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Spring 2010

L.A.'s Art Historian: Henry T. Hopkins, 1928-2009

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Recommended Citation

Willick, Damon. "L.A.'s Art Historian: Henry T. Hopkins, 1928-2009," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 12.3 (Spring 2010): 66-68.

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Column Damon Willick

L.A.'s Art Historian: Henry T. Hopkins, 1928-2009

“My heart has always been in Southern California... I was born and raised in Idaho and my father had a business in Chicago and California. Every February we would come down to Southern California and we'd come out of the 10 degree below weather of Idaho and go across the Nevada desert and through Las Vegas, a blip on the map, hit that valley and come into San Bernardino and the orange groves would just knock your head off. Then you would start to smell that funny combination of oil and sand, and you'd get hooked. So that's my Los Angeles. It will always be that way no matter how ugly it gets, it will always be my Los Angeles.”

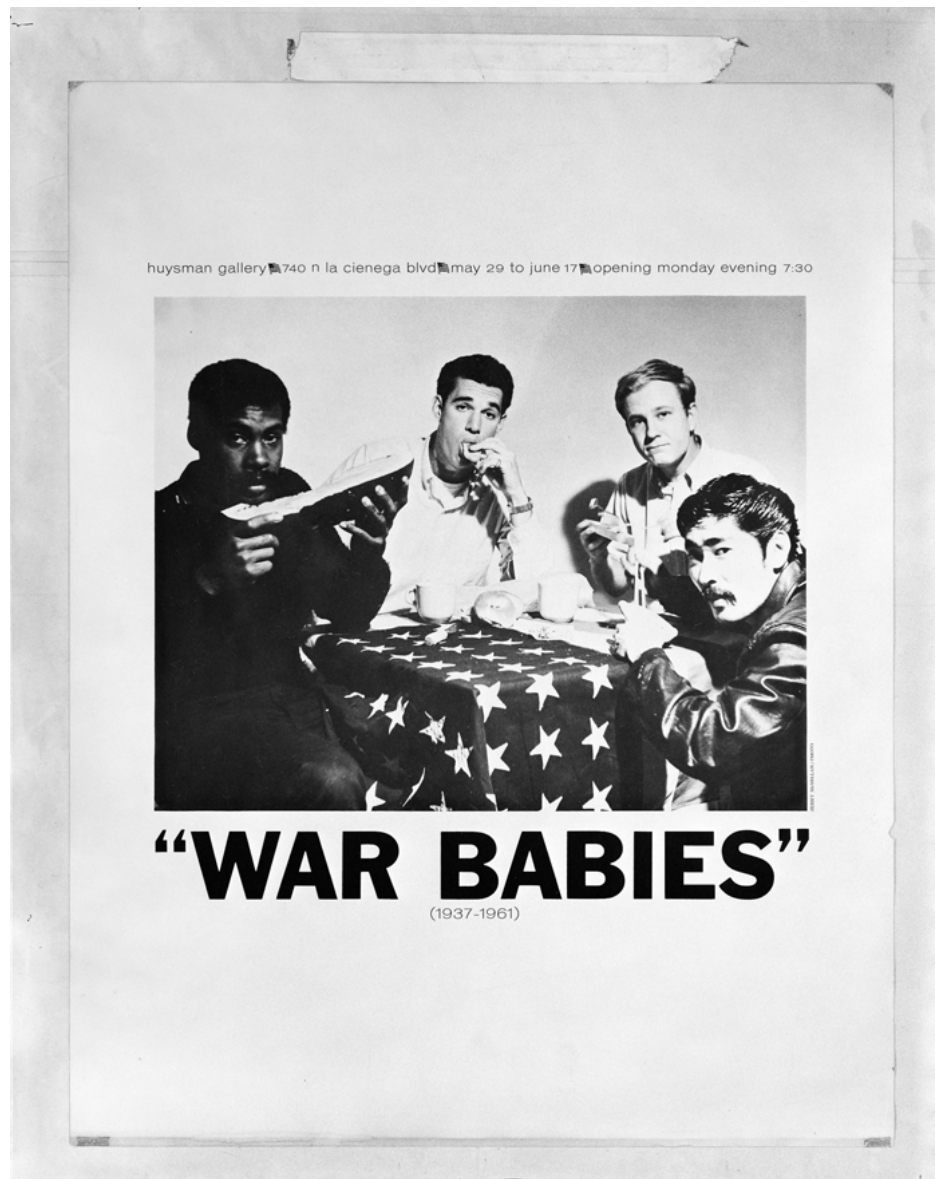
-Henry T. Hopkins

Henry Hopkins died on September 27, 2009. He was 81 years old.

Along with Walter Hopps, Hopkins was one of the most important curators, museum professionals, and art historians who made Los Angeles a viable art center in the late-1950s and 1960s. After completing his undergraduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and serving in the U.S. Army, Henry moved to Los Angeles in 1957 to study painting and art history at UCLA. Though never completing his PhD, he curated one of the earliest museum exhibitions in the late-1950s of Los Angeles contemporary

art at the university art gallery. The exhibition, entitled *Thirty-Seven Works by Thirty-Five Artists of Los Angeles*, included works by Billy Al Bengston, Wallace Berman, Robert Irwin, Ed Kienholz, John McLaughlin and others, and traveled across the Southwest to such venues as the San Francisco Museum of Art (later renamed the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), Des Moines Museum, and the Fort Worth Museum. The artists Hopkins grouped together, many of whom were part of Hopps's Ferus Gallery, would become the first in L.A. to achieve national and international recognition.

In 1960, Hopkins directed the Huysman Gallery, which was across the street from the Ferus Gallery on La Cienega. Though Huysman's history was brief, the gallery offered an alternative to the dominant Ferus Gallery and gave many young artists their first public exhibitions. For example, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and Ed Ruscha showed work early in their careers at Huysman, and Hopkins's *War Babies* exhibition of the work of Bell, Goode, Ed Boreal, and Ron Miyashiro is central to any history of L.A. art. The poster for the exhibition included a photograph of the four artists sitting at a table that was draped in an American flag and posing to highlight stereotypes of their ethnic backgrounds: Goode, who was Catholic, is seated eating a mackerel; the Jewish Bell holds a bagel; Boreal, who is African American, has a large piece of watermelon in his hands; and Miyashiro, an Asian, holds a pair chopsticks. For 1961, the exhibition was a daring challenge to the prevailing norms and mores of postwar America and its underlying racial stereotypes and identity politics. The John Birch Society targeted Hopkins and the gallery for desecrating the flag.



War Babies exhibition poster, Huysman Gallery, Los Angeles, 1961. Pictured, from left to right: Ed Bereal, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and Ron Miyashiro. Photo: Jerry Mcmillan. courtesy Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica.

Hopkins left the Huysman Gallery shortly after the *War Babies* exhibition to take a position at the Los Angeles County Museum, later renamed the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. While at

LACMA, Hopkins was a jack-of-all-trades curator and administrator, and he is credited with establishing the museum's education department and renowned docent program.

After leaving LACMA in 1969, Hopkins directed the Fort Worth Art Center from 1969-1974, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 1974-1986, before returning to L.A. to head the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation as well as UCLA's Art Department and Hammer Museum. At each venue, Hopkins supported L.A. artists; most famously, he organized the first museum exhibition of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, at SFMOMA in 1979.

I got to know Henry while a graduate student in art history at UCLA in the late-1990s, where I was studying postwar L.A. art. Henry not only served as a committee member for my dissertation, he was also my primary source of firsthand information. I remember vividly my first visit to his office in the old Dickson Hall and how nervous I was to be meeting with a man who wrote the very history I was "rethinking." From the moment we met, Henry could not have been more generous with his time and knowledge. I truly hope that his Rolodex has been preserved by the Getty Research Institute or the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, for it is a vital archive of Los Angeles art history. In our frequent meetings, Henry would search the overstuffed Rolodex for phone numbers and addresses of important contacts that he thought might help with my research. "Jim Demetrion? Nancy Reddin Kienholz? Lyn Kienholz? The Factors? Walter Hopps? Here are their phone numbers. Tell them that Henry Hopkins suggested you call." More often than not, once people found out that it was Henry who had given me their numbers, they would immediately give me the time of day. Henry was the key, and I know that I was not the only student that benefited from his incredible generosity.

Henry never lived in the past or rested on his accomplishments, and he was a vital proponent for younger generations of L.A. artists

and writers. He often expressed how he felt a deep responsibility to the future of his students. To this end, he would organize dinners with a mix of the established and not-yet-established artists, collectors, and writers of the area, and I remember him saying on more than one occasion that it was essential for there to be opportunities for the younger and older generations to connect. Henry was as comfortable with his students as he was with old friends, and I can tell you that his interest and support of my work as a graduate student informs and influences how I teach and interact with my own students today.

I last saw Henry in February of 2009. Though I did not know it at the time, he was not feeling well. I had invited him to my L.A. art history class to meet my students and discuss his unique perspective on Los Angeles. He arrived on campus with a full carousel of slides and energetically engaged the class for over two hours. His lecture started with Duchamp and the Arensbergs in Pasadena before World War II and ended with Ed Ruscha and Kienholz in the 1970s. He could have kept going, but class had run out of time. Walking back to his car, he seemed as spry as when I was a student at UCLA, and he wore the same style of thick-frame glasses and blazer that he always had. In fact, Henry's sartorial consistency was oftentimes the target of good natured ribbing and jokes, and I wish that I had attended the Henry Hopkins look-alike contest organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art and hosted by Irving Blum a few days after his class visit.

I am unsure exactly how to end this all too brief remembrance to such a monumental figure other than to say: Thank you, Henry, for your support over the years, and thank you for your work. I am humbled to have known you.

DAMON WILLICK is Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Loyola Marymount University and an editor of *X-TRA*.