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There is a paradox in attempting to define Los Angeles art both past and present. In fact, the problem of definition is a broader one and is related to the nature of the city itself. The moment one tries to pinpoint what exactly Los Angeles is, one simplifies and distorts its complex diversity. Likewise, Los Angeles art of the recent past,
which at its best is unsettling, broadens and challenges long established constructs of post-World War II art history. For example, L.A. artists such as Ed Ruscha, Judy Chicago, and Raymond Pettibon defy simple categorization. Is Ruscha a Pop or Conceptual artist? How are Chicago’s Minimalist sculptures and smoke performances related to her Feminist art? Where do Pettibon’s punk album covers fit in relation to postmodernism? Two recent art exhibitions, the Centre Pompidou’s Los Angeles 1955-1985: A Birth of an Artistic Capital and Translucence: Southern California Art from the 1960s and 1970s at the Norton Simon Museum, offer us divergent approaches to displaying and understanding Los Angeles’ art history. Where the Pompidou’s large-scale retrospective in Paris attempts to make sense of thirty years of L.A. art, the Norton Simon exhibition in Pasadena, California, focuses on a small group of like-minded artists working roughly at the same time. Though remarkably different in scale and approach, both exhibitions expand our understanding of what is, and can be, the value of Los Angeles art.

Common cliches of Los Angeles as the sum total of Hollywood movies, Disneyland, congested freeways, urban sprawl, gangland crime, and temperate climate often obscure views of L.A. art. Los Angeles is obviously more than these stereotypes; at its root, the city is essentially a working-class town, though more geographically dispersed and climatically sunny than most American urban centers. However, art critics and historians, particularly New York-based writers starting in the 1960s and 1970s, have long approached Los Angeles art as the anomalous product of a foreign region, surprised that serious art can come out of the shallow eccentricities of a West Coast city. As the subtitle to Barbara Rose’s Art In America article of 1966 announced: “A report from the sprawling, palm-studded land of Disney and DayGlo colors suggests a distinct and recognizable ‘LA sensibility’—derived from as disparate sources as the bizarre atmosphere of Hollywood and
the surrealist forms of Arp and Gorky—has been forming among younger artists there.”

Or, as Jules Langsner proclaimed in 1963 of L.A. art’s emergence: “In the space of a half-a-dozen years the status of Los Angeles in the art community has changed from the home of the nuts who diet on nutburgers to a lively and vital center of increasing importance on the international art map, having become in the interim the country’s second city.”

Ignoring for the moment what exactly is a nutburger, such essays cast Los Angeles art as of secondary importance to New York art, the product of outsiders unaware of their own contributions to art history. An extreme example of such inaccurate if not negative notions of L.A. art is Peter Schjeldahl’s 1972 *New York Times* essay, aptly entitled “LA Art? Interesting – But Painful” that declared all important American artists were New York artists. Schejeldahl wrote: “It is perhaps a little foolish to speak of California art versus New York art. New York’s gravitational field is so strong that any American working in the mainstream (New York) mode will, should he become influential, more or less automatically be a ‘New York artist.’”

Needless to say, such notions of Los Angeles marginalize its art as peripheral to an East Coast center. Whether it be the trumpeting of the Ferus Gallery artists in the early-1960s or the recent recognition of the area’s vibrant MFA programs and faculties, the significance of L.A. artists is something critics, historians and curators have been wrestling with for the past half-decade. Too often, however, L.A. is perceived as continually emerging in a state of adolescence or gets cast as other or foreign to the staid, serious, and historically significant New York scene.

The Pompidou Centre’s Los Angeles 1955-1985 goes a long way to counter the image of L.A. art as secondary or rootless. Curated by Catherine Grenier, the exhibition is as sprawling as the city it sets out to frame. Encompassing some twenty galleries of the museum’s top floor, and displaying approximately 350 works by 85 artists, the show offers a unique, though somewhat overcrowded and at times
confused, European perspective of Los Angeles art. European art historians and critics have long identified Los Angeles as a vital contemporary art center, and, as a result, many Los Angeles artists have found greater and more immediate recognition in Europe than in New York. As a number of early museum shows in Germany, Stockholm and elsewhere attest, European curators often have a refreshingly open and inclusive understanding of the American art scene and have resisted marginalizing Los Angeles as secondary to New York. In fact, Europeans often see Los Angeles as an antidote to New York’s dominance and dogma. As German art critic Werner Spies wrote in the early 1980s: “Los Angeles has become the counter image to the terse, sated world of New York.”

In her introductory essay to the exhibition’s informative catalog, Grenier frames the Pompidou survey as a rereading not only of Los Angeles art history, but also of American art in general. Writing specifically to a European audience, she explains: “The period 1955–85 was an enormously fecund one for art in Los Angeles, bringing conspicuous growth and recognition and giving wings to an entire generation of young artists. It is vital, then, that the French and European art public should attain to a deeper appreciation of an era–prodigal and fascinating, yet little known–with so much to offer in terms of expanding and enriching our awareness of contemporary American art.” The catalog undoubtedly achieves this goal with its informative critical essays by Howard Fox and David James and extensive anthology of significant historical writing on Los Angeles. However, the exhibition itself is more confused and unfocused than its accompanying publication.

The first gallery of the Pompidou exhibition hints at a curatorial thesis that never fully takes shape as a whole. The combination of Ed Ruscha’s Pop painting Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights (1962), John McCracken’s polished Minimalist sculpture, Red (1965), and Jack Goldstein’s appropriative film-loop, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1978) implies Los Angeles art’s Hollywood connections, TV special effects and manipulations, and obsessive attention to surface. Such clichés do little to challenge or expand past art historical constructions. The curatorial wall-text, however, informs us that: “Particularly vibrant and diverse, the art reflects the complexity of a world-city where experimental art and counterculture have interacted with Californian popular culture, ethnic self-affirmation, and the worlds of Hollywood and Disneyland.” This proclaimed perspective of L.A. art as the product of an ethnically diverse counterculture residing in a global yet locally unique and fantastically staged and promoted region is a fresh and interesting thesis for an exhibition. However, the combination of text and work in this introductory gallery, as well as throughout the rest of the show, does not quite mesh. How do Ruscha, McCracken, and Goldstein illustrate the vibrancy, diversity, and ethnic self-affirmation described by the introductory wall-text? It would have been more effective to combine the Pop art of Ruscha with some other works represented in the exhibition, like Chicago’s china plates of The Dinner Party or the photo-documents of East L.A.’s ASCO, to illustrate the exhibition’s proposed thesis.

Grenier has organized the rest of the galleries chronologically, starting with 1950s Assemblage and concluding with 1980s painting. In between, the exhibition devotes galleries to L.A. Pop, Abstract Expressionism, Conceptualism, and Performance, but things get muddied with post-1975 works. For example, Feminist art, which is not a singular movement, shares its space with the
photo-documents of ASCO’s performances. All of the postmodern works, for lack of a better term to describe the theoretically sophisticated work from the late-1970s onward, seem crowded and thrown together in comparison to the first galleries. As is often times the case in exhibitions or publications, the canonical L.A. artists of the late-1950s and 1960s are privileged in their placement and presentation. Though predictable in direction, the works on display are undoubtedly first rate. The opportunity to see Los Angeles’s canonical artists together is a rare treat, and the heavy hitters all make their appearances. Great examples of work by John Baldessari, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Chris Burden, Vija Celmins, Judy Chicago, Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, David Hammons, David Hockney, Robert Irwin, Mike Kelley, Ed Kienholz, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, Charles Ray, and Ed Ruscha highlight the exhibition. It is uncommon to be able to see such artists’ best work together, and, though Los Angeles art afficionados will undoubtedly complain about the exclusion of such artists as Sister Mary Corita Kent, Maria Nordman, Richard Pettibone, Gordon Wagner, Peter Voulkos, Robert Williams, and others, Grenier has selected many artists that challenge and expand the existing canons of L.A. art history. Artists like Ed Bereal, Allen Ruppersberg and John Knight stand out as important selections. In the Assemblage gallery, Bereal’s work, such as Focke-Wulf FW (1960), comes across as being as socially and politically biting and significant as the better known Kienholz tableaux. Meanwhile, in the Conceptual/Performance galleries, Ruppersberg’s Al’s Grand Hotel (1971) and Knight’s Site Displacement (1969) prove Los Angeles’s Conceptual art scene to be more diverse and sophisticated than previously thought before. Grenier deserves credit for highlighting Ruppersberg’s humorous brand of Conceptualism that irreverently counters the high seriousness of much Conceptual art of the period.
In comparison to Denmark’s Louisiana Museum of Modern Art’s 1997 survey, Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997, the Pompidou exhibition lacks the clear curatorial approach that curator Lars Nittve took by highlighting the utopian/dystopian dialectics of the city through work that reflected this theme. The Pompidou exhibition does not have such a focus, and, as a result, there are odd pairings of work and unclear wall-texts. One is left wondering why, for example, John Altoon’s drawings are displayed in a gallery designated “Assemblage”? Or, how might Eleanor Antin, an artist from New York living and teaching in San Diego, be an L.A. artist? It is not as if these connections cannot be made, but that they are not made effectively here. Thus, the exhibition fails to connect Altoon to the Ferus Gallery that exhibited his paintings along with the assemblages of Kienholz and Berman, and never explains the southern California sprawl that stretches from L.A. to San Diego, thus enabling Antin to be considered a Los Angeles artist. Without such contextual connections, we are left to our own devices to navigate and narrate the show. This gets quite tiresome with 350 works on display.

However, Los Angeles 1955-1985 is an important moment in Los Angeles’s art history. The Pompidou validates Los Angeles’s place in contemporary art by staging such a large-scale survey, and its catalog will undoubtedly be a vital source for future scholars of the period. The exhibition succeeds in displaying the development of L.A.’s diverse art scene, but ultimately falls short in creating a coherent and accessible show.
At Pasadena’s Norton Simon Museum, curator Michelle Deziel has assembled a small but visually and perceptually exquisite exhibition of southern California Minimalism that forgoes breadth in favor of depth. Translucence: Southern California Art from the 1960s and 1970s includes twenty-three works by ten artists, most of whom were excluded from the Pompidou survey. Of the ten artists in the exhibition, only Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and Craig Kauffman have works in the Pompidou survey, though the other six artists (Ron Davis, Guy Dill, Laddie John Dill, Helen Pashgian, DeWain Valentine, and Norman Zammitt) prove equally important for an understanding of L.A.’s vibrant Minimalist movement. By creating an intimate space, Translucence’s small-scale invites viewers to discern the subtle differences and variations
amongst the ten artists that reveal them to be more significant than their common “Finish Fetish” label.

Starting in the 1960s, East Coast critics labeled West Coast Minimalism “Finish Fetish” or “The L.A. Look” for its polished and oftentimes colored sculpture made from non-traditional art materials such as glass, plastic, and polyurethane resin. These critics often compared L.A. Minimalism to the buffed finishes of custom hotrods and airbrushed resin decks of surfboards, which led to their view of West Coast sculpture as the shallow product of Californian artists unaware of the serious, theoretical approaches of their East Coast counterparts. A comparison of artist statements illustrates this divide. Where New York Minimalist Robert Morris wrote of the gestalt characteristics of his sculpture in art journals like Artforum, the L.A. artists played up their indifference to such theoretical explication. For example, Morris explained of the psychological responses inherent in his pieces: “Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them. If the predominant hieratic nature of the unitary form functions as a constant, all those particularizing relations of scale, proportion, etc., are not thereby canceled.” Los Angeles’s Larry Bell, however, has described his artistic production as parallel to his sartorial concerns: “Choosing the right clothing in which to make an appearance became as much of an obsession for me as trying to be unique in the studio... To be important, I had to feel important. Having style as a hobby was creative, great fun, and extremely important to all of us. In a way the humor and style of my group affected the art scene of Los Angeles.” Many have misread such statements as indicative of a broader regional naivete, but Bell’s straightforward openness reveals a keenly direct understanding of the importance of an artist’s public persona in relation to his artistic success; an openness unacknowledged by Morris though his writing served as an extra-artistic practice meant to affect his
public reception. The Norton Simon exhibition bypasses these important issues of the artists’ public personas and, instead, highlights L.A. Minimalism’s participation in the phenomenal and corporeal aims of the movement and its production of a more colorful and accessible kind of work.

In his defining essay “The Cool School,” Philip Leider identified the uniqueness of L.A. Minimalism’s use of industrial material and apparent indifference to audience. Leider described the group’s common “hatred of the superfluous” and their “drive toward compression, a precision of execution which extends to the production of any trifle, an impeccability of surface, and, still in reaction, a new distance between artist and work of art, between artist and viewer.” Translucence, however, challenges this perceived distance between the art and its audience, and reveals these works to be hinged upon the interaction of object and viewer.
The exhibition’s layout allows for an interactive experience in which one’s reflection, as well as the bodies of others seen through and amongst the work, becomes as much a part of the art as the objects themselves. The select number of exhibited pieces, their placement, and lighting in the spacious galleries combine to enhance the perceptual nature of L.A. Minimalism. Viewers become participants by manipulating the reflective effects of light as it bends and distorts through the translucent surfaces of the work. Norton Simon’s Deziel has selected the right combination of work and designed the galleries perfectly to allow for such a perceptually complex experience. For example, when standing behind DeWain Valentine’s Large Wall (1968), an almost 8-foot-high cast polyester resin monolith, one can see the hazy outline of his Blue Circle (1970) across the gallery floor while simultaneously catching glimpses of one’s own reflection amongst the outlines of others in the gallery.
From the small polyester resin and acrylic orbs and squares of Pashgian and Zammitt to the large, colorful pieces of Valentine and Kauffman, the interplay of one’s own body, the bodies of others, and the works of the exhibition heightens one’s perceptual senses beyond the singular objects of art on display. As a Larry Bell vacuum-coated glass cube (one of the best examples of his work from 1962) reveals, L.A. Minimalism is, here, more than a dumb-downed pastiche of its East Coast counterpart. Unlike the sprawling Pompidou survey, Translucence’s directed curatorial focus encourages such open perspectives and renewed understandings of L.A. art.

L.A. art, like much modern and contemporary art, is vibrant, multiple, and complicated. As the Pompidou and Norton Simon surveys demonstrate, what constitutes L.A. art is largely dependent upon the frame through which one chooses to view its history. If that frame is concise and focused, as with Translucence, L.A. art can be a foil to still too common essentialist histories of contemporary art.

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Footnotes

1. I am using the term L.A. art here to refer to the art exhibited in the Pompidou and Norton Simon exhibitions as well as to work currently coming out of southern California and/or being identified with the region. In today’s global art world, the term L.A. art does not have the same connotations as it did in the 1950s and 1960s.


10. It should be noted that these artists, as well as others excluded from the show, have works reproduced in the exhibition catalog.

11. This is an important issue pertaining to classifying what is L.A. art. With its numerous university art programs, the region has drawn
5. Artists such as Wallace Berman and Ed Kienholz bypassed New York to garner European institutional recognition.

6. Exhibitions like Documenta IV in Kassel, Germany (1968), Graphics: Six West Coast Artists in Milan, Italy (1969), and 11 +11 Tableaux (1970), which originated in Stockholm and toured Europe, are a few examples of early European displays of Los Angeles art.


9. Of note, Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight cites this first gallery as indicative of Grenier’s curatorial success. For Knight, the introductory room embodies the “blank stare” and “puzzled look” of much L.A. art of the period. Knight’s major criticism of the show is its exclusion of the decorative and formalist trajectory of L.A. art, especially the ceramics of Peter Voulkos, the hard edge abstractions of John McLaughlin, and the Pattern and Decoration paintings of the 1970s. See Christopher Knight’s “Paris Does L.A. Proud,” Los Angeles Times, March 15, 2006, E1.

10. It should be noted that the Pompidou destroyed two works when Craig Kauffman’s Untitled Wall Relief (1967) and Peter Alexander’s Untitled (1971) fell off the museum walls in separate accidents. A Robert Irwin painting was also damaged but repaired in a third mishap. See Christopher Reynolds’ “At Paris Exhibit, L.A. Art Is a SmashoLiterally,” Los Angeles Times, August 3, 2006, A1.

