The Year in Review

Dispatches from: Beirut, Berlin, Cairo, London, Los Angeles, New York,
Stretching across 70 museums and galleries, ‘Pacific Standard Time’ is an unprecedented collaboration that traces different histories of Southern Californian art between 1945 and 1980 by Sam Thorne and Stacey Allan.
Pacific Standard Time
PST is best understood as recuperative rather than self-promoting, a long-due counterweight to New York’s centrifugal pull.

Condescension was alloyed with the feeling that self-celebration on this scale is gauche or even paranoid – the kind of thing, as Dave Hickey opined, that Denver would do.

Other reactions saw PST as a brazen act of regional boosterism: city-myth production not so different from the antics of Los Angeles’s original boosters – those Downtown bureaucrats and PR men who ruthlessly promoted urban development early last century. But PST is better understood, I think, as recuperative rather than self-promoting, a long-due counterweight to the centrifugal pull of New York in accounts of postwar art in the US. Certainly this is how it was first imagined by the Getty Foundation and the Getty Research Institute in 2001, when the then-unnamed initiative had the relatively modest ambition of locating and preserving the historical record of LA’s art production. This was prompted by a dearth of scholarly books on the subject, made urgent by the fact that many of the artists who had come of age during World War II were growing old. By 2008, what began as an LA-focused archival endeavour had grown to encompass the whole of Southern California and, more dramatically, had developed an extensive exhibition component with a total budget of around US$10 million provided by the Getty. The initiative was to be led by the Getty, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) and the Hammer Museum, but would take in dozens of smaller institutions and alternative, artist-led and commercial spaces.

At this point, any evaluation of PST will be partial in the extreme. This is not only because the programme is less than halfway through, but, with the enormous quantity of background scholarship and parallel publications, a clear sense of its impact is unlikely to be possible for some years. Such is the range and depth of material generated by the Getty’s investment, it’s even likely that our understanding of Southern Californian art will at some point be measured in pre- and post-PST terms. Less optimistically, this one-off cash injection provides a unique opportunity for those institutions which otherwise pay scant attention to marginalized artists to organize something they’d never usually get past the board.

The umbrella title ‘Pacific Standard Time’ – insinuates a geographical zone that stretches from Vancouver and Seattle to Tijuana, but the focus is almost exclusively on Southern California, with no more than a smattering of Bay Area art. Few people, if any, will be able to see all of these exhibitions, which are clustered in and around LA, but framed by a triangle of outlets a couple of hours’ drive in each direction: down the coast to Santa Barbara and as far inland as Palm Springs. Over the course of a week, I saw around 25 affiliated exhibitions. Aside from the flagship shows presented by the four lead institutions, these encompassed spaces as diverse as the Robert Venturi-designed Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MOCASD) and a middle school in Santa Monica, the tiny Craft and Folk Art Museum on Wilshire Boulevard and a lone mezzanine of the Natural History Museum. Exhibitions are
intensely varied in approach, including surveys of movements and tendencies—Light & Space and ceramics, as well as Chicano, African-American and feminist artists—and focuses on individuals as diverse as Sam Maloof and Wallace Berman, Fred Eversley and Barbara T. Smith. Others trace the history of specific sites, such as the Watts Towers Art Center, Pomona College, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives. Whether a greatest-hits show, like the Getty Center’s flagship ‘Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1945–1970’, or a tiny, grain-like archival offering such as ‘She Accepts the Proposition: Six Women Gallerists, 1967–1977’ at the Crossroads School, the shared 35-year period and SoCal vicinity links these island exhibitions into an archipelago.

Below: James Turrell
**Stuck Red and Stuck Blue**
1970
Construction materials and fluorescent lights
Installation view
Included in ‘Phenomenal California Light. Space. Surface’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art
San Diego

Right:
Ward Youse
*Ceramic Group*
1950
Glazed ceramics
Dimensions variable
Included in ‘The House That Sam Built: Sam Maloof and Art in the Pomona Valley, 1945–1985’ at The Huntington Library