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MoCA ART

On top with our downtown contemporary art museum

By Hunter Drohojowska

Has it been five years already? I remember the fresh smack of the Museum of Contemporary Art's debut exhibition, "The First Show," held at the Temporary Contemporary in November 1983. Paintings and sculpture known to most of Los Angeles through slides and art magazines had been assembled as a wish list for a permanent collection, an in-brief art history survey, and a lesson for novice L.A. collectors.

The pieces were drawn from some of the top collections in the world — masterworks by Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, Matta and Yves Klein, Joseph Cornell and Alberto Giacometti — and they were hung together as an exhibition of passion, a demonstration of the drive to collect the best with the goal of passing it on to a museum as cultural heritage.

The question then, as it remains, is where the money would come from. MoCA's very existence is largely due to a scheme concocted by MoCA's founding president, Judge William Norris, and members of the Community Redevelopment Agency. By attaching the 1 percent funds usually reserved for art in public places, the museum's construction was paid for by the developer of the California Plaza location. The land was donated

asked only for proof that such an institution would be supported by the community.

Within a year, there was \$13.5 million of proof — money raised for the operating endowment with million-dollar seed donations from collectors Eli Broad and Max Palevsky, other big donations from downtown businesses nudged by ARCO's Robert O. Anderson, and much of the money scraped up in bits and pieces from the people of the city.

Merry Norris, now president of the Cultural Affairs Commission, remembers that she had never before asked anyone for money, but she made the calls. So did Marcia Weisman and other trustees. Checks for the minimum \$10,000 flowed in from schoolteachers and artists, gallery owners and aficionados.

It almost went for naught when an economic recession undermined the plans of developer Cadillac Fairview. And there were the inevitable scandals. In 1982, Palevsky sued for the return of his donation because he didn't approve of Arata Isozaki's design for the permanent facility. MoCA's founding chairman of the board, Eli Broad, explained with understatement in 1983: "Considering our egos and different views on art, and the diversity of our founders and board members, it's remarkable how well we've done in pulling together

MoCA

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over three difficult years."

Solutions were found. The Temporary Contemporary, a warehouse rented from the city for a dollar a year and renovated by Frank Gehry, garnered an avalanche of international press. It seemed to symbolize the free-wheeling, experimental mandate such a museum should have. Before the doors opened, curator Julie Lazar arranged "Available Light," a performance collaboration among Gehry, who did the sets; choreographer Lucinda Childs; and composer John Adams.

Lazar's support of performance, video and new music, including the consistently vanguard Explorations series and the Territory of Art radio program, reinforced the idea of the museum as an active, restless, cutting-edge kind of place. Curator Julia Brown's series "In Context" lent a welcome conceptual bent to MoCA's first years. Under her aegis, and that of Koshalek, the museum commissioned new work from artists rather than simply buying out of the studio.

A detour from such progress and the nadir of the museum's shows was "The Automobile and Culture," designed to correspond with the 1984 Summer Olympics. Founding director Pontus Hulten and inventive curator Walter Hopps came up with this high-concept exhibition that foundered on its own bend to the popular vote. More memorable than the show was the opening party with its freeway buffet of cuisine pit stops serving food synonymous with neighborhoods — fresh shellfish at the Pacific Coast Highway, tacos on Olvera Street.

Reputation rescue came in the

form of 80 abstract expressionist and pop art pieces from Giuseppe Panza di Biumo's collection that were purchased as the core of MoCA's permanent collection later that year. Yet another scandal erupted when it was discovered that the museum contemplated selling many of the pieces. Indeed, the very reason Panza wanted MoCA to have his collection — its daring and experimental nature — began to evaporate.

The following year was a bit better, with the imported retrospectives of Jonathan Borofsky and John Chamberlain. The museum did well by organizing the first retrospective of talented L.A. painter William Brice. And there was an exhibition of the stellar collection of minimal and pop art from the '60s and '70s left to the museum after the death of the brilliant Barry Lowen. But lukewarm exhibitions like the photojournalism of W. Eugene Smith and the inane if popular Red Grooms diluted the impact.

One assumes the MoCA staff was saving its energy for the opening of the permanent Contemporary in December 1986. "Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986" was Brown's last effort before leaving for the position of director of the Des Moines Art Center. (She was replaced by Mary Jane Jacob, formerly of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art.) Yet in '86 and '87, it often appeared that Lazar was the lone pioneer, commissioning collaborations like "Zangezi: A Supersaga in 20 Planes," a play by futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, directed by Peter Sellars with music by Jon Hassell.

This year has been more promising, with thoughtful exhibitions such as associate curator Kerry Brougner's "The Image of Abstraction" and imported shows like the retrospective of

Anselm Kiefer and Frank Gehry, as well as the less well-known work of Fischli and Weiss or Christian Boltanski. "Striking Distance" proved that MoCA is building a permanent collection with work by the best young L.A. artists purchased through a grant from the El Paso Natural Gas Co.

Museums, as repositories of culture, symbolize the advent of civilization, the smoothing of barbarian edges. Even in the realm of contemporary art, a museum demonstrates the skills of refinement, the belief in something beyond the self and its immediate gratification. In the last five years, MoCA has generated a softening of the hard, blank, hopeless mall of L.A. life. It has done this through its own events and in the blossoming of related art activity such as the expansion at the L.A. County Museum of Art, the hundreds of new galleries, the city's new status as a contender in the competitive world of contemporary art. For this, I can genuinely wish MoCA a happy birthday. With many happy returns.