

by Hunter Drohojowska

Just a few blocks off the "Nickel" (Fifth Street) in downtown Los Angeles, a hefty Indian woman and a grizzled old man are hunkered down with a bottle of Thunderbird in front of a "bum shelter," an outdoor public sculpture by Jon Peterson. Nodding in the direction of Peterson, who is standing nearby, the woman demands, "Who is that gray-haired man?" Her companion answers, "They call him the Gentle Marxist. He built this here house." The woman sizes up the streamlined, fiber-glass structure and spits: "This is no goddamned house. This here is a piece of artwork!" "Hey!" the man replies, "I sleep here!" Then adds, "Here, girl, have a drink." The woman shakes her head. "That ain't gonna do no good," she mutters. "It's still a goddamned piece of artwork."

That sort of interaction between art and life is not uncommon in downtown Los Angeles these days. The dialogue above occurs in *The Young Turks*, a two-hour film by Stephen Seemayer, a performance artist who has been chronicling the art scene's migration to downtown L.A. for the past two years. In his film, statements by artists are intercut with conversations with drunks and prostitutes. Convivial evenings at Al's Bar, a down and dirty and thoroughly intriguing mecca for artists these days, are contrasted with footage of bums who've been rolled, beaten and, in one case, murdered. In another scene Seemayer films one of the bums heating cans of food over a little makeshift outdoor fire. The bum stares into Seemayer's camera and shouts, "I'm living down here because I want to be here. I choose to be here! There's a degree of freedom and no responsibility." He settles back and smiles. "You just need something to drink, something to smoke, and you hope to hell there is something in the dumpster when you wake up!"

It seems that the artists and the bums share a certain rapport. In the past few years, hundreds of artists have moved to downtown L.A. for the same reasons the bums did: inexpensive survival, the proximity of a sympathetic community and a sense of iconoclastic freedom as urban pioneers. However, the artists do have their work, and with it comes money. Following the artists came a commitment to erect a Museum of Contemporary Art in 1984; following the Museum announcement came the galleries — more than 15 at this writing — and following the galleries has come real estate speculation. The price per square foot of space in the manufacturing zone has gone from five to 20 cents. Nevertheless, downtown loft space is still relatively cheap, and artists are moving downtown daily. Needless to say, this movement has affected their art.

This is the year, in fact, of L.A.'s first urban art. It's a reaction against what might loosely be characterized as the "beach art" or "suburb art" of the '60s and '70s: the decorative, pretty, clean artworks of light and space and spirit for which L.A. has long been recognized and (on the East Coast) disdained. All over the city, art is being made that radiates anxiety, aggression and energy, art that reflects the mental stability of meth addicts on a binge but seems perfectly in tune with the times.

The terms "New Wave" and "Punk" keep surfacing as critics attempt to define this surprisingly altered aesthetic and, in a sense, the terms are not inappropriate. Artists are defying the cool, middle of the road, polite work of the last two decades just as musicians rejected disco. The palm tree and swimming pool icons, the empty plex boxes and bubbles no longer seem relevant. Part of this shift is the result of visual boredom. The other part may be political. John Lennon, Ronald Reagan and the Pope were victims of attempted and successful assassination within the first half of the year; the Presidency is reactionary; doomsday possibilities are escalating faster than the defense budget. Nothing new, but all more sharply focused. There has, in fact, been a lot of talk about the uncanny resemblance of some of L.A.'s urban art to German Expressionism — an angry, violently individual style that erupted in the years before the outbreak of World War II.

Whether this intense and angst-swollen "downtown" art is a product of the political clime or urban environment or both is not clear. One thing, however, is: L.A. art of the '80s may have its fetishes, but a "finished" look isn't one of them.

If California is a state of mind, L.A. is a series of attitudes. No one ever had to live at the beach to look and think as though they did. The same is true of downtown. All over the city, from Venice to Van Nuys, the tendency is towards expressive, emotional art. Three of the four artists featured here — Victor Henderson, David Amico, Andy Wilf — exhibited at the now-defunct Vanguard Gallery last December. Ironically entitled "We Are Very Kind," the show was my first indication that some very raw, tough art was being made in L.A. Also about the same time, I saw Coleen Sterritt's sculpture at the Kirk deGooyer gallery downtown. And there are hundreds of other artists working in equally powerful ways. But unfortunately this is not a book. Consider the following just a few notes from the manufacturing zone; notes from my conversations with the artists themselves, talking about their work.

David Amico

After four years of living in New York City, it was natural for David Amico (29, a graduate of Cal State Fullerton) to choose the downtown area when he returned to L.A. The ground floor of his building is Pino's Paradise Lounge, and its Dime-a-Dance atmosphere of artificial flowers, Mexican pulp comics and cheap romance permeates his paintings. "The images are coming right off the street so they are accessible to anyone," he says. "That sharing quality is a point of departure, so the person without any art historical background is getting an experience they can associate with. Artists should pursue that broad support system more and worry less about maintaining authority systems that allow only a very few of us to survive." He adds, "For me, discovering the ultimate painting is not just some technique, but a way of sharing something emotional, getting away from the hierarchy and back to the street."

Amico's canvases are painted in day-glo and silver radiator paint. One depicts a clean-cut blond man standing blindfolded but trying to read his resume in front of a big yellow "X." The enigmatic title: "Against Medical Advice." Amico explains, "I



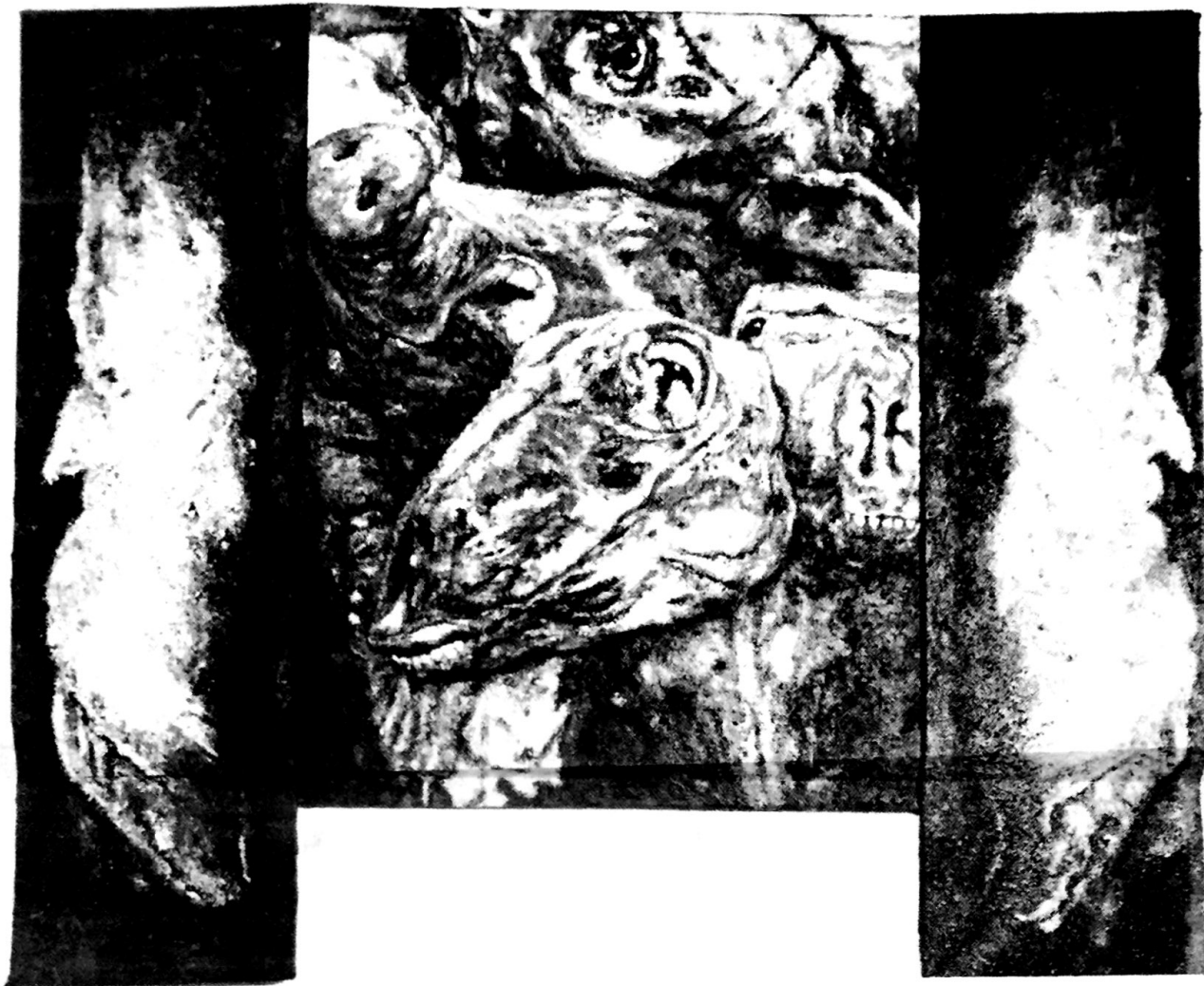
URBAN ART

Notes from the manufacturing zone: young artists have finally a of palm trees and swimming

see people striving to get into situations where they don't have to deal with society and social questions — wealthy people moving upwards in a fashion that removes them from the issues of the street. Well, saying 'no' to all the people like them who tell you that what you are doing is not right is 'against medical advice.' But they don't know any more than you do; you just have to stick it out because that's where the real development starts to take place. Individuals who take care of themselves, even 'against medical advice,' will survive."

Coleen Sterritt

Coleen Sterritt lives in an airy industrial loft full of wicker furniture and memorabilia. Good cooking utensils, Charles Aznavour albums and novels by Colette add to a tasteful ambience. Off in one corner, however, stand nine sweet tripods of natural wood each supporting one of the ugliest rocks imaginable: big round river rocks, each covered in some truly revolting substance like flock, resin or rubber. They look as though they were lifted from the set of *Alien* and have all the aesthetic appeal of open heart surgery. Asked about this apparently "Mr. Hyde" aspect to otherwise unabashedly pleasant surroundings, Sterritt says, "I'm interested in primitive anthropological forms. But I want to produce an emotion. I want to draw in a viewer and then produce a reaction of fear or revulsion. One man came in here and just kept going on and on about how they reminded him of pus, infections, open bleeding organs, things like that. Those colors and surfaces are definitely an influence from downtown. But I really like living down here, and now



Left,
"Siempre Estele
— 12.25.78"

by Victor
Henderson

photo by
Michael Levine

Right,
"Keep Your
Eyes Peeled, Be
On Your Toes"

by Andy Wilf

photo by Stan
Avedon

Victor Henderson

"I want to make 'fascist' paintings," says Victor Henderson. "Overwhelming art like the Mexican murals or the portraits of Lenin and the Ayatollah. I want to make something *that* powerful, almost architectonic, but without the ideology."

A former resident of the downtown area, Henderson now lives in Venice, since he can't afford the newly inflated downtown rents. On the exterior wall of his studio is painted a receding view of a street so that if you are walking away from the beach on Brooks Avenue it looks as though you might take a detour into the side of his building. This was the first of seven murals Henderson painted as a founding member of the L.A. Fine Art Squad, with Jim Frazen, Leonard Koren and Terry Schoonhoven. One of the "Squad's" best-known projects is the "Isle of California," a darkly amusing mural of L.A. after the earthquake. Henderson left the "Squad" in 1973, but his career has been marked by an ability to, in his words, "continually resurface on the edge of things." His most recent paintings are close-cropped self-portraits, monumental, disembodied heads in thick, runny surfaces of lurid wax, bringing the energy of the street into the art.

From a distance, Henderson's staring eyes are accusing, tortured and angry. Moving closer, the paintings dissolve into mosaic strips of color, both beautiful and repellent. Certainly they are Byzantine and introspective, but they are also garish and thoroughly metropolized. Intentionally repellent.

Henderson feels that the biggest influence on the downtown art is the Third World population — Asians and Hispanics. "The rich Catholic imagery, the computer-looking graffiti, stuff that looks like writing of the future, that's more powerful than any force in the art world," he says. "Those desperate fantasies and allegories! To me, the East L.A. murals are more relevant than any paintings in the L.A. County Museum. There is an incredible mass of people on the edge of existence, barely hanging on; artists should do work that relates directly to *that* scene. L.A. is not laid back anymore. There are 200 killings in one week! This is the first city art being produced here, and it's not about the old illusionist deep space with clouds and mountains. It's about people hanging on the bare edge of existence."

All this new urban art has one more thing in common with punk music than its mean, irreverent attitude, and that is the rapidity with which it has been accepted by dealers and collectors. The Ulrike Kantor Gallery represents Henderson, Wilf and Sterritt in a landmark Frank Lloyd Wright house on Doheny Drive. After six years of dealing privately from her home in Malibu,

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ring zone, where L.A.'s
abandoned the aesthetics
g pools.

places like Westwood just make me nervous. Here, it seems more 'real.'"

Andy Wilf

Andy Wilf established his artistic reputation as a photorealist. An art school dropout, Wilf began his career doing "hotel art": production paintings of Spanish galleons and toredors. Turning out 300 backgrounds a day, Wilf claims he knew nothing of contemporary art at first. "Then," he says, "I discovered 'Pop Art.' It was Ralph Goines' 'Airstream Trailer,' or something, and I wanted to paint like that, to heighten the illusion of realism." Five years later (in 1975), Wilf was selected to be in the Whitney Biennial; at the time he was 25.

When Wilf moved downtown, from Huntington Park, he began to abandon the careful, controlled manner of portrait painting; now his latest works are clotted impasto images of butchered animals. "I lived across from the Grand Central Market downtown when I started these pictures, and it took me about six months to build up the courage to paint them. I thought of them as religious things, the Lamb of God as an icon in the format of the triptych. Of course, most people just say, 'Hey, do you eat meat?,' but that has nothing to do with it." The central canvas of this particular triptych is a jumble of lamb and pig heads, their snouts, jaws and glassy eyes rendered in tones of dried blood. On either side hang narrow vertical canvases of a single leg and hoot, and in front of the grisly trio stands a hibachi on an altar, grilling a pair of papier mache lamb chops. Wilf has titled this tableau "Keep Your Eyes Peeled, Be on Your Toes."

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photo by Jerry Brane from the collection of Daniel Melnick

"Against Medical Advice" by David Amico

Kantor decided to show young artists again. She explains:

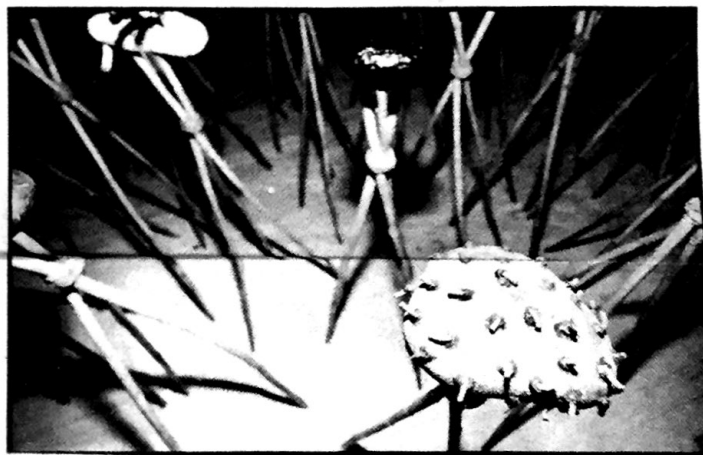
"I went to Chuck Arnoldi and told him my plan but said, 'I don't want to show painters like you because you're too boring. I want to show the punk paintings. I happened into one studio and saw these outrageous paintings of Andy Wilf and thought, 'Now, these are interesting!' I called my ex-husband Paul and said, 'I'll probably never sell anything of his, but I want to show him as a painter.' Paul told me I was crazy. Now Andy Wilf has just won the 1981 Young Talent Purchase Award given by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art!"

Beaming like a proud mother, Kantor adds: "There's an energy in the new painting and sculpture that seems to happen every 20 years. This time it seems to be happening in Los Angeles. In 1974 I opened and closed a gallery in one year because nothing exciting was happening. Now, in 1981, it's happening and I don't

know why or how; I just accept it. Some of these painters are in their thirties, Victor Henderson is 40 but it doesn't matter."

Since Kantor is selling the radical work of these artists, other dealers, collectors and institutions have come calling in her wake. With increasing frequency, people who dress with the unmistakable flair of the West Side may be seen strolling downtown on Sunday afternoons when the galleries are open. Artists usually associated with the West Beach Cafe in Venice are turning up to play pool at Al's on a Friday night. It's an incongruous melange and indicates the trends of development downtown.

At no point was this more apparent than at a fundraiser last Valentine's Day for the non-profit gallery Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, where a wallet to wallet crowd of West Siders attended a show of Erotic Edible Art. Artists all over the city had donated works to the gallery to be purchased or auctioned, and the evening events included Stephen Seemayer out on a window ledge, barbecuing beef tenderloins cut in the shapes of hearts and penises (the penises sold better than the hearts); Gary Lloyd giving and receiving obscene phone calls from paying customers; and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's graphic fistfucking videotape "Garage Sale." LACE netted \$10,000 from the sale of artist-produced erotic fortune cookies, licorice S and M gear and other vaginal-phallic comestibles, as well as the original works of art. One of the most original may have been James Croak's sculpture "Nickel Street, Tete a Tete." It was a platter upon which two skinned lamb heads had been placed facing one another with the lips touching, as if kissing. In a clear gesture of support for the downtown art scene, the piece was purchased for \$25 by corporate art consultant Merry Norris and Judge William Norris. Judge Norris is one of the most influential trustees of the proposed Museum of Contemporary Art. ■

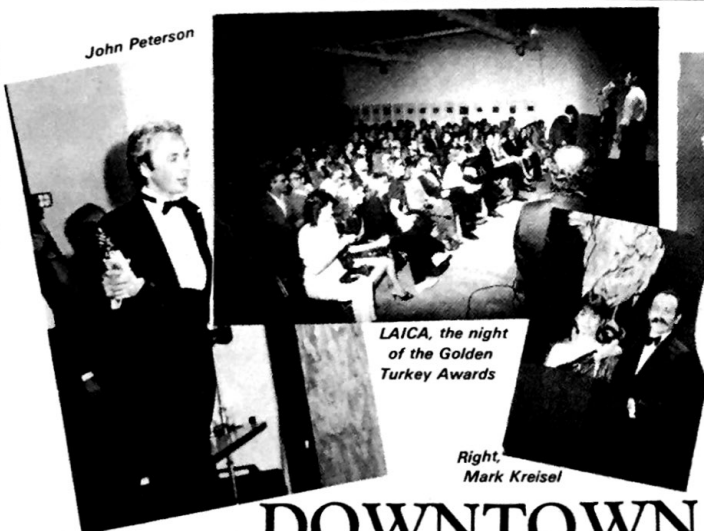


Sculpture by Coleen Sterritt

photo by Dennis Keeley

In my more lucid moments, I often question the value of writing about the subject of art. I mean, unlike other journalistic pursuits, it certainly doesn't have the potential for fame and wealth. As my colleagues discuss El Salvador, movie deals and the latest corporate scandal, I'm left muttering about post-bountiful, neo-fiber-glassed nihilism. Most people don't know what I'm talking about or care, and I really don't blame them. Every once in a while, though, something happens in the art world that is so delightfully absurd, I temporarily stop yearning for a plant column in *House and Garden* and recognize my turf. Such an event was the Golden Turkey Awards offered last Thursday evening.

At Al's Annex, the temporary name for a scruffy warehouse commonly known as LAICA downtown, a mock-Hollywood spectacle was staged. A 40-foot limousine with smoked windows sleeked up to the entrance and the black tie crowd of over 200 artists craned their necks to see ... not Warren or Barbra or Francis, but Stephen Seemayer, director, producer and artist responsible for the film *Young Turks*. Other limos deposited another 11 stars from the *Turks*: Bob and Bob, Linda Burnham, James Croak, Woods Davy, Randy "The Action Critic" Johnson, Jon Peterson, John Schroeder, Coleen Sterritt, Monique Safford and Andy Wilf. Video cameras rolled as an artist posing as an on-the-spot reporter interviewed



John Peterson

LAICA, the night of the Golden Turkey Awards

Right, Mark Kreisel

DOWNTOWN GOES HOLLYWOOD

each "celebrity" about getting the "Golden Turkey" award. Responses came in appropriately stilted TV-speak. Inside the gallery, decked out in enough sequins to be the envy of Bob Mackie, Joan Hugo, South Coast editor of *Art-week*, hosted the makeshift bar stocked with hard liquor, ice and a few token bottles of Perrier.

All of this farcical extravagance was conceived and founded by the PaPa Turk, Marc Kreisel, a nine-year veteran of life in the manufacturing zone. Kreisel is the proprietor of Al's Bar, a notorious if modest gathering place for downtown artists. (The establishment's black matchbooks read, "Al's, The Only Bar in L.A.," without any



Steve Seemayer

phone number or address.) Kreisel wanted to "do a performance" (read "give a party") that put some of the money he'd made on Al's "back into the community." He scripted the evening's ceremony as a parody of the Oscars, complete with art-as-showbiz patter. At one point he explained the origins of the urban community:

"I started the downtown art community in 1976 ... I was over on Jefferson and Main, by USC, and had been asked to leave. That was in the days before artists were in control of lofts and there weren't any landlords giving leases. One day I tripped over this wino and it turns out he's not a wino, he's an artist. He's got this teeny weeny brush and he's brushing this little teeny rock. I say, 'Hey, buddy,

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photos by Steve Fritz