PULLOUT SECTION | E11

Los Angeles Times

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PST

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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**

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

VIJA CELMINS J. Paul Getty Trust

"FREEWAY": Vija Celmins' 1966 painting gives a view from inside a moving car. It will be part of "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture" at the Getty.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Putting L.A. in the front seat

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

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
ART CRITIC

Sometimes we seem to know less about the early years of post-World War II art in Los Angeles than we know about the Pleistocene Age mammals dredged up from the La Brea Tar Pits. In the last 30 years, L.A. pushed to the front ranks of international capitals for new art, a dizzying development widely documented — but what happened in the 30 years before that?

Yes, we know bits and pieces — some better than others. Repeated censorship attempts by public officials — of a shrine-like 1957 Wallace Berman assemblage sculpture that included a sexy drawing, a 1964 Ed Kienholz assemblage sculpture about carrying on in the back seat of a Dodge, etc. — have been chronicled many times. Justifiable superstars, such as Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, are carefully considered. The story of Ferus Gallery has been told ad nauseam, and the 1970s feminist and Chicano art movements are no mystery.

Yet, compared with the magnitude of more recent events, retrospective knowledge is broad but shallow, a surface barely scratched. We don't even have access to much of the actual art to pique curiosity: No museum anywhere in the world, including Southern California, comes close to featuring it prominently in permanent collection displays.

Temporarily, however, the rich back story to the city's current prominence will unfold this fall in an unprecedented, six-month series of exhibitions called Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980. The event, initiated almost a decade ago under a $10-million Getty Trust umbrella, will excavate the region's first generations of postwar contemporary art.

More than 60 shows will be held at museums, university galleries and nonprofit spaces scattered from Santa Barbara to San Diego, Santa Monica to Palm Springs. A few are on view now; but Oct. 1 is the series' official start date, with a painting and sculpture survey at the Getty Museum as its spine. There hasn't been anything like this vast exercise in cultural archaeology before — not just for L.A., but anywhere.

Why are L.A.'s early years so poorly considered? One reason is the inappropriate template overlaid on the period's art, which can make it appear inconsequential.

American art of the late 1940s through the 1970s was initially valued for its avant-garde qualities — a forward-looking cultural idea born in 19th century Europe, but one that did not apply in 20th century L.A. A French term originally meaning the advance guard of an army that goes ahead of the rest, an avant-garde implies linear progress. Art's advancement was reflected by an unfolding sequence of "isms": Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc. — right up to Abstract Expressionism, which put contemporary American art on the international map in the wake of World War II.

L.A., however, never had an avant-garde. An avant-garde requires, well, a *garde* — a strong, powerful artistic establishment that dominates the status quo but eventually follows the path forged by advance troops. L.A. had no avant-garde because it had no *garde* — no mighty, monolithic artistic establishment ruling the city's cultural life.

Twentieth century art in Southern California varied from conservative to adventurous, the cautious to the inspired, but there was no aesthetic edifice to topple. The city was too young, too new, too much of a vast and indifferent sprawl for one cultural establishment to have a stranglehold. What emerged instead was an unorthodox iconoclasm. It recognized the wildness of individual personality and the social messiness of life, and it celebrated the power of heterogeneous hybridity over purity.

Sound familiar? By the 1980s, the concept of avant-garde progress had unraveled everywhere. Suddenly the multivalent L.A. School was an international cultural model for this new norm. With luck, that's the back-story Pacific Standard Time will clarify.

Here's a sample of what we might expect to discover: If you want an artistic revolution, forget the avant-garde; try a merry-go-round instead.

When a strange exhibition of abstract paintings opened on May 18, 1955, on the cheery Santa Monica Pier, that anarchic thought was on brash display. An ambitious young art tyro named Walter Hopps, who had just turned 23, forked over $80 to rent the carousel as an exhibition space. Hopps wrapped it with tarpaulin, festooned it with abstract paintings and hung others on the carousel building's pillars. "Action," the show was called.

A sly nod to action painting, the word was newly coined in New York for vigorously brushed abstractions. But these nervy paintings were made by mostly younger artists from L.A. and San Francisco, including Craig Kauffman, Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff, Wally Hedrick and Gordon Wagner — at 40, the senior figure. (Berkeley's Richard Diebenkorn was listed on the announcement, but his skittish L.A. dealer insisted he withdraw.) The lively surface agitation of the Californians' abstract paintings stood in sharp contrast to the static carousel, now stilled for the event.

For 10 days the gaudy wooden horses didn't move, the raucous calliope was silenced. Recorded jazz played instead, aurally echoing the painterly improvisations. But to those who ventured out onto the pier, "Action's" paintings surely made some noise.

The hubbub has long since quieted down, of course. The eccentric show has been, if not entirely forgotten, certainly eclipsed by the artistic explosion of the last 30 years. In the '50s the number of adventurous artists, eager patrons and art venues impatient to show their work could probably be counted on the combined fingers of the Brooklyn Dodgers starting lineup, soon to relocate to Chavez Ravine.

But that was then and this is now. How did so phenomenal a transformation happen?

Expect Pacific Standard Time's sprawling narrative to bust some myths — first, the one that says L.A. is distinct among metropolitan powerhouses because, until recently, it had scant artistic history worth mentioning.

Hopps' merry-go-round inspiration no doubt came from the vast Dada and Surrealist art collection that Walter and Louise Arensberg displayed in their Hollywood home, five blocks from Grauman's Chinese theater. Both Arensbergs died less than 18 months before the Santa Monica opening. But Hopps got his teenage art education among their trove of paintings and sculptures — Picasso, Duchamp, De Chirico, Sheeler, Brancusi, Dali and scores more, plus African and Pre-Columbian sculpture.

Duchamp, whose landmark 1963 retrospective in Pasadena Hopps would later organize, was clearly the merry-go-round show's spiritual godfather, if not its actual one. The Arensbergs, his chief patrons, had helped found the wartime organization American Arts in Action (1943) and the Modern Institute of Art, Beverly Hills (1947-1949), dedicated to moving Modern art from the underground to the public square.

Both organizations failed. Together with UCLA's 1949 inability to meet the terms of a planned gift of the Arensberg collection, such implosions have contributed to L.A.'s entrenched public profile as an artistic backwater. Yet, the Arensberg collection was also turned down by at least 10 other prestigious institutions, including Washington's National Gallery, the Chicago Art Institute, Mexico City's National Institute of Fine Arts and Harvard. (It finally landed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) For art, American society is always mostly shallow and reactionary.

The artistic exchange between L.A. and San Francisco that under-girded Hopps' merry-go-round show also soon eroded. Blame — or credit — goes to the freeways. The state's two main cities are roughly as far apart as Baltimore is from Boston, while the construction of a freeway network helped the huge Southern California region coalesce as an autonomous creative engine.

Freeways altered perceptual habits. In 1966, when she was 28 and freshly out of UCLA graduate school, Vija Celmins painted a minor masterpiece embodying the change. Her silvery gray "Freeway," about 17 inches high and 26 inches wide, derives from a photograph taken from the passenger's seat inside a moving car. The artist would elaborate its formal pictorial qualities during a brilliant career that has now spanned 45 years, but I know of nothing else quite like it.

At the bottom, the dark curve of a dashboard and a wiper resting on the invisible windshield conspire to turn the window intó something like a movie screen. Brush strokes are virtually invisible, erasing any sense of physical touch. Deep, one-point perspective looks far down the highway on the right, while the vast space is pulled up short by the sharp contrast of a heavily shaded nearby truck lumbering along in the left lane.

Typical landscape paintings pull you into cohesive illusionistic spaces, but not "Freeway." Visually the canvas breaks in two, one side near and the other far. You look at and across it, as you do when driving, your eye forced to scan both the painted object and the fleeting image. Lateral perception is common in seeing modern abstract paintings, with their flat shapes, gestural brush strokes or linear color patterns; but it's virtually unheard of for the precise accounting of figurative realism. Two starkly different perceptual experiences collide — one born from abstract art, one from L.A. life.

Celmins' small gem of a painting is among 79 works in the Getty Museum's survey, "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970." Go see it — and as much of the rest as you can. With luck, revelations about the postwar L.A. School will unfold in similar ways.

christopher.knight@latimes.com

File photo

1963: With a show in Pasadena, Marcel Duchamp, right, dined in Las Vegas with wife Teeny Duchamp, left, pop artist Richard Hamilton, collector Betty Factor, Dada/Surrealist artist William Copley, collector Monte Factor, curator Walter Hopps, and collector Betty Asher.

ON THE COVER

1. Maren Hassinger, part of the coming Hammer Museum show "Now Dig This!," created trees out of steel rope along freeways in 1979. By Ken Lubas / L.A. Times. **2.** Edward Kienholz's "Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps" by Susan Einstein / J. Paul Getty Trust **3.** Edward Ruscha's "The Back of Hollywood" by Edward Ruscha / MOCA. **4.** John Kapel's "Chair" by ©John Kapel / LACMA.

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Pacific Standard Time online

Explore an interactive timeline, videos, reviews, features, a full list of shows and more photos from The Times' archives. Plus, follow Sharon Mizota as she visits all the shows.

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PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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 1: Hal Glicksman

With no art museum infrastructure to speak of in postwar L.A., schools were critical venues for showing new art. Pomona College, where Jose Clemente Orozco had painted the first major Modern 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 rambunctious Chicano collective Asco (Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón and Humberto Sandoval) went one better by occasionally taping its stylish members to urban walls. There 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, life-long 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 '60s and '70s, Light & 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

SEPT. 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, as 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

California Design, 1930-1965: 'Living in a Modern Way'

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.) Prediction: 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 mystically 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).

Regen Projects/MOCA

MOCA: Raymond Pettibon's "It Terrifies Me...," in "Black Sun."

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 vistas made by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Minor White, all crashing coastlines and monumental mountain peaks, to the stark typologies 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

Crosscurrents in L.A. Paintings and Sculpture, 1950-1970

Nine years in the making! Forty-seven artists! Seventy-nine paintings, sculptures and mixed-media works! A spine for the behemoth PST series, this is the Getty's flagship exhibition of L.A.'s first generation of international-grade artists. The show is bound to be at least somewhat controversial, if only for who's in and who's not.

J. Paul Getty Museum

OCT. 2

Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981

With the presidential fall of Richard Nixon and rise of Ronald Reagan as its cheeky California brackets, the show examines a publicly placid but conceptually rich artistic period — the setup for the creative explosion of the 1980s. The blowout includes about 125 artists. Meanwhile, that titular "black sun" suggests a less-than-cheery interval.

TAYLOR SHERILL Getty Trust

GETTY: Ken Price's "BG Red," 1963, is in the flagship show.

MOCA

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

Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California, 1964-1971

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 (1899-1968), 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 Hopps' 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

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Los Angeles Times

COVERED UP: David Alfaro Siqueiros' mural about Anglo oppression, "America Tropical," is shown partly whitewashed in 1934.

ESSAY

Hot rods and hedonism

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

D.J. WALDIE

In September 1945, under a pall of ocher smog and summer heat, Los Angeles entered the postwar world. The city then was bigger, wealthier and more diverse than ever. Its established people — mostly past middle age and conservative, a few who were really rich — still had the narrowness of the Midwest towns from which many of them had come in the 1920s. The city's new people — Okies and Arkies, black Southerners, and white ethnics — had arrived with the war. Few of them had much interest in art.

Of course, there was art in Los Angeles they could have seen. Wide-shouldered men in post office murals reaped and forged and lifted up symbols of a better America to come. Sabato Rodia's unfinished Watts Towers/Nuestro Pueblo glittered over the Pacific Electric tracks south of downtown. At the doctor's office, in the bank lobby and on sale at Barker Bros., sweetly impressionistic landscapes continued to see Southern California as a timeless garden.

And at the county Museum of History, Science and Art in Exposition Park, curators mounted temporary loan exhibitions among the mastodon skeletons. The Huntington Library displayed a superb collection of 18th century portraits and landscapes. Chouinard Art Institute, the Art Center School and Otis Art Institute offered day and evening lessons to veterans on the GI Bill. (Some would get jobs cartooning for Disney or Warner Bros.) Serious collectors could find Matisse and Picasso, Klee and Kandinsky at Earl Stendahl's gallery on Wilshire Boulevard and Frank Perls' gallery nearby, but Stendahl and Perls were practically alone.

Art — as a faith and a business — was something found mostly in New York that September, not here. Los Angeles didn't even have its own art museum. The city had no center; its moneyed people were too segregated. Downtown and Hollywood were separate Protestant and Jewish worlds. Black and Latino Los Angeles were kept nearly invisible. With a few exceptions — Man Ray was the subject of two retrospectives in the 1940s — little public notice was taken of modern art. Officially, Los Angeles distrusted anything that was radical.

On Olvera Street in 1932, city workers had whitewashed "America Tropical," David Alfaro Siqueiros' blunt allegory of Anglo oppression. In 1939, conservatives on the county museum board had turned down a gift of avant-garde works from the collection of Walter and Louise Arensberg. Vincent Price, Edward G. Robinson and Fanny Brice founded the Modern Institute of Art in 1947 to keep the Arensberg collection here, but the institute closed when funding ran out.

Indifference was turning into hostility. In 1951, the Los Angeles City Council held two days of noisy hearings to condemn the "offensive and nauseating" abstract works in the All-City Outdoor Arts Festival sponsored by the Municipal Art Department. The hearings tarred modernist painters as "tools of the Kremlin," and the department was nearly dissolved. When the county museum acquired a small Jackson Pollock, curators were ordered not to show it publicly. Councilman Harold Harby in 1953 tried to block a gift to the city of Edmund Kohn's "Bird in the Moon"; Harby's critique of the abstract painting: "If this is a bird, the moon can have it!"

Losses in the local culture war were serious enough, but the conflict was fought in a tiny arena. The real preoccupation of L.A. in the 1950s was the culture being made and consumed in the commonplace and insistent new suburbs.

Suburban landscape

In the tract house valleys and flatlands of Los Angeles, young guys with a knack for tinkering were turning 20-year-old jalopies into chromed and lacquered hot rods. Surfers were taking jet-age materials and giving their boards sleek contours in polymer and fiberglass. Aerospace workers were learning the skills of vacuum forming, acrylic casting and vapor coating. Quality-control experts looked over their shoulders, evaluating the sheen of the finishes they applied to sheet metal and plastic.

The things the men made were loud, fast and colorful. They jostled competitively with the stuff of suburban life — billboards shouting come-ons, men's magazines lingering over every airbrushed inch of skin, local TV recycling vintage Hollywood — and all of it pouring into suburban Los Angeles in an unfiltered torrent of immediate, disposable content.

Surfing Heritage Foundation / LACMA

"SURFBOARD": Hobart "Hobie" Alter's 1961 work.

In a media-saturated city, Spade Cooley, Bill Haley and the Metropolitan Opera all played on the kitchen radio. The latest issue of House Beautiful on the Danish Modern coffee table assailed the Abstract Expressionists but also warned middle-class housewives that their tastes needed to be modern. Their kids furtively passed around copies of Mad magazine and Action Comics, lingering over four-color graphics that rendered the suburban everyday as satire or horror.

From this bricolage, the popular culture of postwar Los Angeles was rising, part corporate product and part do-it-yourself assembly in which all the arts — high and low — were mashed up and extruded as more objects of middle-class consumption. Los Angeles had impulsively disposed of its own past and long ago made self-invention its only tradition. The new popular culture and Los Angeles were made for each other. It was an egalitarian, ahistorical and optimistic fabrication of what the city thought its future should be, with all of the excess and aspiration that implied.

The rest of the country wondered if anything more might be expected, if Los Angeles had anything to say other than its advertised dreams. Seen from New York's Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles looked like a mess of its clichés: happy, sun-besotted, trivial and too immersed in spectacle to make serious contemporary art. In Los Angeles, no one seemed to care, even though the shallowness was at least partly true.

In New York in the mid-1950s, you looked to history and theory to explain how the fears and longings of the age were expressed in its art. In Los Angeles, you only had to look to desire. Los Angeles — a bipolar city of bright surfaces sharply bounded by shadows — tended to eroticize everything, to give even the banal a Dionysian spin into play, physical perfection, violence, altered states of consciousness and a thirst for the infinite.

The infinite had been a part of the sales pitch for Los Angeles for a long time: in its light, its deserts, its emptiness and its place at the end of roads leading west. Ecstatic religion, New Age thought and UFO cults had satisfied ordinary folk who wanted transcendence. In a rapidly changing Los Angeles, dabbling in LSD and Zen satisfied some of those who looked for a personal cosmic doorway.

'California sublime'

Los Angeles itself was one of those doorways for guys who liked to draw, who liked to gamble, who dropped in and out of art school and who didn't fit in well.

Guys like Ed Kienholz, one of the founders with Walter Hopps of the Ferus Gallery in 1957, where Kienholz later showed "Roxy's," the first of his life-size environments assembled from the city's junk. And guys like Billy Al Bengston, who experimented with industrial pigments and spray lacquer to render luminous hearts, irises and sergeant's stripes. And Kenneth Price, who put the same gloss on ceramic pieces, joining traditional craft work to functionless abstraction. And Craig Kauffman, who began painting in a West Cost expressionist style but who is best known for perfectly finished panels of vacuum-formed Plexiglas. And John McCracken, who brought the same perfection to resin-coated planks, casually propped against a gallery wall. And Robert Irwin, an intensely focused minimalist in painting and later a fabricator of sight-altering installations made solely of light.

If Los Angeles was fundamentally insubstantial, then its art could be weightless and limitless light and space — what the critic Rosalind Krauss would later call "the California Sublime."

And if the city was a less-than-innocent joy ride of suburban desires, then Los Angeles artists would cram all of popular culture in the back seat.

Throughout the 1950s, the great museums of New York laid out a didactic history of art that ultimately led to a room where contemporary paintings were hung. Those paintings were intended to point out the logical direction art would take.

In Los Angeles, no arrow pointed the way. In Los Angeles, there was no art history exam to be passed. You were on your own. Successful New York artists fitted their work into a system of reputation merchandizing that involved certain galleries, art critics and publications.

None of that was true of Los Angeles before the 1960s. To drum up patronage for their struggling galleries, some artist-entrepreneurs set up courses on contemporary art in Westside living rooms — Tupperware parties for the aesthetically curious. New art was risky, and it didn't pay in Los Angeles. But the surfing was good, almost everything was cheap, and anything was possible.

An unruly hybridization of the ordinary and the visionary gave a specifically Los Angeles context to the sunny abundance of Andy Warhol's soup cans (first shown at the Ferus Gallery in 1962), the moral outrage of the Peace Tower (a Vietnam War protest coordinated by Mark di Suvero in 1966) and the ethnic manifestos of Chicano art (itself an extension of farm labor organizing).

Superficially, the arts here seemed to be the less introspective products of a transcontinental counterculture centered in New York and San Francisco. But Los Angeles had a recklessness, a hunger for memory and an identification with the everyday that led its arts to different ends. They could be vulgar and excessive or precious or intensely private, just like L.A.

Through the late 1950s and early 1960s, L.A. artists assembled from light, space, color, adolescence, joy and the debris of the city a body of work that investigated and delineated what Los Angeles meant when it was on the verge. Some observers saw the birth of a new capitol of art in that. Some saw only the sheen on perfect surfaces.

Hardly anyone saw the fire that would burn the heart out of these daydreams. Hardly anyone saw that Watts and the rest of Los Angeles was on the verge of 1965.

calendar@latimes.com
Waldie is the author of "Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir" and "Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles." He is a contributing editor for the Los Angeles Times.

ANTICIPATION

" 'Best Kept Secret,' an exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum featuring faculty from UC Irvine in the early '70s such as Chris Burden, Laddie John Dill [Barish's partner], Robert Irwin and many others. Also: '5 LITE,' a Light and Space show in an alternative pop-up space downtown [MK2 Projects], featuring five Light and Space artists: Larry Bell, Ed Moses, Robert Irwin, Laddie John Dill and Robert Wilhite. Curated by Ed Moses."

— PAMELA BARISH, fashion designer

"I especially look forward to seeing [MAK Center's] 'Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design' at the Schindler House and 'California Design, 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way' at LACMA, both of which will reveal that Los Angeles had many interesting things happening before 1945."

— STEVE TURNER, Steve Turner Contemporary

"I'm really looking forward to the MOCA exhibits — 'Under the Big Black Sun' and 'Weegee in Los Angeles.' And the 'Phenomenal' show down in San Diego that features [James] Turrell, Larry Bell, Bruce Nauman, John McCracken."

— DARREN STAR, TV writer and producer

STEFANIE KEENAN Getty Images

Darren Star

"Frankly, I'm looking forward to seeing the brochure. Is there one? I like something I can flip through backward. But if you twist my arm, I'm looking forward to the ASCO show at LACMA, and the 'L.A. Rebellion' film series here at the Hammer, and anything to do with L.A. literature between 1945 and 1980. Rumor has it that, in between all the visual arts, one or two decent books got written here back then."

— DAVID KIPEN, Libros Schmibros lending library/used bookstore Boyle Heights and the Hammer Museum

— COMPILED BY DEBORAH VANKIN

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

CONVERSATION

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.

JORI FINKEL

The artists associated with Light and Space, the movement dedicated to investigating patterns of visual perception and attention that began in Southern California in the 1960s, are an unruly bunch.

Most reject the label out of hand. Two of the movement's giants, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, stopped speaking to each other decades ago and have never completely mended fences. One of the few women associated with this work, Maria Nordman, refuses to be in group shows on the subject. And Doug Wheeler, one of the first artists to make the shift from paintings to large-scale, mind-bending environments, routinely declines interviews.

So the mere fact that the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego was able to realize the exhibition and catalog for "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface," part of the region-wide Pacific Standard Time celebration, is something of a feat. Curators Robin Clark and Hugh Davies have brought together work by 13 of these artists (Nordman is the biggest omission), ranging from deliberately subtle light projections to slick so-called finish fetish work associated with surfboard and hot rod culture.

One of the largest pieces is a room-sized installation by Wheeler that messes with your senses: He has outfitted a gallery with more than 200 feet of recessed neon tubing in such a way that an entire wall dissolves into a hazy, penumbra-like effect. It is a re-creation of a piece from 1968.

"Doug was working ambiently, making spaces rather than objects, very early on. The only other person doing it back then was Jim Turrell with his projection pieces," says Davies, who is also the museum's director. The Times convinced Wheeler to sit down with Davies to talk about the powers of perception — and the challenges of making and showing his work. It is the first in a monthly series of artist and curator interviews tied to Pacific Standard Time.

A lot of Light and Space artists who work on issues of attention and perception have lived in the desert. What is it about the desert that shapes or fuels this work?

Doug Wheeler: I grew up in rural Arizona, and when I was young, I'd have to get up at 4:30 a.m. and "ride" fence line, which was my chore before breakfast. The idea was to check different sections of the fence to repair any spots that were compromised. So at first it's dark and you can barely see, and then gradually the light is coming in. The sky was always everything. If there were a couple of scattered cumulus clouds, I found that the clouds created this sense of space, defining space, making it feel dimensional. You don't see that so much here, where there's so much pollution and clouds are two-dimensional-seeming. But out there there's a real sense of volume, when you look at the vault of the sky. That's what I started playing with as an artist: not looking at things but the tension in between things.

Hugh Davies: I think it's no coincidence that many of the artists in our show lived in the desert and also flew a lot — your father was a doctor who flew all over the state to make house calls.

DW: He was called the flying doctor of Arizona. He had three Staggerwing Beechcraft airplanes — the Lear Jet of the '30s, they called them. He'd fly off to do surgeries in places where they didn't have access to hospitals.

HD: You grew up in the desert with the three-dimensional quality of clouds and the really expansive horizon. And Turrell, who also flies, lives out there now. And Bob Irwin at one point in his career left L.A. for Las Vegas, and that was about the desert. I think what distinguishes this body of work from what's happening elsewhere in the world — particularly what's happening in urban New York — is the sense of horizontality and space versus verticality and claustrophobia almost.

DW: There are places you can go where you almost feel like you are the only living thing, and you become conscious of yourself in ways normally you're not.

Is that one of your goals as an artist — to give us a desert-like experience where we become hyper-aware that we're in a particular body, at a particular time and place?

DW: One work that I want to do is called "Synthetic Desert" — I did a number of drawings for it. I call it synthetic because I don't think any of us — though landscape painters might object to this — can duplicate what makes up a desert experience. My idea is to create an environment where sound or lack of it, or the light or the modulation of it, might feel to you like in a desert landscape. But I'm not trying to create a diorama-like thing. The art is in no way competing to be the real thing.

Like it or not, the term Light and Space came to encompass a mix of perceptual work that came out of Southern California in the 1960s. What's your feeling about the term?

HD: I like the fact it has "space" in it; to me that was the breakthrough of the work. The work became ambient and was about environmental experience instead of focusing on an object. New York minimalism, as I call it, was at that time very much obsessed with the object, and the objects were meant to be obdurate, cold, machine-made, obscuring the artist's hand. To me that was like the military-industrial complex — they used to make landing strips for Vietnam out of the same material that Carl Andre made his work from. Here it was more handmade, with techniques borrowed from car culture or surfboard manufacturing or aerospace engineering. It was about translucence and transparence and this fabulous optical play that [Donald] Judd didn't get into until much later, when he

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 preception of modern art everywhere. The J. Paul Getty Museum presents *Crosscurrents in LA*, at the Getty Center.

Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas, 1963. Ed Ruscha. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; gift of James Meeker, Class of 1958, in memory of Lee English, Class of 1958, scholar, poet, athlete and friend to all. © Ed Ruscha.

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

Presenting Sponsors The Getty Bank of America

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

JAY L. CLENDENIN Los Angeles Times

EXPLORERS: 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.

PHILIP SCHOLZ RITTERMAN Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

UNTITLED: This 1965 acrylic on canvas with Plexiglas and neon light by Wheeler is among the works being exhibited in the show.

started using Plexiglas. He came around to what artists of Southern California were doing all along.

DW: I don't like categories. They're just limiting. We all in our own individual ways have this idea of what we're doing. We think we're really special making work all by ourselves. I thought I found my own valley where nobody else was camping.

Some other groupings like Pop Art or assemblage art seem less contentious. Is it because the artists grouped together under the Light and Space umbrella all have such strong personalities?

HD: I would say that a breakthrough occurred in the '60s amongst Southern California artists interested in the phenomenal and perception. They to a certain extent spurred each other on and to a certain extent ripped each other off. It's similar to the birth of Cubism, when you go back and ask the question: What exactly did Braque do, or Picasso, or Juan Gris? Well, with paintings it's a bit easier, because you can trace their exhibition history. But in the '60s this work was being shown in the artist studios [and] labs, where very few people saw it, so the chronology is difficult to ascertain. But personally I don't care who was the first one to find the vaccine, when there were four people here working at the same time and the discovery wouldn't have been made otherwise. I don't care who gets the Nobel Prize. I think the important thing is to celebrate what they all did as a group and introduce them to the next generation.

Do you feel like artists at the time got more support from curators and collectors in Europe than from people closer to home?

DW: Without a doubt. My studio back then was an old dime store in Venice on Windward — it was big enough I could play basketball and ride a bike in it — and nobody ever came over. Then one day there's a knock on the door and it's Rudolf Zwirner and Hans Neuendorf, major art dealers from Germany, and Rudolf asked me to move to Germany, which I wasn't ready to do for personal reasons. The thing is: He knew. They knew. That's one reason why I like the idea of showing with David Zwirner [in New York] — he's Rudolf's son and I'll be showing some LED pieces with him next January.

HD: It was like the jazz musicians early on. They got a lot of support in Europe before they were recognized here — in France, Germany.

DW: And Italy, England also.

HD: The first place I saw Light and Space from California was the 1976 Venice Biennale, through Germano Celant's show "Ambiente" and going to see Count Panza di Biumo's place in Varese. I'm an East Coast guy who went to East Coast grad school, and this material was never on my radar.

People get frustrated by some of the work because it seems under the radar in another way — it's barely there or hardly registers. A light beam is directed through a window. A wall is painted over. A scrim is hung.

HD: It happens in almost any new art form; when people don't know what they're looking at, they get upset. A lot of breakthrough paintings, from the Impressionists to Malevich, were hated at the time.

Several Light and Space artists — I'm thinking of Bob Irwin now — went through periods when they refused to let people reproduce their installations in magazines or books. Are the works really that hard to photograph?

DW: I don't think you can photograph my work. In 1968, Time magazine did a piece called "Place in the Sun" and they wanted an image of one of my light encasements. And I said make it two colors, black and white, because then everybody will know we're just documenting the work, not trying to be it. So they made the image in the magazine green and blue. I don't think they understood what I meant.

HD: I think the fact that the work can't be photographed has really hurt its acceptance and dissemination. Pop Art photographs really well — it zips around the world. But how can a field of light be captured?

jori.finkel@latimes.com

Crosscurrents in L.A.
Painting and Sculpture
1950–1970
October 1, 2011–February 5, 2012

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME AT THE GETTY CENTER

FROM START TO FINISH
De Wain Valentine's
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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

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PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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 lewd tussle with fellow performance artists Paul McCarthy and Kim Jones; proceeded into a kind of love triangle with artist Allen Kaprow and Dick Kilgroe, 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 to 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, she takes the feminist mantra "the personal is political" as a fundamental principle.

Now 80, a lively woman with short white hair, vivid blue eyes and a keen yet guileless conversational manner, she speaks with striking candor of the many experiences that have fed her art.

When asked about the nature of her "radicalization," the genesis of that journey from housewife to artist, she recounts a painful episode from adolescence. She grew up in Pasadena, the daughter of strict Presbyterian parents. When she became involved with a star of the UCLA football team, her parents disapproved.

© BARBARA T. SMITH AND THE BOX
Claire Trevor School of the Arts

THEN: Smith tries to be conventional during "Birthdaze."

> Like many women who came to consciousness in the 1960s, Smith takes the feminist mantra 'the personal is political' as a fundamental principle.

"My father told me that if I ever went out with him again, I was not to consider myself his daughter," she said. "He was effectively making sexuality and who I chose to mate [with] — I doubt very much I would have married him — conditional on his love for me. It totally screwed me up."

The muddled entanglements of sexuality and power, longing and rebellion embodied in this early confrontation would go on to be predominant themes for Smith. In 1951, 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 — "concept paintings" (her term) at the dawn of Conceptualism that also anticipated elements of Postmodern critique.

RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

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

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, tread 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 1985, where she lives on the ground floor and rents out the bedrooms.

Distraught 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."

calendar@latimes.com

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

A REGIONAL TIMELINE

Decades of innovation amid resistance

SCOTT TIMBERG

'40s

1945: Alfred Hitchcock's psychological thriller "Spellbound" opens, with memorable dream sequences by Salvador Dalí.

1946: Bassist and composer Charles Mingus, who grew up in Watts, records with his band the Stars of Swing. The recordings, now lost, anticipated the next decade's influential West Coast jazz sound.

1946: Theodor Geisel, who writes children's books under the pen name Dr. Seuss, moves to Hollywood to work for Warner Bros.

1947: Beginning of organized resistance to Modernism and abstraction in art as well as the beginning of "the painting witch hunt," in the words of art historian Peter Plagens. "If screenwriters and college professors could be called on the patriotism carpet," he writes in "Sunshine Muse," a key history of West Coast art, "why not artists?"

1947: Cold War begins in response to formation of Eastern Bloc: Resulting expansion of U.S. defense budget creates aerospace boom in Southern California.

'50s

1950: Texas saxophonist Ornette Coleman arrives in Los Angeles as a member of a rhythm and blues band. After he is fired from the band, Coleman remains in L.A. for most of the decade, working at times as an elevator operator, and emerges as the leader of the jazz avant-garde.

1951: Modern art equated with Communist propaganda by Los Angeles City Council; public display is forbidden.

1953: Helen Lundeberg, an important and innovative Los Angeles artist who works with both geometric abstraction and landscape, has a one-woman show at Pasadena Art Institute.

1954: Los Angeles industrialist Norton Simon purchases his first artwork: two paintings from the Dalzell Hatfield Gallery inside the Ambassador Hotel. By the end of 1955, he had purchased 17 more works.

Associated Press

CANDIDATE: Sen. John F. Kennedy in Los Angeles on July 9, 1960.

1955: Beat-influenced artist Wallace Berman publishes first issue of Semina, an idiosyncratic magazine of poetry and visual art.

1956: Driving a Ford along Route 66, Ed Ruscha arrives in Los Angeles from Oklahoma and begins one of the city's great art careers.

1957: The Ferus Gallery, begun by eccentric curator Walter Hopps and artist Ed Kienholz, opens on La Cienega Boulevard.

1958: Business-minded Irving Blum takes over the Ferus co-ownership from Kienholz; he either saves the gallery's finances or dulls its leading edge, depending on whom you ask.

1959: LACMA show, "Four Abstract Classicists," of Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, Fred Hammersley and John McLaughlin, geometrically minded artists later described as fathers of an L.A. school of "hard edge" painting.

1959: Heiress Virginia Dwan opens gallery in Westwood that will at times outstrip Ferus and any other for inventiveness and imagination.

'60s

1960: Important developments in Los Angeles modern architecture: Maverick "organic modernist" John Lautner designs flying-saucer-like Chemosphere House in Hollywood Hills. Julius Shulman photographs Pierre Koenig's Case Study House in an arrangement of light, costume and hillside.

1960: Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles nominates Sen. John F. Kennedy for the presidency. Norman Mailer, writing about it for Esquire, calls Los Angeles "a kingdom of stucco ... one has the feeling it was built by television sets giving orders to men."

1960: June Wayne founds Tamarind Lithography Workshop on Tamarind Street in L.A. Among the first artists to work with Tamarind: Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis and Rufino Tamayo.

1961: Hawthorne band the Beach Boys begin recording their debut album, "Surfin' Safari," released the following year.

1962: Andy Warhol's first show anywhere in the world takes place at Ferus Gallery; his Campbell's Soup Cans paintings sell for $100 each.

1963: Walter Hopps, new director at Pasadena Art Museum, puts on Marcel Duchamp retrospective, an important portal for the influence of the French Dada artist on the West Coast.

1964: A young gay painter from Yorkshire, David Hockney, visits L.A. in part because of John Rechy's novel "City of Night." Meets writer Christopher Isherwood and creates swimming-pool paintings.

1964: Studio Watts begun by collection of L.A. jazz players, artists and poets; space offers classes in visual art, dance and acting as well as studio space for artists.

1965: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art moves from Exposition Park to larger quarters on Wilshire Boulevard, becoming the largest museum of its kind in the American West.

1965: White police officers in Watts pull over a young black driver; their conflict sparks a conflagration that will result in 34 deaths, more than a thousand injured and in excess of $40 million in damages.

1965: Nicholas Wilder opens his gallery, selling work by Bruce Nauman, John McCracken and David Hockney.

1966: Gemini G.E.L., a seminal print studio, opens. Associated at first with East Coast figures like Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Rauschenberg but later prints work by Ruscha, Hockney and John Altoon.

1966: Opening of Ed Kienholz retrospective at LACMA includes "Back Seat Dodge '38" and "Roxy's," the artist's recollection of a Las Vegas bordello; the L.A. County Board of Supervisors denounces the show as "revolting and pornographic."

1967: Artist brothers Alonzo and Dale Davis open Brockman Gallery in South Central Los Angeles, one of the city's first black-owned galleries.

1968: Los Angeles band The Byrds releases "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," an unlikely turn toward country folk and traditional American music for the pioneers of psychedelia.

1968: Nation rocked by Sirhan Sirhan's assassination of Robert F. Kennedy at Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel.

1969: The Pasadena Art Museum moves into a new Ladd + Kelsey-designed building on Colorado Boulevard. Though it was one of very few modern art strongholds south of San Francisco, the museum was hit with serious financial strain over the next few years.

1969: "Easy Rider," directed by Ferus fellow traveler Dennis Hopper, opens, signaling a new sensibility in Hollywood.

1969: The Manson family murders occur in Benedict Canyon and environs; they become a symbol of the end of the '60s and of the dark side of the counterculture.

'70s

1970: Shy San Diego-area teacher and artist John Baldessari moves to Los Angeles. He will become an important force in Conceptual Art not only for his own work, but for his decades of teaching at CalArts and UCLA.

1970: In the Chicano Moratorim, 20,000 march down Whittier Boulevard in East L.A., protesting the Vietnam War..

1971: CalArts, which had grown out of the Chouinard Art Institute and had been funded by Walt Disney for a decade, moves to Valencia, becoming one of several influential and prestigious art schools in Southern California.

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

SCULPTOR: Simon Rodia at the Watts Towers.

1971: LACMA's Art and Technology show — which includes Christo, Ellsworth Kelly, Andy Warhol and other European and New York superstars — highlights a program the museum had been pursuing since 1967.

1972: Womanhouse, a politically minded exhibition space for female artists only, launched in a large Hollywood home by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro of CalArts' feminist art program.

1972: A modern-day Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration is held in Los Angeles, instigated in part by California muralist Carlos Bueno. Key event in building of the Chicano movement and a return to traditional Latin American arts and culture.

1972: Helene Winer, director and curator of the Pomona College art gallery, is fired, bringing to an end several years of experimentation in minimalism, conceptual art, performance art and video.

1973: Tom Bradley elected Los Angeles' first black mayor. He shapes the city and perceptions of it for the next 20 years.

1973: African American architect Paul R. Williams, who re-designed the Beverly Hills Hotel as well as new homes for Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Barbara Stanwyck, retires.

1974: Norton Simon takes over the struggling Pasadena Art Museum, moving his collection of European and Asian art into the Colorado Boulevard space.

1974: Opening of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Pacific Palisades designed by Robert E. Langdon Jr. and Ernest C. Wilson Jr. in emulation of a first-century Roman villa.

Associated Press

OBSCENE? A guard at LACMA prevents viewers from opening the door of an Edward Kienholz piece.

1974: A touring art show called "West Coast '74: The Black Image" comes to Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, and shows African American artists working largely outside the protest tradition.

1974: Orange County native and Whittier College alum Richard Nixon resigns the presidency of the United States on the eve of impeachment for his role in the Watergate scandal.

1975: Artists from Los Angeles and elsewhere in the state make up a third of the Whitney Biennial. It's considered a recognition of California's cultural flowering. Two years later, the Whitney would include work by Baldessari, Vija Celmins, Nauman, Chris Burden and others.

1975: A key show demonstrating the region's leadership in video art, "Southland Video Anthology," opens at the Long Beach Museum of Art and tours on the West Coast. Includes work by Allan Kaprow, Paul McCarthy, David Salle and others.

1976: "Concepts: Six Contemporary Asian Artists," an exhibit at Pasadena's Pacific Asia Museum, demonstrates the wide range of work produced by the state's Asian American artists.

1976: California Gov. Jerry Brown closed the California Arts Commission, creating the California Arts Council. With a leadership including Noah Purifoy and other Southland artists, the council will emphasize grants and community-based projects.

1976: John Outterbridge, Alonzo Davis and Greg Bryant and other artists in and around Watts launch Los Angeles' first jazz festival, named for Watts Tower artist Simon Rodia and eventually encompassing a range of art forms.

1976: Art Center College of Design moves to its Craig Ellwood-designed Hillside Campus in Pasadena.

1977: The exhibit "Los Angeles in the Seventies" opens at the Fort Worth Art Museum and tours nationally. A wide range of media is represented, including work by artists Michael Asher and Judy Fiskin.

1977: California African American Museum chartered by the state of California. Will open in 1981 in a temporary space and in a permanent building in Exposition Park during the 1984 Olympics.

1979: The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles is founded; fundraising and organization begin, though the museum in its early years occupied what is now the Geffen Contemporary — the Arata Isozaki building on Grand Avenue will not open for seven more years.

'80s

1980: "Los Angeles," the debut album by the band X, is released, emphasizing a desperate, nihilistic sensibility different from the canyon-rock and introspective singer-songwriters who preceded them.

1980: Ronald Reagan elected the 40th president of the United States.

LARRY DAVIS Los Angeles Times

ASSEMBLAGE ARTIST: John Outterbridge was director of the Watts Towers Arts Center from 1975 to 1992.

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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-PHILP

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: Postwar 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. Suntanned 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, unemotional 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 if 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-Philp is the author of "Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s," published earlier this year by Henry Holt.

From Joe Goode/Henry Holt

ON TO SOMETHING: This photo from the book "Rebels in Paradise" shows Joe Goode, left, Jerry McMillan, Ed Ruscha and Patrick Blackwell in 1959 in the Hollywood rental house they shared.

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

PORTFOLIO

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.

CHRIS BURDEN: The performance artist is seen in 1982 with his "Flying Kayak."

MARY FRAMPTON Los Angeles Times

HARRY CHASE Los Angeles Times

PETER VOULKOS: The sculptor poses in 1965 with his 1961 ceramic sculpture "Gallas Rock."

JAMES TURRELL: The Light and Space artist is seen in 1984 in his in-progress Roden Crater project.

CON KEYES Los Angeles Times

GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

ED RUSCHA: The longtime locally based artist (seen in 1980) has worked across many media.

KEN HIVELY Los Angeles Times

BETYE SAAR: The assemblage artist (seen in 1981) challenged stereotypes.

GEORGE ROSE Los Angeles Times

JUDY CHICAGO: The feminist artist is seen working in 1978 on her "The Dinner Party" installation.

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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' dodecagonal 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 her 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, he 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]

BILL ORCUTT Orange County Museum of Art / Alexander and Bonin N.Y.

'8 NATURAL HANDSTANDS': The photo from Robert Kinmont of Sonoma is included in the exhibition "State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970" at the Orange County Museum of Art.

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 gallerists 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 spheres — 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.)

RON DAVIS J. Paul Getty Trust / Tate Images

"VECTOR" (1968): Ron Davis' mind-bending geometric creation is shaped and colored in a manner that gives it a three-dimensional appearance that almost has it jutting out at the observer.

OSCAR CASTILLO Fowler Museum

CAR CULTURE: Oscar Castillo's photograph of a 1947 Chevy in Wilmington is emblematic of his works documenting the Chicano community, a pursuit he began in the late 1960s.

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 Kinmont. 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 handstand 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 atrocity 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."

jori.finkel@latimes.com

NEW FROM THE GETTY

Pacific Standard Time
Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980
Edited by Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh, with Lucy Bradnock
This stunningly illustrated history of the vibrant and diverse postwar art scene in Los Angeles is the first in-depth scholarly survey of the region's art.
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PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

CULTURE MONSTER | PST A TO Z

One writer's mission: 52 shows in 3 months

SHARON MIZOTA

Over the last few weeks, Pacific Standard Time has slowly begun to unfurl its tendrils; the ambitious initiative will eventually touch almost every corner of the SoCal art scene over the next six months. Stretching from Santa Barbara to San Diego, Santa Monica to Palm Springs, it includes 60-something Getty-funded exhibitions and a slew of related shows at more than 70 galleries, revealing the history of art in L.A. to be as sprawling as the city itself and as rich.

For the next three months, I intend to see every PST show listed on the project's website — there are 52 of them opening between now and December. I'll be writing regularly about my adventures for Culture Monster (See www.latimes.com/pst-scene.)

It may be a foolhardy endeavor, but I hope to augment The Times' more in-depth features and reviews with additional insights and perhaps draw unanticipated connections.

Large surveys at the Getty Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art are obvious draws, but I'm particularly interested in the nooks and crannies that seldom make it into art history surveys. Some PST exhibitions explore ceramic art, political posters, experimental film and early performance art as well as the ways in which divisions of gender, race and sexual orientation have shaped artistic communities and practices.

I'm hopeful that Pacific Standard Time will not only provide L.A. art with the sense of history it deserves but will give marginalized groups and movements their art historical due. Its wide-ranging approach seems less about anointing masters and masterpieces than about exploring and understanding many types of art making and points of view. This makes sense for a city whose most definitive feature is that it's nearly impossible to define.

When I arrived in L.A. from the Bay Area five years ago, it took me awhile to grasp the depth of this multiplicity. Now I'm looking forward to learning about Beatrice Wood as well as Los Angeles' role in the Mexican avant-garde and the connections between activism and art in African American communities in South L.A.

I'll start my PST travels next week with three very different shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "ASCO: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987" makes insiders of the conceptual art collective that once tagged the outside of LACMA's building to protest the exclusion of Chicano art. "Maria Nordman 'Film Room: Smoke,' 1967-Present" is an installation of an unscripted, 1967 film shot on a Malibu beach. And finally, LACMA is staging Ed Kienholz's immersive installation "Five Car Stud." Created between 1969 and 1972, it was the last work Kienholz made while living in L.A. and remarkably, this is the first time it will be publicly exhibited in the U.S.

I hope you'll check in and share your thoughts and reactions too.

calendar@latimes.com

KATHLEEN BALLARD Los Angeles Times

CERAMICIST: Beatrice Wood, shown in 1971, was called the Mama of Dada.

The 20 artists who are setting the Standard

These are the 20 most popular Pacific Standard Time artists, judging by the number of exhibitions in which their work appears. The performance art festival in January has been counted as a separate exhibition. This list does not include any shows at commercial galleries.

John Baldessari	11
Ed Ruscha	10
John Altoon	8
Chris Burden	8
Vija Celmins	8
Judy Chicago	8
Joe Goode	8
Ed Kienholz	8
Ed Moses	8
Betye Saar	8
Billy Al Bengston	7
Wallace Berman	7
Llyn Foulkes	7
Jack Goldstein	7
Robert Irwin	7
Craig Kauffman	7
Suzanne Lacy	7
John Outterbridge	7
Barbara T. Smith	7
Edmund Teske	7

BETYE SAAR Hammer Museum

BETYE SAAR: "Black Girl's Window," 1969, assemblage in window.

JOHN BALDESSARI J. Paul Getty Trust

JOHN BALDESSARI: "Quality Material," 1966-68, acrylic on canvas.