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"Pacific Standard Time"



Asco, *Termites y Guerrero*, 1975. Performance view during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), East Los Angeles, 1975. Photo: Ricardo Valverde. From "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987."

"PACIFIC STANDARD TIME: ART IN L.A., 1945–1980"

VARIOUS VENUES · October 1, 2011– April 2012

WHAT IS THE STORY OF POSTWAR AMERICAN ART? When it's told as a fabled West Coast-versus-East Coast matchup, Los Angeles is typically cast as a brash, vulgar upstart, pitted against a sleeker, more cosmopolitan New York. Familiar episodes are trotted out to emphasize an aesthetic of dazzle and doom ostensibly unique to Southern California—say, the early debut of Pop art, with Andy Warhol's soup cans premiering at the Ferus Gallery in 1962; the finish-fetishists' embrace of industrial luster; Chris Burden being shot in the arm. It has become a tired tale.

About a decade ago, in 2002, the Getty Research Institute decided to breathe new life into the study of local artistic practices. Building on its deep archival collections, it began a research initiative aimed at locating, preserving, and documenting a diverse array of Los Angeles-based art, architecture, and design. The project soon ballooned into an unprecedented venture involving a far-flung network of institutions, curators, art historians, decorative arts specialists, craft scholars, film archivists, architectural historians, and artists, who unearthed boxes moldering in basements, recorded oral histories, digitally remastered crumbling videotape, and restored faded snapshots.

This fall, prepare to sample—or even gorge on—the fruits of this labor: More than sixty exhibitions about art in Southern California from 1945 to 1980 will begin to open across the region. Corralled into the overarching rubric "Pacific Standard Time," and launched with the assistance of some ten million dollars in grants from the Getty Foundation, it includes presentations of art, design, cinema, performance, and video at museums and art-related institutions as far south as San Diego and as far north as Santa Barbara. (Full disclosure: I wrote essays for two exhibition catalogues connected to "Pacific Standard Time.") Venues include major museums as well as smaller spaces, such as ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. A performance and public arts festival this coming January, organized by the Getty Research Institute and LAXART, will include restagings of pieces from the 1960s and '70s alongside newly commissioned work, bringing together historical figures with their contemporary progeny.

The roster of "Pacific Standard Time" exhibitions indicates the ambition and the eccentricity that are Southern California hallmarks. There are monographic shows on designers Charles and Ray Eames, photographer Oscar Castillo, woodworker Sam Maloof, Conceptual-art gallerist Eugenia Butler, and enamelist June Schwarz, to name a small sample. In addition, there are group shows organized along lines both thematic ("Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography, 1945–1982," at the Palm Springs Art Museum) and medium-specific ("Proof: The Rise of Printmaking in Southern California," at the Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles). Focusing on subjects canonical and counterinstitutional, the exhibitions trace an enormous range of artistic innovation that includes women ceramicists, African-American filmmakers, Japanese-American activists, Chinese-American architects, and collaboratively made protest posters.

A few themes recur: the foundational role played by the region's many art schools; the rapid institutionalization of performance and video; the impact of social movements such as feminism; and the efflorescence of noncommercial, artist-run ventures like the LA Woman's Building. But the biggest revelation here is the centrality of nonwhite artistic production—most prominently, Chicano art, which is

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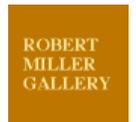
spotlighted in eight shows, including the first retrospective of the visionary Conceptual/performance collective Asco. The primacy of Chicano work has the potential to reorient histories of Southern Californian art away from comparisons with New York and toward tensions and affinities with the broader cultures of the US-Mexico border.

The “Pacific Standard Time” promotional slogan reads, “One era. A million moments of impact.” As marketing catchphrases go, it’s not bad, though it immediately raises some unanswerable questions. Can the unruly thirty-five-year swath from 1945 to 1980 be considered “one era”? And is there a whiff of old-fashioned municipal boosterism in the Getty’s touting of its hometown? More likely, in a time when all things global are the rage, “Pacific Standard Time” represents a serious attempt to forge a critical regionalism sensitive to specific, local conditions. Though it remains to be seen whether the responses to this massive endeavor end up consolidating the usual narratives, the wealth of material—familiar and obscure alike—will undoubtedly be a lasting resource for scholars and students.

Giving a full consideration to the richness of these offerings might depend on how much gas you’re willing to burn, how much traffic you can withstand, and how many days off work you can afford to take. If you live in the area, lucky for you—take advantage of it. One hopes viewers’ individual courses through this terrain will reveal surprising resonances and omissions ripe for further research. Even if they don’t, “Pacific Standard Time” is already an impressive achievement, with a scope as vast, sprawling, and dynamic as the city of Los Angeles itself.

—*Julia Bryan-Wilson*

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