

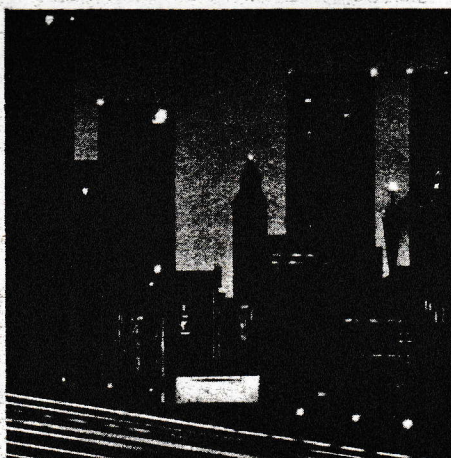
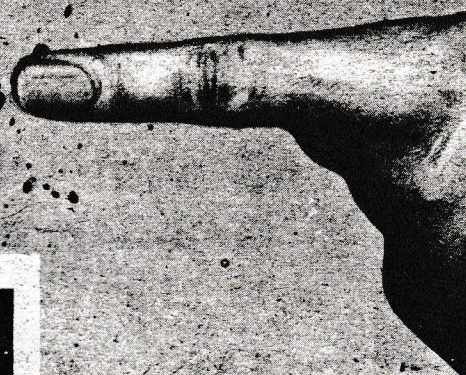
L.A. WEEKLY

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DOWNTOWN!



— The Real Estate
Gold Rush
— The Contemporary
Art Boom

Inside: L.A.'s Biggest Guide To Movies, Music & Fun

For what must seem like ages, people have been heralding the emergence of downtown Los Angeles as the center of contemporary art in Southern California. Predictions of another Soho-type art district, along with all the contradictions that Manhattan enclave has come to stand for, were being made for downtown L.A. almost before the first gallery banner went up. Between the opening of several new galleries and the arrival of LAVA '81 — a day-long festival sponsored by Los Angeles Visual Artists — the damn thing's finally happening.

This coming Sunday morning, a host of prominent city officials and art dealers will gather at the Japanese-American Cultural and Community Center, located on South San Pedro Street, to kick off the festivities. Selected works from each of the downtown galleries will comprise a group exhibition on display at the cultural center. Double-decker buses will then shuttle the curious and prosperous around to the various galleries in an area described by city cultural affairs director Fred Croton as the "last American frontier." To find their way around, visitors need only follow balloons color-coded to gallery locations on a LAVA '81 map.

It is not without irony that the map approximates the design of a Monopoly board. Like the settlers of '49, many sense that there's gold in them there galleries, or more particularly the previously uninhabited factory space the galleries are housed in. In the past year and a half, the number of galleries in the downtown area has soared from five to 25. They run the gamut of aesthetic interest, but about half of the spaces are non-profit, so not everyone has their eye on the bottom line. But they all have a stake in hyping the "downtown" phenomenon.

One of the most consistently aggressive alternative spaces downtown is Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Its attitude is manifest in its resistance to the cheerleading for LAVA '81. Having exhibited more than the lion's share of downtown artists over the past three years, LACE will open this fall with an artist exchange with the San Francisco-based alternative space SITE. Performances and installations will be presented by Ondyn Herschelle, Al Wong and Jill Scott, with a performance by Tony Labat at 2 p.m. on September 13. Marc Pally, an articulate and educated director, explained the decision. "It's important to emphasize that downtown is a cosmopolitan, not provincial, art center. We wanted the gallery to be experiential, rather than object-oriented, and to point out the geographical network that exists among the arts."

LACE is situated above a surreal-looking boutique, Monarch Bridal Gowns, on a heavily Hispanic block of Broadway. It is a space run by artists for artists. Pally and program coordinator Jim Iserman both create painted wood constructions. Program coordinator Lin Hixson does performance. Pally said, "LACE is structurally decentralized so that the community can have impact on programs and policies. Since all of the staff are artists, we immediately identify with the artist population." Examples of their approach include the sponsorship of last year's performance festival *Public Spirit* and an artists' studios tour.

LACE is supported by membership fees, fundraisers and the dwindling source of government money. They don't sell work. (Price lists and telephone numbers are provided and while they take no commission, a ten percent donation is appreciated.) The budget is a perennial problem, but the trade-off is curatorial freedom.

"LACE is not in the business of validating art," said Pally. "We want to take risks, function as a laboratory so artists can try things out, do things they might not do in another setting. We endorse first exposure, new talent, installation, performance and political works."

In marked contrast to LACE is Arco Center for the Visual Arts, one of the original downtown non-profit galleries. It is an immaculate gallery located in the mall beneath Arco's gleaming glass silos on Flower Street. As a handsome tax write-off for big oil money, the Center is not plagued by the usual financial restraints. Regardless, curator Fritz Frauchiger claims total freedom in



ART & THE DOWNTOWN

organizing the Center's exhibitions. "Arco pays the bills but they never say what to show." He continued to say that Robert Anderson, Arco's chairman of the board, created the Center as a community service "for real art people and not as some sort of rubber stamp operation." Granted, the Center is not likely to exhibit the anti-capitalist sentiments of an artist such as Hans Haacke, but it does feature high caliber, carefully considered contemporary art. Only rarely does Frauchiger runs into the kind of problem presented in the current exhibition of works on money by Karen Jossel. Arco lawyers were a bit concerned that by his hand-tinting and stitching of bills ranging in denominations from \$1 to \$100 Jossel might be illegally defacing legal tender. The bureaucratic powers that be assured them that it would be all right, though they didn't encourage it. The show, along with Arco's Third Biennial, will be on view September 13.

Frauchiger, a handsome, idealistic sort, appears able to balance quite neatly between the corporate and aesthetic worlds. He runs the Center like a small museum without a permanent collection, catering to some 10,000 visitors during each six-week exhibition. They don't sell work but provide price lists and phone numbers. Frauchiger described the process. "What we do here is give the artist a show, a press release, advertising, foot traffic, a catalogue and presentation. Everything is

icing for him. We advertise heavily in *Art in America*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Arts*, *Artweek* and the *L.A. Times* as a service to the artists, as a way of getting their names known in the international art world."

The Arco Center has been downtown for over five years now. Of the changes Frauchiger mused, "We felt very alone down here before. Now there is an infusion of talent and energy that I like very much. I think the downtown artists are taking more chances, and I like that a lot. That's where leaps are made. It's the sort of work you can't sell easily. The corporations have trouble with it, and they're the biggest buyers around. [Downtown art] is not created with sales as the primary criterion, and that may not be lucrative, but it's healthy."

Profits may be irrelevant to the non-commercial spaces, but the other side of the burgeoning gallery scene didn't move downtown for the fresh air. The rent is low, the profile is high, and dealers recognize the attraction of art as a hedge against an inflationary economy. Of course, they are not saying that in so many words. It is more common to hear platitudes that refer to the area's "community sensibility" or "pioneer spirit." The city's bicentennial slogan, "L.A.'s the Place," seems to have become the mantra of downtown redevelopment.

Cirrus Gallery and its printmaking facility was in Hollywood for eight years

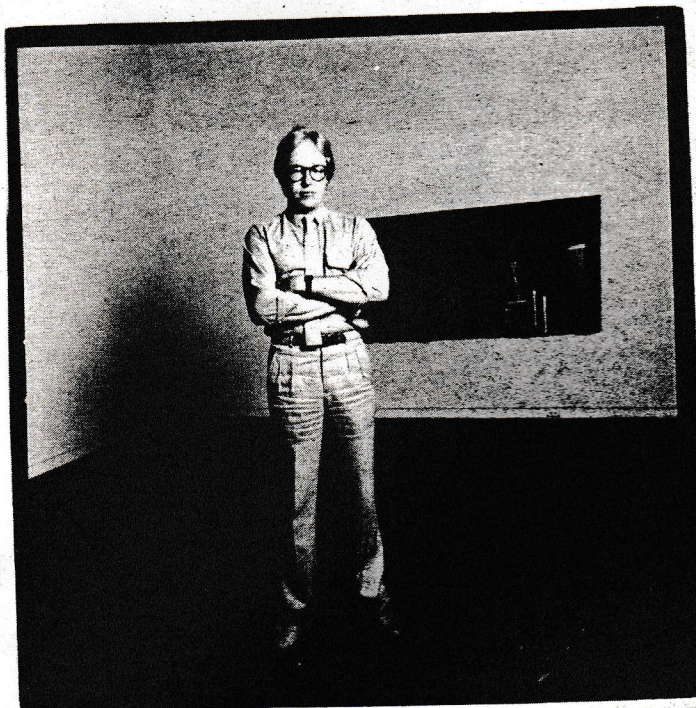
when, in 1978, owner Jean Milant relocated to an old warehouse on Alameda Street. He represents "young Southern California artists" and will open this fall with an exhibition of nine painted steel "I" beam sculptures by Jay Willis.

One of the first established dealers to join the artists' move downtown, Milant successfully encouraged others to follow suit. "I felt that the move was right," said Milant. "For one thing, it's not true that people don't come downtown. Bankers, lawyers and stockbrokers are used to coming here." Milant recalled with surprise the increase in both foot traffic and sales. "It was amazing. The group that comes here now is more serious about art. The West Side people actually come more often because it's 'freeway close,' just 18 minutes from Brentwood."

Milant is chairman of the LAVA '81 steering committee and stresses that the event evolved from the downtown sense of community. "The galleries are all gaining by being next to each other and competing with one another. They are going to help one another stay down here. One of the interesting things I can see about the LAVA '81 meetings is the way the younger dealers are learning more professional attitudes from the older dealers."

LAVA '81's fall line-up features the debuts of four new commercial galleries. And some of the newer owners seem to be catching on to the tricks of the gallery business faster than their seasoned col-

"So much attention has been focused on the development of downtown that an aura of self-consciousness now hangs as heavy as the smog."



GOLD RUSH

by Hunter Drohojowska

leagues might like. Byron Weber (former partner of Adrienne Simard in the Simard/Weber Gallery) has not yet opened his doors but proudly claims to have "stolen" an artist from Cirrus and another from the Malinda Wyatt Gallery in Venice.

Weber has a college degree in art, but his professional past is business. He worked as a business analyst at Dun and Bradstreet, as an auditor, and, most tellingly, as a salesman. "Because I come from a business background," said Weber, "I take quite a different approach to dealing art." The lean young man discussed this philosophy with cool nonchalance. "This is the roughest, most cutthroat, fast-moving gossip business in the world. You have to be able to put the information in the right place at the right time to sell work. I'm polite and businesslike, but I'm not above creating gossip and situations to my advantage."

Weber decided to open a gallery three years ago when he received "an inheritance and a choice of doing whatever I wanted to do with my life." Greg Card's wood and mirror constructions comprise his opening show. Weber carries "non-objective, classical work" but admits that he's having trouble finding artists that he considers worthwhile. "Art in L.A. is too quick, too easy. The new museum [MOCA] will make a difference, when people can learn from seeing the work instead of copying from books and



Gallery Gold Miners: (above right) Mark Pally of LACE, (above center) Fritz Frauchiger of Arco Center, (above left) Peter Nelson and Margaret Schock of Stella Polaris, and (lower center) Jean Milant of Cirrus

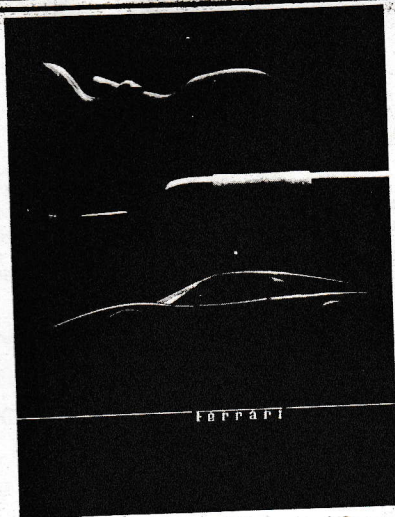
art magazines."

Right beneath the Weber Gallery, in Boyd Street's stately Los Angeles News Company building, another gallery is being completed, Stella Polaris. It plans to bring a number of internationally known artists to Los Angeles. The gallery's pre-opening \$25 per person black tie cocktail party is a benefit for the Scandinavian-American Foundation and features an installation by the late Swedish tableau sculptor Oyvind Fahlstrom. An enormous work, *Meatball Curtain*, derived from R. Crumb's cartoons in *Zap Comix* and originally created for the *Art and Technology* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. No less an august personality than the MOCA's new Swedish director Pontus Hulten will speak to the crowd on Fahlstrom's art.

The gallery directors are Peter Nelson, a poet and native Californian, and Margaret Schock, a striking-looking Swedish dealer from Stockholm. The formation of their partnership is an intriguing tale. Nelson had been teaching English at the University of Hawaii for 11 years. Schock had closed her gallery and returned to the study of art history and economics for the past three years. They were introduced by a mutual friend in Sweden and decided by "intuition" to open a gallery in downtown Los Angeles. They have an expanded view of the gallery role which includes a bookshop for art and poetry publications, regular poetry readings and small concerts. Vivaciously, Schock described their intentions. "Peter and I are very interested in the art and consciousness relationship. Art can do more than just be a decoration on the wall. The right kind of art can enrich the inner life and be a base for the

Gold Rush Continued on page 12

photos by Ken Collins



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Gold Rush continued from page 11

outer life as well. I see art dealing as spiritual matchmaking. Putting two lovers together, the painting and the client. These things come spontaneously when people know what they want." Schock went on to explain that the gallery's name translates as North Star. "It is an important star that is connected to the whole

universe, since art is eternal." Schock does not fear, however, that these cosmic concerns will override the prosaic arena of finance. "Nobody wants that old-fashioned way of buying art that is based on insecurity. They are not going to be pushed to buy anything. That's the way we're going to sell... and we are going to sell a lot. I sold a lot in Stockholm."

At this juncture, the interview was interrupted by the building's owner Sue Iwasaki. Along with Tamara Thomas and John Fernandez, she is a partner in a number of downtown buildings. She mentioned that negotiations were still under way but she felt optimistic that the MOCA would take interim space in her building on Boyd Street, just down the block and across from the Downtown Gallery. This flurry of activity makes Boyd Street and those surrounding it a compact and walkable neighborhood of galleries. Right around the corner, on Towne Avenue, is the Adrienne Simard Gallery.

As far as I know, Adrienne Simard is the only black woman art dealer in Los Angeles. She and her husband Marcellin bought out former partner Byron Weber and abandoned life in the San Fernando Valley for the joys of running a gallery. A former art major and teacher, Simard has no previous gallery experience but says that owning a gallery has been her "long-time fantasy." Her first show, September 13, features the figurative expressionist paintings of Patrick Morrison. Simard is not inclined to pick a single direction for the gallery yet, not even with regard to minority art. She said, "I don't want to be pigeonholed as the L.A. black art dealer who is going to be the savior for minority art, but, yes, I'm black and because of my awareness I have a sympathetic eye and ear to minority artists who are good."

Simard can afford to wait longer than some to find the gallery's focus. Husband Marcellin, a French Canadian, is a cardiologist and associate professor at UCLA. He said, "What I want to do is make enough money from my cardiology to pay for the gallery so there isn't any pressure on Adrienne to sell a certain amount per month. What the gallery makes goes back in the gallery. This will give us more latitude."

Double Rocking G Gallery on Mateo Street is a mixture of alternative space

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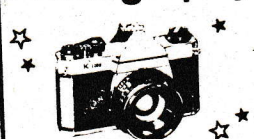


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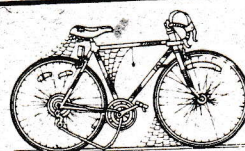
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and commercial gallery. It is also uncertain about its future direction. Created by two commercial artists, George Landry and George Yasuda, the space will open on September 13 with an installation by Vida Freeman and the "Rocking G Film Spree," four and a half hours of short films by artists. The two directors say they don't know yet whether they will rent space to artists or take commissions, but

phenomenon. I guess. It's just that it all happened so fast. Embryonic beginnings are spotlighted; thrown into exaggerated, high relief. So much attention has been focused on the development of downtown Los Angeles that an aura of self-consciousness now hangs as heavy as the smog. Conversations within the art world are tinged with the assumption that "the whole world is watching." Increased

"Increased media coverage becomes the breeding ground for a star system, the seasonal network of hot young artists — a destructive pattern for which New York has become notorious."

they'd like to open the space to performance, film, dance and theater. Landry said, "We are freer in our space than other galleries."

In principle, the proliferation of galleries in Los Angeles is great, the much-needed idea whose time has come. In a city that has been historically grumpy about the dearth of exhibition space, 20 galleries spawned in as many months is a positive

media coverage becomes the breeding ground for a star system, the seasonal network of hot young artists — a destructive pattern for which New York has become notorious.

The first local example would have to be the Young Turks, 13 artists whose actual work will be on view at the Downtown Gallery from September 13. Qualitative considerations aside, these artists have become associated with the downtown scene via Stephen Seemayer's pseudo-documentary of the same name [L.A.

Weekly, July 24-30]. They have become "stars" of a sort. A number of them are included in such "downtown" shows as Tom Garver's exhibition, *The New Art of Downtown Los Angeles*, which originated at Madison Art Center in Wisconsin, *Urban Landscape*, a show coming up at Cal State San Bernardino, and *New Fauve Painting* at Cal State Los Angeles.

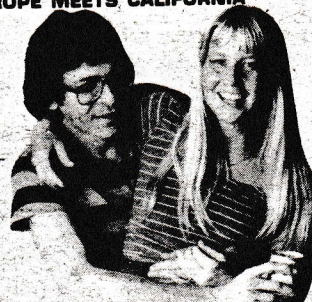
All this attention tends to encourage competition for the sake of success rather than for the maturation of good work. The bandwagon rolls and everyone jumps on in the attempt to be in the right place at the right time. And who can blame them? Artists in Los Angeles have been hungry for such a long time, they are excited by the mere whiff of recognition. Affairs like LAVA '81 certainly have their place, bringing the audience to the down-

town galleries. Yet the hype seems a bit too reminiscent of promotional offers for Knott's Berry Farm. A radio spot that encourages "a fun-filled day looking at art, great for the whole family."

A friend — who maintains he's an artist who lives downtown and not a downtown artist — accuses the scene of being a stillborn child, a being that cannot survive. That remains to be seen. But all the self-congratulatory ego stroking already threatens to eviscerate the original appeal of the downtown area — a rough-edged, careless attitude that may have been scruffy and cocky but at least held a measure of authenticity. ■

LAVA '81 begins Sunday September 13 at 10:45 a.m. at JEA, 244 South San Pedro Street, Little Tokyo, 628-2725.

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