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For Pacific Standard Time, it's mission mostly accomplished

The expansive survey put a needed spotlight on the region's post-World War II art and raised many artists' profiles. But few museums saw real bumps in attendance.

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times

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This time last year, the Southern California art world was poised to open an unprecedented set of exhibitions: Pacific Standard Time, the \$10-million Getty-funded initiative consisting of some 65 museum shows exploring the region's art post-World War II.

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The project's organizers identified a handful of goals: encouraging scholarship about Southern California art history, preserving related archives, raising L.A.'s profile as a cultural capital, stimulating cultural tourism and boosting museum attendance.

So what did it actually achieve?

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On most counts, the project has been considered a fruitful and even enviable model for a regionwide arts collaboration. The exhibitions at museums from San Diego to Santa Barbara, each exploring a different facet of Southern California art history from 1945 to 1980, did draw international art-world attention and media coverage, from a special issue of Art in America magazine to reviews in German newspapers.

Several critics and curators have said that because of PST, textbook accounts of 20th century art history, which tend to be rich with innovations by New York artists but thin on their L.A. contemporaries, will need to be rewritten.

As Helen Molesworth, the chief curator of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, put it, "The shows made such a strong case for some [California] artists that you just can't leave them out anymore."

[PST: Full Coverage](#)

Local surveys recently completed by the Getty showed the city did gain some of that hard-to-measure quality known as cultural cachet, with 80% of one group of respondents agreeing "somewhat" or "strongly" that it "made me think more highly of L.A. as an arts/cultural destination." (The Getty's economic report on cultural

tourism is pending.)

But according to an independent L.A. Times survey sent this summer to all participating museums, the effect on museum attendance was less impressive. Only six museums of the group reported that their PST shows were their best attended show of the last five years.

A dozen other museums, including the Getty Center itself, actually posted a drop in attendance in 2011. Despite the openings of six PST exhibitions and installations, 2011 Getty attendance was 1,167,795, down slightly from 1,205,684 in 2010.

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Getty Trust President James Cuno said that growing attendance was never a primary goal of PST, which began as a scholarly project devoted to research and "the preservation of the archive related to this generation of L.A. artists" before it grew into a set of public exhibitions.

"I think it was an extraordinary success, focusing on the substance of its accomplishment: We both preserved this endangered history of L.A. art and presented it to the public," said Cuno, who arrived at the Getty shortly before PST began.

It was enough of a success the Getty is planning on funding a sequel to occur most likely in "five or six years," he said. One topic under consideration is art of the Pacific Rim.

As for the Getty's drop in attendance, Cuno mentioned museum closures on Jan. 1 and in July for so-called Carmageddon as factors. He also noted that the visitor numbers specific to fall 2011, the prime season for PST shows, were actually up a bit from the same season the year before.

Other museum leaders also praised the scholarship generated by the shows and the critical attention they received even if general attendance wasn't through the roof.

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego show on the history of Light and Space art, for example, did not bring in the size of crowd that contemporary installation artist Tara Donovan did a year earlier.

But director Hugh Davies says the Light and Space show drew attention in the national publications and "a very important audience for us in terms of out-of-town visitors and art professionals."

"The number of museum curators, gallerists and collectors who came during that slot was above and beyond any show we've done," Davies said.

Like other museum directors, Davies pointed to the 40-plus catalogs published to accompany the exhibitions — which feature new scholarly essays on many fresh topics — as the "real, lasting legacy" of Pacific Standard Time.

The conceptual art show at the Orange County Museum of Art, "State of Mind," drew 10,637 visitors, not quite half the number who attended "Birth of the Cool," a memorable survey of Pacific Standard Time territory four years earlier.

Orange County Museum director Dennis Szakacs said "State of Mind" was never meant to be a blockbuster. "It was an exhibition that looks at a narrow span of art history in both time and subject matter," he said. "I think that was one of the most extraordinary things about Pacific Standard Time as a whole: It provided us all

an opportunity that is increasingly rare to do these kinds of shows."

Szakacs' show is one of the few from PST that has a full travel schedule. After going to the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver this month, it will reach Site Santa Fe and the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

His only criticism of Pacific Standard Time is that there might have been an embarrassment of riches. "When there are so many things for a consumer to choose from, it can become confusing. It got to the point where everything going on in California during that time seemed to be part of the PST umbrella."

Long Beach Museum of Art director Ron Nelson, who acknowledged that he was "really hoping for triple the usual attendance" from his video art show (which brought 11,260 visitors) also had reservations about the size of PST. "We were one of the first exhibitions to be announced, and I knew it was going to grow, but I didn't know it would grow quite so large," Nelson said. "As splendid as it was, it made it difficult for people to see everything."

Ann Philbin, director of the Hammer Museum, suggested that some sort of free transportation, beyond the shuttle buses offered opening weekend, might have helped.

"I think they did a very good job on publicity and PR, but I think they could have done more to bring out the locals," she said. "We had had dreams at one point of having buses to take people around to various sites, and that didn't happen. That could be good for next time."

Still, the Hammer Museum posted strong attendance for its African American art-making survey "Now Dig This!," trailing only Pacific Standard Time offerings at the Getty and LACMA, both of which are much larger institutions.

A few smaller museums also drew big crowds. The Santa Monica Museum of Art's show on artist Beatrice Wood, the Otis College gallery's history of the Women's Building and the Pomona College Museum of Art's look at its own history as an avant-garde crucible drew record attendance for their museums.

"We saw our highest numbers ever — our highest number of daily visitors, repeat visitors, total attendance, everything. The museum was packed every day and actually got more crowded as the show went on," said Elsa Longhauser, director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art. "I think [the Getty] giving money to the smaller museums enabled us to hire the best and most qualified scholars, and that made a difference."

Wood was a legend in ceramics who spent the last half of her 105-year-long life in Ojai. Other ceramic and design shows — including those at the Mingei in San Diego, the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, Scripps College art gallery in Claremont and the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona — also did particularly well for their institutions.

The exhibitions coordinator of the Craft and Folk Art Museum attributes the trend in part to the intense interest in all things mid-century modern, a design movement closely associated with Southern California. "Pacific Standard Time brought to the surface a lot of innovative movements going on in ceramics, textiles and wood — things that were very experimental," said Sasha Ali.

LACMA's survey of midcentury modernism, one of five Pacific Standard Time offerings at the museum, brought all of these strands together. A sweeping survey featuring everything from Saul Bass movie posters and Rudi Gernreich swimwear to Natzler bowls and Eames furniture, with surfboards and cars included for good show, it drew more visitors than any other Pacific Standard Time show.

LACMA director Michael Govan acknowledged that the show ran for an unusually long eight months and was helped early on by spillover from the museum's blockbuster Tim Burton exhibition. But the design show continued to draw high visitor numbers throughout its run — giving it a daily average that also outstripped other PST offerings.

Still, Govan said it would have been wrong to expect spikes in attendance for Pacific Standard Time shows on the whole. Their goal, he said, was to provide greater historical context for understanding of Southern California art history and not just spotlight the art stars who emerged.

"What PST did was not to oversimplify but to make things more complex — and of course that's not the kind of thing to bring in millions of visitors," Govan said.

"If you were expecting a massive festival environment with huge tourism, then you were setting yourself up for failure. If you measure it by more lasting measures like how it shifted the spotlight in art history from New York to L.A., then it would be considered a success. That's what we were in it for. I don't know where the other expectations got stirred up."

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