

TIME

OCTOBER 24, 2011

The Culture

Art

Los Angeles Plays Itself. How Southern California became a nexus of art

By Richard Lacayo

HENRY JAMES ONCE MADE A FAMOUS inventory of “the items of high civilization... absent from the texture of American life.” No king, no aristocracy, no palaces—how could anyone produce art in a place without those? Keep in mind that he was thinking about Nathaniel Hawthorne’s relatively civilized New England. God knows what James would have made of Los Angeles around 1950.

In the years after World War II, there could hardly have been a city less likely to become a great art center than L.A. It didn’t really have a major museum, much less one devoted to modern work. And anyway, everybody knew that Manhattan—where the Abstract Expressionists were going head to head with the work of Picasso and Matisse—was the place to be. In L.A., where Hollywood studios were the dominant cultural force, you could still engage Paris in your art if you wanted to, but your real struggle was against the behemoth rodent Mickey Mouse.

Yet six decades later, L.A. is a major locus of art-world production. Showing how it got from there to here is the immense task attempted in “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980,” a vast regional effort in which 60 or so museums, galleries and other art spaces in Southern California have joined to sort through the history of their local art movements in the decades after World War II. Since the project originated with the Getty Research Institute, the J. Paul Getty Museum gets one of the tent-pole shows, “Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970,” which includes works by Ed Ruscha, Edward Kienholz and David Hockney. But a story

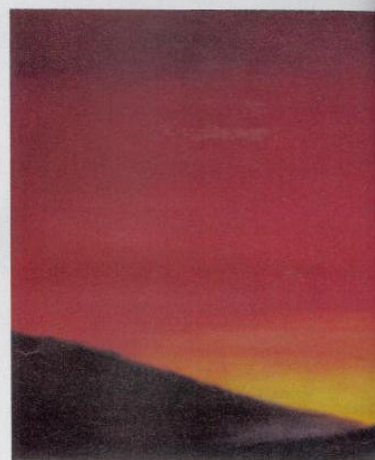
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this big has more than enough chapters to go around: architecture and design at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; video, performance and conceptual art at the Museum of Contemporary Art; African-American artists at the Hammer Museum; and so on.

One collective lesson from this multitude of shows is that L.A.’s cultural immaturity in the early days was an advantage. If nothing else, backwaters can irrigate free thinking. With no presiding isms, no cultural orthodoxies, Billy Al Bengston could paint with the spray guns used to customize motorcycle gas tanks. There was no one to tell him you can’t do things like that and call it art. If Ruscha wanted to make deadpan pictures of words, as in *The Back of Hollywood*, go for it. With no weight of tradition holding them down, John McCracken could apply surfboard resins to his minimalist planks, and ceramic artists could put aside vases to make enigmatic sculptural “things” like Ken Price’s *BG Red*. It was all O.K.

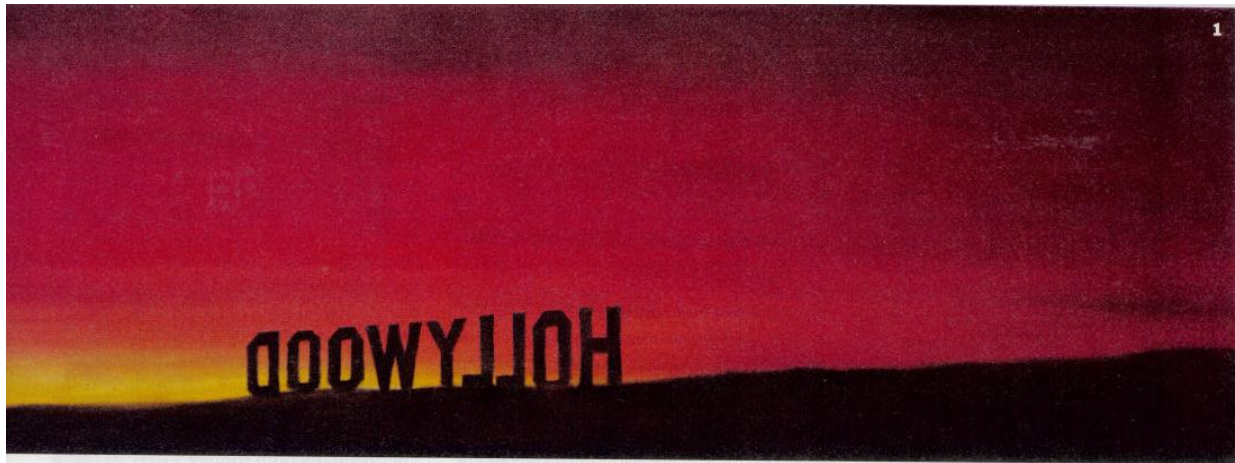
When Pop art came along in the early 1960s, it drew heavily on the local idiom of movie fandom, so it’s no surprise that the first exhibition of Andy Warhol’s soup cans wasn’t in Manhattan but at L.A.’s Ferus Gallery. For years the gallery was the main outpost of militant SoCal modernism: a tiny stockade, mostly containing hip young white guys like Kienholz, Bengston and Larry Bell, with actor-photographer Dennis Hopper hanging around the edges.

In architecture, local taste was often ahead of the tradition-bound Eastern seaboard. Though the movie colony went in for would-be English manor houses and craptastic palazzi, in sunny L.A. it was also possible to build houses truly open to the elements—things European modernists had long dreamed of but European winters discouraged. Those were the glass-and-steel boxes of light and space that Hockney painted after he arrived from London to chronicle this brave new world in implacably cool pictures like *A Biquet Splash*.

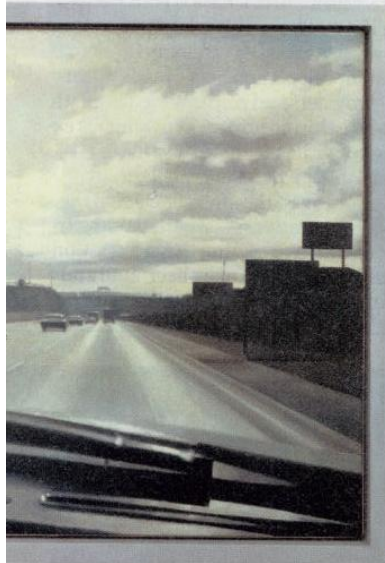


Light and Space is of course the name of what’s probably the most consequential of the SoCal art movements—the one that produced Robert Irwin’s translucent fabric scrims stretched over entire rooms, which used pure light to play with our perceptions. But by the time those artists emerged in the early ’70s, the whole “paradise by the Pacific” mythos of the Golden State was getting tattered. The first people to recognize that L.A. wasn’t the Garden of Eden were the ones who did the field work. So blacks and Latinos tended to make art that had a political edge, like John Riddle’s *Ghetto Merchant*, a welded steel sculpture built around the melted remains of a cash register dug from the embers of the 1965 Watts riots.

But you didn’t have to be black or Latino to wonder where L.A. was headed. Vija



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Celmins, a Latvian émigré, made one of the most psychologically sophisticated accounts of the city's mixed prospects in *Freeway*, a brilliantly mordant photo-realist painting in which the open highway looks a lot like the road to nowhere. And if there's a single image that could sum up the collective impression of L.A. in "Pacific Standard Time," it would be *Zuma #25*, a photograph by John Divola. It was part of a series he made over two years in the late 1970s: views of the Pacific seen through the windows of an abandoned beach house that became more dilapidated in each succeeding picture. In the contrast between the beckoning blue ocean and the decaying thing that humans had built at its edge, it's hard not to see a metaphor for the City of Angels. It's the place where paradise was lost. ■

Made in L.A.

- 1. *The Back of Hollywood*, Ed Ruscha, 1977
- 2. *Zuma #25*, John Divola, 1978/2006
- 3. *BG Red*, Ken Price, 1963
- 4. *A Bigger Splash*, David Hockney, 1967
- 5. *Ghetto Merchant*, John Riddle, 1966
- 6. *Freeway*, Vija Celmins, 1966