

## ARTS&amp;BOOKS

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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## It artfully altered the image

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
ART CRITIC

Was Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980 worth it?

The six-month series of art exhibitions at more than 60 museums, university galleries and other spaces all around Southern California is long over, having mostly wrapped up in the spring. Now, the post-event bean-counting of attendance and such is pretty much done. So the question might seem a bit bizarre.

In reality, it's not. Changing a deep cultural stereotype is about as easy as landing a robot-rover on Mars — not impossible but something of a miracle when it finally happens. PST did that, and the achievement deserves recognition.

Every great city comes larded with clichés, which color the ways in which it is experienced. High on the list of L.A. shibboleths: The city has no history. For art, that stereotype is now as dead as a doornail — thanks to PST.

Before, saying L.A. had no significant art history made the city look feeble. After, it's the speaker who'd look lame.

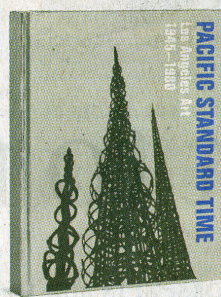
Being new, Los Angeles benefits from a forward-thinking outlook, or so the rhetoric has always gone, but inevitably suffers from a headlong rush within a historical vacuum. Historical illiteracy is a nagging problem — especially in America's polyglot society, where the dominant shared experience is often defined as a lack of common ancestry. What good is being new without the perspectives afforded by the past?

PST never aspired to tell a comprehensive story of art's efflorescence in Southern California in the generations immediately after World War II and before the explosive 1980s. It wasn't a master narrative being handed down on golden tablets from a Brentwood hilltop to the teeming sprawl below, itemizing winners and losers. It was instead a patch-



ALEXANDER WATKINS

**PACIFIC STANDARD TIME** began as a Getty archival project and grew into a regional series of exhibitions, including the Getty Center's "Crosscurrents."



Getty Publications

**THE CATALOG** of the exhibition is lasting evidence of PST's point.

work of stories stitched together independently by the scores of institutions that partnered with the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Foundation.

Some tales were richly convincing. Others were speculative, compromised or unpersuasive. Some artists were inevitably overexposed, others inevitably overlooked.

Yet think of it as scorched-earth art history. By restricting the time frame from 1945 to 1980 and spread-

ing the exhibitions over territory too large for all but the most stalwart to fully take in, PST exposed the prodigious foundations on which the last 30 years have been built. Now, there's no denying it. There's even a big stack of books where you can look it up.

L.A., as every artist and art follower from Seoul to Berlin knows, has become one of the handful of great production centers of new art in the world today. That phenomenon didn't issue forth full grown like Athena from the head of Zeus. The seed was planted — and cultivated, plowed under and planted again — by artists as soulfully significant as any who have ever lived. PST's critical importance is not about proposing a myth of progress, which bedeviled Modernism for so long, but about the reality of concentrated density at the Pacific's cultivated edge.

As it was "back then," so it is now — and by a factor exponentially larger.

On top of it, the stereotype-smashing was a bargain. PST began as a Getty archival project in 2002, born

of a concern that vast troves of information teetered on the brink of being lost as sands slipped through the hourglass. By the time the project had evolved into actual exhibitions dotting the landscape from Santa Barbara to San Diego, Santa Monica to Palm Springs, the cost was something slightly in excess of \$11 million. That's peanuts.

Forget fanciful comparisons to the Mars lander Curiosity, with a cool price tag in the region of \$2.6 billion. Instead consider Documenta, probably the most prestigious contemporary art exhibition internationally, hosted every five years for just 100 days in the modest, central German city of Kassel. The installment that closed Sept. 16 cost more than \$30 million — nearly three times as much as PST.

Or six times, if you figure that two installments of Documenta took place in the decade it took to get PST opened and closed. Imagine what might happen if the Getty upped the ante.

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