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CANON BUSTING

Through sheer edification and some real surprises, 10 “Pacific Standard Time” shows boost our knowledge of hitherto marginalized artists.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

UNTIL AS RECENTLY AS THE 1980s, Southern California did not have the museums, galleries, collectors or press coverage to support its artistic community, and many worthy artists fell through the cracks. Now, the multivenue extravaganza “Pacific Standard Time” (PST) seeks to broaden the understanding of postwar L.A. art by celebrating its major players and reclaiming some of those lost names. Receiving partial funding from the Getty Foundation, more than 60 cultural institutions are mounting exhibitions that cover aspects of Southern California art from 1945 to 1980. (Openings began in October and extend into February.) Many forgotten figures are being reexamined, but how much of the art historical revisionism will stick?

A survey exhibition at the Getty Museum, with the bland title “Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970,” hits the tried-and-true hot spots: hard-edged geometric abstraction, Abstract Expressionist ceramics, assemblage, Finish Fetish, Light and Space, Diebenkorn, Hockney and Ruscha. Although it includes great works, the show says nothing new. It has been up to less-funded, scrappier institutions to enter fresh figures into the mix.

Who knew about Chicano artist Domingo Ulloa, who studied under Rico Lebrun and made potent political art beginning in the 1940s? Or about Daniel LaRue Johnson’s eye-catching relief painting *Big Red* (1964), whose combination of charred wood and vermilion stripes seems like some strange collaboration of Wallace Berman and John McLaughlin? Shouldn’t Ben Sakoguchi have received widespread acclaim for his sharp, satirical Pop paintings? And why isn’t Senga Nengudi as well known for her 1970s nylon stocking sculptures as Annette Messager and Ernesto Neto are for their similar, later works?

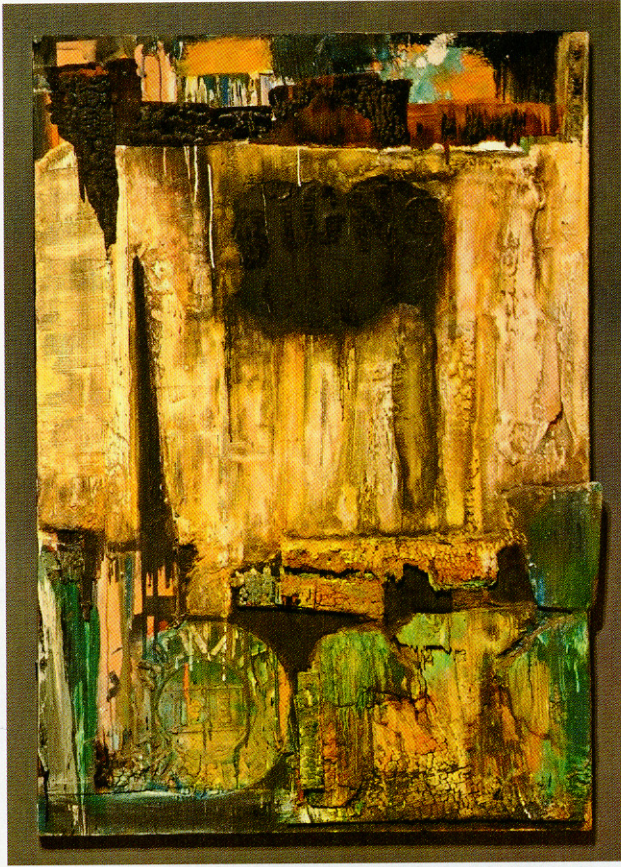


These artists have faced neglect not only as West Coasters but also as minority artists marginalized by a primarily white-bread L.A. art world. Given PST’s canon-expanding goals, the most logical place for curators and organizers to start has been with ethnic and minority groups largely excluded by mainstream museums and galleries. PST offered the opportunity for ethnic-based institutions to highlight the contributions of their constituencies. Among others, the California African American Museum, Japanese American National Museum and Museum of Latin American Art stepped up to the plate.

The resulting exhibitions don’t stray far from their institutions’ mission statements. But their presence in the context of the other PST shows points to lasting art historical prejudices. PST might serve not simply as a stepping-stone for getting more L.A. artists into the Whitney, Museum of Modern Art and Pompidou but, more immediately, as a catalyst for getting more West Coast African-Americans, Asians and Chicanos into the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and L.A. MOCA. Hopefully, some of these currently segregated artists’ works can be woven into the fabric of L.A. art.

Above, Senga Nengudi setting up for a performance of *RSVP X* in her Los Angeles studio, 1976. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

Opposite, David Hammons: *America the Beautiful*, 1968, lithograph and body print, 39 by 29½ inches; in “Now Dig This!” at the Hammer Museum. Collection Oakland Museum of California.



Noah Purifoy: *Watts Riot*, 1966, mixed mediums, 52 by 37 inches.

Right, Ron Griffin: *Sylvester*, 1972, wood, glass, resin and fiberglass, 48 by 24 inches.

Works this page in "Places of Validation, Art and Progression" at the California African American Museum. Photos Gene Ogami.

Opposite, Daniel LaRue Johnson: *Big Red*, 1964, mixed mediums on canvas, 62 inches square; in "Now Dig This!" Collection Dr. and Mrs. Leon O. Banks, Los Angeles.

WALL TEXT FOR THE California African American Museum's exhibition, "Places of Validation, Art and Progression," notes that "parallel universes" exist in Los Angeles. This survey makes a strong case for that assertion by featuring an eclectic range of works—made between 1940 and 1980 by 89 artists—from realist bronze sculptures to conceptual stunts.

The exhibition's haphazard installation and lack of didactic panels enhance the feeling of discovery prompted by works like Timothy Washington's imposing 8-foot-tall, mixed-medium sculpture *Energy* (1970), a goddess figure with wheels for arms, impossibly long spindly legs and a doll's head peeping out of her pelvis. In another gallery, with more familiar pieces by Fred Eversley, Charles White and Betye Saar, is Ron Griffin's weird and wonderful *Sylvester* (1972), a sculptural Pop representation of the deceased disco singer, featuring a Superman emblem and, hermlike, an erect phallus.

Alonzo and Dale Davis's Brockman Gallery (1967-89) and Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32 (1968-70) were crucial to

the development of African-American art in Los Angeles; both venues, along with other institutions and galleries that supported black art in L.A., are commemorated in vitrines and documentary videos. The Davis brothers and Jackson are also accomplished artists. In an untitled painting from around 1975, Alonzo Davis reconstitutes the American flag, depicting it rotated and with its stripes boxing in a blue rectangle whose white stars have been replaced by two silhouettes, one black and one white—residents appearing in the window of a domesticated space. A harsher political statement is made in Noah Purifoy's *Watts Riot* (1966), a sculptural relief that evokes both Robert Rauschenberg and Alberto Burri, constructed from burnt debris from the 1965 L.A. uprising. The most radical response to the unrest of the times, however, is David Hammons's sardonic 1968 body print on silver paper depicting a group of overlapping, seemingly clapping hands with a text that reads, "The King's Show Has Ended Let's Give Him a Hand."

Hammons made his expressive, politically astute body prints in the 1960s and '70s by "inking" himself with margarine or other greasy material and pressing his body to a support. A number of the prints are on view in the Hammer Museum's "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980." This elegant exhibition, curated by art historian Kellie Jones (and likely traveling to MoMA P.S.1 in the fall), features 140 works by 35 African-American artists, including the aforementioned pieces by Daniel LaRue Johnson



and Senga Nengudi and stellar contributions by Hammons, White, Saar, Purifoy and Melvin Edwards. Hammons, the unpredictable maverick of the group, left L.A. for New York in 1974. Apart from his body prints, other works from his L.A. years show his jazzlike penchant for thorny lyricism—including *Bag Lady in Flight* (1970s, reconstructed 1990), a wingspan of folded grocery bags, ornamented with geometric patterns of tufted hair. Similarly poetic in tone are the early occult-themed prints and drawings by Saar and paintings of wildlife by William Pajaud and Suzanne Jackson. The abstract, welded-steel sculptures of Edwards—rarely seen in L.A. museums—have a tough visceral impact, with threatening appendages loosely referring to lynching posts and weaponry. And the powerful selection of White’s drawings and prints, including depictions of splattered blood and riot-scarred ruins, likewise belies any conception of him as a sentimentalizing realist, emphasizing his hard-nosed commitment to racial equality.

The range of John Outterbridge’s work here comes as a revelation. On view are three intricately handsome abstract reliefs from the “Containment” series (1968-70) that use arrangements of leather straps and soldered metal as nuanced symbols for social suppression. Also featured are his “Captive Image” doll-like assemblages (1974-76) that play off the ancestral and religious figures of older cultures. Adding a funky environmental context for the works at the Hammer was a new installation at LAXART in Culver City, *The Rag Factory* (2011), constructed from clustered and draped skeins of scavenged clothing and textiles [see review this issue].

AT THE JAPANESE AMERICAN National Museum, “Drawing the Line: Japanese American Art, Design and Activism in Post-War Los Angeles” tries to touch all bases by including an industrial designer, an actress, a graphic artist and a community newspaper in its mini-survey of “ten contributions to the visual landscape of L.A.” The exhibition’s limited scope makes its selections feel arbitrary, but two of the artists stand out.

Matsumi Kanemitsu, who moved to L.A. in 1971 to work with June Wayne at Tamarind Press and who died in 1992, reveals a quirky sense of humor and a deft touch in abstract works featuring ink splashes and biomorphic shapes. Evoking the drawing styles of John Altoon and H.C. Westermann, his wacky print *Hollywood Hills Ghost*—from the series “Illustrations of Southern California” (1970)—features a twisted Mickey Mouse silhouette floating among amorphous palm trees. Impressive, too, are Ben Sakoguchi’s meticulously rendered paintings from two series: “Bombs” (1983), depicting missiles and atomic explosions, and “Orange Crate Labels” (1974-85), chronicling mass-cult events ranging from the Zoot Suit Riots to the Jonestown massacre. In a concurrent group show, “Sub Pop,” at Cardwell Jimmerson Contemporary



SINCE THE GETTY MUSEUM IS FEATURING A CONVENTIONAL SURVEY, IT HAS BEEN UP TO LESS-FUNDED, SCRAPPY INSTITUTIONS TO ENTER FRESH ARTISTS INTO THE MIX.

Art, four large panels from Sakoguchi’s astounding 8-by-28-foot untitled painting (ca. 1968) of a Bosch-like procession further confirm his status as a discerning magpie of mass-media imagery. Amid swirling patterning, the panels include painted depictions of menacing fashion models, stills from *King Kong* and *Dr. Strangelove*, an Eastern European news photo of a tank invasion and an appropriation of one of Vija Celmins’s airplane paintings.

Given its broad scope, PST provides a survey of current curatorial trends. Following the academic vogue for cultural studies, a sizable number of shows focus on social histories of institutions. While these exhibitions do much to historicize their subjects, they present individual artworks and artists as mere players in a larger game. For minority artists in particular, the focus on institutions and collectives as nurturing cultural forces discourages rather than fosters the assimilation of their works into the mainstream art world.

“Doin’ It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building” at Otis College’s Ben Maltz Gallery is perhaps the most egregious example of this curatorial tendency. The show is a vitrine-heavy presentation of every committee, splinter group and caucus held at the landmark consciousness-raising site, founded in 1973 in downtown Los Angeles. Broadsheets, books, posters, photographs, brochures, video interviews, flyers, newspaper clippings and press releases detail the



DEPICTING SUBJECTS RANGING FROM ATOMIC EXPLOSIONS TO FASHION MODELS, BEN SAKOGUCHI IS A DISCERNING MAGPIE OF MASS-MEDIA IMAGERY.

activities in an all-inclusive fashion, bolstered by an exhaustive two-volume, 610-page catalogue. Only a handful of artworks are sprinkled throughout the 39-page checklist. While thoroughly recording this important feminist venue's history, the Otis exhibition seems a missed opportunity to demonstrate the vitality and substance of the art objects the site engendered.

THREE PST EXHIBITIONS SURVEY the art of L.A. Chicanos more obliquely. An experimentally conceived exhibition at the Museum of Latin American Art, "MEX/LA: 'Mexican' Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985," is a pop sociologist's grab bag, juxtaposing Mexican-influenced mass culture artifacts with art made by contemporary L.A. Chicano artists, and masters like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Curators Rubén Ortiz-Torres and Jesse Lerner attempt to show the omnipresence of Mexican imagery and styles in L.A. culture. Best demonstrating their thesis are kooky hybrids—like the wildly ornamented Mayan-themed architectural drawings of Robert Stacy-Judd. A photograph of this London-born architect dressed, Montezuma-like, in plumage (ca. 1931) exemplifies the exhibition's kitsch undercurrent.

But while the exhibition is full of fascinating and curious objects, its hipster stance does no favors for serious art. Engaging works by John Valadez, Graciela Iturbide and Barbara Carrasco fight for attention with monitors broadcasting clips from Disney's *Three Caballeros* (1945) and Ernie Kovacs's comic 1961 TV skits inspired by the surreal lounge music of Juan García Esquivel. Sober portraits of peasant workers painted on *Los Angeles Times* newsprint by Alfredo Ramos Martínez are hung next to a monitor with selections from Warner Brothers cartoons starring Speedy Gonzales. (By this measure, the influence of French culture on L.A. might be represented by the performances of Pepé Le Pew.)

Focusing on the social history of Chicano art, an exhibition at UCLA's Fowler Museum, "Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement," surveys nine groups and spaces that, according to wall text, "employed art to increase social equity and cultural visibility for Chicanos." Despite impressive selections of works by Judith Baca, Carlos Alvarez, Judith Hernández and John Valadez, the exhibition succumbs to the academic vogue for tracking cultural production. The emphasis here is solely on the formation of groups, institutions, galleries and caucuses; art and artists seem secondary.

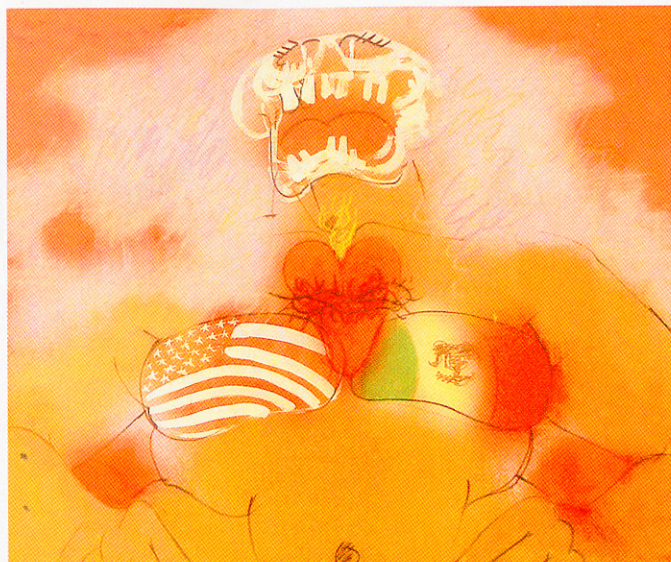
CURRENTLY ON VIEW

- "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980," at the Hammer Museum, through Jan. 8.
- "Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation," at the Autry Museum of Western Art, through Jan. 8.
- "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970," at the Getty Museum, through Feb. 5.
- "MEX/LA: 'Mexican' Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985," at the Museum of Latin American Art, through Feb. 5.
- "Drawing the Line: Japanese American Art, Design and Activism in Post-War Los Angeles," at the Japanese American National Museum, through Feb. 19.
- "Do In' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building," at Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College, through Feb. 26.
- "Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement," at the Fowler Museum, UCLA, through Feb. 26.
- "Places of Validation, Art and Progression," at the California African American Museum, through Apr. 1.
- "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987" will be on view at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass., Feb. 4-July 29.
- "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-80" will likely appear at MoMA P.S.1, New York, in the fall.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is a new installation, *Xolotl Soup*, by Arturo E. Romo-Santillano, centered on his video reenactment of a 1971 mock-passion-play walk along Whittier Boulevard, titled *Stations of the Cross*, by Asco—the Chicano art collective that consisted of Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón III and Patssi Valdez. Romo-Santillano’s work is viewed from a phone booth whose receiver broadcasts a surreal conversation loosely commenting on the faux-vintage performance footage. The installation concisely communicates the glitz and off-beat humor of the group in a more satisfying and efficient way, in fact, than anything that appeared in the concurrent sprawling survey of Asco’s actual work at LACMA [see review this issue]. In that show, the collective’s anarchic participatory streak seemed stifled by inaudible video projections, an overkill of photo documentation and a dearth of contextualizing solo artworks by group participants.

Lastly, “Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation” at the Autry Museum of Western Art is a revisionist’s delight, focusing on six artists whose works celebrate their multicultural backgrounds in fresh, innovative ways. By including around 15 examples of each artist’s work, the exhibition, curated by art historian Tere Romo, provides a chance to appreciate the artists’ individual styles and developments. Worthy of attention are the luminous “mission style” paintings from the 1940s by Hernando Villa, moody abstracted still lifes by Alberto Valdés, playful myth-based ceramic sculptures by Dora de Larios and the tough political paintings and prints of Domingo Ulloa.

Perhaps most impressive, however, are the paintings by two artists, Eduardo Carrillo and Roberto Chavez, who exhibited in the 1960s at Ceeje Gallery, the funky rival of Ferus Gallery that showed mostly figurative art. Highlights by Carrillo are the large-scale surrealist cityscape *Las Tropicanas* (1972-73) and the small oil *Untitled (Doorbell)*, 1969, an exquisitely painted Thiebaud-like depiction of a simple doorbell pregnant with mysterious meaning. Chavez is represented by off-kilter expressionistic portraits such as



El Tamalito del Hoyo (1959), depicting a comical tough kid from his old East L.A. neighborhood. In Chavez’s versions of Adam and Eve (both 1962), Eve has doll-like joints, one stone leg, and red fingernails and lipstick, while Adam is a pot-bellied mannequin adorned with necktie and umbrella who worriedly presents a pristine egg. While the works’ bluntness evokes Otto Dix, their exuberant brushwork and color seem reminiscent of Matisse or Kirchner.

Romo’s exhibition successfully addresses the “hyphen” in these Mexican-American artworks, allowing them to speak to a wide audience. Indeed, the broad appeal of the best works of PST makes evident that all art today lives along a variety of hyphens. While assimilations into national and international canons may come later, celebrating the hyphens seems the first positive step in developing a more all-embracing L.A. identity. ○

Opposite, Ben Sakoguchi: *Bombs*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 43 elements, dimensions variable; selections appear in “Drawing the Line” at the Japanese American National Museum. Photo courtesy the artist.

Above, Judithe Hernández: *Reina del Barrio*, 1976, spray-paint on canvas, 20 by 23½ inches; in “Mapping Another L.A.” at the Fowler Museum.

Left, Eduardo Carrillo: *Las Tropicanas*, 1972-73, oil on canvas, 7 by 11 feet; in “Art Along the Hyphen” at the Autry Museum of Western Art.

MICHAEL DUNCAN, a West Coast-based critic, is curator of the forthcoming exhibition “L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy” at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

