

**NEW  
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examiner

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**CALIFORNIA:  
THEN AND NOW**

\$20 U.S.



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Ed Ruscha, *Norm's, La Cienega, on Fire* (1964)  
detail. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist.

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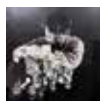
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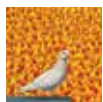
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## NEW ART EXAMINER STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

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Design and Layout—Michel Ségard

### Website:

[www.newartexaminer.org](http://www.newartexaminer.org)

### Office:

5555 N. Sheridan Rd., Unit 1415A,  
Chicago, IL 60640, USA.

### Inquiries:

[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)

All Letters to the editor are printed. Send to:

[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)

# Introduction: California Then and Now

**W**ith this latest edition of New Art Examiner, we usher in a new year in times that are strange yet still. For this quarterly volume of essays from the last three months of 2021, we turned our perceptual lens to the West Coast state of California and its art community which is as expansive and monumental as it is fresh and young.

California seems to be a melting pot of not of just aesthetics but of media and creative processes. The confluence of the gallery, world, street art, pop culture, music, film, etc. all seem to be caught up in the same whirlwind that is California's spirit. Perhaps it is the youth of the region as an American cultural hub, and maybe the climate, that has allowed it to transcend the didactically partitioned spaces of arts and culture on the East Coast, whose roots were still set in the loam of European classicism.

In an interview with gallerist Louis Stern, Neil Goodman gets insight into a bit of the history and practice of the region's curatorial world. Los Angeles, in particular, gets a close look from Sara Rouse who assesses the rapid transformation from the mid twentieth century to now from the Bay Area painters to the multimedia artists of today's L.A. And seminal California artist Ed Ruscha's career and influence gets profiled in an interview with Alexandra Schwartz.

We do not stray too far from our home base for our little West Coast retreat. Michiko Itatani, Harrold Neal, and Thaddeus Mosely are a few of the iconic and storied artists profiled in this issue, and we also take a look at current exhibitions at Cranbrook Academy and Galerie Camille in Detroit. So, we are happy to report that the art world is becoming publicly available again! At least for now. Either way we will continue to take deep dives into what we see and continue to grow our creative community,

Thank you as always for your readership and support,

*The Editors*

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The *New Art Examiner* is looking for Chicago based writers interested in the visual arts. We also have an opening for an additional assistant editor, who must be based in Chicago. Assistant editor needs to be proficient in editing and proofreading, and would be expected to write at least one review per quarter. Writers would start with short reviews of exhibitions. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted. There is a modest quarterly stipend for the assistant editor, and writers get a starting pay of \$50 per review and \$75 per article.

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# “California Dreaming”

## An Interview with Louis Stern

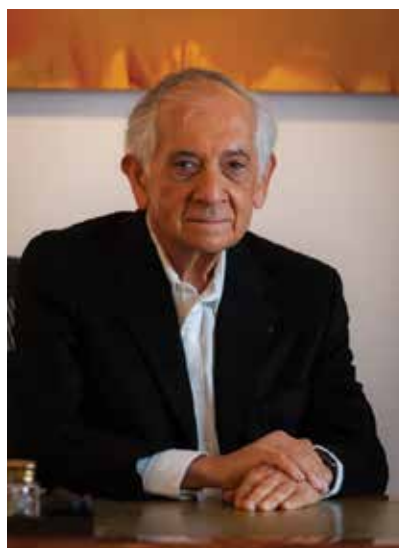
by Neil Goodman

*All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray  
I've been for a walk on a Winters Day  
I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA  
California Dreamin' on such a winter's day  
Mamas & the Papas*

I first met Louis Stern at his namesake gallery in West Hollywood more than a decade ago while looking for representation in Los Angeles. Although the work was not for him (the gallery specialized in twentieth century LA and southern California hard edged abstraction), I appreciated his suggestions for other venues, particularly in the context of a cold call. I was also added to his mailing list, and over the course of many years, I received hard bound periodicals of several of the artists he represented, including Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and Helen Lundeborg. Some artists, like John McLaughlin were nationally known, while others were more regionally based. Like the song “California Dreaming,” their aesthetic was anchored and inseparably linked to both their time and place.

Coincidentally, I was also teaching a course on pattern and abstraction at Indiana University Northwest, and the above-mentioned artists (along with the periodicals that Louis had sent me), were used pedagogically to explain concepts related to specific course assignments. As a result, my familiarity and interest with many of these artists developed sequentially, paralleling my teaching schedule. In this respect, I was both teacher and student.

Louis Stern has witnessed substantial growth and development in both the CA and international artworld. Through his thoughts and experiences, I found him to be a highly educated and committed dealer, who in the romantic sense, believed that quality and not commerce is our sustaining value. In an artworld that seems to have a very limited attention span, the core value of the artists and their estates that he represents have a long view of history and a sustaining belief in the value and power of art.



Gallerist Louis Stern. Photo by Eric Dahan.

As this was an extensive interview, many of the answers capture the spirit of our conversation as opposed to literal transcriptions, and hopefully shed some light on the California experience through the eyes of a veteran dealer:

**Neil:** In my earlier years, California evoked a place both imagined and real. The movie “Echo in the Canyon” by Andrew Slater portrayed the musical confluence of the early 1970’s. As a longtime Los Angeles dealer, do you see any equivalency in your California experience?

**Louis:** LA lacks a sense of a “hornet’s nest,” as there is not a strong center but rather a series of pockets, each geographically distant. Many of the leading artists in LA needed to establish themselves elsewhere before becoming recognized in LA, Ed Ruscha is a very good example of this. The Ferus Gallery was an important fixture in LA and perhaps eclipsed a certain amount of attention from other artists of that period.



Helen Lundeborg (1908-1999), *Untitled*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 30 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeborg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

**Neil:** More specifically, in Chicago, our identity was initially based on the “Monster Roster” and then later the “Hairy Who.” Are there important cornerstones that define a lineage of Southern California Art?

**Louis:** Perhaps the most well recognized lineage were Ruben Kaddish and Phillip Guston, who both studied with Lorser Feitelson. Unlike New York, the lack of international recognition, principally for Helen Lundeborg, Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and to a lesser extent John McLaughlin, did not establish an international presence. Although in many ways these artists developed in parallel worlds artistically from their NY contemporaries, they did so without the publicity and fame.

**Neil:** The Guggenheim Museum reshaped Bilbao both economically and culturally. Is there an equivalency in the LA museum world?

**Louis:** Not really, as many of the museums have a much longer lineage, and unlike Bilbao, they are well established cultural institutions. I am optimistic that the Lucas Museum will result in a more public presence, as it is a museum that the lay person can understand, and will feature work that will be visually accessible to almost everyone.

**Neil:** LA has developed into a major world center in the artworld. What impact has that had on you as a dealer?

**Louis:** Historically everything moves west. LA is a center for architecture (Charles and Ray Eames, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra), design, music, and writers. Also, the proximity of Mexico has been an important influence on LA. In this way, all of these factors have made us a destination.

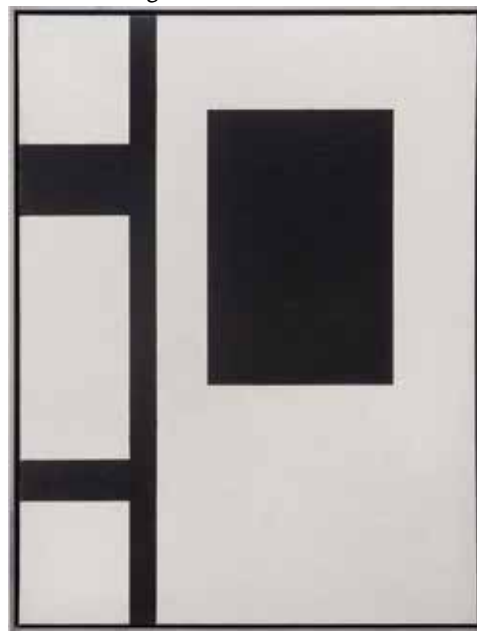
**Neil:** Is there something unique to the Southern California landscape that has influenced both style and form?

**Louis:** Openness, light, climate, contrast, and the ocean. I grew up in Casablanca with very similar climatic conditions, and Morocco was a destination for artists like Delacroix and Matisse. The Fauves went to the south of France for the same reason that many migrated to Southern California, looking for sunny skies.

**Neil:** In the Wikipedia biography, it mentions that you began the gallery with your father. How did you both get started?

**Louis:** I did not start working with my father when he first opened the gallery. I was a baby at the time and the gallery was in Casablanca. My father was in the French Foreign Legion and settled in Morocco before moving to the US. We first settled in New Orleans, then Los Angeles, and then Arizona and eventually moving back to LA. He began principally dealing in modern and impressionist work. I began working with him when I was sixteen. Presently my son Daniel is involved in the gallery and represents the third generation.

John McLaughlin (1898-1976), *Untitled Composition*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. ©Estate of John McLaughlin, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.





Karl Benjamin (1925-2012), *Elliptical Planes*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. ©Benjamin Living Trust, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



**Neil:** Likewise, your original interest included both impressionists and post impressionists. When did your interests shift towards hard edged twentieth century abstraction?

**Louis:** About twenty-five years ago. I saw hard-edged abstractionists as a group that had not gotten its due. Although quite different, I felt the same about the work of the Mexican Modernist Alfredo Ramos Martinez, whose estate the gallery still represents.

**Neil:** As I mentioned, I was introduced to many of the artists that you represent through your publications. As this is both expensive, time consuming, and somewhat unique to a mid-sized gallery, what is your reasoning?

**Louis:** The publications educate the collector about the artist and give them an opportunity to broaden their understanding of an artist's work as well as their background. In this way I am an "old school" dealer.

**Neil:** Many of the artists that you represent are, or were, connected to universities in Southern California and Los Angeles. Recognizing that teaching creates a lineage of shared thoughts and forms, what was the role of universities or art schools in developing a regional aesthetic?

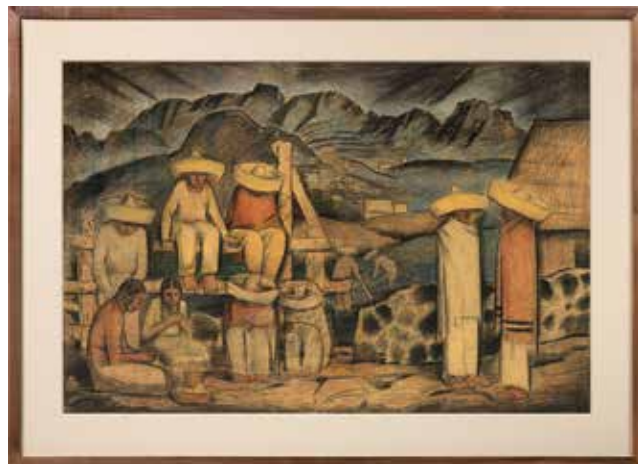
**Louis:** The cross pollination of ideas between students and teachers are at the center of the arts, and universities are catalysts.

**Neil:** Likewise, as the prevailing art schools in Southern California are now largely conceptually orientated, does the work in your gallery engage that generation?

**Louis:** Indeed it does, they see themselves connected to the artworld in a broader sense. As a vital part of the LA artistic community, we serve a certain need in providing context and history for current art trends.



Lorser Feitelson (1898-1978), *Space Forms*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 40 x 74 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



Alfredo Ramos Martinez (1871-1946), **(Left)** *La Procesion*. Tempera on paper, 11 x 17 inches. ©The Alfredo Ramos Martínez Research Project, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami. **(Right)** *Pueblo Scene*. Pastel and Conte crayon on paper, 24 x 35 1/2 inches. ©The Alfredo Ramos Martínez Research Project, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

**Neil:** I notice that you exhibit in several art fairs each year. Do you like art fairs and do you think the brick-and-mortar gallery is becoming an anachronism?

**Louis:** We are in a cycle, and it is important to do the fairs. Likewise, the estates that we represent need walls, as they give the collector credibility and confidence, as well as knowledge and reputation.

Helen Lundeberg (1908-1999), *Selma*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



**Neil:** Do you feel that the artists you represent have been adequately represented in museum collections and surveys?

**Louis:** They will be, because of an ongoing exhibition history as well as the commitment by the gallery to continued representation of their estates and works.

**Neil:** As your gallery has a more singular focus, has the renewed emphasis on content and subject been influential in any of your decision making?

**Louis:** In 1992 our work with the Mexican modernist Alfredo Ramos Martinez resulted in a major retrospective at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City. We also represented Samella Lewis for a number of years. In my view, merit and quality are determining factors for representation.

**Neil:** As the artworld becomes increasingly digitized and/or performance and video based, do you think tangible works of a moderate scale can compete with the same level of impact?

**Louis:** No idea, it is a brave new world!

**Neil:** As many of the artists in the generation that you have championed fades, do you think there will be a continued audience for the work?

**Louis:** Yes, cycles in the art world move in an out of fashion. There is more speculation in terms of economy now, but the cycle will change.

**Neil:** If you could look at the artworld when you started and compare the artworld to today's environment, what would be the defining difference?

Louis: Communication—cell phones and iPads! The internet is as important historically as the printing press was in the Middle Ages.

**Neil: On a personal note, if you had a choice of one seminal work of art to own, what would it be?**

Louis: Fernand Leger. Contrast of Forms from 1911, 1912 or 1913.

**Neil: What advice would you give for a young artist hoping to make their way in the artworld?**

Louis: Believe in what you are doing. You must also be lucky and enjoy the right circumstances and timing. You must have the personality for it, and good PR helps. It may take time, but quality will ultimately be recognized.

**Neil: Finally, what do you feel is your most important accomplishment as a dealer?**

Louis: Recognizing the artists that never got their due and bringing them to the forefront! ■

**Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the Los Angeles correspondent for the *New Art Examiner*.**



Samella Lewis (b. 1924), *Modern Day Prophet*, 1968. Linoleum cut, 18 x 12 inches. ©Samella Lewis, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

Samella Lewis (b. 1924), *Man in Blue Shirt*, 1960. Ed. AP woodcut, 12 x 9 1/2 inches. ©Samella Lewis, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



# The Idea of Los Angeles

By Sara Rouse

“Psychedelics.”  
 “Hot girls.”  
 “John Wayne.”  
 “A huge landmass in the United States  
 that was stolen from my people.”  
 “Opportunity.”  
 “No idea.”  
 “All out of ideas.”  
 “The truth is in the ocean.”

These are just a sample of the responses included in Doug Aitken’s 2011 photobook *The Idea of the West* which documented his survey of one-thousand people in Los Angeles, California. Aitken, from Redondo Beach, asked each person to describe their idea of “the West.” The accompanying set of artist-curated photographs compliment the off-the-cuff responses with a mix of staged and found images. One, an aerial view of a suburban cul-de-sac lush with trees, is dotted with perfectly blue swimming pools in every backyard. Another image catches a man, staring directly at the camera, with the glare of the sun creating a glowing third eye above his forehead. Most mystifying, is a shot of young people all dressed similarly in white, holding hands, and smiling in a disappearing line across the beach. The picture seems to be snapped just a moment before everyone walks happily into the ocean foam, arm in arm. The book, as much about scope as specificity, collects the evocative photographs and chance encounters to build a tonal rendering of L.A.’s collective imagination. *MIRAGE* (2017), another Aitken artwork, made for Desert X, camouflaged a typical California ranch home in Palm Springs with mirrors, inside and out. The simplified structure, altered to have no windows or doors, is made to almost disappear into a continuation of the desert landscape that surrounds it. While Aitken later went on to adapt the project for other locations, it’s this one that I remember, the sculpture seamlessly reflecting the glow of the Coachella Valley sunset, folding art object and boundless landscape into one.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park No. 79*, 1975. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 93 x81 inches. © The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

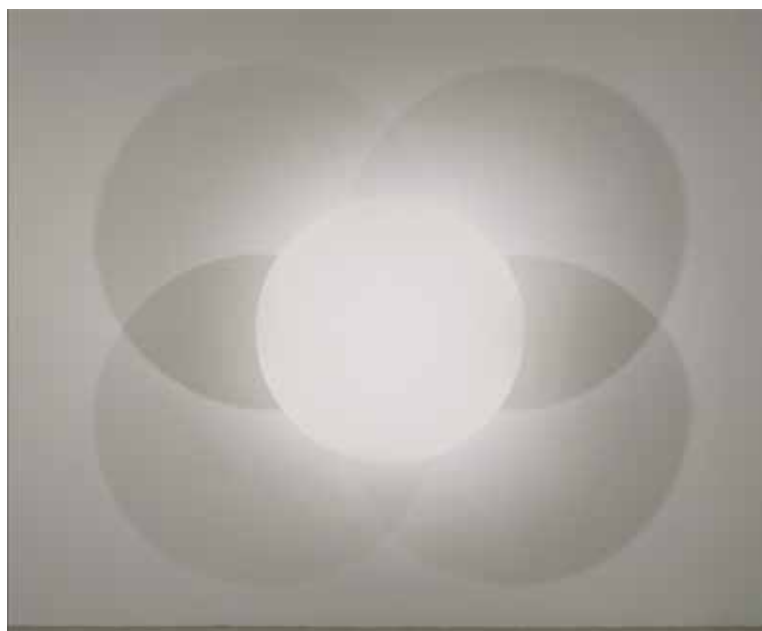


I came to Los Angeles in September of 2019 from Chicago, and before that from Tennessee. It was ambition that took me to Chicago. As a young artist in the southeast, I wanted desperately to build up a life, but by the time I moved to California six years later I was shedding a skin and leaving it behind. While I can't name the exact force that continues to lure artists from all over the world to the American West, and specifically to Los Angeles, for me it was a conscious untethering. Three unusual years later, I'm uncertain if I've distinguished this city from its mythology. L.A. is a place that dances intimately with its own air-brushed self-image, the real and the projection seeming to create and respond almost simultaneously to one another. It seems irresponsible to consider the contemporary fine art made here without first acknowledging that it's hardly the city's main export. The story machine of Hollywood, the original behemoth of film and media creation, is still inarguably the most significant cultural economy in Los Angeles as is Big Tech in nearby San Francisco. This gives contemporary art in Southern California a unique context, closely intertwined and influenced by the production of mass popular culture. It seems inevitable that fine art developed here must participate in or push against the markets that have captivated our desires and dominated American consumption for decades. I'm thinking specifically of those major California exports of film and fantasy, celebrity culture, the beauty and sex industries, and now social media. Alongside these industries, the progression of the art market since the millennium has steadily moved toward complete globalization and its inevitable homogeneity. Regional specificity and local histories of art, at least

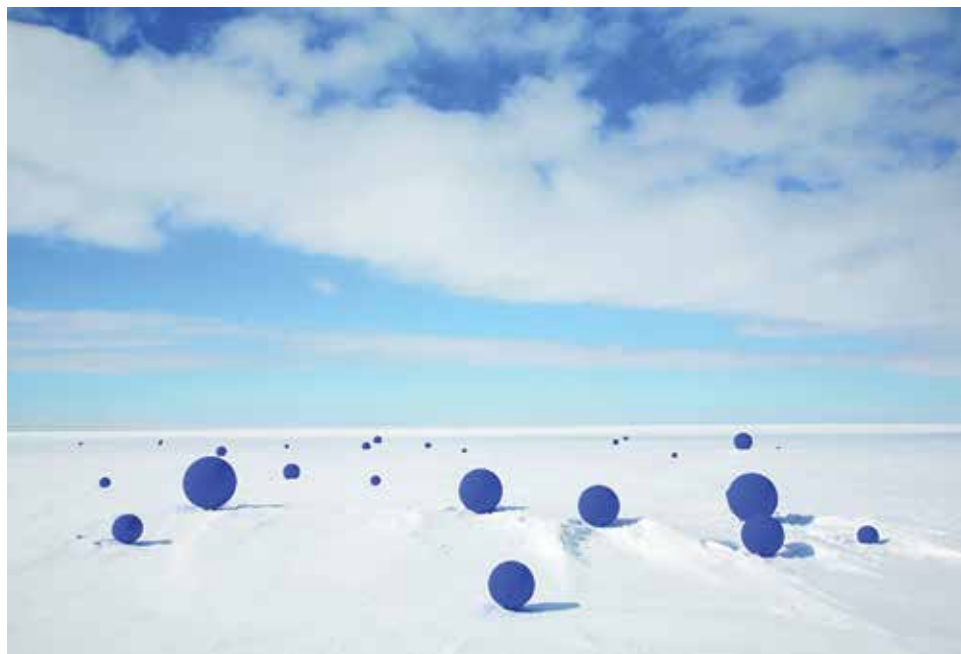
at the more exclusive levels of the market, have begun to dissolve allowing, for better and worse, the same product to be available in Hong Kong, Berlin, Mexico City, Paris, Chicago, and New York as at the local Gagosian franchise in Los Angeles. Perhaps in response, some of the most dominant, memorable, and culturally important artwork today counters that commercial flattening with a strong sense of place and identity. In search of a foothold in this landscape of reflection, I've continued to revisit the artists whose legacies have defined this SoCal city in order to better recognize the art leading it today.

The first time I realized an artwork was iconic of the west coast was in an introductory painting class in Tennessee. Amid conversations centering the New York artists that defined Abstract Expressionism in the 60s, was a presentation on Richard Diebenkorn. We were taught first to notice how the artist's Bay Area cityscapes sit between traditional landscape painting and the then blooming vocabulary of abstraction. Then we were led to recognize that with the Ocean Park series, named after the artist's neighborhood in Santa Monica, Diebenkorn entered into direct conversation with Mondrian. In comparison to the stark distillation of Mondrian's visual vocabulary down to three primary colors, basic values and two directional lines, Diebenkorn's paintings felt gentle, atmospheric, and more intuitively connected to the landscape in which he lived. This forefronted the obvious influence of the warmth and intensity of the Southern Californian light and ocean views as the distinct mark of western art. From then on, I've deeply associated west coast artmaking with this sun-infused, invigorating sense of light and color.

**Left:** Larry Bell, *Untitled (Terminal Series)*, 1968. Vacuum plated glass coated with silicon monoxide, with metal binding, 20 x 20 x 20 inches. © 2018 Larry Bell/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago. **Right:** Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1968. Acrylic and cellulose nitrate lacquer on aluminum and light, Disc 60 3/8 inches in diameter. © 2021 Robert Irwin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Museum of Modern Art, New York.



**Lita Albuquerque**, *Southern Cross*, 2014, from *Stellar Axis: Antarctica*, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica, 2006.  
Photo: Lita Albuquerque.



It was also early in my art education that I was given the book, *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees*, and like so many art students, I was deeply influenced by Lawrence Weschler's conversations with Robert Irwin. The biography follows Irwin's trajectory from grappling with the early years of AbEx to his career-defining work concerned with the limits of perception. In conversation, Irwin describes Los Angeles with love and admiration and described driving around town in the perfect car looking for the freshest Coca-Cola in town. California's diverse culture of artisans were essential to Irwin's material evolution from oil painting on canvas to shaping metal, plastic, and light to create mesmerizing finishes and ambiguous forms. With his light works, Irwin challenged himself to make as he said, "...a painting that does not begin and end at an edge but rather starts to take in and become in-

volved with the space or environment around it." With the MoMA showing of *Untitled* in 1968, Irwin disintegrated the boundary between the meaning an artist creates on the picture plane and the meaning of everything that supports it. The glowing white discs' diffuse play of light and shadows are made to keep the eye in a fragile state of discernment. The viewer tries to distinguish the illuminated object from its shadow, from the wall behind it and from the air in front of it. This series became more closely tied to Minimalism and the California Light and Space movement and its philosophy and mode of making, seen in the work of Irwin along with Larry Bell, Lita Albuquerque, and James Turrell, expanded the definition of art along with its relationship to the body and refocused the way we look at images to include the material environment and context in which we live. I think of this work now as I drive each

John Baldessari, *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, 1973. 12 offset lithographs, each 7 x 10 3/16 inches. © John Baldessari. Photo: SFMOMA.







Mike Kelley, *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry* (1991). Conference rooms, copy room, office furnishings, murals, approximately 10 ft. x 44 ft. x 25 ft. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992. Photo by: Douglas M. Parke.

day, creeping along the freeway in my daily commute, under the flat disc of a neon pink sun or gigantic shining moon ushering the shifting palette of a radiant Los Angeles day into the purple glow of night.

At the same time another California artist, John Baldessari, was transforming the relationship between image and text in painting and photography. His performance work, *I Am MAKing Art* documents Baldessari standing opposite the camera, repeating the statement flatly, *I am MAKing Art*, while improvising casual arm movements and hand gestures that boil the elements of the artwork down to the edge of indistinguishability with life. In the series, "Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line," (1973) Baldessari tosses three red rubber balls into the air while Carol Wixom captured the attempts on a standard roll of 35 mm film. The six "most successful" exposures of the 36 became the artifact of his performance. The resulting off-set lithographs capture the liminal spaces between the artist's intent, process and the presented image. It's hard to understate Baldessari's influence on founding Conceptual Art and its lasting effects on art in general in Los Angeles. In addition to his exploration of new forms, he was also a beloved teacher, building a legacy at California Institute of the Arts, commonly known as CalArts, that remains palpable. Baldessari would famously teach at CalArts and later UCLA to students including Mike Kelley, James Welling, Tony Oursler, David Salle and many others before passing away in 2020.

The visionary pushing against the boundaries of form and definitions has been a cogent element in the contemporary art mythology of Los Angeles, most famously personified in the 1990s by Paul Schimmel's polarizing "Helter Skelter" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. The seminal exhibition featured a cast

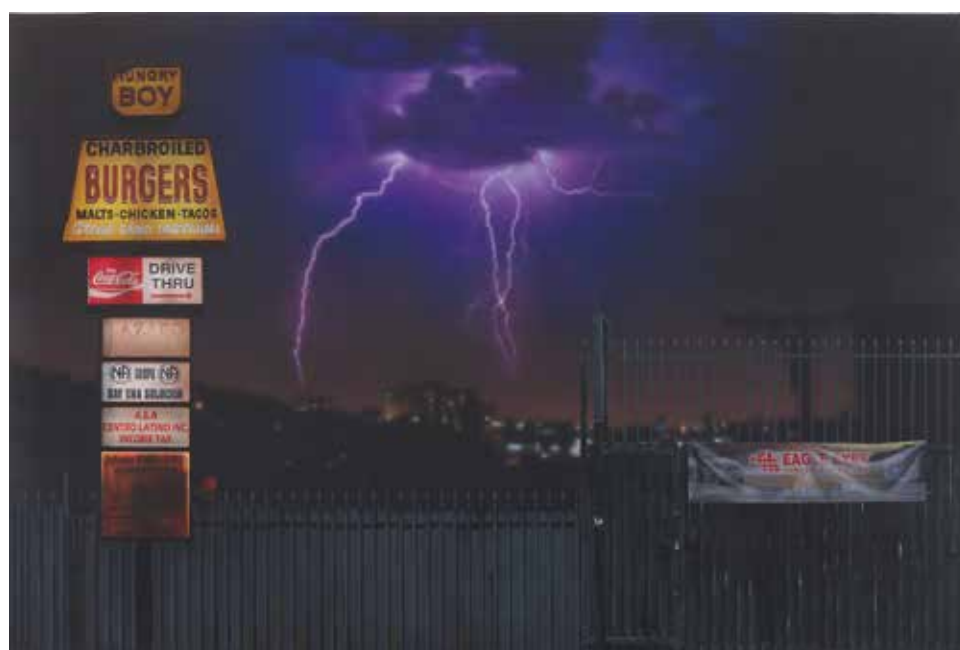
of Southern California artists that have now proven to be some of the most influential American artists in the last thirty years including Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Charles Ray, Raymond Pettibon, Larri Pittman and Liz Larner to name a few. While the show was highly speculative, claiming to sum up what Los Angeles would be in the 90s at the very beginning of the decade, it captured a breaking wave of angst and subversion of good taste that may seem outmoded today. But at the time, it introduced a tactless, subversive voice into a climate saturated with the "finish fetish" artists. "Helter Skelter" included Mike Kelley's *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry* (1991). Schimmel and Kelley worked closely to create a full-scale model of the artist's commissioned proposal for a set of murals to adorn the walls of a distinguished Gehry designed Chiat/Day office building in Venice, California. The pair worked tirelessly to bring the proposal to life according to spec, down to the exact doorknobs designed by Gehry, as the artist knew that his design would never be accepted for its intended site. The concept repurposed the disgruntled, off-color jokes and flyers that are common in company break rooms to be enlarged and painted on the walls of the central conference room. Alongside crude caricatures of balding, suited businessmen, one wall reads from floor to ceiling in bold black letters, "IF ASSHOLES COULD FLY—THIS PLACE WOULD BE AN AIRPORT!" Kelley added a transparent window in the conference room wall that would reveal the adjacent mail room, though its utilitarian design was never meant to be truly seen. The cartoons and gags take on the quick, coarse look of a photocopy bringing the consciousness of out-of-sight labor into a normally sheltered white-collar meeting space. From the exhibition's cast of heavy hit-



John Valadez, *Pool Party*, 1987, 69 x 107," oil on canvas. Cheech Marin collection. Courtesy John Valadez. Photo: <https://udspace.udel.edu>.

ters, I see Schimmel's vision of Los Angeles most concisely represented in the work of Mike Kelley. Though the artist himself came to California from Michigan, he typified anti-establishment temperament and visionary practice in the spirit of his teacher, John Baldessari. Kelley's influence is seen in the prevalence of bright multi-media installation art and an ongoing artworld affinity for the abject. While "Helter Skelter" alone cannot contain what L.A. was in the 1990s, it galvanized an antagonistic perspective that became a part of the larger market and the trajectory of art made in the city since. It must be said that LA's scene, historically and today, is less male and much less White than Schimmel's roster of artists or the standard Modernist art education suggests. Charles White, David

Hammons, Carrie Mae Weems, Catherine Opie, and Diane Thater all come to mind as Angelenos with just as indomitable legacies as the artists outlined so far. The works of these artists are interwoven into the history of the city and one should consider their impact on L.A. simply by taking a different path through time. It's also naive to consider the culture made here without considering how Los Angeles has been shaped by the people who have been living on this land the longest. As a newcomer to Southern California, I've found this city to have a lingering cultural segregation with an apparent wealth of Indigenous, Latinx and Chicanx artists showing in parallel and on the edges of the mainstream narrative. While I was guided in school to understand a Richard Diebenkorn painting in the stream



Sayre Gomez, *Hungry Boy*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 72 inches. Photo: François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.



Lauren Halsey, Installation view of *we still here, there*, March 4–September 3, 2018 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Zak Kelley.

of the American visual consciousness, I am only now learning about the impact of the artists that led the Chicano muralist movement (José Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera) as well as the generations of artists and community builders following them, including realist painter John Valadez, and the photographer and performance artist Harry Gamboa Jr. who co-directs the program in Photography and Media at CalArts.

Los Angeles today is in some ways a more self-aware and contradictory site, both politically and culturally. This place finds itself in the center of overlapping, imminent reckonings—climate catastrophe, increasing political isolation, festering income inequality and its resulting explosion of homelessness. L.A.'s art market continues to grow in its gravitational pull as the collector class becomes richer, the working class more precarious and the state of art reflects it all. The scene is pluralistic without a standout singular mandate. The pervasive artistic ideologies are driven by the major art schools and corralled by galleries into diverse programs that can cater to any collector according to their whim and position. With a multitude of realities held in L.A. seeding the many futures ahead of us, I see the tension between the perception of the city and its true potential reflected in two young artists working today, Sayre Gomez and Lauren Halsey. Both artists have strong winds at their backs with seemingly skyrocketing careers, and in my view, wildly diverging perspectives. Sayre Gomez is a painter, born in Chicago and a graduate of Cal Arts, who works across painting, sculpture, and video to create hyper realistic quotations from the urban landscape of Los Angeles. His images and objects are air-brushed and stenciled to perfection, with many slipping totally into *trompe l'oeil*. Gomez pictures L.A. with an excruciating eye for detail and a pragmatic flatness. Many of his images buzz with multiple focal points—a sublime sunset, a homeless encampment, an ironic smile on a

discarded take-out bag. Gomez shows regularly with François Ghebaly in both Los Angeles and New York, his last two exhibitions titled "Apocalypse Porn" and "X-scapes." Both shows feature views of Los Angeles that are stunningly modeled, simultaneously decrepit, beautiful, and deeply cynical. Gomez's work captures the uncanny aspect of L.A.'s sublime in-decline environment, and it leaves me with the haunting feeling that I'm apathetically watching the city burn, surveying perfectly modeled renderings of the scene recontextualized and on sale in pristine gallery white-space. Alternatively, Lauren Halsey is an installation artist born and raised in South Central Los Angeles who graduated from Yale University shortly before exhibiting in "Made in L.A. 2018," along with solo exhibitions at MOCA and David Kordansky Gallery. Halsey's work is a neon bright pastiche of hand painted signs and objects that shows a completely different realism based in the cityscape. Her self-titled exhibition at Kordansky in 2020 featured a cacophonous sculptural collage of painted cubes and prisms all embellished with the visual vocabulary of her neighborhood. There is joy and celebration in every painted image, be it a take on a Cheetos logo or a reproduction of an illuminated sign of a local hair shop. There is also the pressing reality that Halsey is memorializing a culture being swept out by gentrification. In addition to her installation work, Halsey leads the multi-faceted community project, *Summaeverythang*, which throughout the pandemic sourced and delivered organic produce to the people of South Central and continues to do so. Halsey's work, while holding space for many of the contradictions of this place, has me looking for all that should be preserved and invested in, despite the challenges of the future. ■

**Sara Rouse is an artist and writer living and working in Los Angeles. She received her B.F.A. from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 2012 and her M.F.A.**



# That Was Then This Is Now: Alexandra Schwartz on Ed Ruscha

By Kelli Wood

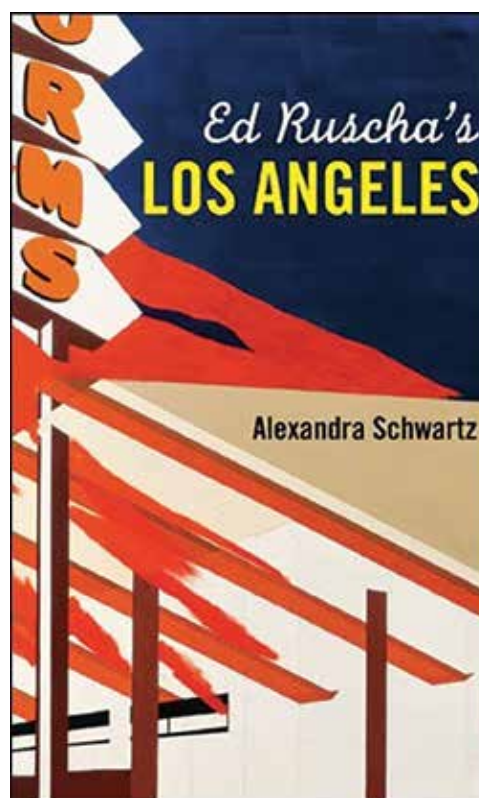
For decades the bicoastal binary of LA and New York positioned California as jejune within the art world, superficial to the formidable genius emanating from Empire City artists and as proclaimed by her equally eminent critics. Yet since the 1950s Ed Ruscha has capitalized on the urban contradictions and consumerist stereotypes of Lotusland, garnering him international celebrity as an artist synonymous with the city itself. Characteristically Delphic, Ruscha once opined, “I’m dead serious about being nonsensical.” His pithy vernacular paintings, photographs, and prints have influenced pop, minimal, and conceptual art movements worldwide, and his works command considerable attention in the market today; In November Ruscha’s citric *Made in California* litho (1971) and liquid *Ripe* (1967) broke auction records selling for \$100,000 and \$20 million.

Dr. Alexandra Schwartz has played the role of archivist, historian, compiler, critic, and curator of Ruscha’s art for over 20 years. The *New Art Examiner* spoke with her about the concurrent journeys of Ruscha’s work and her writing.

Schwartz: Thank you so much for having me. I’m really pleased to get the chance to talk about Ed’s work. And I think I mentioned to you that I wrote for the *New Art Examiner* a long time ago when I was in grad school.

**NAE:** Oh wow, well welcome back. Given the title of our issue, I can’t help but to want to start our interview with Ed Ruscha’s *That Was Then This Is Now* (1989). In retrospect his works seem to have a sort of prescient quality. Can you give us some context for the ‘that’ and ‘then’ of his artistic practice?

**Schwartz:** Sure. Ed Ruscha was born in 1937. So he’s now 84, and he’s been around a long time. I first got to know his earliest work, which was made in the late 50s to early 60s. Ed was unusual in that he was able to build a big international career from Los Angeles. At that time there weren’t that many artists who succeeded in doing that or



Book cover, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (MIT Press, 2010). Photo: Alexandra Schwartz.

even really wanted to do that. The push was to go to New York. If you wanted to have an ambitious career, you had to be in New York. But he was very entrenched in LA, both in terms of his own life and also his subject matter.

**NAE:** A kind of bi-coastal polarization.

**Schwartz:** Oh yeah. Of course, I would say that's not true at all anymore. At this point LA is such a powerhouse. But at the time what was happening in LA was not what was happening in New York, and Ed was able to bridge the gap.



Ed Ruscha, *Norms, La Cienega on Fire* (1964). Oil on canvas. 64 1/4 x 124 1/2 inches. © Ed Ruscha.

A lot of his early work was in line with what was happening in pop art and conceptual art. And he was able to build his career from LA when it was still a separate world within the art world.

**NAE: The site and place of Los Angeles was, and is, so essential to Ruscha's work.**

**Schwartz:** So much of his early work in particular deals with the city. At that time, it was going through huge changes. It was growing a lot. It was the height of Hollywood and then the waning of the studio system and the beginning of a new Hollywood. And there was a vibrant art scene there. Ed's work was so much about LA and its literal landscape, the way the city was being developed. Car culture. In his early books, such as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), he was doing this kind of study of meticulous study of the LA landscape, and his works show how he was fascinated by it. There were so many changes happening in LA at the time in terms of its infrastructure, and the whole process was new to him as someone who grew up in Oklahoma.

**NAE: How do you, we, think about Ruscha's work as LA's geography shifts and touchstone landmarks disappear or are threatened? Places like Norm's La Cienega.**

**Schwartz:** I think it's something that's always interested him. I don't know if you've read about the works that the Getty acquired, in which every year he's taken photographs of many different streets in LA. But he's very much a historian, scholarly in a certain way, systemic. Ed's interested in how the city changed every year—what got torn down, what got built? This history of the city. Thinking about the city as a living thing has always been part of his practice. It's always changing. Things are disappearing and things are coming up.



Ed Ruscha, *Ripe* (1967). Oil on canvas. 59 1/4 x 55 inches. © Ed Ruscha.



Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Offset lithograph, 1966 (second printing 1971). 7 1/8 x 5 3/4 x 3/8 in. Getty Center. © Ed Ruscha.

**NAE:** His work is also so much about the people as well as the place.

**Schwartz:** In my opinion, Ed's work examines LA in terms of the architecture and urbanism, but also the culture, Hollywood. The movie industry and their image making connects with his image making as an artist who was trying to establish an art community where he could work and have a lively set of interlocutors. And also, the way that community built a market among collectors.

One thing that I found really fascinating about him in thinking about the architecture and urbanism is that he knew Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and their work. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* was very influential on *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), one of the main texts of postmodern architecture. He was immersed in this kind of thinking about LA as a new kind of urbanism that celebrated vernacular and pop imagery and wasn't highfalutin. I think he was critical of it in some ways, too, especially of Hollywood, which he both loved and was kind of a part of, but also saw some of the emptiness within it.

**NAE:** What about the 'then' of your writing on Ruscha? How did you first start working on his art? You've worked on his archive not just as an art historian, but also as a critic, and also presumably as a friend. What is that like?

**Schwartz:** Well, I was lucky in that. I learned to work with contemporary artists by working with him. The way I got to know him is that when I was in graduate school, I wrote a seminar paper about his work, and I found all of these interviews with him. I love doing that kind of archival research and looking at the reception of an artist's work. So, I had used all these interviews, and my advisor, Maria Gough, said in kind of an offhand way, oh, you should do a book of these.

**NAE:** And that became the book you co-edited with Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal* (2004).

**Schwartz:** That's right. I happened to be in London when he was giving a lecture at the Royal Academy. I introduced myself then and eventually I went out to Los Angeles and pitched the idea of a book of his artist interviews, and he was game. And I was young—24, 25. I feel like the fact that he was willing to work with me when I was so green was a lovely gesture of good faith. And at that point, his archives had not really been seen by scholars or really anyone outside his studio. He's well organized and his studio is well organized. But most of what I was looking at, at that time, was very fresh.

**NAE:** A little before his work really took off.

**Schwartz:** Hah, he was much less busy than he is now. He was busy, but he wasn't the giant that he is now. He was just a lovely person to have that first kind of working experience with. He was sort of paternal toward me and very kind, very generous. Between the late 90s, early 2000s and now, the context of his work has changed so much. LA has so many museums, there are a lot of collectors and galleries. And Ed has become, just, this giant in the field commanding sort of insane prices. And he's also become this elder statesman, which was not the case when I started working with him, either.

**NAE:** It's interesting that term elder statesman, because in a way that there had been a kind of stereotype of femininity or juvenility ascribed to the LA art scene, and Ruscha performed a kind of hyper masculinity in order to achieve his artistic aim.

**Schwartz:** Yeah. It's really interesting. He was good looking, that's just kind of a fact. And so I think that he realized that he could help make a name for himself by playing with that. He was trained as a graphic designer, and





Ed Ruscha, *Made in California* (1971), lithograph. 20 × 28 w in.

he was working actually as the art director for *Artforum*, back when it was based in LA. I think he realized that he could use that to his advantage. He put ads out in *Artforum*, which other artists were doing at the time, too. But I think that the image of the artist as West Coast, James Dean-ish, sort of part-cowboy, part-surfer, worked. A lot of the artists associated with the Ferus Gallery, which was the big, ambitious gallery in LA at the time, were doing that. That was very much him as a young person, I think, and he's always been savvy about media. And it's not that I think it was all disingenuous. I think it was ironic, a lot of it. But I think that that image was something that he had fun with.

**NAE:** I do remember that ad where he has the buxom and blonde pulling Ruscha's Ferus Gallery business card from her cleavage. I was thinking artists like Judy Chi-

cago tried to do the same thing with ads, and they were not necessarily received in the same way.

**Schwartz:** Yeah, absolutely. There's a reason why the Feminist Art Program was in LA at CalArts. Not that it was so much better elsewhere. But I think that it was such a macho culture...it was not a great atmosphere for women artists. It was so determined by Hollywood and this kind of cool movie star with starlet company culture. I feel like there is a lot for Judy Chicago to do, to be critical of, in that context. It was quite fraught in terms of that early feminist moment with Womanhouse and the Feminist Art Program versus what was happening with Ferus. There really were not women artists associated with Ferus that were well represented.

**NAE:** So much of that macho Americana in his work seems to transcend just a West Coast aesthetic.

**Schwartz:** It's funny. My perception of that has changed recently. Just this past year I did an exhibition in Oklahoma City that was Ruscha's first ever solo show in Oklahoma, which is kind of unbelievable at the age of almost 84. **ED RUSCHA:** OKLA at the Oklahoma Contemporary. In doing that show and looking at his work, I saw how important not only LA was to shaping his sensibility, but also Oklahoma. The cowboy thing, the horizontality of the Oklahoma landscape, the Western, both in the terms of Hollywood Westerns, and a Western mythology that's so much a part of his work. And I think it's significant that he didn't do a show that looked at his Oklahoma roots until now. For a long time, I think, he really didn't want to call attention to that part of his life. He was so invested in being in LA, but as he's gotten older, he's gone back to his roots a little more. And once I had that new angle to look at his work, I started to see it everywhere.

Ed Ruscha, *That Was Then This Is Now* (1989). Acrylic on canvas. 32 x 46 inches. © Ed Ruscha.





Ed Ruscha, *Standard Study #2*, 1962. Opaque watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite on paper. 5 3/8 x 10 1/8 inches. © Ed Ruscha. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**NAE:** It makes me think of the quote from not your first book with him, but your second book, Ed Ruscha's *Los Angeles* (2010), where he disavows Los Angeles out of needing to be seen as part of the center and not periphery of art.

"Being in Los Angeles has had little or no effect on my work. I could have done it anywhere. I don't see any independent trends here. The climate isn't that conducive to painting."

—Ed Ruscha, 1966

Now that Los Angeles itself is a center, it's as if he's able to revisit the parts of his practice and creativity that come from his roots in Oklahoma. The then has in a way become the now for Ruscha's work.

**Schwartz:** Totally. I think a lot of it is personal, too, now that he's older. It was touching doing that show. It was obviously important to him to have a big show in his home state. There was this huge museum dinner, and he had invited just everyone he knew from Oklahoma—his family, his childhood friends. He brought his grandson and his son. It was obviously so personally meaningful to him to come home again.

**NAE:** I really responded to Ruscha's works on those drums. It's interesting that he had collected the drums from Los Angeles and waited so long to make works from them. And now the phrases, the language of those pieces are from Oklahoma.

**Schwartz:** We had some of those works in the exhibition in Oklahoma City, and I think people really responded to them. Ed has talked about how he's a little afraid that that kind of slang and vernacular language of his childhood is dying out because a lot of those regional distinctions are just not surviving. There's something maybe a little nostalgic about those works and wanting to preserve the language. But also it's just part of his childhood memories.

Ed was happy about the show, and it was sentimental too for me to be reunited in a working relationship with him after so many years. After my life has changed so much, and his life has changed so much.

**NAE:** So what about the now for you? What does the future look like as a writer and curator?

**Schwartz:** I'm working on a couple of shows that are opening in the first half of 2022. The first one is going to



Ed Ruscha, *Never Not* (2018). Acrylic on drum vellum, 31.5 in. diameter. © Ed Ruscha.



Installation view of "ED RUSCHA: OKLA" at the Oklahoma Contemporary 2021. Photo by Alex Marks.

be at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, and it's called *Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art*. It's looking at 35 artists from all over the world who are using garments as part of their practice. So that can mean garments that are part of installations, sculpture, or garments for performance. It's at the intersection of art and fashion, art and costume and looking at how artists are using costume to think about issues of identity and activism. A hybrid between an art exhibition and a fashion exhibition. Some of the best-known artists involved are Nick Cave, Devan Shimoyama, Mary Sibande—the exhibition features artists from all over and at all stages of their career. There's work coming from India and Thailand and Nepal. And then I'm a co-curator on a show at the Aldrich in Connecticut with Amy Smith Stewart, "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone," that is looking back at Lucy Lippard's "Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists" show from 1971.

**NAE:** Wonderful. It seems like you started in this place of examining contemporary art and its very masculine roots, and your work has taken a trajectory toward the history of contemporary women artists and garmenting and fashion. We're looking forward to what comes next. ■

Alexandra Schwartz is a New York-based art historian and curator and Adjunct Professor at SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology. Her upcoming and recent exhibitions include "Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art" at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2022), "Ed Ruscha: OKLA" at the Oklahoma Contemporary (2021), and "As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings" at the Clark Art Institute, with a catalogue from Yale University Press (2017). She is the author of *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* (University of California Press, 2015), *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (MIT Press, 2010), the co-editor of *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA, 2010), and the editor of *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages by Ed Ruscha* (MIT Press, 2002). Her catalogues have twice won Awards for Excellence from the Association of Art Museum Curators.

All images courtesy of Ed Ruscha.

**Kelli Wood** is a Regional Editor of the *New Art Examiner* and Assistant Professor of Art History—Museum & Curatorial Studies at the University of Tennessee.



# “Joan Mitchell” at SFMOMA: A Long Overdue Introduction

*By Sarah Thibault*

I had seen Joan Mitchell around, like acquaintances in a friend group who you never really got to know. Her work appeared, like this fictional cool girl, occasionally and in small doses. From afar I have always coveted her fearless mark-making, as well as her iconic personal style: the effortless 1950s, bohemian chic à la française with skinny pants, a turtleneck, short square bangs, and a cigarette always burning from her fingers.

From one painter to another, I gave her quiet acknowledgement for a lifetime of dedication to the craft of painting, a career that spanned over four decades. It was clear she had developed an idiosyncratic vocabulary, and a unique approach to color—cerulean blue, burnt sienna, warm lavender and an almost bloody crimson red are some of her palettes.

But other than her canonical status as one of the few women among the notoriously macho Abstract Expressionist painters, the few paintings I saw of hers never made much of an impression on me. I didn’t quite get her. What drives her work? I wondered. How does she construct an image? Plus, there were my own finicky, painterly critiques. Too much white, her colors are too muddy. There’s not enough variation in her brush strokes.

When “Joan Mitchell,” the 80-painting survey show at SFMOMA was announced, I decided I would keep an open mind out of due respect for her as one of the women on whose shoulders I stand. I hoped that perhaps I didn’t really know her work, and that I hadn’t seen the best of her yet.

I was not disappointed. The spanning retrospective curated by Sarah Roberts and Katy Siegle felt like a formal introduction to an artist who I had misunderstood for decades. Seeing so much work at once, along with texts, photos and video interviews of the artist, even old paint brushes from her studio—to extend the metaphor a bit too far—felt as if Mitchell and I were seated next to one another at a dinner party and allowed to converse at length.



Joan Mitchell in her studio at 77 rue Daguerre, Paris, 1956. Photo by Loomis Dean/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock.



Joan Mitchell, *La Vie en rose*, 1979. Oil on canvas. 9 feet 2 1/2 in. x 22 feet 3 15/16 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, anonymous gift and purchase, George A. Hearn Fund, by exchange. © Estate of Joan Mitchell.



Joan Mitchell, *No Rain*, 1976. Oil on canvas. 9 feet 2 inches x 13 feet 1/58 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the Estate of Joan Mitchell. © Estate of Joan Mitchell.





Joan Mitchell, *Petit Matin*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Private collection.

Personal details spilled from the wall texts next to wild bursts of oil paint and photos from her life. I was surprised to learn that despite her avant-garde presentation and unconventional life, she came from an upper-class family that supported her artistic practice financially, if not personally. One slightly gossipy wall text explains that her family bought her the estate in Vétheuil, France where she spent the last half of her life.

There are other moments of subtle salaciousness that hint at short-lived relationships, substance abuse and a history of depression. The retrospective presents Mitchell's personal strife as inseparable from the inner fire that fueled her ground-breaking, often-challenging paintings. In a video that accompanied the exhibition, we see Mitchell explaining that men saw her as too harsh, too outspoken—for a woman. She even took to calling herself un *mauvais herbe* or bad seed, like the flowers she painted, unwelcome, but as the exhibition catalogue explains: "beautiful, strong and persistent when seen by the right eyes."

All this personal intrigue aside, the "Joan Mitchell" exhibition is as monumental in scale as much of the work

itself, with 80 large-scale paintings and a travel schedule of three destinations in two years (SFMOMA, Baltimore Museum of Art and the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, both in 2022). Out of all the works, 10 of the paintings will only be shown in San Francisco.

I was surprised to find that, like many painters in history, she was inspired by nature and landscape, as well as the more subjective sense of place as in *No Rain* (1976) and *Evenings on 73rd Street* (1957). In addition, there were more personal renditions of poems or songs like the epic, multi-paneled *Ode to Joy (a poem by Frank O'Hara)* (1970–71) and *La Vie en Rose* (1979). As Roberts and Siegle write in the catalogue, "Across her life, Mitchell experimented with how painting could embody physical experience and also the complexity of the inner self. Ultimately, she sought to get beyond the boundaries of that self to connect with the world: a poem, a passage of music, a dog—even a tree."

The exhibition cites Van Gogh, Monet and Cezanne as Mitchell's major influences. These references helped ground the show in a tangible art historical context (other than the nebulous nihilism of Abstract Expressionism) and gave me a new lens with which to regard her life's work.



For example, in *Blue Tree* (1964), a wild mess of brown, magenta and cerulean blue is maybe a leafless tree set on the backdrop of a cloudless sky ripped from the platonic ideal of a tree and made into something new.

Her painted universe is passed through her own internal filter, always exploding and being reborn onto her larger-than-life size canvases that make the viewer feel the color (those yellows!) rather than just see it.

This artistic lineage is underlined by the last painting in the show, *Untitled* (1992). The piece is a diptych with two masses of yellow and orange marks, one on each canvas like two bouquets of sunflowers, accented with tufts of green placed in the lower half of a white and gray backdrop. Sunflowers, an iconic subject matter for Van Gogh, were an ongoing motif throughout Mitchell's career and one of the plants she named as fellow *mauvais herbes*. They are rendered here dynamic and dripping as if made of pure emotion, a self-portrait of the artist as an offering. They were originally made as a gift to friends and are some of the last works Mitchell ever made.

This exhibition felt like a balm after too much screen time has left me craving a blast of pigment expressed through someone else's expert hand onto a real surface that you can reach out and touch (but I didn't). As the curators suggest with their poetically worded call-to-action: "Mitchell's subtle surfaces and moving color will offer visitors a transporting visual experience and remind us of the irreplaceable and overwhelming power of seeing art in person." In other words, go buy some tickets to this show. You won't regret it. ■

"Joan Mitchell" is on view at SFMOMA through January 17, 2022, and at the Baltimore Art Museum from March 6 to August 14, 2022. The show was previously on view at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris from February 20 through August 26, 2019.

**Sarah Thibault is an artist & writer based in San Francisco, CA. She is a Charter Resident of the Minnesota Street Project and the host of The Side Woo podcast. You can find her on Instagram at @sarah\_thibault**



Joan Mitchell, *Sans neige*, 1969. Oil on canvas. 8 feet 6 2/5 inches x 16 feet 5 inches. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, gift of the Hillman Foundation. © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

# Remembering Jerry Hausman (1925-2021): Art Educator, Scholar, Intellect, and Friend

*By Diane Thodos*

When I first met Jerry Hausman in 2009 it felt like I had discovered an open door that I had been seeking for a long time. He was the living memory of the formation of the Abstract Expressionist and art education movements in New York City during the late 1940's and early 50's. He always expressed a sense of exhilaration about that time, and spoke about the feeling of possibility that was in the air as though it had happened only yesterday.

He had been in the middle of it all, with endless stories to tell. We would talk for hours, till our mouths were dry and we had to grab a glass of water just to keep going. He recounted the artists, writers, teachers, critics, art educators, dealers, galleries, and personalities that were part of a rich and dynamic praxis he was swept up in. Jerry was a rare kind of personality, someone who was essential in building the rich networks that connected artists, educators, writers and intellectuals over a 70 year span. He had been the kind of essential person that held the art world together and made things happen, part of the glue that kept it together and made it work. As a professional artist and art critic this was something I had ceaselessly looked for but almost never found. One great exception was Jerry Hausman.

Jerry was a critical innovator in the field of public school art education right after WWII, when John Dewey's emphasis on "Art as Experience" was transforming the field in radical ways. He was a "walking history of art education in the United States,"<sup>1</sup> as one of his friends put it. His career lasted more than six decades. In that time, he served as president of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, head of the art department at Ohio State University, Vice President of the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and as professor of art education at New York University.

After WWII, Jerry enrolled at the Pratt Institute to study commercial art. For a while he was a cartoonist doing inking for the Captain Marvel Comics. He began studying art education in New York City at Columbia University in 1947 while also attending the famous Art Students



Jerry Hausman at Ohio State University Department of Art, 1953.

League where he had Hale Woodruff and Reginald Marsh as teachers. He also had William Baziotes as an important teacher and mentor. Jerry ended up teaching at NYU in 1948. "I fell in love with Washington Square... I was within three minutes walking distance of the Cedar Bar."<sup>2</sup> There he experienced the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist art scene first hand. Hans Hofmann had his classes above a country music night club called the Village Barn at 35 E 8th Street. "His classes consisted of experienced serious painters and then old ladies with tennis shoes... We used to have artist's panels. That was the beginning of The Club,"<sup>3</sup> a social gathering hall that became famous for the artists, writers, and intellectuals who gathered to discuss modern art.



*I was there at the beginning...the whole experience of going to school there was just so eye opening...my fellow students were Alfred Leslie, Larry Rivers, George Segal. It was an art education program that had in it the active participation of people who were in the middle of the art world. I went to the early meetings of "The Club." In an evening you would have Alfred Barr or Leo Castelli, Harold Rosenberg or Clement Greenberg, [Adolph] Gottlieb or Ad Reinhardt. Ad Reinhardt later became one of my closest personal friends... Ad was incredibly bright. His insight and sensitivity comes out a lot in his writing. Ad was teaching at Brooklyn College... Rothko was a difficult person [to know]. Very quiet. People called him "the Rabbi"... Franz Kline was a 'tough guy'... [Robert] Motherwell was always the most impressive because he was the most like an academic and was trained in philosophy... very articulate and spoke with eloquence, very erudite. He was quite a hero to me because he was so smart... [Willem] de Kooning hardly ever spoke. He was a strong presence there.<sup>4</sup>*

Jerry recalled the early dealers "Sam Kootz and Sidney Janis...both these guys manufactured shirts. They did not come out of the art world in the sense of [having] any formal training or history or criticism. They were in the art business."<sup>5</sup>

He would regularly go to the Cedar Tavern where he saw Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, de Kooning and beat writers like Allen Ginsberg. A friend of Jerry's was in Hans Hofmann's art class and invited him to come to his critiques.

*We used to go to the Hofmann's critiques on Friday evening above the Village Barn—the Hoffman School of Art. He was just a master in the fact that his classes were not a homogenous group. They [students] were not at the same level of training. He had beginners, some middle, and some very very experienced artists working there. What always impressed me about his critiques is he would arrange the work with a view towards a sequential lecture that he wanted to give...he was putting together his narrative of what art ought to be like. He would talk about "push-pull"...it was like going to a performance.<sup>6</sup>*

Keith Brown, an art educator currently teaching at Loyola Academy in Wilmette, IL, was a student when he met Jerry in 2008. He recalls Jerry recounting an important studio visitation.

*He remembers being in Jackson Pollock's studio...seeing the drip paintings...he remembers not liking or understanding them. ...then [later] coming to the realization that they were ground breaking, that art was breaking the rules, that action painting was legitimate and seeing the canvas as a space to act...he understood how radical it was.<sup>7</sup>*

Jerry was close to Irving Sandler, author of the seminal text on Abstract Expressionism *The Triumph of American Painting* first published in 1970. "I was Irving Sandler's doctoral advisor. I have known him since 1948 when he was a student at NYU and chronicled *The Club's* panel discussion."<sup>8</sup> Jerry also had deep and lasting friendships with George Segal, Ad Reinhardt, and Alan Kaprow. "George Segal, a close friend of Jerry's, would scavenge throwaway material from the Johnson & Johnson factory in New



Artist George Segal. Photo: Wikicommons.

Brunswick New Jersey where he lived. This is where he got a lot of plaster gauze that he experimented with to make his figurative sculptures—wrapping the forms and figures and putting them in staged scenes with found objects."<sup>9</sup> Jerry even ended up being a model for one of Segal's plastering sessions.

Reinhardt and Hofmann had a strong impact on Jerry's teaching and philosophy.

*When we talk about Hofmann or Reinhardt we are talking about pedagogy, their approach to teaching. A lot of my interests go back and address the task of teaching another audience...younger people, children...that's where I started. I go back to the problem of what we are teaching children, how they see their world, how they identify what's important for their picture, their expression...their concepts."<sup>10</sup>*

Jerry frequently attended lectures by art scholar and psychologist Rudolf Arnheim at the New School for Social Research and got to know him very well.

*I cannot say enough nice things about him...as you go through your life as a teacher you try to model yourself after people. He was always one of my models. I have never known a man who would prepare his lectures as carefully as he did and deliver them with such clarity. I used to go to Meyer Schapiro lectures also. Meyer was teaching at Columbia... this is an art historian who could speak about any creative art with such expertise.<sup>11</sup>*



Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann.  
Photo: Wikicommons.

Jerry's time in the New York art world was well summed up in a Harold Rosenberg quote he often repeated. "What goes on the canvas is not a picture but an event."<sup>12</sup> This insight profoundly influenced Jerry's approach to innovating the field of art education. "My education was not an organized curriculum, it was coming of age in a place where a lot of things were happening. I didn't realize how much I was learning when I was doing it."<sup>13</sup>

In 1953 after getting his PhD in art education at NYU, Jerry was whisked off to Ohio State University where he became president of the art department. He was very effective in expanding the art program while building the art education department based on the innovative work of Viktor Lowenfeld. Before this time art education in public schools focused on art as eye-hand coordination drawing from life, and competence in craft. Lowenfeld's approach was radically different. "The function of teaching of art was to help in the expression and realization of ideas... Children draw what they feel not what they see"<sup>14</sup> as opposed to art as imitation. The "Conference on Creativity" Jerry attended at Penn State in 1953 was groundbreaking in how it emphasized how "creative experience became an integral part of a person's...stream of living...where youth can come to grips with ideas and feelings they want to embody in an organic form."<sup>15</sup> Art education was undergoing radical transformation.

After establishing the department at Ohio State University, Jerry returned to NYU as a teacher in art education. By then he had already established himself as a fairly influential art educator in changing the way people were teaching art. He also worked at the John D. Rockefeller III fund giving grants to artists. He had a real "crusade about

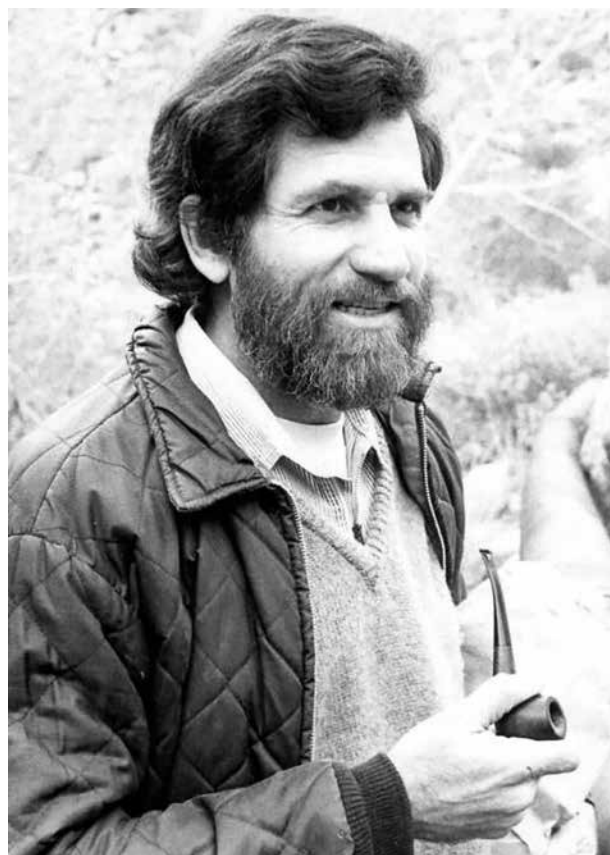
the money getting to the right people."<sup>16</sup> Leah Hausman recalled how her father:

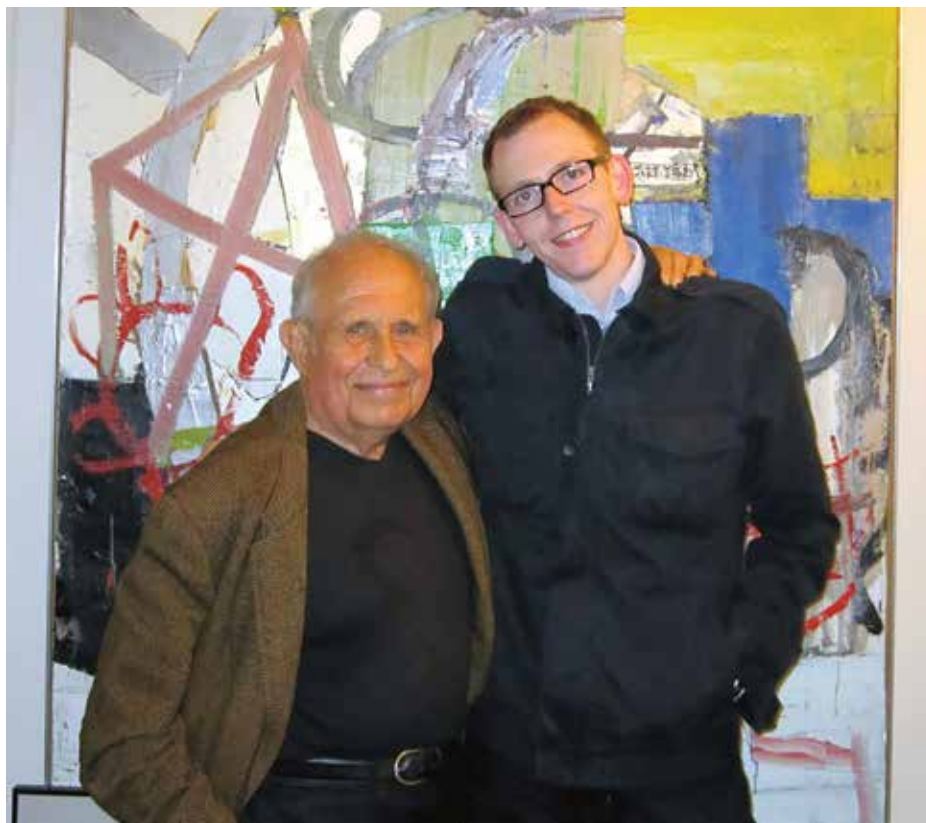
*always found artists appealing and Charismatic... There was always a crazy group of guys [around him]...they all had the same mission. They were fighting the good fight together...he attracted good and interesting people right to the end. Dad was really into Alan Kaprow's work in New York, happenings, artists coming together in a space...he talked about John Cage and Merce Cunningham.<sup>17</sup>*

Jerry would go to their performances in grungy downtown warehouses. He was also actively interested in politics and took relish protesting Nixon at the march on Washington in 1969. He was deeply concerned about civil rights and the Vietnam War and remained politically active "right to the end."

After teaching at NYU he went on to become president of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design where he invited Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Wilson to lecture and perform at the Walker Art Center. Chicago artist Wesley Kimler attended MCAD in 1978-79 when Jerry was president. "During Jerry's tenure there...MCAD was probably the best art college in America in large part due to Jerry."<sup>18</sup> Kimler and Jerry had a close relationship. When Kimler's work at MCAD raised controversy "...he was fierce. He stood up for me. I will never forget it...he was a special man...a champion of mine and was throughout the course of his life afterwards."<sup>19</sup> Jerry brought artists

Artist Allan Kaprow. Photo: Wikicommons.





Jerry Hausman with Chicago area educator and visual artist Keith Brown in front of a painting by Wesley Kimler. Photo courtesy of Keith Brown.

like Robert Irwin, Iranian artist Siah Armajani, and Robert Bauer, known for his intense psychological portraiture, to MCAD. "It was a very heady place. I was stunned watching conceptualism 101 being reinvented...Jerry was this huge influence and brought this level of sophistication to the Minneapolis art scene."<sup>20</sup>

I got to know Jerry well in 2009 when he showed interest in the local effort to reestablish the New Art Examiner as an art publication. We ended up having endless rambling discussions about the problems of art and culture under the neoliberal economic system of the last 40 years.

*I think from the actions of the art world and the culture at large...the biggest problem we are facing is the commodification of art...thinking of art as an object of commerce. There is so much [of that] in the museum world and in the gallery world. Witness now the new director of the LA County Museum of Art his background is as an art dealer...spectacle and aesthetic marketing are part of the culture at large...and that has become the big problem.*<sup>21</sup>

He saw the same decline happening in public education. Keith Brown recalls his thoughts:

*The crisis today [in art education] comes from...confusing evaluation and testing... there has been a very strong move to measure the effectiveness of education in terms of performance on tests...that has been a disaster because it leaves out vast areas of learning and puts emphasis upon the regurgitation of certain kinds of things. ...Present day living seems to conspire to rob us of powers and capacities to respond imaginatively and creatively. Crisis and ambiguity are increasing pressures for simplification and premature clo-*

*tures...if you can't test for it it's not important...The subjective is elusive...it can't be codified...we are dealing with codes within all areas of culture... In some ways the codification is tied to commodification.*<sup>22</sup>

Jerry was always aware of the hazards of commodification in art and education. He would quote Ad Reinhardt's thoughts on the future of art. "The next revolution will be the emancipation of the university academy of art from its marketplace."<sup>23</sup> Clearly things have gone the opposite direction since Ad spoke those wishful words, given how the mainstream art world is more market-oriented now than ever. Keith recalls "We had lots of conversations about the commodification of art—about capitalism and neoliberalism, how it hurts the art in general. He was very much against the commodification of art."<sup>24</sup>

Like me, Keith saw the uniqueness, sincerity, and value of Jerry in an era when social fragmentation, alienation, and economic austerity were on the rise. Keith recalls:

*He was so genuine. I don't see that a lot in the art world... he was very real...a very authentic person. He was a gifted thinker and he did like to go deep...and so kind and so tender and loving. I have talked to lots of smart people and lots of PhD professors and never got that level of warmth that I would get from Jerry...he was a real connector of people...I learned that from him...he thought the world was interconnected and he really tried to make that so...Because he lived such a long life he could see things so clearly. Generous, passionate caring, he cared so much he would connect you with someone else. He knew everyone who was interesting.*<sup>25</sup>





Jerry Hausman. Still from the documentary film *Beginnings: Art Education at Ohio State University*.

Jerry's daughter Leah remarked on his lifelong commitment to integrity.

*He was such a nice guy that it was easy to lose sight of the fact that he was fierce...Dad would take a stand. He was very principled...you always felt he was fighting the good fight, that he was 100% behind you for the right reasons, and not afraid to tell you when he thought you were in the wrong...Ebullient, positive, optimistic, a real people person...he brought people together.*<sup>26</sup>

Jerry was an energetic participant during a critical period of American Modernist art history. He was an active agent who helped make important art movements and innovative art education become a reality. His dynamic personality and energetic intelligence transformed art departments and institutions while forging close bonds with creative people for over half a century. He lived a life of engagement and human connection that is almost impossible to find in the art world of today. I will never forget him telling me, "I want to use my memories to help people who are working now...I want to enrich others. I really do."<sup>27</sup> ■

Jerome Hausman was an art educator and writer who lived in Evanston. He had a BA from Cornell University (1946) and an MA / PhD from New York University (1953). Between his graduate programs, Hausman studied at the Pratt Institute and the Art Students League of New York in 1947. In his incredible career he served as Director of the School of Art at Ohio State Uni-

versity (1953–1968); Associate Professor, New York University (1968–1975); President of Minneapolis College of Art and Design (1975–1982); Vice President of Massachusetts College of Art and Design (1982–1983). In the mid-1980s to the 2000s he was visiting professor at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Northern Illinois University, and University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Hausman continued to review books, write papers, present at conferences, receive awards, and research the field of art education up until his recent passing in October of 2021 at the age of 96.

**Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit [dianethodos.com](http://dianethodos.com).**

### Footnotes

All interviews were with Diane Thodos

1. Interview with Keith Brown Dec. 15 2021
2. Interview with Jerry Hausman Dec. 18 2009
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Interview with Keith Brown Dec. 15 2021
8. Interview with Jerry Hausman Dec. 18 2009
9. Interview with Keith Brown Dec. 15 2021
10. Interview with Jerry Hausman Dec. 18 2009
11. Ibid
12. [theartstory.org/critic/rosenberg-harold/](http://theartstory.org/critic/rosenberg-harold/)
13. Interview with Jerry Hausman Dec. 18 2009
14. Ibid
15. Interview with Keith Brown Dec. 15 2021
16. Ibid
17. Interview with Leah and Sandy Hausman, Nov 24.2021
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Interview with Wesley Kimler Dec. 15 2021
21. Interview with Leah and Sandy Hausman, Nov 24.2021
22. Interview with Keith Brown Dec. 15 2021
23. Ibid
24. Ibid
25. Ibid
26. Interview with Jerry Hausman Dec. 18 2009

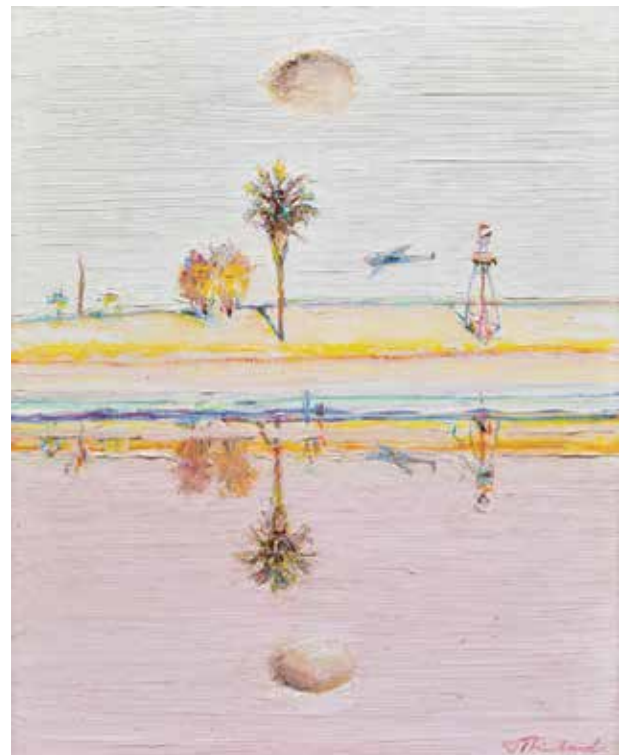


# The Legacy of Wayne Thiebaud

By Evan Carter

I was first introduced to the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud in my second year as a student earning my BFA in painting. The class was atelier style studio with a focus on understanding color theory to depict light and space. Even in the early 2000's this was somewhat of a dated approach, but the belief was that to understand the broader function of painting as an artform one must understand the history and techniques that lead up to the present moment. This would then enable a young artist to innovate their own approach to the medium.

Thiebaud's work was a bridge between these two worlds. His understanding of color, his abilities as draftsman and observer of the physical world were elevated by a subtle but somehow still bold exaggeration of the color spectrum. I remember a trip the museum of fine arts in Boston where I saw one of his famous paintings of slices of cake on their own individual plates and thinking about the electric pinks and blues that outlined the forms making them feel heavy and three-dimensional despite the looseness of his brushstrokes. He amplified the colors we don't fully see but that exist in the shadows and the light that fall around his everyday subjects. He was almost like a physicist mapping out the equation of perception



Wayne Thiebaud, *Palm Tree and Cloud*, 2012. Oil on board, 12 1/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Wayne Thiebaud/ Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Source: Crocker Art Museum.

Wayne Thiebaud, *Cake Slice*, 1979, Oil on wood panel. ©Wayne Thiebaud. Source: WikiArt.org.



Wayne Thiebaud, *Big Field*, 2007, oil on board, 10 1/2 x 15 1/2". © 2021 Wayne Thiebaud. Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS). Source: WikiArt.org.

As a student of color theory, it was an essential lesson. But as a young artist trying to locate my own creative process, Thiebaud's work was just another mile marker on a much longer journey. It was not until years later that I saw his work more and more and was confronted with its facade of banality and painterly scholarship that I began to perceive a deeper meaning.

Thiebaud had been presented to me as a West Coast artist in the camp of the Bay Area Painters like Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and the many other lesser sung contributors to that movement. But he was also considered a pop artist, which to me never felt quite right. Pop art was so much more about production and process than subject alone. With the fact that Thiebaud's subjects consist of Americana and the everyday it is an understandable association, but it is not just our role as consumers in a capitalist culture that his work implicates, it is the gaze and perception itself that grounds the work in a legacy of painting that has deep roots in art history. Simultaneously evoking senses of alienation and playfulness places Thiebaud in a pantheon of unique voices like Henri Matisse or Giorgio Morandi who showed us worlds that could be read between the lines of what we see.

As time goes on, it is more essential than ever to connect with the work of artists we lose. Artists, whether aware or not, are playing a long game. They are explorers and discoverers, and those who follow their path inevitably find something worth passing on to the next generation. Wayne Thiebaud is such an artist. ■

**Evan Carter is a visual artist and assistant editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He joined the team in 2017 while earning an MFA from the University of Chicago and has been covering arts and culture in the city and beyond ever since. He is invested in the creative community and its capacity to make meaning and reveal truth in everyday life.**



Wayne Thiebaud, *Hill Street (Day City)*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 1/8 inches. © Wayne Thiebaud. Source: Wikiart.org.

# REVIEWS

## “Thaddeus Mosley: Forest” Baltimore Art Museum, 2021

By Ed Roberson

The Baltimore Museum of Art has stepped forward with a solo exhibit of five large Mosley works under the title ‘Thaddeus Mosley: Forest,’ curated by Jessica Bell Brown, the museum’s associate curator of contemporary art. It is only the third one-person museum show this 95-year-old artist has had in his three-quarters of a century career.

Architects have as their principal structure the column: base, pillar, capital. The base is the foot; the pillar is torso; and the capital is the head, a top hat flourish. It calls to mind the statement-development-resolution thought pattern present in most of the arts, even the strophe-antistrophe-epode of classical poetry. Thad Mosley’s sculptures work around this idea and its structure; three joined segments of varying carved shapes carry most of his sculptural ideas. In this exhibition, one of the sculptures is a prime example of how Mosley uses and embellishes these ideas.

*Aero Intersectional* (2018), is an airy, 7-foot walnut wood sculpture of three ascending sections. The line of ascent is laterally off the side of each preceding section, emphatically pegged into its balanced connection and giving the completed assemblage the appearance of flying off, disappearing. In the trunk-like base section, Mosley retains the natural grain and deformities of tree growth, knots and water decay, which he uses to create a rounded-off form suggestive of anything from a primitive Horace Pippin owl to the stance of the Egyptian Horus Falcon. As if driven in by a powerful stab, the second section of the sculpture is pegged into the top of the first, and stands high off its peg, carved to produce an articulated floating plank. The last section is also lifted by its peg, but more gracefully, and is rotated to angle upward. It is also more carved and air bound than each of the former sections. Within this segment, two extra pegs appear at first as decoration, as leads for the eye, or feathers; but then they can be seen to secure the top section solidly into thin air, the same as the two previous sections pegged themselves each into the other. The composition then does not fly off, as its form



Thaddeus Mosley, *Aero Intersectional* (2018). Walnut, 84 x 67 x 36 inches. Photo courtesy Karma, New York, NY.

suggests; the completed sculpture is literally intersectional between grounded earth and the air above the sculpture: *Aero Intersectional*.

Mosley’s work is abstract art in the sense that it is non-representational. But it is not the abstraction of line forms or geometry. No theorem, theological program, or spirit is quoted. Most 20th century traditional abstraction focuses on an object or observation and reduces it to its



Thaddeus Mosley, *Tatum Scale* (2020).  
Walnut, 84 x 67 x 36 inches. Photo  
courtesy Karma, New York, NY.

purest element beyond representation. It admits to the shifting ways we see what we see, until the object is no longer representational, or is completely and recognizably surreal. The abstract expressionists go even further than that by having as a starting point that which is non-representational, that which cannot be naturally seen by the eye. Mosley's sculptures seem to address all of these ways of seeing simultaneously in a single work. A work that presents to the viewer nothing other than pieces of wood placed in a narrative line of lifting its weight into space— and insisting, by its freeze into stasis, by its permanence, its elegant articulation, that it is nothing more than itself. It is art(-iculated) work: art!

In Mosley's work, the abstracted essence is alive, not a calculable least common denominator. It is in that formal, geometrical sense that Mosley can be called an abstract artist: the lines and placement convey rationalized readily visible information about the form.

What Mosley is seeking however is more, it is the vitality within the information of the living form. He seeks an object's power beyond what his singular vision can see, something like our sense of proprioception. We know when and where our hand is when it is not in sight. His idea of the form's essence is the form's own narrative, not that of the observers, no matter how numerous those observed perspectives out-number the form itself to the point of non-representation. The abstraction of the multiple, instead, in Mosley's art prioritizes the object in a special way.

The multiple perspectives of artists such as the Cubists are based in visual geometry. The abstract perspective of the animist is based in the belief that all objects have spirit, if not life. Mosley is an animist in a very traditional sense. If the non-representational quality of the sculptures identifies him as an abstract artist, then this animist quality may be what calls to mind those powerful possessions of African art, folk and outsider art. In the making of the work, an obvious investment from the material itself is evident in his sculptures. Call it conversation, call it spirit work, call it creativity, it is the artistic intelligence of discovering. Art.



The written material on Thaddeus Mosley continuously points to him as self-taught in this context. I have often heard observers question the use of each of these terms, 'self-taught,' 'folk art,' 'outsider art' regarding Mosley's work. I, too, find these terms misleading and clearly wrong in his case. The term 'self-taught' implies that without authorized formal institutional training, real art is only possible under a separate specialized, mediated consideration. When in fact, art is equally as rare coming from the 'taught' as from the 'self-taught,' and determined through equally mysterious mediation. The artist has to use, i.e., live, what the institution holds as teaching. All so-called 'real artists' and 'art' are self-taught from that perspective. The term is an institutionally self-serving and discriminatory one. In Mosley's case, it can also be easily seen as racist, however unintended. Lack of full consideration, lack of access, lack of visibility and interest are all at least second hand tools of racism.

The title of this exhibition, "Forest," makes reference to the close, tight arrangement of the works on display, set up to resemble the experience of entering Mr. Mosley's densely filled studio space. This curatorial stance may have begun with Michael Olijnyk, then Curator of Exhibitions for Mosley's hugely successful Pittsburgh retrospective at The Mattress Factory. This exhibition took place 2009, in Pittsburgh's North Side area near Mosley's



home and studio. Some observers outside of those experiences, however, would rather the works were given more air space around them, from which to observe each work individually.

Notwithstanding their density of placement, most of the pieces carry such weight that they clear out the space around themselves for your attention. An unusual double sculpture, *Tatum Scale*, (2020), consists of two separately placed walnut forms, one like a stool to the piano keys suggestion of the other. The towering forms of the piano element soar off into the air like one of the pianist Art Tatum's famously extended lyrical arpeggios, at a breathtaking angle. The pegs locking the cantilevers into place in this sculpture, however, are so elegantly concealed that the column, elaborately articulated as it is, appears as a single action—or should it be called a 'run.'

Who 'taught' any of us gravity? Yet, the levels of manipulation of gravity include dance, kickboxing, and the sea-legs of Mosley's Navy service; and maybe as well, his insight into how a soaring music can be made to have such exhilarating and scary weight in space, as suggested in his 'self-taught' *Tatum Scale*. As if proprioceptively, we can see where our feelings are. The eyeballs eerily carved into the surfaces of both elements of the installation remind us of Tatum's lifelong blindness.

In the sculpture titled *Off Minor*, (2019), a dog could recognize minor, aka sad. Sadness has a hung head silhou-

ette easily readable. The crosscut disks of walnut composing 'Off Minor' bang like a palm against a forehead, or hang down like a head slumped below the shoulders. The two collided disks teeter, pegged into place at the top of a third columnar base section. This may be the most nearly representational sculpture in the exhibit, yet rather than the image, it is the gouge-work in this piece that carries the power.

*Off Minor* is the title of one of Thelonious Monk's most difficult and disruptive recorded compositions. For anyone accustomed to seeing photos of Monk on the many album covers, the iconic hung-head silhouette of this sculpture, though nowhere quoted except through the title, is Monk. Like Monk perhaps, the middle disk segment of the sculpture contains a near devastating crack that slits the cross-cut disk almost in two, leaving just enough wood to maintain the integrity of the circle form. The cantilevering quoted in the sculpture this time, however, is within the hovering open circle form. The crack smirks into a lipped mouth at the open edge of the form. The gouging that is patterned into the wood ripples the light horizontally across the thickness of the cut, then follows dramatically onto the circle's face as deep, emphatic parallel grooves around the form, suggestive of a recording. The grooves also suggest the markings of an ancestral elder in the Kif-webe mask used in Africa as a counterpoint to chiefly authority—an independent and stern judge.

Thaddeus Mosley, *Off Minor* (2019). Walnut, (left) face view, (right) sideview. Photos courtesy Karma, New York, NY.





Thaddeus Mosley, *Opposing Parallels—Blues Up and Down for G. Ammons and S. Stitt*, (2015). Walnut, 88 x 36 x 28 inches. Photo courtesy Karma, New York, NY.

sult, the viewer's visual information changes dramatically as the subject of the sculpture changes with the viewer's changing perspective. The meaning of what you are seeing is dynamic—in flux. It is on-going in time as if alive, or as suggested by the title, as if it were in musical time. One way to see this particular sculpture is as the visual music of a trio, of three pieces of walnut humming. Mosley, an avid historian and connoisseur of jazz, works with this music playing constantly in his studio, Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt dueling on their saxophones while he and the wood go at it, humming along.

The studio walls are plastered with photos of African masks and other images from art and notes of art ideas. The preponderance of African masks is an important observation: Mosley can talk about these masks for hours.

Absolutely the most astonishing move of this sculpture, however, is its shifts from the silhouette of an apparently overwhelmed hung-head human, into the stern face of the judgments that perhaps put him there, and ultimately, to the thrown back, big-nosed face of a laughing clown! I recommend a listen to *Off Minor* to attempt any understanding of these elements presented by the sculpture.

There is a third sculpture that equally refers to jazz music or musicians: *Opposing Parallels—Blues Up and Down for G. Ammons and S. Stitt*, (2015). This is the most complex composition of Mosley's sculptural forms in this exhibit. There are three similar simple chevron forms; two are flattened dimensionally, while the third is folded into depth. They rotate in a falling, or ascending direction depending on the orientation of the chevron point; yet balanced together, they are a pillar of stability. The viewer's movement around the sculpture to different perspectives changes the silhouette, the initial perceptions of placement, and the actual shapes of the individual formal elements of the sculpture and their relationship. As a re-

Like many western tourists, on my first visit to western Africa I was astonished at how many everyday faces so closely resembled the powerful beauty of the abstraction in their African masks, something of which I had not been so aware at home in my neighborhood ghetto. This made me re-think the masks as portraiture. But they are not portraiture in the end, nor are they simply abstraction by nature of their reduction of the representational. Even the most geometrically patterned masks appear so clearly representational as to have personality, gender, and age, leaving many viewers to regard them as spiritual effigies. Some masks were in fact worn for cultural rituals enacting powerful supernatural forces alive and at work in present real-time ceremonies. They have iconic display power, but also a liveness, an activity.

Mosley's sculptures possess an evident power of spirit. Our dance, our cultural ritual is art. Mosley's works are not an abstract effigy of a thing, other than maybe sculptural effigies of the idea of abstraction itself. In an animist tradition, Mosley's work may be more than effigy, in the sense

of an ideation, a work-up of abstract art's ideas alive in the 20th and 21st century. Their live performances—not just their appearances—are suggested in his art. Performance art is an animation in real-time of an art idea. It seems to bring the power and conviction of something living in the now, something undeniable. Viewers may feel the undeniable postures of Mosley's work as having actively called upon their attention in a similar way.

*Katz's Kurve*, (2020) is a circle. The circle with its singular continuity makes it the most determined of geometric statement, unlimited and unending in its power. In *Katz's Kurve*, the circle doesn't continue to where it is expected. It ends off the mark, in mid-air, an Ignatz brick upside the Krazy Kat head of your expectation. In fact, the point where the two trajectories diverge is accentuated at two points, two laid back ears in the sculpture. Mosley has often stated that he works intuitively, responding to the information in the wood material. When a reference to any image outside the present working comes up, he says he notes it in the composition but it is not the inspiration for the completed work. With his irrational brick in his popular 50's cartoon, *Krazy Kat and Ignatz*, the Hollywood-Southwest artist George Herriman foresaw the

absurdist like Samuel Beckett. The surreal landscapes in Herriman's cartoons are typical conscriptions of surrealistic forms into popular culture; *Katz's Kurve* could be one of Herriman's hallucinations of southwestern buttes and mesas, O'Keefe's or Dove's sunrises.

20th and 21st century abstract art has grandly explored the hallucination of fast paced modern life, its blur into the unrecognizable even unreal. Thaddeus Mosley's art insists on the live reality of even the unreal at the basis of what we see and experience. His art insists on a live spirit in all of life and its goings on. The animated abstraction of a Mosley sculpture is the lively collaboration of artist and material for a performance of what they see in each other, what they are looking for from their proximity, artist to wood, fire bearer to tinder, or builder to timber. There will be action to observe. Mosley's work is a Soul Train Line of American sculpture. ■

**Ed Roberson is Emeritus Professor, Northwestern University. He is the author of many books of poetry, most recently *Ask What Has Changed*, 2021 (Wesleyan University Press), and *MPH and Other Road Poems*, 2021 (Verge Publications).**



Thaddeus Mosley, *Katz's Kurve*, (2020). Walnut. Photo courtesy Karma, New York, NY.

# “Life Is But a Dream”

Galerie Camille, Detroit, October 1–30, 2021

by Sean Bieri

It's not often one visits an art show in the middle of its run to find that “the artist is present,” and rarer still to find all four participating creators on site, but there they were, smiling benignly—albeit in the form of foot-high fabric effigies. It's appropriate that the four artists in “Life Is But A Dream” at mid-town Detroit's Galerie Camille, in October, 2021, should be represented as portrait dolls, which exist in a strange liminal zone between comforting and creepy. These little guys looked pretty cool, hip, friendly, inviting, but it was close enough to Halloween that I could almost feel their stitched-on eyes following me around the room as I scrutinized their work...

Luzhen Qiu was born in Hangzhou, China, and her gauzy, complex scenes in colored pencil on layers of mylar

are, she says, “dreamscapes” formed from childhood memories. Geometric patterns, swirling clouds, and twisting dragons evoking ancient China share two- and three-dimensional space with characters from Maoist propaganda, Rococo filigree, flowers, birds or insects. Qiu shows us historical epochs succeeding but not supplanting one another, accreting in onion-skin layers, never quite obscuring what came before. A personal history—itsself a sheaf of translucent memories—is feathered into the mix. In *Fragonard's Temptation*, framed by a multicultural mélange of decorative flourishes, the bust of a woman seems to be coalescing atop a column of roiling waves and blossoms, with a twisty ice cream cone for ribs, a splash of red wine gushing from where her heart will be, and a swirling pink

Luzhen Qiu, (Left) *Fragonard's Temptation*, color pencil on mylar, 36" x 24." (Right) *Red Stage*, color pencil on mylar, 4" x 36." Photos courtesy of Galerie Camille.







Scott Northrup, **(Left)** *The Wages of Fear*, analog collage, 12" x 12" x .75." **(Right)** *Hook Up Or Hang Up*, analog collage, 12" x 12" x .75." Photos courtesy of Galerie Camille.

ribbon to knit it all together. A skeletal *memento mori* proffers a floral crown, ready to meet the head once it materializes from the mist, and an Alice-like girl in a bunny-eared cap looks on. Rabbits appear often in Qiu's work here; the anthropomorphic rabbit in "Red Stage," with skeletal arms and swirls for breasts, is both a dress mannequin and a cage for a uniformed schoolgirl.

The dream turns dark in Scott Northrup's photo collages, in which mid-century America collides with the existential void—with Weegee on hand to document the aftermath. Like the victims and bystanders in the tabloid photographer's crime scene tableaux, Northrup's subjects slouch, sprawl, or gesture awkwardly against inky shadows, frozen in moments of anxiety. Collage can elicit laughter or unease with its ironic juxtaposition of incongruous elements, but many of the photos Northrup appropriates apparently come from old copies of *Life* magazine or some similar title in which scenes from the sobering news of the day share the page with cheery ads for household products. Rather than fabricating ironies, Northrup's collages could be seen as distillations of this whiplash-inducing dissonance. In *The Wages of Fear*, Bobby Kennedy leans his head into his crossed arms, a grave expression creasing his brow, while beneath him sprouts a cluster of earnest, chin-stroking students and comically grimacing advertising models who ape or mock the senator's concern. Telephones appear frequently in the collages, but they don't seem to help much with communication; one humorous image, *Hook Up Or Hang Up*, in which several smiling blue jean models dance around an outsized Princess phone, looks like an artificial intelligence program's misguided

Mary Fortuna, *Protection Snake*, linen, cotton, embroidery, applique, 15" x 20." Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.





Mary Fortuna, *Night Garden*, linen, cotton, embroidery, 16" x 20." Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.

attempt at writing a teenybopper song. Subtle variations in the black expanse behind the figures give depth and compositional structure to the void.

Mary Fortuna (curator of the exhibit, and creator of the artist dolls) incorporates a number of venerable mystic symbols into her textile works, but they become fresh, quirky, and personal when she translates them into embroidery. She takes a mix-'n'-match approach to her symbolism, mashing up several glyphs and icons into a unique matrix of meaning. On one small tapestry, *Four Corners Protection*, a unifying ouroboros encircles an arresting Hand of Glory, which cradles a pure lotus blossom amid a cloud of industrious bees (a favorite icon of Fortuna's—see also her beaded bee swarm mobile hanging nearby). The coarse, neutral-colored fabric on which Fortuna often stitches her emblems

intensifies the color of the thread and contributes to the work's homespun (that's a compliment) feel. In *Protection Snake*, a rainbow-striped serpent twists beside a row of seven chakra symbols; their vividly colored stitching against the drab background gives the symbols the look of merit badges sewn onto a uniform to commemorate stages of enlightenment. In *Night Garden*, Fortuna switches to a black background, scattering it with brightly hued flowers and bugs, like 18th Century Dutch painter Rachel Ruysch attempting a needlepoint sampler. Eyes appear frequently in Fortuna's work too, either that of Providence, or else the bright blue mati (in Greek) or nazar (Arabic), meant to ward off the evil eye. Fortuna's felt mobile featuring dozens of the staring blue orbs should be enough to thwart any malevolent intent.

Sarah Rose Sharp utilizes mystical symbols, too—her *Planchette*, for example, a pillow-like version of the automatic writing implement, is encrusted in charms, Ouija board iconography, and a pentagram. But pop culture—and fresh produce!—provide material for her playful textiles and constructions as well. Hip urban gardeners (one with a large pet moth) pose in front of intricately beaded cruciferous vegetables, framed by embroidery hoops, in two pieces both called *Brassica*. And in *Luchaberry*, a



Sarah Rose Sharp, *Baby Luchaberry*, fiber, 15" x 14." Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.





Sarah Rose Sharp, *Gang of Four: Rosie, Scott, Luzhen, Mary*. Cotton, linen, yarn, wire, felt, 5" x 10.5." Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.

hurtling masked wrestler is about to elbow drop a large basket of blackberries (the individual blackberries among the audience of buttons must be disappointed by their champion's poor showing). There's good fun in poring over the details of Sharp's "surrealist miniatures"—aka, bizarre dollhouses which reside in a neighborhood somewhere between Pee-Wee's Playhouse and the Uncanny Valley. Incongruities in the scale, material, vintage, and context of the furnishings (a plastic doll's head in a real bird's nest conducts an occult ritual in one room, while elsewhere a woman with an anchor around her leg takes a bubble bath under a fishing lure) give the houses a tweeky energy, as if they were about to come to herky-jerky, stop-motion life.

Fortuna brought this show together by simply inviting three trusted friends to exhibit with her. It paid off; the bricolage technique all four artists use, and the mysterious thought processes it triggers in the viewer, delivers on the show's dreamy theme. Still, speaking at the gallery, Fortuna admits to having doubts about mounting a show claiming "life is but a dream" in a time rocked by multiple crises—going

"gently down the stream,"—while the world turns increasingly nightmarish. But as Sharp says, "it is not nothing to take an idea from a place where no one else can see it and put it where someone else can." That faith in art and the connection it can foster jibed more with the hopeful message of a different song the show's title inadvertently got stuck in my head—not "Row Row Your Boat," but the old doo-wop hit "Sh-Boom": "Life could be a dream, sweetheart." ■

Sean Bieri, a cartoonist and graphic designer, has written on art for the *Detroit Metro Times*, *Wayne State University* and the *Erb Family Foundation* among other outlets. He received both his BFA and a BA in Art History—28 years apart—from Wayne State. He is a founding member of Hatch, an arts collective based in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck, where he lives. He is currently assisting Hatch in the renovation of the "Hamtramck Disneyland" folk art site.



Sarah Rose Sharp, *Baby Haus*, surrealist miniature (mixed media), 21" x 22" x 8.5." Photo courtesy of Galerie Camille.

# “Personal Codes: Virtual Cube in the Kitchen”

## Michiko Itatani at 4th Ward Projects, Chicago

*By Michel Ségard*

I have seen Michiko Itatani's work for 42 years, ever since she did an installation at the Mariane Deson Gallery in 1979. Her works then were very large installations, occupying entire walls. In this exhibition, most of the paintings are less than a foot square, a dramatic reduction in scale that creates a new discourse between the work and Itatani's viewers.

The space, 4th Ward Projects, is also small and intimate. It is a converted room in the basement of a six-flat in Hyde Park near the end of a dead-end street. One must enter it through a rear door under the back porches of the building. It is one of those spaces that has been around for some time, but that most art lovers have never heard of, and it had been closed for nearly two years due to the Covid pandemic.

Originally a poet, Itatani manipulates three specific motifs like words to create the images in this show. Her first and signature motif is the field of angled parallel lines that are in nearly all her paintings. They represent writing, the presence of information. In recent years, she has added a circle of glowing forms that represent spirituality. And in this show, she adds an irregular dodecahedron, a twelve-sided polyhedron with varying flat sides. It is based on a 1934 sculpture by Alberto Giacometti called *Cube* that Itatani had seen at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This mysterious shape appears in all the paintings of this show.

Studying these 21 intimate and loosely rendered paintings (almost drawings), a narrative begins to emerge. It starts with Itatani's recollection that there was a large

Michiko Itatani, **(Left)** *Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-18), 2019. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 6 x 6 inches. **(Right)** *Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-12, 2019). Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 8 x 8 inches. Photos courtesy of the artist.







Michiko Itatani, *Tesseract Study* (painting from Cosmic Encounter 19-D-18), 2019. Oil on canvas, 42 x 34. Photo courtesy of the artist.

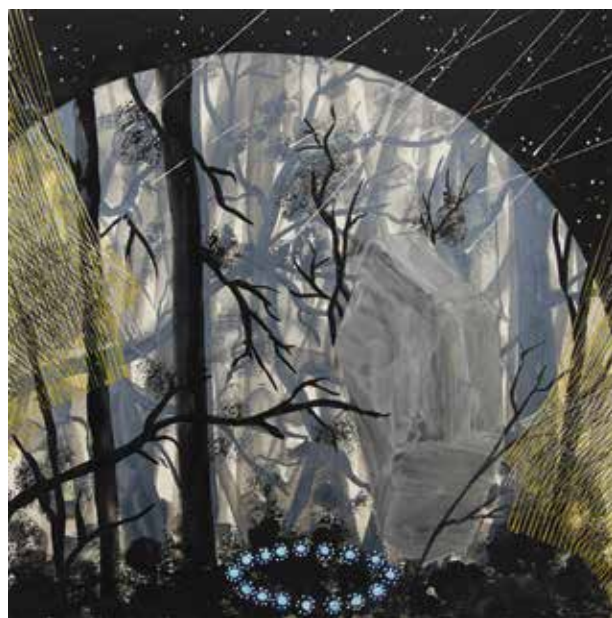
stone in the middle of the kitchen of her father's house. It was sometimes used as a table or a chair, but most often it was just there. *Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-18) depicts the family home on a starry night, smoke rising from the chimney and "eyes" peering out from the roof gable. Itatani's signature line fields appear on each side, announcing the presence of the house, while 16 blue lights form a ring in front of its entrance. Giacometti's Cube sits unobtrusively in the lower right-hand corner and outside the house. We are given an overview of an ancestral family compound.

*Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-12) give us a close-up of the building with a slight Roger Brown twist, featuring silhouettes in the windows. The line fields are present on each side, like drapes flanking a window or side flats defining a stage set, while the ring of lights hover over the floor of what appears to be a patio. The Cube sits on the lower left protected by a grating and guarding the entrance to the house. In this piece, Itatani uses repeating patterns, in this case the window gratings, to create an almost symmetrical, abstract composition that almost

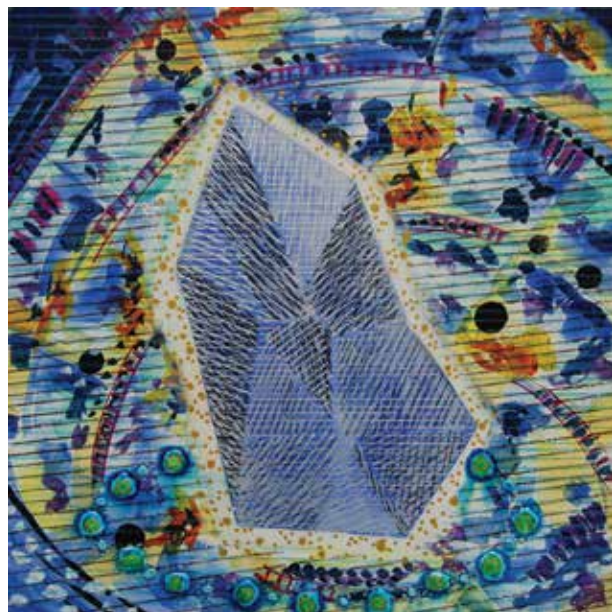
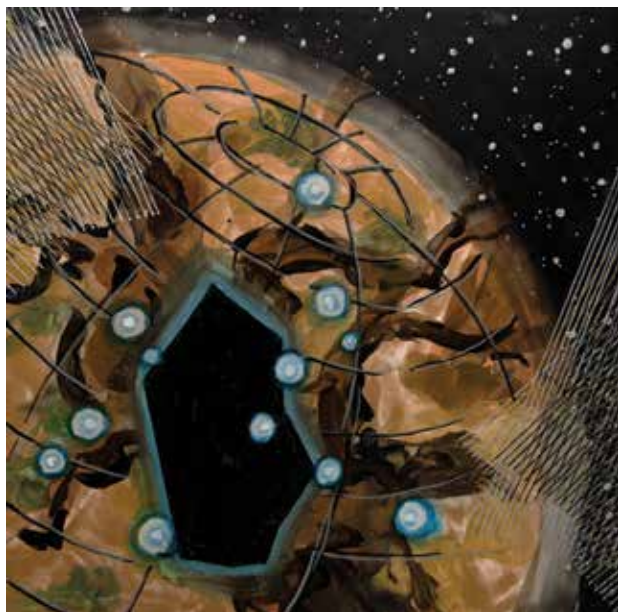
eclipses the straightforward rendering of the house.

In one of three larger paintings, we see the interior of this house. *Tesseract Study* (from Cosmic Encounter 19-D-18) focuses on an interior stairway. The posts, beams, and stairs don't quite read as a plausible space, giving this painting a subtle Escheresque quality. The walls covered with bare tree branches give an additional surreal sense to the scene. But Itatani's three motifs are ever present. The ring of lights hovers at the top of the painting, while the Cube sits at the base of the stairs, again protected by a grating. And the line fields flank the sides, protruding into the space. The network of posts, beams, and stairs create the abstract compositional framework of this piece, but being off kilter, it gives the work a sinister undertone. The bare tree branches suggest a space open to the outside, but at the upper right, there is a window to the night sky. The whole work suggests that we are in another dimension where something unearthly is going on.

The otherworldliness is reinforced in *White Night* (from *Tesseract Study* 2019-K-28). This small 8-inch square painting has an outdoor setting. A protective white bubble houses the Cube, now a prominent object in the painting in a forest of bare trees that faintly suggest anthropomorphic forms—if you don't focus too sharply. The ring of lights seems to rest on the ground next to the Cube. While the line fields, this time in prominent gold, flank the



Michiko Itatani, *White Night* (from *Tesseract Study* 2019-K-28), 2019. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 8 x 8 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Michiko Itatani, (Left) *Study of Cube*, (from Cosmic Giacometti 2018-K-26), 2018. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 6 x 6 inches. (Right) *Study of Cube* (from Cosmic Giacometti 2018-K-28), 2018. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 6 x 6 inches. Photos courtesy of the artist.

painting as usual, but here, they suggest curtains flying in the breeze of an open window. And above, a shower of meteors rains down out of a black night sky. All in all, we are now in a science fiction setting.

This sci-fi mode is carried into *Study of Cube* (from Cosmic Giacometti 2018-K-26). The focus of this tiny painting (6 by 8 inches) is the Cube depicted as a black mass floating in space above a strange earthlike world. There are brown branch-like markings on its surface that could be rivers or seas. Or the whole thing could be a spherical greenhouse floating in space with latitude and longitude lines serving as a structural framework. The ring of lights is broken up, and each light floats independently around the Cube like a mini satellite. And the line fields still flank the picture on either side. The Cube has now become a spaceship circling this strange planet. The first few bars of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* echoed in my mind, and I wondered whether the Cube were really a monolith.

Finally, in *Study of Cube* (From Cosmic Giacometti 2018-K-28), we see the Cube in glorious color with the line fields on its surfaces and giving off a golden glow in the smallest piece in the show, only six by six inches—and the most colorful. The Cube is floating in a swirling, patterned space

with a separate black line field overlaying a rich primary colored background filled with suggestions of figures and curved ladder forms (genetic material?). The ring of lights is back serving as a pedestal at the base of the Cube, and the linear fields on its surface suggest that it is the source of all knowledge. It brought to my mind the monolith from the film 2001 and the Rosetta Stone at the same time. In summary, the work feels like a religious painting or icon, declaring the presence of a superior intelligence—the source of all knowledge.

What I have described is just one interpretation of these small, intimate paintings. I could have stayed all afternoon sussing out additional meanings in this collection of images. Going contrary to her previous work, Michiko Itatani condensed her cosmic understanding and perspective into a handful of small, lovingly rendered paintings and shown them in a comfortably casual and intimate space. ■

**Michel Ségard** is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.



# “Harold Neal and Detroit African American Artists: 1945 Through the Black Arts Movement”

by K.A. Letts

Art history, like all history, is a kind of storytelling. It is hardly news that long-held prejudices against female and minority artists have awarded significance in that story mostly to white male artists. Even now, 95% of the artists represented in major museum collections in the United States are white. Black artists still comprise less than one percent.

This race-based editing has permitted something like cultural amnesia. Art historian Julia R. Myers has spent the last ten years working to correct this condition for a certain very particular time and place: Black artists in Detroit during the last part of the 20th century. Through research in primary sources, interviews with contemporaries and scholars, friends and family, Myers has unearthed the buried history of artists who found their collective voice through figurative painting. The exhibition “Harold Neal and Detroit African American Artists,” and the comprehensive catalogue that accompanies it, represents the

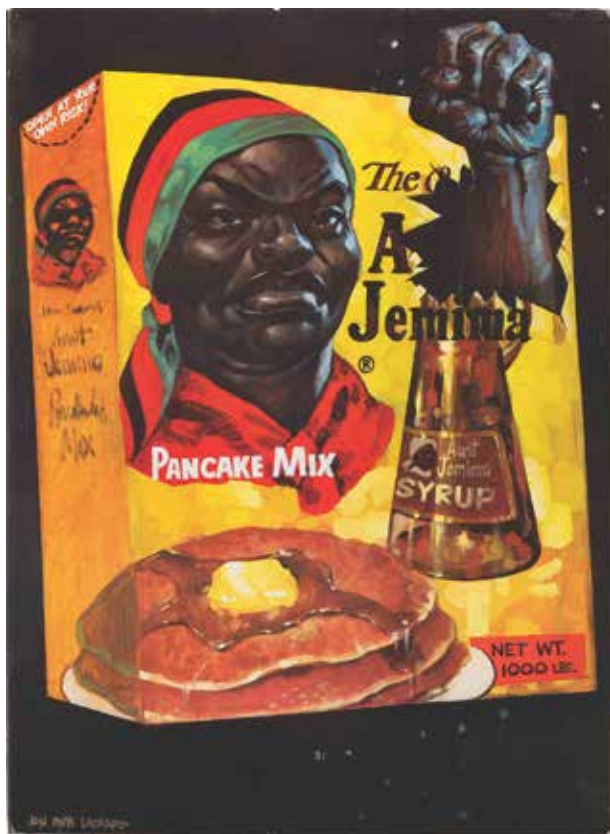
rediscovery of a significant chapter in Detroit’s Black art history that was in danger of being lost.

Myers has chosen the influential and politically active painter Harold Neal as the central figure in the story she is telling. The ten near-contemporaries who formed his circle created a community that was in dialog, if not always in agreement. Black-owned and operated galleries like Contemporary Studio and the Easel Gallery, as well as more established spaces like the Arwin Gallery and non-profits like Detroit Artists Market provided multiple venues where the work found an audience. From 1945 through the Black Arts Movement in the 1970’s, a vibrant subculture of politically active artists made work that spoke the militant language of racial justice.

Harold Neal was a member of the first generation of Black artists who had at least limited access to art education through the G.I. Bill. Like many of the artists in this exhibition (Hughie Lee-Smith, Henri Umbaji King, Glanton



Harold Neal, *Title unknown* (Riot Series?), 1960's. Oil on board, 24" x 29."



**Top Left:** Jon Onye Lockard, *No More*, 1968-1969. Offset lithograph, 32" x 23.25." **Top Right:** Harold Neal, *Title unknown* [Tonya Blanding], 1968. Acrylic on board, 37" x 30." **Right:** Glanton Dowdell, *Untitled*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 40.25" x 24.5."



Dowdell, Charles McGhee), Neal attended the Society of Arts and Crafts (later renamed Center for Creative Studies). Unlike some art schools, Black students were welcomed there. Two older alumni, portraitist LeRoy Foster and sculptor Oliver LeGrone, were also part of Neal's circle and are included in this survey.

"I am angry and it is only natural that this preoccupation would influence, even pervade my work," said Neal after the 1967 Rebellion in Detroit. Like many of the artists in this show, he believed that it was the primary duty of Black artists to advocate for racial justice in a visual vernacular that was widely accessible. But in a way, Neal's painting practice sat uneasily with his political views. His political ends were radical, but his formal means were conservative. In this he was influenced by his teacher at SAC, Sarkis Sarkisian, who practiced a kind of decorative figuration that employed thin layers of color to create a luminous effect in his paintings, as if they were lit from within.

One of Neal's primary thematic concerns was the place of Black people, and particularly of Black men, in an oppressive white society. His painting of an African American woman and child next to a physically restrained male (like many of the works in this exhibition, the title and date have been lost) describes the role of incarceration in the





**Left:** LeRoy Foster, *Untitled* [Portrait of Paul Robeson as Emperor Jones], 1976. Oil (?) on board, 44" x 52.25."  
**Right:** Charles McGee, *Mask*, c. 1962. Charcoal, 22" x 17.5."

destruction of the Black family. The accomplished paint handling and layers of glazes and fragmented text project an effect of hazy romanticism that is at odds with the polemics of the theme. Another poignant painting (whose title has also been lost) portrays Tonya Blanding in the arms of her mother. The four-year-old was shot during the 1967 Rebellion by National Guardsmen who mistook a lit cigarette for a gun. The mother, her face in shadow against a highly stylized, pastel urban background, presents the dead child to the viewer in a way that suggests a pietà.

Jon Onye Lockard, Neal's close friend and fellow radical, apprenticed as a sign painter in his teens. Later, he graduated from Wayne State University and made his living as an itinerant portrait artist. A committed Black Nationalist, Lockard believed that "fine arts can be produced for the masses, and it is to this end I intend to devote my talents." His lithograph, *No More* exemplifies the effective, if raw, agitprop he espoused. A box of cereal featuring the image of a clearly enraged, Pan African scarf-wearing Aunt Jemima (still instantly recognizable since she was only retired from packaging by Quaker Oats in 2020) smashes her fist through the box. Lockard said of the Aunt Jemima image that it "made a large portion of the American public comfortable, which made me uncomfortable."

In the gallery near Lockard's lithograph, we find a small oil painting of three lynching victims that juxtaposes the beauty of a pink dawn with the ugliness of racial violence. The picture's creator, Glanton Dowdell, was a leader in Detroit's militant black circles and an advocate for armed self defense. He was convicted and sent to prison for second degree murder in 1949, where he continued to paint and to teach art. His fractured self-portrait, *Southeast Corner of my Cell*, won an honorable mention in the Detroit Insti-



Glanton Dowdell, *Southeast Corner of my Cell*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 40" x 24."



Jon Onye Lockard, *If I were Jehovah*, 1970.  
Conte crayon on paper, 30" x 40."

tute of Art's 1955 Annual Exhibition for Michigan Artists. Upon being paroled in 1962, he remained active as both an artist and a Black activist in Detroit until he was forced into exile in Sweden in 1970, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Leroy Foster's 1976 portrait of Paul Robeson immediately calls to mind the heroic paintings of Black men in art historical settings by contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. Commissioned by the founder of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Foster's series of portraits was created to celebrate the singer, actor, and civil rights activist on his 80th birthday. Untitled [Portrait of Paul Robeson as Emperor Jones] pictures a powerful, lavishly uniformed figure on an opulent throne.

Charles McGee's charcoal drawing *Mask* depicts a child reluctantly donning a featureless white paper face, a re-

curring image that continues to resonate with young African American artists like Tylonn J. Sawyer. Both Neal and Lockard have artworks in the show that repeat the mask theme. A large allegorical painting (Title, date unknown) by Neal features a reclining Black man with a stark white face, framed by a stylized proscenium. He holds a scale, at the opposite ends of which two small figures rest, one black and one white. The large figure seems ambivalent, as if he can't decide which end will win out. Lockard's drawing *If I were Jehovah*, characteristically treats the mask image in a much more direct way that leaves no doubt of his intent. Of all the artists in the exhibition, Lockard seems most comfortable with his own rage.

The Black Arts Movement's proposition that the campaign for racial equality should form the main theme for all Black art, and must be executed in an accessible figura-

**Left:** Harold Neal, *Title unknown*, 1966. Oil on board, 26.25" x 20." **Right:** Allie McGhee, *Last Oil*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 68" x 68."





tive style, created a rift within Detroit's African American arts community. By the late 60's, Black artists whose work tended toward the abstract, such as Allie McGhee, Charles McGee and Al Loving, began to oppose the limitation of art's purposes to the promotion of political ends. McGhee said he found it "painful and taxing to be involved in social rage." McGhee's 1969 painting *Last Oil*, which is included in the exhibition, marks the transition of his painting toward a means of expression he described as "more eternal."

Work made by the artists in "Harold Neal and Detroit African American Artists" was widely shown in Detroit galleries and respectfully reviewed by art critics during the 35 years covered in the exhibition. But over time, the Black Arts Movement's confrontational attitude toward White culture proved to be a hard sell. Larry Neal (no relation) theater critic and influential spokesman for the movement, pulled no punches: "The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world." The justice of their hostility notwithstanding, the White art establishment subtly fought back by declining to collect politically outspoken work by Detroit's Black figurative artists or to acquire it for their museum collections. The power of their not-so-benign neglect is evident from the many pieces in this exhibition with no titles and the artworks mentioned in the catalog that are now lost.

The artworks that Julia R. Myers has assembled for "Harold Neal and Detroit African American Artists" take us on a mid-century tour of politically incendiary work by the city's Black figurative artists. They speak eloquently of police violence, Black incarceration, of Black impoverishment and oppression--facts of Black life that sadly retain their relevance--in an exhibition that is both a celebration and an indictment. ■

Harold Neal, *Status Seekers*, 1963. Oil on illustration board, 30.5" x 47.5."



Harold Neal, *Title unknown*, 1966. Oil on board, 26.25" x 20."

"Harold Neal and Detroit African American Artists" and its accompanying catalog by Julia R. Meyers, is a project funded in part by Michigan Humanities, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities; Eastern Michigan University and Women in Philanthropy of EMU. The exhibition originated at the EMU Art Gallery in September, 2021 and is now on view in the Elaine L. Jacobs Gallery at Wayne State University until January 20, 2022. It will open at the Marshall Fredericks Museum at Saginaw Valley State University on February 1, 2022.

**K.A. Letts** is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist ([kalettsart.com](http://kalettsart.com)) and art blogger ([rustbeltarts.com](http://rustbeltarts.com)). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.

# Binary Stars at Cranbrook Art Museum

## “Olga de Amaral: To Weave a Rock” and “Allie McGhee: Banana Moon Horn”

By K.A. Letts

With two simultaneous solo retrospectives at Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Michigan, Senior Curator of Contemporary Art and Design Laura Mott has paired Colombian fiber artist Olga de Amaral and Detroit abstract painter Allie McGhee, presenting them as binary stars whose bodies of work exert a gravitational pull on each other. The exhibitions tell a compelling story of two prolific artists—and well over a combined century of remarkable work—devoted to the pursuit of excellence in their art practice.

### Olga de Amaral

“Olga de Amaral: To Weave a Rock” is Amaral’s first U.S. retrospective and comes at a time when the art world has become more appreciative of crafts traditionally under-valued because they have been practiced by women. Although Olga de Amaral has longstanding connections to Cranbrook and to Detroit, she is essentially an international artist and a leading Latin American abstractionist. During her sixty-year career, she has woven a groundbreaking body of work that transcends the genre’s previously explored boundaries.

For many of her artworks, Amaral employs materials within the established craft of weaving wool, cotton, and linen—weaving them into bands and wrapped cords which she then assembles into large architectonic struc-

tures. The exhibition opens with several examples of monumental works that take the techniques of her early, modest-size weavings (shyly displayed at the entrance to the gallery and almost unnoticeable) and expands them into the scale of architecture, or even landscape. Through accretion and repetition, Amaral forms walls and pillars from woven bands and wrapped cords, most often from wool and horsehair and hung from battens. She describes the small squares and bands of warp and weft that she uses to build her monumental pieces as “the ‘words’ I use to begin creating landscapes of surfaces, textures, emotions, memories, meanings and connections.”

*Muro tejido cuadrículado (Woven Gridded Wall)*, a woven wall of horsehair that the artist created in 1970, is exemplary of her early process. Natural dyes give the pieces their muted richness and refer obliquely to the landscape of her native Colombia. In addition to traditional fibers, Amaral has also been open to the use of unorthodox materials that suit her expressive goals. Dried leaves and translucent polyethylene appear in several of the works in this collection—humble materials that nonetheless project an aura of opulence.

In work produced at the beginning of the 21st century and later, Amaral began to plait or braid small woven squares into irregularly shaped panels which she then coated with clay, acrylic paint or gold leaf. A particularly

Allie McGhee, *Micro Dream*, 2020-2021. Acrylic and enamel on canvas. Photo by K.A. Letts.







**Left:** Olga de Amaral, *Muro tejido cuadrulado* (*Woven Gridded Wall*), 1970. Wool and horsehair. **Right:** Olga de Amaral, *Luz blanca* (*White Light*), 1969 (remade 1999, 2010). Plastic. Photos by K.A. Letts.

beautiful grouping of works that employs this methodology is entitled *Estelas* (*Stelae*) (2007). In this installation composed of a layered formation, several flat yet monumental pieces hang, sensitively illuminated, in a kind of black void. The woven linen strips and squares are plaited and woven into irregularly shaped sheets and impregnated with gold leaf. In an accompanying statement the artist says, “I think of them as stones full of space, each one a presence full of secrets. Many together, like mounds of stones or rocks, point to an answer, an unknown order, a hidden history.”

As the visitor progresses through the galleries, Amaral can be seen abandoning traditional techniques of weaving. Several pieces are composed only of threads that hang vertically from the ceiling. In a side gallery, three long knotted columns of richly colored strings imply attenuated human figures; they exert a powerful sense of presence. The

magisterial procession reaches a crescendo in the Mixing Chamber, the center gallery from which the other galleries radiate. In this windowless space, which could seem claustrophobic, there is instead a sense of psychic expansion. Amaral has dispensed with traditional weaving altogether with the *Brumas* (*Mists*) Series. The thin painted threads that hang straight down reveal three geometric shapes suspended in the center. The title “Mists” is thoroughly descriptive of the installation, which can be experienced as an environment rather than as a sculptural object.

### Allie McGhee

After the dark luxury of Amaral’s work, the paintings and shaped relief constructs of Detroit artist Allie McGhee’s companion retrospective “Allie McGhee: Banana Moon Horn” offer a contrast in light and air. At the entrance to the gallery, the artist provides a playful and



Olga de Amaral, *Estelas* (*Stelae*), 2007, Installation. Linen, gesso, gold leaf. Photo by K.A. Letts.



**Left:** Olga de Amaral, *To Weave a Rock*, 2021. Installation detail.

**Right:** Olga de Amaral, *Brumas (Mists)*, 2021. Series. Acrylic, gesso, cotton on wood. Photos by K.A. Letts.



informative wall of influences similar to one he keeps in his studio. It's a key to his work—a map of sorts—to help visitors navigate the recurring strategies, motifs and meanings of his lifelong cosmic explorations. An informal assemblage of packing materials, newspaper clippings, random crushed and twisted papers, maquettes, and African carvings offers an informal introduction to his personal cosmology, from the microscopic to the infinite.

Several artworks from the 1970s next to his studio wall installation provide examples of McGhee's early, more referential work. His painting *Artist in the Studio* from 1973, a calligraphic self-portrait that has an antic, improvisational quality, calls to mind the work of Paul Klee. Barely discernable formalized shapes—a toylike boat, flags, a wheel—float over the indeterminate white surface of the painting. As is often the case, McGhee doesn't insist on telling viewers what they see, he merely persuasively suggests.

Several of McGhee's late 20th century artworks in "Banana Moon Horn" feature veiled references to racism in the U.S. and political turmoil in Africa. In his improvised wall collage, *Ku Klux Klown*, McGhee satirically compares

the cone shape of a Klansman's hood to a soiled and empty pastry bag. A mummified black banana—perhaps a humorous stand-in for the artist himself—floats overhead in a gentle but unmistakable put-down. Four works on paper from the artist's *Ubangi* series also refer both to images from the West African region and to the exclusion of Black American artists from the higher levels of art establishment recognition at the time. In *Ubangi News* (1984) McGhee appropriates the mailing wrapper from *ARTnews* magazine for his own imagined arts publication cover.

An accomplished, almost mural-sized, painting has been installed on its own freestanding wall in the gallery's center; *Apartheid* (1984) marks a waypoint on the artist's journey toward a hybrid artform that moves into three dimensions while retaining features of his painterly expressionism. There is a political subtext here, with the suggestion of an open hand reaching through a triangular barrier. McGhee's characteristic crescent shape anchors the composition on the left, balancing out the applied and painted rectangles on the right.

Allie McGhee, Studio installation detail, assorted materials. Photo by K.A. Letts.





**Left:** Allie McGhee, *Artist in the Studio*, 1973. Mixed media on Masonite. **Right:** Allie McGhee, *Ku Klux Klown*, 1969. Mixed media on found object, petrified banana. Photos by K.A. Letts.

But McGhee's work was not—and is not—primarily political in nature. He has created, lived, and worked in Detroit for 50 years as a significant member of the city's creative class from its heyday to bankruptcy and back. Like many Black artists in Detroit, he was active in the Black Arts Movement during the city's tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s. He knew and socialized with some of Detroit's most politically active artists, such as Harold Neal and Aaron Ibn Pori Potts, but found himself drawn to abstraction in his art, turning away from the highly charged political figuration of the time, and toward to what he described as "something more eternal."

Near *Apartheid*, the hybrid wall construction *Dreamtime* (2021) demonstrates some of McGhee's pictorial strategies and provides an example of the sweeping universality he is aiming for. Slanted bars of black, cobalt and ochre on a conventional canvas substrate suggest nocturnal light and shadow, and the fictive space of the canvas co-exists peaceably with three-dimensional applied scraps of wood and crumpled vinyl elements. With utmost

economy of means, McGhee has successfully evoked the dreamy nighttime reverie of the title.

As he has moved further into experiments with three-dimensional painted abstraction, McGhee has become increasingly engaged in a project to erase the distinction between image and ground. He has learned to quietly stalk his materials, tricking them into betraying their true nature, and in so doing, he exposes an underlying cosmic reality that he calls "the all."

McGhee is a keen observer of his materials, their properties and how they behave in relation to each other. He employs gravity as a compositional tool, sometimes reorienting his artworks from floor to wall and back again, often working on a large group of pieces simultaneously. The artist's brush can seldom be detected in the application of pigment to surface of his artworks. He doesn't so much apply paint to his substrates as push it around with sticks or the edges of corrugated cardboard. He pokes and prods his paints, pours and flings, staples, scratches and carves.

Allie McGhee, *Apartheid*, 1984. Mixed media on Masonite. Photo by K.A. Letts.





Allie McGhee,  
*Dreamtime*,  
2020. Acrylic  
and vinyl on  
canvas. Photo  
by K.A. Letts.



McGhee likes to mix disparate types of paint within individual pieces, from enamel to acrylic to oil, reveling in the unexpected interactions of the substances. He exhibits a certain glee in breaking art rules. "In college," he says, "they'll tell you: 'you can't ever do that.' And I think: 'I can't wait to break [that rule]. You get the most wonderful results.'"

Installed in the gallery near *Dreamtime* is a collection of painted, folded, three-dimensional wall hangings that skirt the boundaries of accident and intention, arriving at a state of being that seems both surprising and inevitable. *Blues Wrap*, is loosely folded, origami-like, and painted with fat stripes of acrylic and enamel in blue, yellow, orange and black, a palette that McGhee often favors. The resulting cone shape holds the wall with authority. Nearby, *Red Mask* flirts with figuration. Taken together, the artworks in this section of his retrospective may be his most quintessential works.

Allie McGhee has been creating work for fifty years, but he is very far from resting on his laurels. In the final

gallery of "Banana Moon Horn," a couple of recent high points in his work show his undiminished zest for creative exploration. Paradoxically entitled *Micro Dream*, the largest painting in the show fills an entire wall. It is a joyous storm of blues and yellows, and one of the few of the artist's works where the sweep of his arm and the movement of his body in relation to the painting can be felt. With *Long Look*, a medium-size painting in the same gallery, McGhee achieves an apotheosis of sorts. He renounces some of his signature strategies, relying instead purely on the action of paint on ground to coax an otherworldly image into existence.

### Laura Mott's Curatorial Strategy

In her juxtaposition of work by Olga de Amaral and Allie McGhee in adjacent galleries, Curator Laura Mott employs a strategy she used with great success in the 2019 Cranbrook blockbuster exhibit "Landlord Colors." In that wide-ranging survey, she installed pieces by artists with related sensibilities near each other to highlight their similarities and differences. That approach has paid off here also. By showing their work side by side, Mott has thrown the similarities between Amaral and McGhee into high relief. We see their shared formal inventiveness, their dogged appetite for work and their exquisite sensitivity to materials. And from Amaral's stated evocation of "an unknown order" and McGhee's metaphysical embrace of "the all," we sense their deep spirituality. ■

"Olga de Amaral: To Weave a Rock" and "Allie McGhee: Banana Moon Horn" will be on view until March, 2022 at Cranbrook Art Museum. (It should be mentioned here that Laura Mott shares curatorial credit for the Olga de Amaral retrospective with Anna Walker of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, where the show originated.)

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist ([kalettsart.com](http://kalettsart.com)) and art blogger ([rustbeltarts.com](http://rustbeltarts.com)). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.



**Left:** Allie McGhee,  
*Blues Wrap*, 2019. Acrylic  
and enamel on vinyl.

**Right:** Allie McGhee,  
*Long Look*, 2021. Acrylic  
and enamel on wood.  
Photos by K.A. Letts.



# Dan Ramirez and the Soft Spirituality of Flat Physics

By Evan Carter

When one is asked to name a Chicago legacy artist, they are likely to think of one or more of the ‘imagists’ of the Hairy Who collective or some of the prominent but previously marginalized African American artists who have been canonized with retrospectives at the MCA or Art Institute such as Kerry James Marshall. It is time that we make space on that pedestal for long-time Chicago painter Dan Ramirez.

Ramirez studied art in Chicago, receiving his MFA from the University of Chicago in 1977 and going on to exhibit across the United States and Europe. The Art Institute of Chicago owns a number of works on paper by Ramirez and he has been represented by Zolla Lieberman gallery since 2012 after exhibiting in Chicago for almost 40 years. It is here that you can see his most recent paintings in a small exhibition called “Sheets of Space/Finding Place.”

It is nearly impossible to avoid broaching the subject of minimalism when discussing his work and this is an aesthetic commonly alluded to in catalog essays and reviews of the work. Ramirez does have a relationship to minimalism in that he was once a trucker who would haul industrial materials similar in scale and form to sculptures by Richard Serra. But whereas Serra’s work is more often



Dan Ramirez, *I Sleep, While My Heart Keeps Vigil*, 1980. Aquatint with Etching on off-white wove paper, 22.5 x 30 inches. Photo courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

literal in the way it is titled by the artist, Ramirez engages in the poetic and even playful language in his titles akin to someone like a Robert Irwin with a bend toward the spiritual, reminiscent of the architecture of Tadao Ando.

Unlike the minimalists for whom the notion of perception was a practical utility in recognizing supposedly ‘universal’ forms, Ramirez inserts spatial puzzles into the perceptual field and adds emotional punctuation with titles such as that of the celebrated work on paper *I Sleep, While my Heart Keeps Vigil*. Ramirez does not shy away from the spiritual or the imaginative, nor does he pare down the creative process that relegates the work to a frigidly intellectual didacticism.



Dan Ramirez, *Cezanne's Gravitas*, 2021. Oil/clear tinted acrylic varnish on panel, 36 x 48 inches. Photo courtesy of Zolla Lieberman Gallery.



Dan Ramirez, *Nightwalker*, 2021.  
Oil/acrylic on panel. Photo courtesy  
of Zolla Lieberman Gallery.

In examining his body of work, one will notice the gradual introduction of color and the inclusion of curved lines into his paintings. “Sheets of Space/Finding Place” presents the most recent iterations of this mode of working. Ramirez’s longtime use of the gradient makes a prominent appearance as does the illusion of ‘peeling’ as though fields of color are adhered to the surface like wallpaper and are being pulled off at a corner.

In *Cezanne’s Gravitas* the artist makes allusions to painting’s formal history as a little game or mind puzzle for the viewer. A circle colored with a red to blue gradient is partially exposed as it seems to balance atop the upper incline of a downward slope. Not to spoil the answer to the puzzle for you the reader but the artist clued me into the inspiration; an apple rolling off a tabletop. The painting evokes the physics of this trivial moment, almost as if illustrating the event as if it were happening in our own kitchen or at a desk when our back is turned. We hear the gentle rolling sound and then the soft thud, itself an abstract image constructed with our senses.

The more conscious allusion to painting is perhaps another clue into where Ramirez has arrived in his career as an artist. His earlier work broke free from the rectangle and occasionally featured multiple panels of aluminum or steel in addition to canvas or monofilament wire to extend the boundary of the work. But these pieces seemed to be activated by a defiance of boundaries much like other artists working within the tradition of minimalism and abstraction. They could activate the space around them,

disrupting perceptual space rather than just occupying it. The recent work in “Sheets of Time/Finding Place” occupy the space within the more traditionally rectangular picture plane creating a constrained but more populated playground for the artist to experiment in. In *Nightwalker* Ramirez relies heavily on subtle augmentations at the substrate’s border to create a jaunty composition that feels as though it is falling apart. Tall rectangles are slightly askew like a skyscraper that tilts slightly as it drops in a controlled demolition. Here again though, the title helps construct a narrative around what we see. Is the orange circle, partially obscured, the moon? A streetlight? Are we the nightwalker passing through shadows with the world around us tilted in the disrepair of the modern age or perhaps conversely, our own intoxication?

Whether you are familiar with Ramirez’s career or just discovering it, this recent selection at Zolla Lieberman feels like a key to unlock the abstract logic of his work. With them being grounded in painting we can begin to navigate the distance between his forms and the words he ascribes to them through titles. This is what places his work in the realm of abstraction more so than that of minimalism. The forms may be graphic, geometric, but they are responses to the depth of human contemplation and spiritual experience. The associations to minimalism are fair but are a kind of pigeonholing all too common in today’s art world. ■

“Dan Ramirez, Sheets of Space/ Finding Place” was on view at Zolla Lieberman gallery through January 8th, 2022.

**Evan Carter is a visual artist and assistant editor of the New Art Examiner. He joined the team in 2017 while earning an MFA from the University of Chicago and has been covering arts and culture in the city and beyond ever since. He is invested in the creative community and its capacity to make meaning and reveal truth in everyday life.**



# “Afire” Burns Brightly from Within the Evanston Art Center

By Rebecca Memoli

**150** years after the Great Chicago Fire, Dan Oliver’s “Afire” opened at Evanston Art Center. Through primarily large-scale paintings, Oliver explores his personal and symbolic relationship to fire. He has two vivid memories of fire in his life: his family’s parish church and a neighbor’s home. The works on view examine these memories and how the trauma of fire connects to a larger ethos. Fire also represents passion, rage, energy, and life. “Afire” sets out to visualize the complexity of fire as a metaphor.

In addition to the physical impact fire has on a structure or landscape there is also an emotional impact on the survivors and witnesses. Oliver describes fire as “simultaneously a deeply imprinted symbol and a timely crisis.” Throughout the exhibition, the sense of crisis ebbs and flows. Several pieces are full of flames; edge to edge, dominating the landscape, and consuming buildings from the inside out. Trees appear amputated and consumed by dizzying rows of flames. In a trio of paintings, birds and butterflies provide an escape from the danger of the flames. In his abstracted paintings, fire takes to the background for geometric forms, a maze of pipes. Or at other times, the fire is contained within a body or structure, peeking out of holes and windows.

There are several avenues Oliver follows to explore the various themes that capture what he calls a “psychological reality.” Some paintings are narrative, others more abstract. Despite the shifting subject matter there is a common symbolic language that connects the works. Architecture provides a rigid structure from which fire emerges. The scenery in the more narrative pieces has a mid-western feel to it. The graphic nature of his imagery gives the forms a symbolic feeling even though they are sometimes inspired by specific events.

The painting titled *Church Fire* is highly narrative, depicting a church on fire and the effort to put it out. As though a recalled memory rather than a documented event, the details are sparse but vivid. The church is starkly black in contrast to the flames creeping out of the roof, window, and door. The tree next to the church has also caught fire and there are only a few people: two firefighters, two nuns and three spectators. Light spills onto the sidewalk shaped perfectly by the rounded door frame. The light is more neutral than warm, giving the scene a clean feeling, like a movie set or a Gregory Crewdson photograph.

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Dan Oliver, (Left) *Church Fire*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches.  
(Right) *Fire Bird*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 18 x 16 inches. Photos: Evanston Art Center.



# Material Girls Transform with salonlb.

By Rebecca Memoli

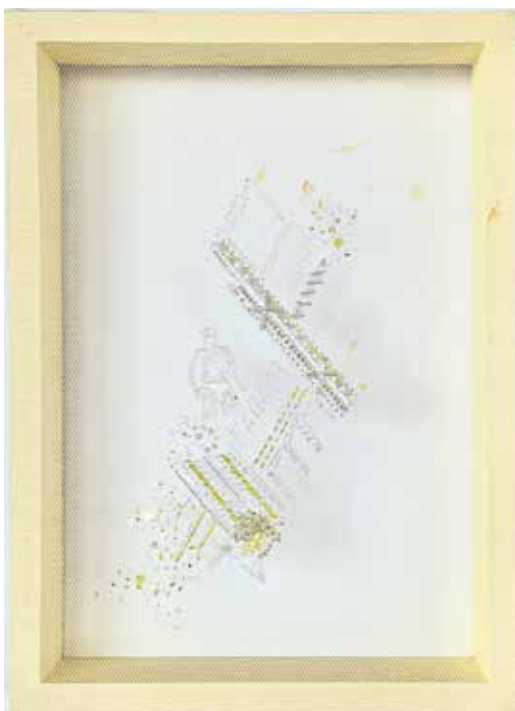
Bridgeport has a hidden art space inside a rehabbed warehouse building that houses a variety of office spaces and a self-storage facility. Don't let the cheesy street themed lobby art fool you, salonlb. is a large open warehouse space with a state-of-the-art lighting system that gives a theatrical feeling to their exhibitions. The recent exhibition "Material Girls: Materiality in a Material World" features work from four artists fresh out of SAIC's MFA Fiber and Studio Arts programs; Théo Bignon, Molly Blumberg, Rachel Hefferen, and Parvin Peivandi. These four artists find interesting ways to transform domestic objects and materials to express their individual experiences and perspectives.

Works from all the artists are interspersed throughout the open floor plan. Moveable walls are used to create

different sections and nooks that tend to focus groups of work by one artist. Ornate furniture accompanies the installation making intimate sections where visitors can sit with the work. The theatrical lighting turns the exhibition space into a collaborator with the artists, washing the walls with splashes of neon pinks and oranges and spot-lighting sculptures as though they are actors on a stage.

Materiality intersects with materialism in the works by Théo Bignon. Adornment, to Bignon, is a "parallel form" with the queer experience because they are both often derided as being superficial. He creates delicate embroidery and hand sewn tapestries that reflect the fragmented beauty of queer existence. His work celebrates sexuality in playful ways. Like in the embroidery piece called *Wink*, depicting a lounging man seductively peering over his spread butt cheeks like a contemporary odalisque. He also provides a darker side by laying out the seedy excitement. Using fine glass beads and thread, *Map* depicts the layout of a cruising park in Montreal.

Boldest of perhaps all works in the exhibition, *F\* (Old Sins Cast Long Shadows)* is almost transparent. Delicate crystal beads glitter in a web-like grid creating the form of a man's torso and the word 'faggot' amidst building-like geometric forms. The beadwork hangs a few inches above the background casting a shadow onto the surface. As the light changes, the shadow becomes more imposing. The glittering surface and its subsequent shadow are connected, bound by thread, reflecting the dichotomy between the desire to be visible and the exposure to judgment that comes with being seen.



Théo Bignon, *F\* (Old Sins Cast Long Shadows)*, 2019. Hand embroidered glass beads on mesh, wood, paint, 22 x 16 in. Images: Scott Renfro. Courtesy salonlb.

Parvin Peivandi, *Weeping Woman*, 2018. Steel, leftovers of grandmother's Kurdish outfits, black paint, thread, 34.5 x 28.5 x 10.5 inches. Image: Scott Renfro. Courtesy salonlb.

Another artist in “Material Girls” that deals with contrasting forces is Parvin Peivandi. An Iranian artist, Peivandi's works explore the contrasts between her Iranian heritage and her experience immigrating to North America. Her sculptures are cold and geometric at first glance, but they also incorporate subtle color and decorative elements on the the surface or behind rigid steel forms.

Peivandi bends American steel with the forces of her own body into 12”x 12” pyramids that are painted black. These tile-like sculptures are installed on the walls in small clusters to form *Self Portrait as a Mosaic Mirror* recalling the mosaics found in Iranian architecture. The scale is shifted to exaggerate the ornament, making it an imposing addition to the architecture. The process is performative as the steel becomes transformed to her will, a meditation on her experience as an immigrant pushing against and utilizing the rigid structure to create something hybrid, neither Iranian nor American.

Fabric and non-metallic elements are used on other sculptures to represent different aspects of her personal life. These sculptures are simultaneously inviting and intimidating. *Weeping Woman* is constructed out of the same black steel forms used in *Mosaic Mirror*. The surface is populated with sequined embellishments from her grandmother's Kurdish outfits. Again, the decorative elements are imposed on a rigid structure.

Both Bignon and Peivandi subvert the use of ornament with their incorporation of embroidery in their works and reworking fabric that have ties to their culture and communities. In *Dining Etiquette*, Peivandi uses pieces of Iranian tribal rugs paired with jagged steel geometric pieces to add a level of daring and imposition to ornament and taking the comfort out of a domestic object.

Molly Blumberg transforms domestic objects and materials by combining them with handmade paper. Her sculptures grant a second life to found objects, using paper to bring out their character. In the *Domestic Taxidermy* series, paper is draped over wooden chairs. How the paper looks and behaves with the underlying form is unpredictable, so the works



are more of a collaboration between the artist and the material. Ambient audio by sound artist, Emily Beanblossom, plays through each sculpture like an amplifier giving, an eerie ghostlike voice to them. The sculptures rattle and hiss intermittently as though they are speaking to each other in another language.

Her *Provisional Bodies* series uses handmade paper to interact with pieces of chairs and other domestic materials. These pieces each take on character as the handmade elements interact with the found materials. They stretch and writhe beneath the thin membrane of paper. *Provisional Body (IV)* is made from a duvet that is wrapped up in a yellow paper. The object beneath the paper takes on a worm-like personality as it bends over a portion of chair like it is slowly traversing over a hurdle.

Although her work is not directly concerned with femininity or domesticity, Rachel Hefferan's woven pieces depicting microbes are conceptual meditations on transformation. The designs begin as photographs taken through microscopes of different microbes from things like fungi and yeasts. The photographs are then woven using a TC2 digital jacquard loom with recycled and donated yarns.



Molly Blumberg, *Provisional Body (IV)*, 2019. Duvet, steel pipe fitting, pigmented handmade paper, deconstructed wooden chair, foil, 24 x 46 x 17 inches. Image: Scott Renfro. Courtesy salonlb.





Rachel Hefferan,  
[*Saccharomyces*], 2020.  
Cotton, polyester, cotton  
& wool mill ends; hand  
woven Jacquard, 83 x 200  
inches. Image: Scott Renfro.  
Courtesy salonlb.

The act of weaving simulates the transference of energy and proteins performed by microbes using the materials around them to create something different.

[*saccharomyces*] is titled after a kind of yeast that is used in the fermentation of hard cider. This weaving is the largest piece in the exhibition. It hangs in the center of the space allowing viewers to see both sides. The large size invites viewers to examine the small details up close, as though through a microscope.

During the pandemic, Hefferan took to a floor loom to create [*Firma calva*]. The colors are neon bright as opposed to the other muted and monotone pieces. The composition itself has a transformed quality, becoming an abstract landscape. The base image for [*Firma calva*] is also turned into a cartoon before being translated into yarn, giving the weaving a playful character. This piece has a more hand-made quality to it. The use of a floor loom makes the scale much smaller and the amount of labor on the part of the artist greater.

A staggering amount of work is on view in this exhibition. Each artist works in a different medium allowing equal play between the freestanding sculptures and the hanging works. Although the space is large and open, an equally effective exhibition would have been possible with half the amount of artwork while also enabling the stronger works to stand out.

The title "Material Girls" places the viewer's focus on femininity and materiality, but the theme of transformation also connects these artists. They each create work that changes the material in form or context. They weave, bend, and transform materials to voice their own perspectives and experiences. ■

**Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows.**

#### "Afire" Burns Brightly: Continued from page 57.

*Modern Dream Home* has less directly metaphorical imagery but is still one of the more conceptual paintings in the exhibition. Unlike the other pieces, the setting does not feel like the mid-west, but someplace in California where you expect to see this style of modern architecture. Fire looms inside the home and creeps around the corner. A bubbly plume of smoke rises from the roof. There are no people in this scene, instead there are a couple of plants in the front reminiscent of the spectators in *Church Fire*.

In contrast to these, *Dystopia* exists in a purely metaphorical space. A burning city under a geometric dome sits in a field. The imagery recalls the Great Chicago Fire which was massively destructive but also the catalyst for growth and rebirth of Chicago as the city it is today.

Oliver attributes inspiration of his work to a myriad of sources, including the Imagists, whose use of graphics, color and form are iconic. Oliver was born and raised in Illinois and received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute. The style of Roger Brown is recognizable, espe-

cially in the way Oliver renders buildings, landscape, and the repetition of graphic imagery. Unlike, Brown's paintings, the buildings in Oliver's paintings are devoid of people. Instead, flames spill out of every window and door.

The works in the exhibition all explore the moment fire burns, whether it be deep inside the body or engulfing the land. The destructive force of fire in Oliver's paintings is ever-present. Whether the piece is clearly narrative or abstract, the same graphically stylized flames, amputated trees, regional architecture, and geometric forms are used. He is consistent in his use of symbolism, but the strategy in which he employs his symbolic language changes as he grapples with all the various themes that emerge from the metaphor of fire. ■

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