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### Western Promises: A New York Critic's Mind-Expanding Pilgrimage to L.A.'s Pacific Standard Time



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John Mason's "Blue Wall" (1959), part of Getty Center's "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970" exhibit

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By Ann Landi

Published: October 19, 2011

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LOS ANGELES— Growing up in New York in the late 1960s and '70s, and with a serious interest in art from about high school on, I saw only glimmers of what was happening on the West Coast. The formalist critics paid heed to Richard Diebenkorn, Larry Bell, Ron Davis, and a few others; Ed Ruscha was an early favorite of aficionados of Pop, and of course we got wind of the antics of Chris Burden, Judy Chicago, John Baldessari, and Robert



Courtesy of LACMA

Gronk's "Untitled" (c.1978), part of the "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987" exhibit at LACMA



Courtesy of Pacific Standard Time

John Baldessari's "Micropainting" (1960) is featured in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County's PST exhibit



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Chris Burden's "Urban Light" (2008) installation at LACMA

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Arneson. But so much else, I was startled to learn, passed under the radar as Gotham turned much of its attention to homegrown, post-minimalist, post-Color Field phenomena.

So this, my first trip to Los Angeles, a three-day jaunt to sample some of the offerings of the citywide extravaganza known as "Pacific Standard Time," was a real eye-opener. Who knew this place was bursting with so much energy and unsung (or undersung) talent? I couldn't see it all, but a brief and intensive overview makes the argument that as Venice was to Rome in the 16th century, so L.A. has been to New York for the past 40 or so years.

A good place to begin is the small and art-historically revelatory "Artistic Evolution" at — of all places — the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. In the 1940s through the early '60s, this institution was about the only game in town for ambitious young artists. Annual juried shows (one of which included no less a judge than Clement Greenberg) gave an early nod to talents like Ed Moses, Betye Saar, Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, and John Baldessari, who destroyed much of his early work but is here represented by his 10- by nine-inch "Micropainting" from 1960, a curiously whimsical expressionist canvas that resembles a head-on view of an army tank in a sandstorm. The 27 works here neatly encapsulate the waning of old traditions in the paintings of then-celebrated artists like Rico LeBrun and Howard Warshaw, as well as the birth of a new artistic generation. Larry Bell's oozy watercolor "Rice Tea, Encino" (1958-59) seems prescient of the luminous boxes that would become his trademark, while John McLaughlin's untitled composition of 1953 prefigures the Zen-like austerity of his later output. (Some artists's baby steps, however, are a surprise: Betye Saar's delicate sepia etching "Lo, The Pensive Pensinsula" from 1961 scarcely hints at the rich, racially charged iconography that would dominate her mature vision.)

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Barrel on the down the L.A. freeway for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where Chris Burden's majestic outdoor sculpture "Urban Light" brings together 202 cast-iron street lamps from an earlier period in L.A.'s history, all painted gray and powered by solar energy. The piece is a strangely classical homage to the city's past, and proof positive that bad-boy artists can grow up to become useful and productive citizens.

"Useful" and "productive" were clearly not on the minds of the group called Asco, a quartet of rambunctious Chicano street artists whose wide-ranging antics might be summed up as Dada-meets-Day-of-the-Dead. For "Asco: Elite of the Obscure," several

galleries inside LACMA document the performances and other public art escapades of Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez, who maintained serious momentum as a group between 1972 and 1987, and drew attention to the creativity, energy, and rage of a badly neglected sector of the city's population (fittingly, "asco" is a Spanish word for nausea or disgust). The four met in the late 1960s at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles and soon established a known presence with their "walking murals" (archetypal characters culled from Mexican religious imagery and street art) and a project called "No Movies"—photographs and promotional stills relating to films starring the foursome that were never actually produced, an acid commentary on the exclusion of Hispanics from the city's best-known industry.

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"First Supper (After a Major Riot)" shows group members partaking of a meal at a table set up on a traffic island in East L.A. Guests of honor include a baby Jesus-like doll lying supine in front of a Rococo mirror and an inflatable skeleton. In many of their collaborations — which included publications, comics, murals, and even elaborate costume gear like sky-high platform boots — the group appropriated a certain grungy glamour, half mocking, half subscribing to prevailing ideas of beauty. Holding a cobra-shaped trophy for the "No Movie Award as Best Actress," Valdez is as appealing as any "minority" starlet of the day, and the Argentine conceptual artist Eduardo Costa even made it into the pages of Vogue with Richard Avedon's photo of his ear-shaped "earring" on a sleekly styled Marisa Berenson. Though Asco's heyday appears to have been between 1972 and 1978, the wonder is that the group could have maintained its high level of streetwise irreverence for as long as it did without being subsumed into mainstream culture or turned into a more easily marketable commodity (by contrast, it took Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat only about 15 minutes to make it from street artists to collector darlings).

As the spearhead and organizer of the \$10 million, 60-venue extravaganza known as "Pacific Standard Time," one would naturally expect the Getty Foundation and its research and museum affiliates to put on some really big shows, and they did not disappoint. For the technologically obsessed, "From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's 'Gray Column'" tells the story of the making of the artist's monumental 12-foot-high freestanding slab of charcoal-gray polyester resin (a material adopted by quite a few L.A. innovators) created in 1976. The "column" itself, which is



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really more of a wall, has a spooky, mysterious quality straight out of "2001: A Space Odyssey," and thus seems a fitting landmark of L.A. culture. Videos, preparatory drawings, photographs, and other bells and whistles make the construction of "Gray Column" seem like the most challenging feat since the erection of the Parthenon, but art geeks will have a blast.

From the research arm of the Getty comes the clunkily-titled "Greetings from L.A.: Artists and Publics, 1950-1980," documenting the growth of an urban subculture every bit as ambitious as its East Coast equivalents during those years (one wonders if perhaps it was the critical and collector-based clout of New York that kept Los Angeles out of a larger dialogue — and therein lie many Ph.D. theses). This is a mostly photo-heavy show illustrating how the leading lights of dissident artist groups disseminated their works to a broader public. A couple of hilarious videos by the flip, irreverent, and endearingly youthful Chris Burden use Madison Avenue advertising strategies to explain, among other phenomena, his income and tax bills as an artist.

But the real blockbuster at the Getty is "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970," which offers up iconic images of the West Coast scene as well as simply and unabashedly ravishing work. Some of the pieces here were comfortingly familiar: paintings from Richard Diebenkorn's majestic "Ocean Park" series, David Hockney's deadpan take on the Los Angeles high life "A Bigger Splash", Ron Davis's eye-bending marriages of geometry and AbEx mark-marking, and Ed Ruscha's brash adventure in hard-edged Hopperism, "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas." But there was also much that was new (to this viewer), especially in ceramics, beginning with John Mason's 21-foot long "Blue Wall," which looks like a merry explosion in a blue-jeans factory. Diminutive early Ken Price sculptures like "BG Red" and "Green and Cream" presage the quirky and original strides the artist would make in this medium, while Henry Takemoto's coiled glazed stoneware reveals the ties with Asia that have animated so much West Coast art.

Some of the work was just plain fun, like Ed Kienholz's "Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps," a full-length portrait of the legendary curator, both fore and aft, made from vertebrae, candy, dental molds, leather, and telephone parts. Stephan von Huene's "Tap Dancer," a pair of jointed feet and legs from the knees down, greets visitors to the exhibition by jauntily rapping out sharp tattoos against a wooden platform. Even Judy Chicago was having a light-hearted, proto-feminist moment by painting a Corvair car hood with hard-edge designs that ever so subtly culminate in an orange-and-red vaginal shape.

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And there are some wistfully dreamy endeavors, such as Peter Alexander's "Cloud Box," which appears to have trapped a smoggy L.A. weather pattern inside a block of cast polyester resin, or Joe Goode's "Torn Cloud Painting," a slashed and torn canvas-on-canvas piece in shades of baby blue, again hinting at the L.A.-Asian axis. Vija Celmins' modest "Freeway," seen from the dashboard in the foreground, turns one of the city's famous thoroughfares into a vision of grisaille melancholy. And Sam Francis's untitled canvas from the "Mako" series pushed a scrim of dazzling jewel tones to the very edge of the painting, curiously placing it in the lineage of the great series of European open-window paintings, such as Matisse's dappled views of the Riviera.

What struck this viewer as intriguing was the way in which Los Angeles art didn't fall into the kind of tidy categories that dominated New York in the same time frame (Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Pop, Minimalism, and so on). Though the artists often shared certain political objectives, and explored similar new media, and often showed at the same venues, little of the work invites easy "isms." It's almost as if the energies were too chaotic and too unbridled for critics and curators to impose labels (and as far I could tell, there were no publications that carried the kind of hefty pronouncements, tagging people for the same teams, as did Clement Greenberg in *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* or Donald Judd in *Artforum*). New York was the kind of place that groomed sleek and ambitious talents like Richard Serra and Brice Marden, easily at home at Park Avenue cocktail parties; L.A., while still producing its share of elegance, gave us raffish weirdos like Ed Kienholz and Llyn Foulkes.



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If "Crosscurrents" at the Getty largely represented L.A. at its most ingratiating, "Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art focused largely on the city's darker side, the Helter Skelter basement of the Hollywood fantasy factory. Many of the works evinced a political edge, reinforced by three slide shows documenting the period's more loathsome moments: troops returning from Vietnam in body bags, the meltdown at Three Mile Island, the assassinations of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, Nixon's resignation, and so on. The show itself as well, occupying virtually all the galleries of the Geffen Contemporary, had a frankly helter-skelter feel (I couldn't determine any particular rhyme or reason for how the more than 500 works were organized — other than, say, occasional groups of pieces by the same artist or works arranged by genre, such as protest posters). There was some truly nauseating work here, such as Paul McCarthy's 1975 "Sailor's Meat" in which the artist dressed up in a blonde wig and black panties to perform what the catalogue euphemistically describes as "exploring repressed psychological states, social taboos, and consumption, and how they relate to each other" (hint: don't bring the kids).

There were also moments of light-hearted silliness (Masami Teraoka's "MacDonald's Hamburgers Invading Japan/Tokyo Ginza Shuffle"); unbridled fantasy (Carlos Villa's "Mask-Unmask"); and visual ravishment (Billy Al Bengston's interminably titled but cheerfully-dyed banners and Stephen J. Kaltenbach's enormous and luminous "Portrait of My Father"). Well worth a second look and more exposure were a number of photographers new to me (John Divola, Chauncey Hare, and Ilene Segalove), as well as the quirky and disturbing assemblage artists Mark Pauline and John Outterbridge (whose works can also be seen in shows of black artists at the Hammer and the California African American Museum). Peculiar, distressing, and occasionally just plain baffling, "Under the Big Black Sun" is nonetheless one of the most riveting exhibitions I've seen in a very long time.

I had time to visit only one solo show in L.A., Fred Eversley's mini-retrospective at the William Turner Gallery in Bergamot Station, but it must surely be one of the most elegant in town. Eversley has been working for four decades in bronze, plastic, and polyester resin, incorporating some of the technologies he learned as a NASA engineer way back when. He belongs with artists like James Turrell, Larry Bell, and Robert Irwin, who brought a certain transcendent (California?) light to sculpture in the 1960s, but Eversley's radically simplified forms also reflect Minimalist preoccupations on both coasts. Many of these works play tricky optical games, like reflecting the viewer and melting into prisms of gorgeous color, but they never feel like gimmicks. When I was in the gallery, a couple of little kids were running from one work to another, peering inside, looking at each other through the works, and squealing with delight. They had the right idea.

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