



Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

PST, A to Z: "Round the Clock" at Vincent Price Art Museum

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Pacific Standard Time is exploring the origins of the Los Angeles art world with museum exhibitions throughout Southern California. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



A friend recently expressed frustration with *Pacific Standard Time* -- too big, too diffuse, too messy. The payoff, she felt, for driving all over the Southland was often underwhelming, with no "summing up" in sight. It's true, even if you have boundless amounts of time and energy (or, ahem, a blog project), you are bound to get only bits and pieces of the story.

Yet, this is also one of the virtues of PST. The scale, scope and rambling nature of the initiative allow for the exploration of corners of the Los Angeles art scene unlikely to surface in yet another grand survey.

All of this is a long way of saying that "'Round the Clock: Chinese American Artists Working in Los Angeles" at the Vincent Price Art Museum is a thoroughly enjoyable, enlightening addition to the PST constellation. Showcasing the works of five Chinese American artists who studied and worked in L.A. from the 1940s to the present, it might be seen as an unofficial companion to ["Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican American Generation,"](#) which features similarly under-known artists.

Besides bringing worthy figures to light, the two shows suggest that a segment of artists of color in L.A. were less concerned with avant-garde experimentation than with expressing themselves in established art media. When you have been shut out of the dominant culture, one response is to shore up your credentials (another is to buck them entirely, but that's another story). "'Round the Clock" complicates this narrative by focusing on artists (alas, all men), who balanced personal artistic projects with commercial work in the film, publishing and advertising industries. In this sense, the show disputes the primacy of traditional art media, not by eschewing them altogether, but by looking at works for hire (design, illustration, animation, etc.) as integral parts of artistic practice.

This mingling of art and commerce is most salient in the mid-century watercolor paintings of Jake Lee. Colorful, picturesque and chock-full of staccato details, they provide an unfailingly optimistic vision of downtown L.A., Chinatown and Chinese American history. It's no wonder Lee found work as an illustrator for

the American Automobile Assn.'s "Westways" magazine and for the Air Force, documenting activities on military bases in the 1960s. His celebratory aesthetic dovetailed perfectly with post-World War II ebullience.

Milton Quon has also had a successful commercial career, with stints as an animator at Walt Disney Studios and as the first Chinese American art director at a national advertising firm (Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn, now known as BBDO). His watercolor street scenes and landscapes from the 1950s are stylistically similar to Lee's, although works from the 1980s and '90s reveal a looser hand and the subtle use of collage elements that provide some punch among otherwise conventional floral and leisure scenes. More interesting are his elegant, 1940's designs for Chinese restaurant menus that fuse calligraphic brushwork with clean, mid-century modernism.

Calligraphy also figures prominently in the work of George Chann, who followed a more traditional artistic path, exhibiting widely in the U.S. and internationally before eventually opening his own gallery in L.A. In abstract paintings of the 1960s and '70s, he mined the similarities between calligraphic strokes and gestural abstraction, citing Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey as influences. The path between Asian artistic and philosophical traditions and modern art is well trod, but for Asian American artists such as Chann, it had a slightly different resonance. His "American Calligraphy" from the 1970s is densely packed with brushy flourishes in sumi ink and oil, but the letters are all in English.



John Kwok worked as a freelance designer and portrait painter, but his abstract gouaches are easily the highlight of the show. Effortless and bold, in clear, high-keyed colors, they exude an astute feel for balance and gesture, infused with a sense of whimsy. An untitled work from the 1970s is a jumble of horseshoe shapes outlined against a clear blue field. Repeated, yet irregular, they create an unexpectedly complex space. In similar fashion, "Fugue," from 1968 features the intersection of two circles, rather like a Venn diagram, except that the collision has given birth, not only to a third, differently toned space in between, but to a burst of brushy black on one side and a series of hotly colored stripes on the other. The composition is at once inexplicable and immensely appealing, not unlike the interlocking layers of a piece of music.

Finally, there is Tyrus Wong, the best-known artist of the bunch, primarily for his concept work on Disney's "Bambi." Several of those early drawings are on view; they are surprisingly intimate (less than six inches wide) and achingly beautiful, as yet uncluttered with cloying, wide-eyed characters. In creating the mysterious, atmospheric scenes, Wong drew on his fascination with the ethereal landscapes of Sung dynasty painting. Like Quon and Chann, he injected Chinese aesthetics right into the heart of American pop culture. Wong went on to become a concept artist at Warner Bros., creating production designs and storyboards for movies such as "Rebel Without a Cause" and "The Wild Bunch." But his early work from the 1930s and '40s blends a really exquisite use of calligraphic line with the heft and chiaroscuro effects of Western painting. Since the 1970s, he has been designing and building snappy, elaborate animal kites,

some of which are on view in the museum's atrium.

"Round the Clock" suggests that for Chinese American artists at mid-century, the artistic path was a negotiated one, a wavering line between personal interest and practicality. Of course, this is true for many artists -- it's the rare superstar who makes a living making art from the get-go. But the show's conceit -- that these artists made valuable contributions regardless of the venue in which their work appeared -- prompts us to look at the line between art and commerce more skeptically. After all, what we commonly think of as art is often just a pricier version of an everyday aesthetic experience: a magazine illustration, a menu, a movie. There's no reason such quotidian things can't be just as uplifting, edifying, inspiring or beautiful.

-- Sharon Mizota

Vincent Price Art Museum, East Los Angeles College, 1301 Avenida Cesar Chavez, Monterey Park, (323) 265-8841, through May 25. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.vincentpriceartmuseum.org

Photos, from top: Jake Lee, "Olvera Street Gift Store Front," not dated, watercolor on paper, 19 x 26 inches. Courtesy of Chinese American Museum at El Pueblo Historical Monument, gift of Judy Deppman. © Jake Lee. Credit: Chinese American Museum at El Pueblo Historical Monument

George Chann, "Abstract in Green Field," early 1960s, oil and sumi ink on canvas, 72 x 49 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Janet Chann. © George Chann. Credit: Janet Chann

John Kwok, "Untitled," not dated, gouache on paperboard, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the John Kwok family. © John Kwok. Credit: Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College

Tyrus Wong, "Bambi (At the Edge of the Meadow)," c. 1939, concept art, watercolor on paper, 3 3/4 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Disney. Credit: Pamela Tom

