING ART IN THE M-ZONE

*From 'guerilla performances'
 to 'found images,'
 'The L.A. Look' echoes life in the
 Manufacturing Zone*

By Hunter Drohojowska
 Photos by Karen Filter

The aesthetic of Los Angeles bears the dubious distinction of being a dependable indicator for real estate speculation. With the value of property rising to the point that, in the mid-1970s, an artist could rent an entire downtown warehouse for the price of a studio in Venice, hundreds of artists have moved downtown, fundamentally changing "The L.A. Look" in local art. Graffiti, skyscrapers, smog, crime, traffic, skid row, ethnic barrios, big business and politics have already managed to show their faces in the work of many artists living in the Manufacturing Zone (M-Zone) today.

Hunter Drohojowska is a Los Angeles free-lancer and art editor of "L.A. Weekly."

This is not the first time the heart of Los Angeles has served as a mecca for local artists. At the turn of the century, the majority of the artists lived in — and drew their inspiration from — downtown. In 1906, Blanchard Music and Art Building — Los Angeles' first private exhibition space for art, located at 233 S. Broadway — was the focus of the downtown art community; it housed studios, the Blanchard Gallery, the Art Students' League and the Ruskin Art Club. Most of the artists of the day worked in the imported styles of Impressionism and post-Impressionism. They lived downtown and painted society portraits, landscapes and genre scenes; there was no sculpture. That most of the art mirrored their environment was the result of that perennial Los Angeles limitation — transportation.

By 1920, downtown's business district and its property values had begun to swell. With the advent of the automobile, the nascent art scene gradually shifted west, ultimately reaching Venice in the late '50s. The definitions of art had expanded considerably, as had the geographical constraints, but art still reflected the surroundings — palm trees and plexiglass made up what was then referred to as "The L.A. Look."

Today "The L.A. Look" consists of what might not seem a probable subject for inspiration — the low-life of downtown Los Angeles. Yet one finds a curious idealism in both the artists who live and work in the M-Zone and their art. In speaking with Barry Fahr, Judy Simonian, Karla Klarin, David Amico, Mary Jones and Joe Clower, you find, again and again, the collective attitude to be at once critical and hopeful.

Today, the Blanchard Building is a parking lot next door to the Goodwill Industries Store. Directly across the street, at 242 S. Broadway, the Victor Clothing Company, a building of Blanchard's era, is still standing. On the third floor there, at an "alternative space" — a gallery representing work not generally found in commercial houses — Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) recently sponsored its Fifth Annual Downtown Artists Show featuring portraits, landscapes and genre paintings circa 1982.

For the show, which ran from mid-April to mid-May, artist Barry Fahr layered a sizable section of the south wall of one room with splatters and skeins of fluorescent enamel, and then over it, sprayed such graffiti messages as "Art Mutant," "Emotional Cripple," and, significantly, "Bad Is Good." Fahr's painting may be seen as a detail of a larger landscape, a visual echo of the city's congested walls.

"Graffiti is anti-modern, anti-establishment and anti-international style," says Fahr emphatically. "It's written by people who need to express themselves, to say, 'Hey, I'm a person, I'm sick of these gray walls and I'm here for a purpose! Sure it's defacing something but it's also expression.'"

Fahr is nothing if not intense. Dramatically pale, his angular features complement a shock of dark hair, dark eyes and dark clothing. He is always in motion, speaking with the same chaotic urgency telegraphed in his paintings. "For me, the graffiti is quick and fast — Abstract Expressionist aesthetics with a message. You can write about any situation — salvation, damnation, pump it all into the image! Spray paint may have low-grade, sleazy connotations but it comes in beautiful, industrial colors and I have every color made by Standard Brands."

Though the 32-year-old Hartford, Conn., native holds a master's degree from the prestigious Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, his loyalties lie with the anonymous authors of the cluttered walls near his Third Street atelier. "At 4 in

the morning, I've been going out to write my own secret messages on walls. On one I wrote 'Ray Gun' like 'Reagan' and a smiley face of fascism. You know — a smiley face but with swastikas for eyes and an S.S. symbol for a nose. With Reagan, everything looks smiley, but you've got to watch it — it's fascist."

At the center of Fahr's studio stand a half-dozen squat architectural sculptures. Cactuslike with 3-inch protruding nails, they stand from 3- to 8-feet in height. Over a period of two years, Fahr has built 18 such sculptures and given them such unconventional names as "Voodoo Pillbox" and "Psychedelic Flak Tower."

They suggest bunkers for a nuclear age and



Judy Simonian squatting by the reconstruction of "Stable Drawing," a painting which was mounted in a Chicano barrio and vandalized shortly thereafter. The piece — later reconstructed by the artist — now stands in her 3rd Street studio.

were, in fact, inspired by World War II flak towers. Covered with a pocked, lunarlike surface and airbrushed with hallucinogenic color, each of Fahr's "flak towers" has a single "window," or blackened rectangle, which adds to its appearance as an ominous guard station.

From a studio window, Fahr points out the origins of his "architecture of aggression." The roofs of adjacent buildings are punctuated with turrets, and the tops of nearby skylights and elevators recall wartime bunker construction. Fahr's studio window faces the helicopter landing pad at Parker Center station of the Los Angeles Police Department.

"The helicopters go all day and night with their lights on, like the city's being observed all the time," says Fahr. "The black hole or space in those flak tower sculptures comes from the idea of observation. Big Brother and who is watching you. Part of life down here is watching out."

New Wave posters lining Fahr's studio walls suggest another inspiration for his art. The artist

designs the lighting and special effects for the local band Wall of Voodoo. His light installations are saturated by the same raw color and distorted forms of his painting and sculpture.

"New Wave music loosened things up," Fahr explains. "Devo, Weirdos, Talking Heads — all were artists disenchanted with that artsy, elite, inbred crowd and they wanted a more popular audience — something more revolutionary. That attitude affected the artists. If the '60s ethic was 'less is more,' the '80s is 'more is more.' I want my light installations to be totally disorienting... so much sensory overload that you've got to find the center for yourself. I want to destroy your senses so that when you come out, the real world will seem OK."

For Judy Simonian, graffiti is not an influence but a virtual dialogue. Ever since she moved downtown from Hollywood in the spring of 1977, Simonian has been stealing out before dawn to either sandblast or paint geometric shapes on walls that read thick with graffiti.

Her purpose is to use the language of the art world to obliterate the cuneiform tangle of the barrio. Within days, the gangs respond with their own language, their own tools, filling or recovering the spaces she has cleared or covered.

One ongoing battlefield is the retaining wall on the north side of 1st Street between Bixel Street and Beaudry Avenue. Amidst ragged black lettering are Simonian's modern white rectangles, being reclaimed with the gangs' red territorial messages (one of which reads "Civilization vs. Anarchy").

Simonian's art is temporary, enduring as process rather than product. Since the walls will almost always be repainted or demolished, photographs frequently are the only record of her work.

The ephemerality of this type of art was part of its initial appeal: "It was kind of systematic. I was purging myself of making any kind of 'art object.' I had had a traditional art training at California State University, Northridge. I remember that suddenly it made no sense at all to bring anything else into the world. Every single mark I made seemed so clichéd. So I started using my own handwriting. That led to the interest in graffiti."

Simonian, 36, is a slight, animated woman. Half-Armenian, she grew up in North Hollywood and remembers an adolescent fascination with "the city," which, to her, meant downtown. Her aesthetic — an elaborate visual conversation with the area — is the final product of that fascination.

Another "voice" was added to this conversation when curator Dennis Komac invited her to create a site-specific installation for "Drawing: Personal Definitions" at San Diego State University last year. For the show, which ran from mid-March to mid-April, Simonian located a roofless, abandoned, concrete building used as a rendezvous for local gangs in a neighborhood adjacent to the college campus. All that remained of the interior were four walls decorated by a labyrinthine pattern of black graffiti with 10-by-10-foot openings at both ends. In one day, Simonian and an assistant closed off one entrance with a 4-inch thick wall which they then painted in shiny black enamel. Over this background, the artist rendered a classical, Grecian vessel in white spray paint. Simonian expected to later cut the vessel shape from the wall to present in the "Drawing" exhibition.

"I thought of (the vessel) as a protective spirit," says the artist. "The other pieces I'd done were intrusions or interruptions of graffiti-in-process but this was different. If anything, I thought the gangs might write graffiti on it."

In fact, the reaction was much more extreme. They tore it to shreds. "It looked like there was a lot



David Amico at his South Broadway studio with "Crowd," a painting inspired by downtown's street people. "My paintings are like humorous morality plays with characters that all of us can identify with."

an egalitarian perspective in the artist. Amico, who works as a computer operator in West Los Angeles, sees the artist as a worker rather than as an enlightened being with some special vision.

Amico gestures toward a favorite painting, a black-and-white canvas of a throng of people staring expectantly into a black void. The work is titled "Crowd."

"My paintings are about people in the street. I don't consider myself any more special than anyone else. If I've gone through certain experiences, then somebody else has probably been through them, too."

Amico is swarthy and sentimental, with an almost painfully retiring manner. A lyrical painter in the city, he used to construct sculptures from objects that he found around the streets. Now he incorporates "found images" in his work. Working from a resource file of several dozen photographs, drawings and cartoons appropriated from the world at large, Amico collages information from the media, the milieu and the mind.

"Using images that come from the street validates their reality for me," he says. "Information that goes out and comes back — the shared accessibility of it all — this is the added element that convinces me that these are shared experiences. There's nothing wrong with nothing new. It's a grounding element." For example, several of his paintings feature the steamy graphics of Mexican comic books which, according to Amico, "look like old American soap operas translated to another form in another culture. They come back to Broadway as our own culture translated."

"Low-art" references like these recur throughout Amico's paintings. His is not Pop Art — that snide, cool commentary on our consumer culture. Amico chooses the images for their appealing honesty and emotional weight.

One compelling example, a painting called "Common Match," embodies the anxiety of confrontation. A helmeted green figure wearing a red joystick strap raises one arm, ready to attack the uniformed security guard on the other side of the

door. The picture vibrates with paranoia, mistrust. Who is the victim and who is the authority?

"These paintings are interesting and palatable at the same time," says Amico. "They're concerned with issues that are somewhat political and social. I don't think that you have to apologize for something you say honestly. There is a believability there that separates this work from merely amateurish art."

Pearly white glasses in the cat's-eye style of the 1950s are the first thing that you notice about Mary Jones. It is an extreme attention to style that is equally apparent in her paintings. They are highly stylized, ambiguous pictures of houses, stick figures and possessions. Doors, windows and figures tilt to create unsettling, off-balance compositions. Painted in three-quarters human scale, they are visually available to the viewer but psychologically inaccessible. The scenes often portend imminent natural disaster. Skies are usually thick with smog, clouds or smoke from approaching fires. Bolts of lightning split the air.

"I think about the time one summer when the skies were on fire and everybody was really sick from the air. I was influenced by that," says Jones. "Buildings downtown burn a lot in the summer and we can see the flames. Fear of fires is just a part of urban living. The paintings have the feeling of that atmosphere — being beautiful, dangerous, strangely colored."

While Jones' architectural landscapes or urbane interiors developed from aspects of the downtown expe-

rience, the truly urban nature of her work lies in a complex vocabulary of symbols. This abbreviated information approximates the graphic terminology of airports and computer games as well as the Oriental pictographs that abound in Little Tokyo. It is easily read by the modern mind. Three lines comprise a house, five lines and a circle make a figure. The more detailed account is superfluous. The paintings are painstakingly composed, each element placed for optimum impact at a single glance. Like freeway signs, they are paintings of expediency and their message can be captured in movement. Yet they are anything but facile.

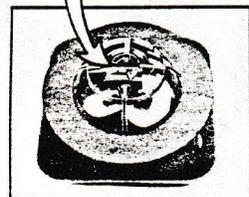
Jones has adopted a hieroglyphic tradition as old as the Egyptian culture and revised it to inject her own meaning into our media-dominated culture. "Symbolism is the connection between art and the time we live in now," says Jones. "I use stylized information because we're so modern that we understand what that means. It's urban information: signs, short, abbreviated elements which are abstract but full of meaning. I like abstraction and images. Symbolism gets to the essence — perfect for the way we receive information today."

Jones, 28, was in graduate school at the University of Colorado when she met Joe Clower, who was teaching there then and is now her husband. In 1977, the two moved to the heart of downtown Los Angeles, at 4th Street and San Pedro. They share an interest in architecture, primitive art and symbolism. Having lived and worked together for five years, they proudly admit to being mutually influenced. Yet their work is fundamentally dissimilar and any element borrowed is equally transformed.

"We encourage each other — have helpful

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things to say about each other's work and enjoy stealing from each other," says Clower. "We fell in love because we had similar interests and compatible personalities. . . . But we're also individuals."

Jokes Jones, "Joe will take anything from anybody. He started by using my doodles — like the stick figure — in his work. It looked so good, I thought, 'Why can't I use my own doodles?' and I started to take things back."

Jones' narrative symbolism suggests the verge of action. When this vocabulary crops up in Clower's work, the effect is more static. With wry humor, he abstracts the city and reduces it to a few telling shapes, which are often presented as caricatures: a fire-escape ladder, a chair, a conical radio tower, antennae, a window, stairs, a skyscraper. Environments of objects are limned in a nervous outline of black, the shapes filled with flat graphic color.

Clower's sculpture is simply a three-dimensional realization of the same shapes. The look is ingratiating but the humor is black. Animation and personality are confined to inanimate objects. Figures are rarely included in Clower's compositions, except as robots.

A soft-spoken 44, Clower is so withdrawn that one doesn't doubt his admission of anti-social inclinations. "My reality doesn't contain many people." The human traits in Clower's work belong to the buildings and the furniture. Clower says, "It's the way primitive people anthropomorphize everything, changing it to look like themselves."

Clower's symbolism, like Jones', is rooted in an interest in primitive art. According to Clower, "It seems to be the kind of art that isn't involved with 'aesthetics.' I'm impatient with art that has to do with appearances at the expense of having some sort of personal importance to the artist. . . . I want something that deals with more than the visual surface of things."

Clower's painting is less formal than that of Jones and his symbols don't so much tell a story as embody a meaning. With the irony of a Saul Steinberg, Clower will represent the artist's tools, palette, paintbrush, tubes, as high-rise bank buildings — portraying art literally as the corporation. The downtown skyline in Clower's paintings often appears to be teetering on the edge of collapse.

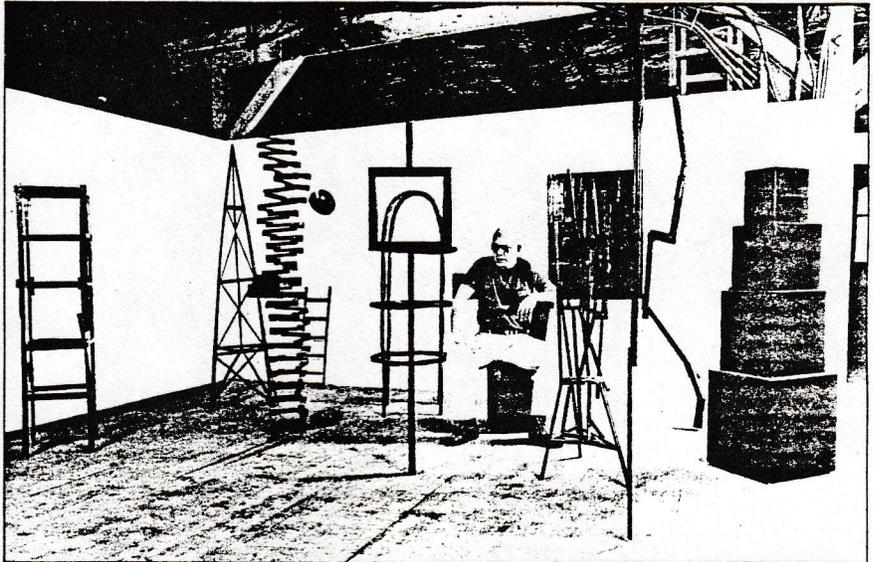
"I don't think my paintings have any conscious political program," the artist muses. "It's just a consequence of being alive. What's going on today has to get into anybody's work. Down here you have everything from identifying with the winos, to worrying about being blown up, from the air pollution to the Japanese realtors. . . ."

Clower's cynicism is not without cause. History plays reruns. Since the artists have returned to the downtown neighborhood, rents have risen from 5 to 25 cents per square foot. Since the city has decided to follow the artists and revitalize the area, there are plans to raze many of the structures surrounding Little Tokyo and build in their place shopping centers and condominiums. Last year's introduction of the "Earthquake Hazard Reduction in Existing Buildings," a municipal code requiring costly structural changes in unreinforced concrete buildings, will designate many additional industrial spaces to be demolished. Among those marked buildings include many where artists now live.

Owners of the building occupied by Clower and Jones do not appear to be willing to invest the more than \$500,000 required to meet the demands of the earthquake code. The tenants have already received notice to vacate and are negotiating with the owners. Other artists will face similar uncertainly as



Mary Jones' abbreviated, symbolic images convey the anxious, urban ambiance of downtown Los Angeles. She sits between two untitled paintings at her 4th Street studio.



Joe Clower seated in "Buena Vista," a sculptural installation that he calls a "three-dimensional drawing." These forms echo the architecture and skyline outside his 4rd Street studio.

downtown Los Angeles fulfills its prophecy of expansionism.

As many artists are forced to relocate in other undeveloped, low-rent pockets of the city, "The L.A. Look" of their art is likely to undergo another transformation. Graffiti and skyscrapers could be replaced by the influences of other environments.

"At the end of 1978," says Clower bitterly,

"downtown seemed like the beginning of an interesting community but it really turned into something else so fast. That spontaneous, popular disorganized feeling started to seem like Las Vegas. They're not revitalizing downtown, they're turning it into some kind of Disneyland."

What will happen next? Clower grins. "I guess we'll all be living together in the Valley." ■