"SUNSHINE & NOIR: ART IN L.A. 1960–1997"

LOUISIANA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

MAX KOZLOFF

Los Angeles artists enjoy the unique yet dubious privilege of living in the lap of mass culture. But if they feel proprietary toward the mythmaking machine of movies and television, their closeness has also encouraged a psychological remove from it. Though they often allude to frenzies on the screen, their central concern is with pop dramas of the mind. As a vehicle for our collective fantasies that give a less than social pleasure, the movie is to them as inevitable a theme as nature is to "landscapists."

Such an overview is offered by "Sunshine & Noir," a deliberately potluck exhibition of Los Angeles art, 1960–97, curated by Lars Nittve and Helle Crenzien, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art near Copenhagen. But the show's value as a historical record or critical proposal is diluted by odd emphases, equally strange exclusions (among them even some males), and the presence of lesser works by significant artists. Louisiana's display is crowded with art by white men who frequently behave like bad boys. From what is shown, for instance, no one would guess that Los Angeles had been a hotbed of feminist art in the '70s. Robert Heinecken, the central figure of LA Conceptual photography, is omitted. Absent too are the witty images of artists such as Erika Rothenberg, Betye Saar, and Carole Caroompas. But the imbalances of this survey of more than fifty artists and close to two hundred works did not prevent it from being provocative. All around me, surprising continuities revealed themselves. I roamed through it, alert to chance accents in which native Los Angeles content—once flavorsome, now savvy—is picked up in widespread idioms.

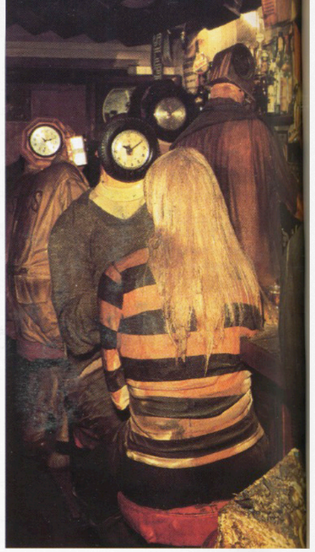
By the '80s, the media theme had become such a topical spectacle to far-flung publics that LA artists ceased being self-conscious about their base in Los Angeles—ceased to think of themselves as local. None of their often obscure movie references could take anything away from the unsavory magnitude of their vision. Yet how much more cryptic and denatured, even in its fondness, is their treatment of visual entertainment when compared to the entertainment itself. In particular, Los Angeles artists of the last thirty-seven years led the way to a view of our media, and the implications behind them, as netherworld phenomena. The British architectural critic Reyner Banham once remarked that, as certain scholars learned "Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned how to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original." Insofar as any of this applies to the City of Angels, the key word here is "Dante."

In a car, stunned by glare, even wearing shades, one is channeled by sulfurous freeways, over long distances, through unpeopled spaces that lack any texture. The mobile solitude of it all, daily repeated, may have done wonders to impair any idea of community in the art of this sun-shocked, sprawling city. As depictions of urban nothings on a strip, Edward Ruscha's photos of gas stations and John Baldessari's windshield views of National City, California, are deadpan classics.

The absence of human street life may tell us something about the tactile extremes of Los Angeles art, which typically veers between hypergloss, to which not even a mote could cling, and soiled rag you wouldn't touch. In the uninviting "skin" of their work, artists enacted metaphors of impossible perfections and uncontrollable disorders. It's tempting to regard these polarities as markers for the disquiet of bodies alienated from the material world. Los Angeles freeways have, in fact, been known as breeding grounds for unspeakable rancors that eat away one's reason. Such was the import of a 1993 film, *Falling Down*, in which a frustrated, white-collar motorist, played by Michael Douglas, blows his cool in a killing spree.

This "pressure cooker" atmosphere had been prefigured in the late '50s and early '60s, the Ferus Gallery days of Los Angeles art. The hardened "syrup" of John McCracken's planks and the spray-lacquered, chevron paintings of Billy Al Bengston have their polar opposite in the sweaty, glutinous lumpy surfaces of Edward Kienholz's *The Beanery*, 1965, his squalid mockup of an artists' bar. As a motif in Los Angeles art, the repressive cleanliness of hi-tech vies with a rhapsody of disgust.

Left to right: **Alexis Smith, *Ring of Fire*, 1982,** painted wall with basketball hoop, ca. 10' 11¾" x 15' 11¾". **Edward Kienholz, *The Beanery*, 1965,** mixed media, ca. 99⅝" x 21' 9⅜" x 74⅛". Installation view.



Stemming from Kienholz, but minus the artist's moralism, the theme of disgust is certainly continued in more recent performances and videos by Paul McCarthy as well as in the installations of Mike Kelley.

The entrance to "Sunshine & Noir" is flagged by Chris Burden's *L.A.P.D. Uniform*, 1993, a row of black, outsized cop suits, each equipped with badge, nightstick, and handgun, spread like cutouts from a child's book. With their immaculate, sharp-as-knives creases, so unlike clothes that have ever been worn—or rather so *like* those that are worn for the first time in coffins—these headless, Darth Vader icons exude a satanic aura. Done two years after the Rodney King beating, they conjure a black and Latino view of the infamous Los Angeles police as archangels of violence.

Those artists who dredge their childhood memories and feelings for subject matter are the rule in this show, not the exception. Repeatedly, "Sunshine & Noir" is colored by an evocation of the juvenile that presumes to be an engagement with the present. Rather than an innocence of perception, "kid stuff" in this context implies the scariness of the world. Jim Shaw, in *Billy's Self-Portrait* #1, 1986, makes it trivial and "jokey" with his comic book bearing the faux

Top to bottom: **Mike Kelley, *Apology (From "Australiana") No. I, II, III, IV, V*, 1984,** acrylic on paper, each ca. 64⅛ x 48". **Kim Dingle, *Priss Room Installation*, 1994–95,** mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view.

title *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Charles Ray induces it with some little genetic glitches in his effigies of the American family. His work retails Hallmark presences that are fermented a little and tremble on the uncanny. David Lynch would like them a lot. I take the point of the parallel made with fairy tales, whose structure underlies so much of the movies. And I am aware of the gothic, fin-de-siècle mood that prevails in the big studios (*Batman* 2, etc.). But I don't care for the "Toons" version of gothic fable in much of Kelley's and McCarthy's work. No matter how darkminded, they shoot at obvious targets, too often with a diarrheic style full of ketchup. The effect is not highfalutin "abject," as some have claimed, but just plain silly, or rather mean silly.

Despite its frequent appearances, kitsch, in fact, is not at the center of the Los Angeles aesthetic. "Artistic" kitsch retails unearned effects and wallows in inverted class snobbery, not typical of a scene that still prizes a "laid back" manner. A fine instance of this latter attitude is found in Alexis Smith's installations and smaller collages (the piece the curators chose, *Ring of Fire*, 1982,

was, however, untypically weak). "Sunshine & Noir" neglects to show us how this key Los Angeles artist has put outworn popular culture to work as a memory device that opens up a social landscape. A piece of hers from 1980 contains the following, each of its phrases in a frame with sides slanted as if seen from a speeding car: "Hello Hollywood/ Goodbye Farm/It Gave McDonald/That Needed Charm/Burma Shave." Here is a work by a pitch-perfect specialist in American vernacular who can summon up the myth of a whole era—even its pathos—as if glimpsed in a roadside jingle. The reminiscent tone in her work presupposes a grownup mind that looks back with rue upon our earlier rites of passage. It's a tone encapsulated by the line Smith put under a prom photo: "We clinked. 'To all the dumb dreams that never happen,' she said." Smith invents voice-overs from pulp fiction superimposed upon ads, film stills, and postcards flecked with stardust, then presented in frames found in the flea market. She exposes our tinsel romanticism with an intelligence worthy of John Heartfield and an affection all her own.

In contrast, Kim Dingle's *Priss Room Installation*, 1994–95, with its Sunday-best baby mannequins—here, one black, the other white—dukes up in a crib, brings you into real contact with the presocial. The "bad boys" have imitated the presocial only in vain because they have forgotten it could be so elegant. Dingle collaborated with a three-year-old, whose back-wall scribbles were likened by certain critics to Cy Twomblys. But I am put in mind of such Los Angeles predecessors as Edward Kienholz and Charles Ray, whose art *Priss Room* mutates with a singular force. It deploys the scariness of the one and the creepy decorum of

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the other to evoke the rage of little girls. Details, like the target on the wall and the mess on the floor, speak of a belligerence that is concentrated in the peevish, somehow aged faces of Dingle's baby dolls. They look as if they have a score to settle. Once seen, their expression burns into memory. To be sure, this furor is puny when compared with the violence in shoot-'em-ups, noir, or any other genre. But it is more unsettling. It goes beyond the conventions of popular genre with a poetry that shows where psychic tumult begins—in a nursery. □

Max Kozloff's collection of essays entitled *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames*, was recently published by the University of New Mexico Press.

"Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997" travels to the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany, this fall; it will open at the Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo, Italy, next spring before traveling to the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in Los Angeles in fall 1998.