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Pacific Standard Time: How L.A. artists took '60s scene by storm

In turning away from the New York art establishment, artists like Ed Ruscha, David Hockney and Judy Chicago did the groundwork for a flourishing L.A. scene.

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Even for legendary decades of change, the 1960s stands out, its impact felt around the world but especially in the Los Angeles art world. The '60s is the point when a number of factors converged that would transform L.A. from just another place that ambitious artists left when they moved to New York into a distinct and thriving art scene in its own right.

At midcentury, as World War II was fading from immediate memory, the art associated with that traumatic period, Abstract Expressionism, had become the powerful and entrenched aesthetic. Especially in New York.

This, as much as anything, persuaded young artists to come to Los Angeles or stay here. The important artists who came of age in L.A. in the '60s had decided to move away from what Craig Kauffman called "messy '50s painting." Young and reckless, having been to Europe and New York, they broke with prevailing views and practices of mainstream art and criticism.

They chose to live in L.A. instead of New York precisely because there was a dearth of critical discourse and gallery infrastructure. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, who had been their heroes, they took a stand for optimism, humor and pleasure. Though most came from modest backgrounds, they refused to adopt the sorrowful introspection and angst of the New York School artists. As Robert Irwin has said, "We didn't have nothing to do with all of that — no dark side, none of that struggle — everything was just a flow."

There were other factors: Postwar prosperity washed over Southern California like a warm tide and contributed to an atmosphere of comfort and ease. The rise of the entertainment industry, especially television, brought L.A.'s seductive image to the national and international arena. Suntanned citizens driving convertibles down palm-lined boulevards were seen as glamorous and exotic, as such images were broadcast into homes around the world. This lifestyle was not just for the rich. Even artists could live it.

The majority of the 40 artists featured in "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970," the exhibition at the Getty Museum that stands as the cornerstone of the large Pacific Standard Time initiative, developed their breakthrough styles in the '60s: Ed Ruscha, David Hockney, Bruce Nauman, Vija Celmins, Ed Kienholz, Judy Chicago, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, John Baldessari, Wallace Berman, Ken Price, Joe Goode, Peter Alexander and DeWain Valentine are a few of the best known.

Many of them took advantage of the new technologies that had become available to the average person in the 1960s: fast-drying acrylic paint, vacuum-formed

Plexiglas, cast resin, Verifax machines, Polaroid instant cameras. Such materials facilitated the production of work that looked, contrary to the facts, as though it had been made by a machine, that had a cool, unemotional aspect completely at odds with the overheated intensity of the Abstract Expressionists.

The assemblage artists on the other hand, took the detritus of a consumer culture and used it in a different sort of subversion, reintroducing the figure to art as it had become despised in painting.

There were only a handful of galleries to show the important hard-edge abstract painting of John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson and others. And those galleries survived by selling European modern art from before the war or the New York School artists. In the absence of an art museum, an art magazine or many art collectors, that scene was in its early stage of development. The open playing field led curator Walter Hopps and artist Kienholz to open Ferus Gallery in 1957. Irving Blum moved to L.A. from New York, saw the gallery's potential and bought Kienholz's share of the business when he wanted to concentrate on his art in 1958. When Andy Warhol had his first show anywhere at Ferus in 1962, a considerable shift in the cultural scene was underway.

The success of Ferus led many other galleries to open on North La Cienega Boulevard. A collecting class evolved. Artforum magazine moved to an office above Ferus in 1965, the same year that the L.A. County Museum of Art opened on Wilshire Boulevard. The Pasadena Art Museum, housed in an old Chinese-style mansion, where Marcel Duchamp was given his first retrospective in 1963, moved to a new architectural building on Orange Grove Boulevard in 1969. Then the economy collapsed.

The recession of the 1970s contributed to the loss of much of the cultural gain. Ferus had closed, Artforum had moved to New York and Blum followed in 1972. The Pasadena Art Museum went bankrupt and was taken over by collector Norton Simon, who installed his collection in the new building.

Not coincidentally, the next generation of young artists who decided to stay in L.A. embraced Conceptual art, performance, photography and video as strategies. Feminists, Chicanos, African Americans, gays and others took advantage of the freedoms of the '60s to demand a voice and create art reflecting their own individual realities.

By 1980, plans were underway to open what is now the Museum of Contemporary Art. The economy revived and L.A. began to reinvent itself as the cultural center that it is today. Along the way, however, the history faded from memory, as history tends to do in L.A.

The Pacific Standard Time initiative has funded dozens of exhibitions to resurrect that missing history and to document the roots of today's scene. Those roots grew deep in the 1960s. As Irwin explained, "The idea of a career wasn't an issue for any of us because if it had been we would've left and gone to New York like all the generations before us, because that's where careers are made. The reason that generation of artists is so seminal to L.A. is because it was the first one that didn't leave and made a commitment to stay in L.A."

Drohojowska-Philp is the author of "Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s," published earlier this year by Henry Holt.