

Laying Claim to Its Place in the Sun

By **PETER PLAGENS**

'Don't be modest,' says a character in Mark Lee Luther's 1924 novel, "The Boosters." "It doesn't pay. We're all boosters in Los Angeles." Alas, the city's history of one booster campaign after another, from railroads, citrus growers and land salesmen, has left Los Angeles—for all the semitropical metropolis's futurist gazing into the Pacific sun—with an inferiority complex. Through World War II, Angelenos directed their grouching at that small, snooty, ballet-and-opera city up the coast, San Francisco. More recently, the foil has been New York, and the resentment of Gotham is particularly sharp where modern and contemporary art are concerned. So when the lights were doused Oct. 2 on the gala-opening reception for the huge multi-institutional group of exhibitions that make up "Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles 1945-1980" and a *son et lumière* spectacular commenced on every marbled wall of the Getty Center, it wasn't long before a stentorian voiceover pronounced, "In contrast to New York Expressionism, artists in Southern California . . ."



Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College

'Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas' (1963) by Ed Ruscha

Indeed, Andrew Perchuk of the Getty Research Institute has said, "For a long time it was thought that if you didn't have a significant group of Abstract Expressionist paintings like New York or San Francisco, you couldn't be a major art center." The result, according to a Getty press release, is that "Southern California gave birth to many of today's artistic trends—and yet the immensely rich story of how this came about . . . remains largely unknown." The hoped-for corrective is "Pacific Standard Time," a Getty-encouraged, Getty-subsidized (nearly \$10 million in grants) collaboration among 60 Southern California institutions resulting in a smorgasbord of everything from handcrafted furniture to hard-edge painting, from guerrilla street performances to sculpture in aerospace materials—all made in California over the past 70 years or so—

in shows rolling out over the next six months. With a little rental car and a pent-up urge to drive (I'm an Angeleno transplanted to New York a quarter-century ago), I took a look at about a dozen of the first PST shows, dispersed from Pasadena to San Diego.

Details

**Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles
1945-1980**

Multiple venues

www.pacificstandardtime.org

PST boasts three centerpiece exhibitions—one at the Getty Museum itself, one at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's two locations, and one at MoCA in downtown Los Angeles. "**Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-70**" (through Feb. 5) at the Getty is an elegant Cliffs Notes introduction. The show includes the sharply poetic, hard-edge abstract paintings (by Frederick Hammersley, Helen

Lundeberg and others) that got the Los Angeles scene rolling in the 1950s; a choice selection of spooky assemblages by George Herms, the underknown black artist Ed Bereal (and, as always implicit throughout this account, "and others"); a roomful of big, airy abstract paintings by the not underknown Richard Diebenkorn and Sam Francis, and an assortment of what, back in the day, was called "fantastic object" sculpture in plastic and cast resin by Craig Kauffman and DeWaine Valentine. And what authoritative Los Angeles show could be without an Ed Ruscha "Standard Station" Pop painting? Certainly not the Getty's table-setter.



Studio Museum in Harlem

'Cotton Hangup' (1966), part of Melvin Edwards's 'Lynch Fragments' series

"Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface"

(through Jan. 22), at both MCASD's downtown branch and its original La Jolla location, is the most visually satisfying meal on the PST menu. That's partly because of the nature of the art—lovingly austere and mystically colorful abstract sculpture and atmospheric environments—and partly because the artists (Larry Bell, Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, et al.) were so talented. And boy, were they young! Ms. Corse was only 20 when she ventured into lyrically all-white minimalist paintings (later to be deliciously complicated by the inclusion of highway-sign reflectivity) that make Robert Ryman seem like a Victorian schoolmaster by comparison. Kauffman, with his techno-lush plastic reliefs, emerges as the premiere object-maker of 1960s cutting-edge

Los Angeles art. And the best works I encountered in my 500-mile pilgrimage were Mr. Turrell's "Stuck Red" and "Stuck Blue" (both 1970), two brilliant vertical rectangles of light on separated walls. At first you think they're merely projections, but then . . . sorry, you really have to see them for yourself. Messrs. Irwin, Turrell and Wheeler, in particular, manipulated light and space to create experiences, instead of objects, as works of art. Their pieces were, in my opinion, Southern California's greatest contributions to art before 1980.

At the other end of the utopia/dystopia spectrum from "Phenomenal" lies curator Paul Schimmel's "**Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981**" (through Feb. 13) at MoCA. Mr. Schimmel is fond of dark, borrowed titles. In 1992 he appropriated "Helter Skelter" from author Vincent Bugliosi (who borrowed it from mass-murderer Charles Manson, who borrowed it from a Beatles song) for an earlier MoCA anthology show. It too, exuded nasty sex, nasty violence and a generally Punk take on life (and death) in the Golden State. The current show's title is taken from a song by "X," the 1970s Los Angeles Punk band. Some of the same artists are back—Richard Jackson with his antipainting pancake stacks of canvases, Paul McCarthy with residue from his scatologically slapstick performances, and Lynn Foulkes with weird Pop-surrealist paintings.



Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

One trouble with the exhibition is that a good deal of it unironically consists of the same stuff—dry typewritten reports, deadpan photos, graphs and plans and maps, etc.—employed by the art's targets: corporations, the military and bureaucrats. (A hilarious exception: Jeffrey Vallance's funeral documents for a dead chicken, a.k.a. "Blinky, the Friendly Hen," that he bought in a supermarket). Another drawback of "Under the Big Black Sun" is a feeling that the disaffection is forced. CalArts and UCLA (where many of the show's artists were students or teachers) aren't the South Bronx. While dress-up abjectness on the part of artists is OK, the art should look genuine. The show seems like "Helter Skelter Lite," perhaps because it is part of an

otherwise upbeat civic initiative on behalf of Los Angeles art. Still, Mr. Schimmel gets credit for pretty much putting the lie to a New York critic's estimate of the '70s Los Angeles art scene as solely "hip young dropout types in Venice, Calif., making baubles for the rich."

Posturing isn't a problem with what I'd call the "learning shows" that try to correct the shunting aside of women, African-American and Latino artists during PST's time period. They make fine use of the Getty largesse: bringing in outside scholars to help with the research, publishing fat, informative catalogs, searching out works crucial to the shows' theses, and—best of all for a viewer—creating first-class installations. **"Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building"** (through Jan. 28) at the Otis College of Art and Design, for instance, would probably be an amen-corner jumble were it not for the time, womanpower and scrutiny the gallery was able to give to wall upon wall, and vitrine upon vitrine, of primary source material from the mid-'70s salad days of the women's movement in the Los Angeles art world.

Just as female artists had more than qualms about proceeding with business as usual in a male-dominated art world (one straw weighing on the camel's back was the publication of a 1969 calendar with 12 male artists in their cool cars), black artists in Los Angeles found it difficult to fiddle around with perceptual niceties after Watts burned in 1965. David Hammons, an eventual MacArthur fellow who would decamp for New York in 1974, said "I wish I could make art like [James Turrell's], but we're too oppressed for me to be dabbling out there." Nevertheless, enough solid, beautifully aggressive African-American art was made during a 20-year period in Los Angeles for the Hammer Museum to mount **"Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980"** (through Jan. 8), the most arresting show outside the centerpiece triumvirate. It contains several rediscoveries, among them assemblagist Noah Purifoy, whose works are certainly ripe for a retrospective. For my money, the small steel "Lynch Fragments" sculptures of the hardly unknown Melvin Edwards (a Guggenheim Fellow and professor emeritus at Rutgers) are the standout works of this exhibition. They're compactly aggressive welded-steel amalgams of chains, tools and abstract forms whose crisply channeled anger makes "Now Dig This!" one of PST's best early-round exhibitions.

"MEX/LA: 'Mexican' Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985" (through Feb. 5) at the capacious Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach adds to the learning curve. It offers not only requisite glimpses of Mexican-American art, but a prologue of Mexican muralists in California in the '30s and subsequently influential Anglo artists (such as painter-architect Millard Sheets) who learned so much from them. The show doesn't shy away from cringe-inducing material—such as clips from Warner Bros.' "Speedy Gonzalez" cartoons from the '50s—which makes it a risky, lively mix. "MEX/LA" makes **"Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972-1987"** (through Dec. 4) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art look awfully thin by comparison. To be fair, Asco—a Mexican-American artists' collaborative including Gronk, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón and Patssi Valdez—performed such antics as taping Ms. Valdez to a wall as an "instant mural." You probably had to be there; small photographic mementos of these thumbs in the eye of the art establishment are overwhelmed by the big Lacma galleries.

Your visit to Lacma will be salvaged by **"Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud 1969-1972, Revisited."** It's the first time this hokey but mesmerizing life-size assemblage depicting a black man's castration by five rednecks has been shown in the U.S.

Getty money and encouragement has made the installations of some midtier shows first-rate, among them the old costumes and vintage videos of **"Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983"** (through Jan. 29) at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, a peaceful refuge on an otherwise semiseedy Hollywood Boulevard, and an exhibition, **"Speaking in Tongues: The Art of Wallace Berman and Robert Heineken, 1961-1976"** (through Jan. 22) at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena. Berman was a great pioneer assemblagist who made mysterious cabinets with fragments of Hebrew letters and old photographs inside; Heineken, a not-so-great photographer who turned soft-core porn into montages.

Finally, a mention of **"California Design, 1930-1965: 'Living in a Modern Way,'"** at Lacma through March 25. An argument could be made that Southern California's most significant contribution to modernism besides "Light and Space" art is its own style of industrial design. Bauhaus + beach: Low-lying hi-fi consoles, swoopy chairs, dude-ranch dresses, and those wonderful transparent "Case Study" houses up in the hills.

During my sampling of "Pacific Standard Time," I saw more than the shows outlined above, but I also missed a few—and obviously I couldn't check out PST exhibitions not yet open. Nevertheless, my eyes roamed over enough art and plowed through enough catalogs that I can ask a few nettlesome questions about the project. First, how is this vast undertaking supposed to be consumed? The venue of the northernmost PST exhibition, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, is more than 200 miles from MoCA San Diego. Southern California suffers a paucity of public transportation, and the roads are always crammed with cars. A Los Angeles artist remarked to me, "Whenever you get someplace on time on the freeway, you feel like you've put something over on somebody." Only a few dedicated art professionals and academics will manage to see all 70 or so PST exhibitions, and most people only a few.

Second, isn't PST preaching to the choir? If the Getty and participating institutions want to make the case that modern art in Southern California is right up there with New York's or anybody else's, shouldn't at least the three centerpiece shows be on view at MoMA, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston?

Third, is not PST's very existence a tacit admission of minor-leagueness? (I spent my childhood in a Los Angeles without major-league baseball and can still remember how having to make do with the old Pacific Coast League rankled the adults.) It's hard to imagine Chicago, whose postwar art also got short shrift in New-York-centric histories of modern art, mounting a "Central Standard Time" campaign.

Finally, it's been said that generals always fight the previous war. Command Central at the Getty may not have noticed, but the art world has gone global: There are biennials in Korea and Turkey, a huge production and consumption machine in China, and multizillion-dollar museums rising in the Middle East. Contemporary art from India is the current hot item, and South America is champing at the bit.

Of course, these considerations should be more PST's than mine. I care about seeing good art—no matter how many Hummers in the left lane slow my pursuit of it—and not so much about grand cultural strategies thought up by grand museums. Being able to gaze upon the most gorgeous object that Judy Chicago, one of the founders of the Women's Building, ever produced—a painted Corvair car hood at the Getty show—and to look at one of Senga Nengudi's lovely and prescient stretched-nylon sculptures at the Hammer Museum—these are the kinds of experiences that made my sojourn rewarding. A little boosterism is fine, but in the end, who cares which coast has the art-historical upper hand? It's the art that counts.

Mr. Plagens, a writer and a painter, is at work on a book about the artist Bruce Nauman, to be published by Phaidon.