What emerges is so messy and irresolute that the well-told narratives start to break down.

There have been a number of major museum surveys of LA art in the last two decades, most notably the Centre Pompidou’s 2006 ‘Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital’, which covered a similar period to PST. These exhibitions have tended to present the city as either the polar opposite of New York (a binary Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt were satirizing as early as 1969, in their video *East Coast, West Coast*), or as a culturally and geographically conflicted anomaly. Implicit in many prominent accounts of LA – from Bertolt Brecht through Reyner Banham to Mike Davis – is its double-status: heaven and hell; Utopia and dystopia. Binary exhibition premises, such as ‘Sunshine & Noir: Art in LA 1960-79’ (1997) at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, follow this line of thinking. They counter a caricatured – and persistent – criticism of LA art as unerringly breezy, the kind of interpretation exemplified by a 1970 *Artforum* review of ‘A Decade of California Color’ at Pace Gallery in New York, in which the critic complained: ‘It is apparently as easy to rack up in Los Angeles as an artist as it is to be a stringer of beards or an importer of herbas.’

More than any other city, art from LA is remarkably still often understood as a primarily localized phenomenon, conditioned by unblinking light, gleaming automobiles – ‘suggestions for colour on wheels’, John McCracken called them – and the lucky proximity to surf-shop resin experiments, craft movements, Hollywood and the aerospace industry.

Instead, PST visualizes a radically subdivided metropolis that makes such binary or localist readings impossible to sustain. For a long time, the narrative has been dominated by the gifted gang of young men – including Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Ken Price and Ed Ruscha – associated with Ferus Gallery (1957–66), and dubbed the ‘Cool School’ by Philip Leider, who edited *Artforum* when it was based in LA (Leider had originally wanted the magazine to be called *Art West*). But, travelling through the PST archipelago, stories become unavoidably more complex, as artists are encountered in wildly different scenes, guises and locales. For example, Bruce Nauman pops up in an exquisite survey of Light & Space at MOCAS and as well as in the Orange County Museum of Art’s fascinating overview of conceptual art. Suddenly, the perceptual environments of James Turrell, Eric Orr and Doug Wheeler don’t seem so far removed from the early process-based sculpture of Nauman, Paul McCarthy or Wolfgang Stoerckle, or even from Michael Asher’s first installations. Often-overlooked communities are also well represented for example, Aseo, the Chicano activist art group are given their first retrospective (which is reviewed on page 134 of this issue), while the Hammer has organized ‘Now Dig This!’ a surfeitive survey of African-American art. The markers that I’d previously used, as only an occasional visitor to LA, to navigate art in the city – Wallace Berman’s obscenity charge in 1957 or the Watts Riots of 1965; John Baldessari cremating his paintings in 1970 or Bas Jan Ader being lost at sea in 1975 – started to
Above: Robert Alexander, John Roei, Walter Berman, Juanita Dixon and Walter Hopp
in the alley next to Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles

Below: Joe Deal
Diamond Bars: Recently Occupied Homes and Backyards
1960
Silver gelatin print
35x35 cm

become unmoored. If PST has a canonizing impulse, as has been claimed, then it has surely failed. What emerges is so messy and irresolute that the well-told narratives and familiar categories start to break down.

But the framing of PST also reinforces some of the art-historical orthodoxies it is attempting to dispute. ‘Art since 1945’ has been a standard periodization since the 1950s, though I wonder about its particular relevance to LA. All but a few of the exhibitions in PST feel reluctant to acknowledge the first third of the 35-year period that it has set itself, and none of the key presentations from the four lead institutions touch the art of the ‘40s (only the Getty Center’s show strays earlier than 1960). It may be that the main activity in that decade was in the Bay Area rather than in Southern California, and LA’s cultural infrastructure was certainly slow to develop. The Dwan and Ferus galleries didn’t open until towards the end of the ‘50s, while the art museums either opened later or—like actor and collector Vincent Price’s Modern Institute of Art in Beverly Hills (1948–9)—were short-lived. In any case, the consistent focus of most exhibitions under the PST umbrella is not 1945–80, but rather the 1960s through to the early ‘70s.

One major exhibition—both the biggest and, reputedly, the most expensive that PST has to offer—is ‘Under the Big Black Sun’ at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA. The show—which is bracketed by Richard Nixon’s resignation and Ronald Reagan’s ascension—includes masses of extraordinary work, though, in its evocation of a vibrant artistic pluralism, it is exhausting as well as enlightening. Highlights for me included early work by Jeffrey Vallance and Christopher Williams, documentation of performances by Suzanne Lacy and Lynn Hershman, and little-known series by John Divola and Robert Heinecken.

The crux of curator Paul Schimmel’s catalogue essay is that the pluralism which cohered as Postmodernism during the 1980s in New York effectively codified ideas and concepts made in California between 1974 and 1981. ‘To claim this period as a forerunner in any theoretical sense must overlook both European critical theory and New York’s own fertile scene. It’s a claim that doesn’t need to be made. But it is perhaps revealing of how acutely felt the decamping was of the so-called CalArts Mafia—former students of Baldessari, including Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican and David Salle—from LA to New York in the mid-’70s. This collective move to the
East Coast – Douglas Eklund once called it a ‘mass migration’ – marks the diminuendo of one strand of PST.

Like museums everywhere, institutions in LA are being forced to broker increasingly Faustian pacts with collectors and corporations, but there is surely hope to be gleaned from a collaboration of this scale. For now, whether PST is regionalist, localist or even boosterist may not matter so much. The more pressing issue is how the research and exhibitions that it has produced can be developed. From wherever you’re sitting, its impact is going to be interesting to watch.

Stacey Allan

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Sometime last year, I came across an interview with the nouvelle vague filmmaker Agnès Varda that touched on her time in California in the late 1960s. The reporter writes that Varda is sometimes reproached for missing the events of May ’68 in Paris. She was, at that time, living in Los Angeles with her husband, Jacques Demy, as he directed his first American feature film. When Varda was asked about regrets, I was moved by her elegant and unapologetic response: ‘In California we had flower children, we had love-ins and sit-ins and huge Free concerts. What we found was a real desire for brotherhood that was magnificent, that wasn’t just about making demands. I wasn’t in Paris, that’s all there is to it – but I saw things they didn’t see.’

My own sense of ‘Pacific Standard Time’ is that it is best taken as something along these lines: a simple statement of fact that we, in Los Angeles, saw things that others didn’t see. We had Wallace Berman, Womanhouse (an installation/performance space organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in 1972) and plastics. We had the 1965 riots in Watts and we had Wet (1976–80), a magazine of gourmet bathing. Some outside criticism of the project has framed it competitively, as overcompensation by a city that, compared to New York, has historically been the underdog. But to frame it in this way is to be out of step with a looser local objective: to open up new perspectives that complicate the idea of a singular US art history.

The lack of critical attention focused on LA has been much discussed as something that has positively shaped – and to some degree continues to shape – artistic developments here, affording greater experimentation with less fear of high-visibility failure. It also means that the successes, if viewed in this binary way, have been largely unrecorded. Take the work of Senga Nengudi, for instance, who is included in the Hammer Museum’s exhibition ‘Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980’. Nengudi, working with the collaborative group Studio Z (which included David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Barbara McCullough, Ulysses Jenkins and others), staged and documented Ceremony for Freeway Pits (1978) – a largely improvised performance ritual with music and costumes.
Right: John Divola
Zuma 225
1972/2006
From the
"Zuma" series
Archival
pigment on
canvas
61 x 61 cm
Included in
"Under the Big
Black Sun"
California Art
1913–1990
at the Geffen
Contemporary
at MOCA

Below:
Ed Ruscha
Annie
1965
Oil on canvas
76.5 x 76.5 cm
Included in "Artistic
Evolution: Southern
California Artists at
the Natural History
Museum of Los Angeles
County 1945–1965"

Like Los Angeles itself, far fewer people will experience 'Pacific Standard Time' than will read about it.