ART UNDER THE CALIFORNIA SUN

Forget the avant-garde. Consider the merry-go-round. As museums across the region document and celebrate the post-WWII art boom here, Christopher Knight explains the special iconoclasm that defines the L.A. aesthetic. E12

An advance look at pivotal artists due for wider recognition. E28
Surfboards and airplanes: the quirky genesis of the boom. E16
Light and space: an artist and curator explain a movement. E20
Putting L.A. in the front seat

The unprecedented Pacific Standard Time will detail a largely yet untold era in the city's art history.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
ART CRITIC

Sometimes we seem to know less about the deepest parts of ourselves than we do about the world around us. There are exceptions, of course. World War II art in Los Angeles is one of them. At least we think so. The recent installation of "World War II Art in Los Angeles: We Know How to Celebrate," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, was the turn of events we had expected. It was a large, comprehensive exhibition of a vast array of works, many of which had been largely forgotten or lost to history.

The exhibition was a revelation. It gave us a glimpse into the lives and struggles of the artists who lived through the war. It was a chance to see the art through the eyes of the people who created it. It was a reminder of the power of art to tell stories and to make us think.

But there was something else that made the exhibition special. It was the way the art was presented. The exhibition was organized around themes, such as "World War II in America," "World War II in Europe," and "World War II in Asia." This approach allowed us to see the art in a new light, to see how it was influenced by the events of the war.

The exhibition was a success. It was a hit with the public and with critics alike. It showed us that art can be a powerful tool for understanding the world. It showed us that art can be a way of connecting with others, of sharing stories and experiences.

The exhibition was a reminder of the importance of art. It showed us that art is more than just a decoration or a way of entertainment. It is a way of understanding the world and ourselves.

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KIEDIS CELEBRATES RUSCHA

"Ed Ruscha creates stories with words that define L.A. and global culture, breathing life into them so they live beyond the canvas." — Anthony Kiedis

CELEBRATE THE ERA THAT CONTINUES TO INSPIRE THE WORLD: ART IN L.A. 1945-1980

More than 60 cultural institutions across Southern California coming together to celebrate the birth of the L.A. art scene.

OCT 2011 TO APR 2012

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME:
ART IN L.A. 1945-1980

pacificstandardtime.org
What to keep in your line of vision

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  ART CRITIC

A few of the 60-plus shows have already opened, but Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980 officially gets launched Oct. 1 and 2 with a trio of major surveys opening at the Getty, MOCA and LACMA. Here's an annotated list of some of the more intriguing exhibitions. Start your engines.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles, 1969-1973; Part I: Hal Glickman

With no art museum infrastructure to speak of in postwar L.A., schools were critical venues for showing new art. Pomona College, where Joe Clemente Orozco had painted the first major Modernist U.S. fresco in 1930, was unusually active. This is the first of a three-part show, focusing on the school's ambitious curatorial programs, continuing into 2012.

Pomona College Museum of Art

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987

In the Mexican mural tradition, public walls “spoke” about public issues. The ramshackle Chicano collective Asco (Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herron and Humberto Sandaval) went the extra mile by occasionally taping its stylish members to urban walls. They became part living-graffiti, part flailing image of Latino social marginalization and individual bondage.

LACMA

Beatrice Wood: Career Woman — Drawings, Paintings, Vessels and Objects

Beatrice Wood (1893-1998), rebellious daughter of wealthy San Francisco socialites, was dubbed the “Mama of Dada” for her close, lifelong relationship to anti-artist Marcel Duchamp. A failed actress, minor artist and major studio potter (in Ojai), she aptly titled her 1985 autobiography “I Shock Myself.”

Santa Monica Museum of Art

OPENING

SEPT. 25

Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface

Sometimes regarded as L.A.’s unique contribution to contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s, Light and Space art focuses on the viewer’s bodily consciousness of perception. Works by Larry Bell, Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, Bruce Nauman, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler will be on view.

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

SEP. 28

Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design

Esther McCoy (1904-1989) was one of the 20th century’s greatest architecture critics and historians, a writer of insightful clarity and fierce social commitment no doubt honed by her work as a researcher for Theodore Dreiser and, later, an architectural draftsman.

Green & Green, Irving Gill, Bernard Maybeck, Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra were among the architects whose work she championed and illuminated.

Mak Center at the Schindler House

OCT. 1


Say “Midcentury Modern” and you’re saying L.A. design, as World War II technologies were put to peace-time use, often inflected by postwar optimism and fueled by the city’s phenomenal growth. (Its population more than doubled during the show’s time-frame.)

Many of the 350 objects will look up-to-the-minute.

LACMA

Speaking in Tongues: The Art of Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken

A potential sleeper, the show provocatively juxtaposes the mysteriously inclined camera-based imagery of the great Beat generation artist Wallace Berman (1926-1976) with the politically astute, mass-media-savvy photo collages of Robert Heinecken (1931-2006).

Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena

Seismic Shift: Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal and California Landscape Photography, 1944-1984

How did we get from the popular romantic visions made by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Minor White, all craggy coastlines and monumental mountain peaks, to the stark topologies of suburban anonymity, like tract homes and industrial parks? The shift had an international impact. Here’s one account of the transformation.

California Museum of Photography, UC Riverside

Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980

David Hammons, one of the most important American artists of the last 35 years, is also the most well-known of the show’s 35 African American painters and sculptors. The eye-opening surprise, however, might turn out to be the late assemblage master, Noah Purifoy (1918-2004).

Hammer Museum, UCLA

OCT. 30


UC Irvine was formally founded — literally in the middle of nowhere, just off the brand-spanking-new 405 freeway — in 1965. But in no time flat the Orange County school’s art department attracted an impressive roster of artists and critics and developed notable students, artistically comparable to UCLA or Yale today. The list includes Michael Asher, Chris Burden, Vija Celmins, John Coplans, Robert Irwin, John McCracken, Bruce Nauman, Barbara Rose, Alexis Smith, Frank Stella and more.

LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

NOV. 13

Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles

The golden age of notorious New York crime and street photographer Weegee, born Arthur Fellig (1899-1986), is generally dated from before World War II. In 1947 he moved to L.A. to work in Hollywood, turning his camera on stars, strippers and studio back-lots. Usually dismissed as selling out — odd for a guy who previously toiled for the New York tabloids — this period of his work hasn’t been closely examined before now.

MOCA

NOV. 17

46 N. Los Robles: A History of the Pasadena Art Museum

When curator Walter Hopp’s retrospective of French iconoclast Marcel Duchamp opened on Oct. 8, 1963, the little Pasadena Art Museum went from being a virtual unknown to a national trailblazer. The Pacific Asia Museum, housed in PAM’s old Chinese-inspired building, will chronicle its full history, from modest roots in 1945 to spectacular flameout in 1974.

PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM

christopher.knight@latimes.com
Hot rods and decadonism

L.A. art came into its own after WWII, when artists tapped into popular culture.

D.L. WALLACE

In September 1949, under a plaster of other argy-bargy and summer heat, the whole city was bigger, weather and music more diverse. It was a different world than the one that was currently passing by. The country was changing fast, and so was Los Angeles. The city was a melting pot of cultures, and the urban landscape was changing rapidly. The city was becoming more diverse, and the art scene was reflecting this change.

The Schwab Art Museum, located in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, was one of the few galleries in the city that showcased contemporary art. The museum was known for its innovative exhibitions, and it was a favorite among the city's art lovers. The museum was located in the old Schwab Drug Store, which had been transformed into an art gallery.

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Into the dimensions of Light and Space

The ethereal art that emerged from the 1960s and '70s is the subject of a new exhibition, Doug Wheeler, a principal figure in the movement, and museum director Hugh Davies discuss.

JOSIE FIKELL

The artist associated with Light and Space was dedicated to investigating the potential of natural perception and atmosphere. One of the most cross-disciplinary works was made in the late 1960s, when artist Douglas Wheeler covered his legs and shoulders with fist-sized, white organza balls. These were placed on the floor in a grid in a desert landscape, creating a labyrinth that led visitors deeper into Wheeler's work. The effect was to make the viewer feel as if they were inside the art, becoming a part of the environment. The works, such as "Light and Space," were intended to challenge viewers' perceptions of reality and perception. They were meant to be experienced in a way that went beyond the artwork itself, inviting viewers to participate in the creation of meaning.

In the 60s we called them neighbor. Today we call them genius.

Experience Ruscha and the other revolutionary artists whose works launched L.A. into the world art scene and changed the perception of modern art everywhere. The J. Paul Getty Museum presents Crosscurrents in LA at the Getty Center.

(Re pursuit of the Getty Museum and Los Angeles Times)
EXPLORER: The “Phenomenal” exhibition in San Diego looks at such artists as Doug Wheeler, left. Hugh Davies co-curated the show. They are bathed in light from one of Wheeler’s works.

Some other groupings like Pop Art or assemblage art seem like combinations. It is because the artists grouped together under such a label often have such strong personalities?

I would say that a break-through occurred in 1950 amongst Southern California artists interested in the phenomenal and perception. They are a certain extent impelled each other on and a certain extent ripped each other off. It is similar the birth of Cubism, when you go back and it is deformation. What extent did you consider about the appearance of the De Stijl? Well, with paintings it is a little easier, because you can figure their exhibition history. But the Westcoast work was being played in the studio artists and it is, where very few people see it, in the chronology is difficult to ascertain. But personally I don’t care on.

East Coast, grad school, and this material was never on my radar.

People get frustrated by some of the work because it seems undergravity, and it is in the lights. It is very rarely that we see light. A light beam is directed through a window. A wall is painted over. A series is hanging.

It happened in almost any new art form, when people don’t know what they are looking at, they get upset. It is a breakthrough painting, from the Impressionist to cubist’s work, never lasted at the time.

Several Light and Space artists... I am thinking of Ken Price now... would go through periods when they would show their installations in telexes or shows. Are the works really that bad? I think so

I don’t think you can analyze my work. In 68, Time magazine did a piece called “There in the Day” and they wanted an image of one of the light ensembles. And I said make it two colors, blue and white, because then everybody will know we’re not documenting the work, but it is really to see. They made the image in the magazine and it was so massive that they understood what I meant.

But I think there is the worker that can’t be photographed has really moved the art world. Pop Art photography was really bad... it can beat the world. But here are a field of light, light everywhere...

JAT@LATIMES.COM

October 1, 2011–February 5, 2012

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME AT THE GETTY CENTER

FROM START TO FINISH De Wain Valentine’s Gray Column
September 13, 2011–March 11, 2012

GREETINGS FROM L.A. Artists and Publics 1950–1980
October 1, 2011–February 5, 2012

IN FOCUS Los Angeles 1945–1980
December 20, 2011–May 6, 2012
ARTIST PORTRAIT

A ’50s housewife as performance art

Early on, Barbara T. Smith was drawn to the avant-garde. A new show revisits her life story, ‘Birthdaze.’

HOLLY MYERS

The coffee table in Barbara T. Smith’s Venice home is piled high with aging cassette tapes. She’s been sorting through audio from a 1981 performance piece called “Birthdaze” in preparation for “The Radicalization of a ’50s Housewife,” her upcoming solo show at UC Irvine’s University Art Gallery.

The piece, originally performed on Smith’s 50th birthday, was a feminist tour de force in which she enacted a version of her own life story in relation — quite literally — to the male avant-garde. It began in a low, tussle with fellow performance artists Paul McCarthy and Kim Jones; proceeded into a kind of love triangle with artist Allen Kaprow and Dick Kilgrove, motorcycle racer and former boyfriend, against a soundtrack of interviews with Vietnam veterans; and ended in a lengthy tantric ritual with another artist, Vic Henderson.

The show, one of many in which Smith’s work will appear over the course of Pacific Standard Time (though the only focus on her work exclusively), will provide documentation of “Birthdaze” and place it in the context of her remarkable but still largely unsung career.

The title of the Irvine show is unequivocally autobiographical. Indeed, it would be difficult to speak of Smith’s work at all without referring to her life to some degree. Like many women who came to consciousness in the 1960s, Smith takes the feminist mantra “the personal is political” as a fundamental principle.

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NOW: “I’m in an open field with no parameters,” says Barbara T. Smith, 80, who is not done expressing herself through her art.

The murdered entanglements of sexuality and power, longing and rebellion embodied in this early confrontation would go on to be predominant themes for Smith. In 1981, while a student at Pomona College, she married a man her parents approved of and had three children. Having studied art, she was determined to become an artist, but the notion was met by family and friends with tepid enthusiasm. “They thought of me painting on Sunday and that sort of thing,” she says.

She became an unwitting pioneer. She installed a rented Xerox machine in her dining room and photocopied everything in sight, including some startlingly intimate regions of her body, to produce a series of artist’s books, becoming one of the first artists in the country to employ this new technology. She framed a series of large, black, vaguely Minimalist paintings behind glass to transform their matte surfaces into what were essentially mirrors — conceptual paintings (her term) at the dawn of Conceptualism that also anticipated elements of Postmodern critique.

Most important, after participating in a workshop with artist Alex Hay, a member of the New York-based Judson Dance Theater, she began to make performance art years before there was such a term.

Food, the body and spiritual imagery figured prominently in these early performances. “Ritual Meal” (1969) was a dinner party in which guests were obliged to dress in scrubs and eat with surgical instruments while film footage depicted the cosmos, naked figures and open heart surgery overhead.

In “Feed Me” (1973), her best known piece, Smith installed herself, nude, on a mattress in a women’s restroom over the duration of an all-night performance festival, surrounded by, among other things, an array of food, wine, marijuana and massage oil, while a looped recording repeated the words “feed me.” Participants were admitted one at a time.

It is a common characteristic of performance artists that they are captivating people, and Smith is no exception. It is less a sense of theatricality or flair, as with an actor, than one of dimly perceived mystical knowledge.

Performance artists, particularly those of Smith’s generation, trend closer than most to the danger zones of the human psyche, leaving them uniquely prone to both revelation and burnout. Smith describes a breakthrough she had in the early 1960s, for instance, in near breathless terms even 50 years later: “My whole internal structure completely changed. Visually, what I saw — the whole world became miraculous.”

Such moments of transcendence have been hard won, however. Smith’s marriage broke up in 1968 and she lost custody of her children in an ugly court battle. (She remained connected to her son, but went for 17 years without seeing her daughters. Her son died of AIDS complications in 1997.) Having forsaken the financial security of marriage and making little work that was salable, she floated between studios for years before buying her current house in 1983, where she lives on the ground floor and rents out the bedrooms.

Distracted by her divorce and drained by her work, Smith immersed herself in Buddhism in the mid-1970s and developed a serious meditation practice, later supplemented with studies in Native American rituals and yoga. Much of her subsequent work has built upon these mystical strains.

Smith conceived of “Birthdaze,” the piece in the Irvine show, to commemorate her 50th birthday. And now, just past her 80th?

“I’m in an open field with no parameters,” she says. She waves at the audio tapes and piles of papers.

“When all this documentation is done, I hope to make more art. I have things to finish.”
THE KEY DECADE

L.A. artists shake up ’60s

A generation finds its creative outlet in Southern California, and a scene is born.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILIP

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: Post-war 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. Sunbathed 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.

Most 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, un-emotional 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 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 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 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-Philip is the author of “Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s,” published earlier this year by Henry Holt.
Intriguing individuals on view

Many of the artists whose work is seen in Pacific Standard Time exhibitions were newsmakers, and as such, Los Angeles Times photographers have been taking their pictures for decades. Here are some of those artists, such as Burden and Ruscha, captured for the newspaper’s coverage of a creative capital on the rise.

CHRISS BURDEN: The performance artist is seen in 1968 with his “Flyingpony.”

JAMES TURRELL: The Light and Space artist is seen in 1968 in his first program Roden Crater project.

ED RUSCHA: The longtime locally based artist (seen in 1983) has worked across many media.

JUDD CHICAGO: The artist’s recent show in 2006 was lauded for her “Dinner Party” installation.

BETYE BABY: The assemblage artist (seen in 1981) challenged stereotypes.
Suddenly, poised for a breakthrough

The sprawl of the exhibitions allows for underappreciated artists to shine too.

Jori Finkel

Nobody thought a 12-sided geometric painting by a little-known artist could top a Hockney. The painting, “Vector,” has languished in storage for at least 30 years. The painter, Ron Davis, has been living off the grid near Taos, N.M., for almost as long.

But when the curators of the Getty Museum’s “Crosscurrents” exhibition first saw the work in a warehouse used for Tate museum storage outside of London, right after viewing one of David Hockney’s greatest “splash” paintings, it was nonetheless arresting.

“It was a knockout moment,” says Rani Singh, describing how Davis’ dodecahedral painting (made of resin on fiberglass, not paint on canvas, in 1968) is shaped and colored in such a way that it seems to jut from the wall in three dimensions.

“It makes an enormous impact in your field of vision,” adds co-curator, Andrew Perchuk. “We knew instantly we wanted to borrow the piece.”

Now part of “Crosscurrents,” which opens Oct. 1, Ron Davis is one of the discoveries awaiting visitors to the museum extravaganza known as Pacific Standard Time. At its core, it consists of 60 exhibitions throughout Southern California exploring facets of the region’s art history from 1945 to 1980.

As expected, the shows celebrate the lions of contemporary art here such as Hockney, John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha. But many say the initiative’s real purpose was to supply much-needed historical context and to identify other regional artists worth greater consideration.

Some, like Davis, were lauded by art critics at one time but have since dropped out of sight. Others never got their due in the first place, perhaps because they were Chicano or African American and showed in community spaces instead of bigger galleries or museums.

“Ed Ruscha’s stock will not lower because of this, and rightly so,” says Chon Noriega, a Chicano art expert who has co-curated five shows under the Pacific Standard Time umbrella. “But the great thing is that there will also be a number of artists who receive some overdue critical attention.”

So who are the breakthrough artists of Pacific Standard Time?

Of course in time one could survey the next generation of curators, critics, academics and also collectors, who increasingly shape art history. But at this stage another tack is to ask some of the shows’ curators themselves: Whose work felt like a discovery to you, and which artists do you think are ripe for reappraisal?

Noriega, who suspects most names in his shows are unknown to a broad audience, named Oscar Castillo, subject of a solo show at the Fowler Museum. As a photographer, Castillo did much to document the Chicano community in L.A. starting in the late 1960s. Noriega praises his ability to sidestep ethnic stereotypes and expose “contradictions apparent between aspirations and reality.”

He also discussed Roberto Chavez and Dora De Larios from “Art Along the Hyphen” at the Autry National Center. Chavez says, “is someone who experimented in all styles — he’s extraordinarily prolific — but it’s really his portraiture of Mexican Americans, family members and others, that stands out.”

De Larios, the only sculptor in the Autry show, interests Noriega for her “lifelong attempt to integrate the deep history of two national art forms, Japanese and Mexican.” He attributes it in part to her growing up in downtown Los Angeles among immigrants from both countries, until World War II internment policies ripped the community apart. “I think that through art she is trying to bring the community back together, and it’s fascinating to see,” Noriega said.

Davis, from the “Crosscurrents” show at the Getty, is poised to be one of the biggest comebacks for his “astonishing perceptual play,” which points the way to Light and Space art, according to co-curator Perchuk. Davis’ paintings will appear in a gallery along with Hockney, Ruscha, Sam Francis and Richard Diebenkorn. “We really feel like the work holds its own, and that’s a pretty major statement,” says Perchuk.

Perchuk also praised the early work of feminist legend Judy Chicago, who went to school to learn auto-body paint techniques to make her own contribution to the hot rod-inspired branch of California minimalism known as “finish fetish.”

“I think the work she was doing in the 1960s, when she painted the [Corvair] car hood in our show, will be a real revelation to people who think of her explicitly sociopolitical work,” he said.

Another name on Perchuk’s list is the late Noah Purifoy, who led a group of artists in making assemblage out of charred railroad ties and other detritus of the Watts riots — “one of the great unsung projects of postwar Los Angeles.”

Purifoy also figures in the Hammer show, “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980,” which is rife with reappraisals. “I would say all of our artists are underappreciated in a way,” offers the show’s curator, art historian Kellie Jones.

There is one exception: David [See Breakthrough, E29]
PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

[Breakthrough, from E28]

Hammons has become an art star for his socially loaded but intimate work using humble materials like margarine, cigarettes and his own hair. Jones says interviewing Hammons in the '80s led her to many other artists now in her show.

"He talked about an entire community of L.A. artists that basically supported him and gave him voice," she says. "David's phenomenal, don't get me wrong, but the isolated genius is not the story I want to tell. I want to tell the story of the whole community."

One section of her show focuses on local gallery at whom she considers strong artists in their own right. She calls Suzanne Jackson a "phenomenal painter ... whose paintings have the lyricism of Francesco Clemente and precede Clemente by a decade."

Jones also names Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, who have large installations in the show. Hassinger used wire rope with some of the gnarly effects of Eva Hesse; Nengudi filled pantyhose with sand, making bulbous hangings that anticipated Ernesto Neto. Both artists, trained in dance, also found unconventional ways to bring performance into their work, and they often collaborated. According to Jones, "They are the bridge between the finish-fetish group and the post-minimalist artists we know about in L.A.," she says.

Finish-fetish work and its more expansive, ephemeral cousin Light and Space are the subjects of "Phenomenal," the new show at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Museum Director Hugh Davies sees Doug Wheeler as one artist from the show poised for reappraisal.

He also names Mary Corse and Helen Pashgian as artists who have never gotten their due. "You don't have to be a psychiatrist to understand why," Davies says. "Much like New York minimalism, Light and Space here was a very macho movement too."

The San Diego show includes Corse's all-white canvases, which have glass micro-beads embedded in the acrylic paint to create a surface that shifts dramatically with the light. It also features examples of Pashgian's acrylic sculptures — globes with an unreal glow, seemingly lighted from within. (Davies is not the only one betting on these artists: Pashgian just had a solo show in L.A. with Ace Gallery; Wheeler and Corse have shows coming up with David Zwirner in New York and White Cube in London, respectively.)

Karen Moss, a curator of the Orange County Museum of Art show on conceptual art, "State of Mind: New California Art circa 1970," says one of their biggest discoveries was Robert Kimmont. She says he has been off the art-world radar for years, partly because of his location in Sonoma ("State of Mind" is one of few Pacific Standard Time shows to include Northern California artists). But he has recently gained more attention, at least on the East Coast, through a 2009 show at the New York gallery Alexander and Bonin.

That's where Moss first saw his work, including a series of photographs from 1969 that show him holding a stand-in in eight dramatic sites in the Sierra Nevada mountains, starting with the edge of a precipice. Moss and co-curator Connie Lewallen liked that image enough to make it the cover of their exhibition catalog. "It felt right because the work is very much about the edginess, experimentation and also humor we associate with the period," says Moss. "He works the border between adventure and danger."

Moss also hopes the show will be an eye opener for people who think they know the work of Suzanne Lacy, an activist, community-oriented artist.

"People don't know about Suzanne's early performance work, her roots as a solo performance artist," says Moss. "They also don't know that she studied premed to become a doctor," she says, describing the theme of decomposition implicit in a 1973 work made of animal organs called "Lamb Construction" that is now being re-created.

MOCA's chief curator, Paul Schimmel, also chose Lacy, "an extraordinary artist who is right on the verge." In "Under the Big Black Sun," his sweeping survey about culture, politics and pluralism in the 1970s, he has included one of her public interventions: a map of Los Angeles, originally displayed near City Hall, on which she stenciled "RAPE" in red letters every time the crime was reported over three weeks in May 1977.

"It documents a sort of social anxiety in this very physical way," the curator says, suggesting that its blend of art and activism was ahead of its time. "I would be shocked if this piece [on loan from Lacy] doesn't end up in a major museum collection.

Schimmel also expects growing interest in Chauncey Hare — "not an artist I'd ever heard of before working on this show." Hare came to photography late in life after working as a research engineer for Standard Oil, and his tour de force shows workers in impersonal offices or cubicles variously enslaved by the greed and uniformity of corporate America. Schimmel calls it "a very powerful point of view, political but at the same time emotional." (Not much for art sales or even museum shows, Hare now offers his services in San Francisco as a therapist in the field of "work abuse."

The curator's final pick was Bas Jan Ader, the Dutch-born L.A.-based conceptual artist presumed to have died in 1975 while trying, in the name of art, to complete a solo sail across the Atlantic in a 13-foot boat. The boat was recovered; his body was not.

Ader is now the subject of much art-world buzz, and Schimmel has a take on why. "I think we all want to believe that art is about miracles — feeling and seeing something beyond language and normal visual recognition, and we see that both in Bas Jan Ader's work and his biography."

Then, with the kind of comparison that can help to carve out space for lesser-known artists in the canon, Schimmel added, "Bas Jan Ader is to Conceptualism what Basquiat was to graffiti or Van Gogh was to neo-Impressionism.

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