

Art

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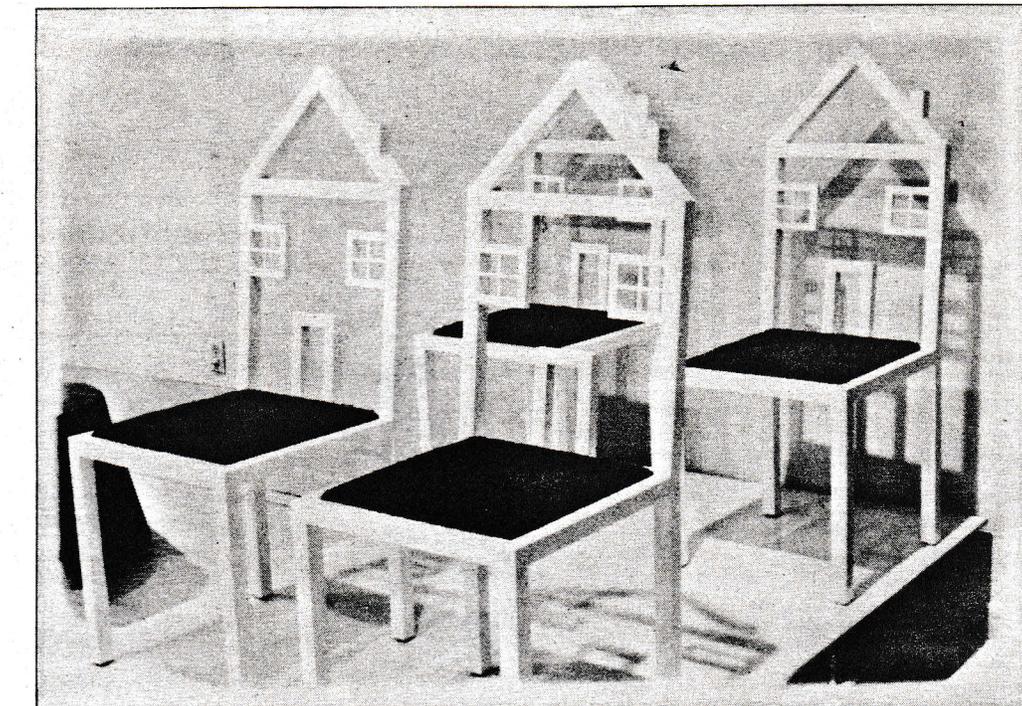
More than 500 people waited to get into the crowded reception at the Whiteley Gallery. When two or three wriggled out, an equal number were permitted to enter by an armed guard at the door. Inside it was as steamy and noisy as a singles bar. The bartender was under siege from the impatient hordes, most of them dressed in what looked like costumes from *Blade Runner*. What in the art world could produce such a scene? The Apocalypse, naturally.

"L.A. Apocalypse" is the title of an exhibition of furniture made by 25 of this city's artists. The label is specious since nothing in this exhibition is remotely prophetic or revealing as implied by the New Testament definition. In fact, such a title in this context of promotion and sales prompts a re-evaluation of the word. "Apocalypse" seems to have acquired a secondary meaning. Historically associated with the end of the world, it has gained a certain prominence in this era of real war and potential holocaust. It's become synonymous with horror, with annihilation. But it's also been adopted into the vocabulary of the taste-makers. More than ever, our society is conscious of living under the penumbra of the mushroom cloud. People tend to dissipate the tension with macabre humor. In conversation, there are casual allusions to post-nuclear clothing, a military look. Post-nuclear themes crop up in music, in film, and in art. With American pragmatism, the end of the world is relegated to a shift in lifestyle. Along the way, the word "apocalypse," with its edgy, extravagant quality and sensationalist appeal, has realized a weirdly chic status. In order to diffuse the grim anxiety of nuclear threat, it's been co-opted as fashion. What emerges is the apocalypse as marketing technique.

Apocalypse will be to the boutiques of the '80s what peace was to the '60s. The apocalypse brought about 2,000 visitors to that art opening just two weeks ago.

The gap between the apparent and real significance of the word is echoed by the schism between the appearance and function of the furniture in the exhibition. Larry Whitely, the gallery owner, wants to continue to represent the artists in his show under the catchy moniker "L.A. Apocalypse." The show's poster and invitations claimed "A new beginning, not the end." The work on view, however, demonstrates the opposite.

Most of the furniture pretends postures of Post-Modernism without a smidgen of evidence that the artists comprehend that aesthetic. It's like a chorus line of pert blondes, all decked out in flash and trash with bubble gum for brains. The stylistic references to the history of art and architecture abound — bits and snippets of Bauhaus, Constructivist or Deco designs — but it is apparent that they haven't been borrowed from the original source. Instead, the artists appear to have imitated first generation Post-Modernists such as the Italian design group Memphis, architect Michael Graves, or L.A. artist Peter Shire. There's a conceptual dif-



Kathryn Love's chairs in linear outline: less affected than most.

Richard Litt

ference between borrowing ideas and not having any. Most of the pieces in the show are third-generation xeroxes of the work of other contemporary artists. The gallery feels like a vacuum, empty of imagination. It looks as though the influence of designer April Greiman, responsible for the interior of the China Club, has become an epidemic.

Among the furniture, which fans are certain to appreciate with words like "fun" and "bizarre," there reigns an in-

black and tangerine. Stephen Andrews grasps for the novelty of the '60s with a pink, perforated lucite table shaped like a wedge of Swiss cheese. Bill Gale tried to disguise the lines of his cloddish wing chair by zolotoning the thing in spatters of pink and padding the seat with a foam cushion in a pattern reminiscent of green vomit. Heidi Wianeki tried a similar trick. On a couple of small end tables she painted differently shaped legs, some curvilinear, some angular, in a separate pastel

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fatuation with surfaces: high-gloss lacquer in neon-bright colors or black, and zolotone, a pre-mixed pointillist effect, predominate. But the marriage between these lush surfaces and the actual form is often unhappy, even arbitrary. Examples: Steve Galerkin's so-called "Post-Modernist Cabinet" attempts to coordinate lean Art Nouveau angles with plump pillar supports, all dolled up in the ubiquitous New Wave color scheme of two-tone grape with geometric accents in

hue. The results are overworked and more annoying than effective. Brian Bell's "Box Drawer" standing on skinny turquoise legs, stenciled in a black-and-white checkerboard pattern, is an unabashed rip-off of a design by Peter Shire. Oddly enough, Kathryn Loye, director of the gallery, shows simple chairs with backs shaped in the linear outlines of buildings that are a bit cute, but still nicely appealing and less affected than their companions in the exhibition.

After several minutes in the gallery, the eye casts about desperately in search of a natural fiber or material, some sign of life in this artificial environment. It comes to rest on Philip Garner's stool made from the seat of a motorscooter. David Perry's tables, especially the one with a small bridge trellis as a base, and with a top of corrugated fiberglass, formica, and what looks like a model of an old warehouse built in just a bit above the surface, are also smart. I understand that his background is that of a cabinet-maker, so perhaps he's been spared the pretensions that hamper the others. Jim Isermann's furniture, derived from the '50s, is also a welcome sight. Although painted in the garish colors of motel decor — turquoise, lime and orange — the voluptuous, curved forms of the chairs, and especially TV cabinets, smack of a certain originality. Isermann uses styles from the past as a way to reassess assumed values and come up with new interpretations in the process. This is a fundamental tenet of Post-Modernism. Having reached what looked to be the concluding episodes of the Modernist search for formal innovation, the artists looked to the past to examine the function of style.

That process of investigation has barely occurred to most of the artists in "L.A. Apocalypse." They are borrowing from those who've borrowed. Style is not a means of cultural exploration but an end in itself. An absolute. When style is divorced from concept, however, all it can do is call attention to itself. The work disintegrates to narcissism, with creators caring only about surface condition and not aesthetic purpose.

If "L.A. Apocalypse" is regarded as the beginning, then this really is the end. The exhibition continues through February 10 at the Whiteley Gallery, 111 N. La Brea. ■