

Notes on Pacific Standard Time

by Jody Zellen
Fall 2011

What is Pacific Standard Time? How might it differ from Eastern or Mountain Standard Time? Is Pacific Standard Time an attitude? A movement? Or is it simply an umbrella under which to reconsider art made in Los Angeles (as well as in California) by a diverse group of artists from 1945-1980?

In the thirty-five year span that Pacific Standard Time (PST) claims as Los Angeles's entry into the art world, just about everything that could happen did. Artists in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, produced idea-based works, used video, experimented with light and space, painted realistic and representational works on paper and canvas, created happenings and invented new genres. Under the auspices of the Getty Foundation and the Getty Research Institute, who provided over ten million dollars in grant money to participating institutions, PST has become a year-long city-wide celebration in which museums, nonprofit spaces and commercial galleries have banded together to present work from this time period.

It would take days and require traversing hundreds of miles to see every show associated with PST. It would take as many days again to read all of the new catalogues analyzing and historicizing this period. In fact, many of the exhibitions require more reading than looking. Faced with the task of undertaking this mammoth initiative as a viewer many questions arise: What benefit is there to seeing it all at once? Does resurrecting work that might have fallen by the wayside become more interesting now than it was then? How does history treat art that is more about ideas than about aesthetics? How does that work resonate now? In 2011, how do ideas and artworks that were fresh and cutting edge then, hold up? How do we look back?

It is impossible to write about all the exhibitions associated with PST so what follows is a travelogue through some of PST most noteworthy exhibitions as an attempt to settle some of these questions.

1) Of the survey exhibitions, the largest and most inclusive are at the J. Paul Getty Museum and at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The Getty's show, *Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture 1950-1970*, brings together a wide range of artists working in all mediums. It presents schools and styles of art that have come to define art in Los Angeles including light and space, hard edge abstraction, assemblage, conceptual and political art. The Getty exhibit traces a line from modernism to conceptualism drawing on iconic works by artists like David Hockney, Karl Benjamin, Dennis Hopper, John Baldessari, Betye Saar, George Herms, Wallace Berman, Chris Burden, Terry Allen and Suzanne Lacy. The exhibition at the Getty sets both the stage and the tone for all of PST, creating a context and a scholarly platform through which to examine the history of art in Los Angeles. MOCA on the other hand does not limit its investigation to Los Angeles but looks at all of California. *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981* brings together ideas that spanned cities and schools looking at how influences and styles developed. San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego had (and still have) influential college art programs that supported important artists as professors and spawned generations of artists. *Under the Big Black Sun* accentuates the important role of artist as educator. With over 500 works by 130 artists this expansive exhibition presents a smorgasbord of genres and styles. While some artists have a room, others are represented by a single work. For example, Douglas Huebler, an important conceptualist, is represented by a single work in the smaller gallery, whereas other less influential artists were assigned more prominent real estate. The reasons for choices like this remain unclear. However, the show does present an instructive path that navigates through the shift in attitudes toward art making that was developing in the 1970s and 1980s. The true achievement of both of these exhibitions and their related print materials is their strong historical footing. The catalogues produced by the Getty and MOCA thoroughly document the ideas in the exhibition and provide content and contexts that go beyond the visual. These along with other recent books about art in Los Angeles at the time, like Hunter Drohowjowska-Philp's *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s*, have made a strong case for the art historical importance of the period.

2) *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980* at the Hammer Museum displays art by more than thirty African American artists who work or worked in Los Angeles. There are outstanding pieces by those who went on to have influential and international careers including David Hammons, Betye Saar, John Outerbridge, John Altoon, Raymond Saunders and Charles Gaines. Besides their racial identity, is there an underlying theme to make the exhibit cohere? To separate (art historically) and segregate (racially) these artists both accentuates and denies the artist's intentions. This exhibition, which celebrates Los Angeles's African American artists, may be historically resonant but it does not clearly articulate the reasoning behind their diverse styles and different approaches toward art-making. In the context of this exhibition, Charles Gaines and Fred Eversley stand out as the only examples of conceptual and light and space works. In conjunction with the exhibition is a 350 page catalogue that includes reproductions, extensive biographies, interviews and scholarly essays that provide insight on friendships between artists and mutual influences, shedding light on relationships that may not be apparent in the work.

3) With *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, LACMA provides a much narrower focus than that of the ambitious group shows already discussed. This exhibit centers on Asco, a collective active from 1972-1987 that used interventionist strategies to combine art and politics primarily by way of performance. Luckily, they documented their activities well and numerous photographs, ephemera and videos have been culled from archives for the exhibition. Asco's core members, Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herron and Patssi Valdez, prided themselves on their Chicano heritage and inserted themselves into the art world by staging somewhat disruptive anti-establishment performances. That Asco's works are located in a specific time, place and political milieu is foregrounded in the purposely anti-aesthetic qualities of the works. An example is Patssi Valdez's *Self Portrait* (1987), in which she submerges her image in a cut and paste collage that has her initials stenciled in black spray paint along the borders. In this work, she adapts a graphic punk-like aesthetic while simultaneously referencing biblical themes. Thinking about the current nation-wide "occupy" movements, the strategies of Asco resonate and make evident that each political movement borrows from the past often in ways unbeknownst to them. LACMA has also served up a sizable catalogue with scholarly essays to contextualize the group's work.

4) The political thrust of the art of this period is the underlying subject of many of the PST exhibitions and *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building* at the Otis College of Art and Design is no exception. The exhibition documents the influence of the collectives who exhibited and performed at or in conjunction with the Woman's Building. The works are presented on the walls as well as in vitrines, where announcements, newspaper articles, photographs and letters are collected. Much early feminist work, like the political work of Asco, was more concerned with message than aesthetics. That's not to say that ignoring aesthetics became an aesthetic in itself (an underlying principle in conceptual and idea-based work). There is more to read here than to look at and one feels guilty to survey the exhibition knowing that a true understanding only can come from reading all the didactic material. Resurrecting the archives and assembling the didactic materials that illustrate the rich history of the Woman's Building allows younger artists to understand how necessary it was for women to create their own exhibition venues. Further, what was then considered marginal now has a viable history, for which the exhibitions two catalogues make a strong case.

-

Besides PST's great educational achievement, the crossover between museum, non-profit and university galleries and commercial venues has manifested unity (whether the product of monetary and publicity incentives or not) that is otherwise invisible in the current Los Angeles art world. Usually there is little dialogue between the commercial galleries and the museums. Many galleries are showing artists who are included in the various museum exhibitions. For example, Judy Chicago appears at the Getty, MOCA and at Otis. Her role as a spokesperson for women artists' rights is articulated in the three exhibitions where different facets of her production are on display. Seeing Charles Gaines's early work at MOCA and the Hammer while a show of new works runs simultaneously at Susanne Vielmetter allows the old work to resonate with respect to his current production.

While some spaces have reached into the 1990s and 2000s to illustrate a lineage of influence, the essence of Pacific Standard Time is to assert the importance of Los Angeles as an influential and

important art center. To those who live in or have passed through Los Angeles in the last sixty years, its weight as a center of intellectual, political and creative power cannot be denied. Pacific Standard Time's enormous scope requires the viewer to drive, look, listen and read for all its expansiveness to cohere. The ambitious project attempts to be a catchall and is indeed a huge umbrella, though one that happens to have a few holes in it. In trying to be comprehensive there is too much crossover that at times dilutes PST's overall impact. Notwithstanding, it allowed the city to reconsider its history and to bring to light many artists who had slipped under the radar. Whether that's a good thing or not is beyond the point. To those familiar with this history, the collective experience presents little that is new, but perhaps that is not the point either. What makes Pacific Standard Time significant is what it has to teach the uninformed and the sense of camaraderie it has injected into an otherwise diverse and segregated community.