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OUT OF BOUNDS

CURATORS MAKE THEIR MARK IN THE INLAND EMPIRE

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHNO

In the decentralized mega-sprawl of the Los Angeles basin, the Inland Empire — the vast region that extends from the eastern edge of the San Gabriel Valley out to Palm Springs — more often than not, gets credited with being an amorphous hinterland. Rather than being a cultural backwater, the IE is populated with many venues for contemporary art. Although it is impossible in the limited scope of this article to cover all the galleries and museums that serve the Inland Empire, here is a brief introduction to three curators and three venues that comprise a vibrant contemporary art core by providing consistently high quality programming.

Since it was commissioned in 1958, the Pomona College Museum of Art has split its attentions between the historical and the contemporary. Even so, observes the museum's curator, Rebecca McGrew, programming for contemporary exhibitions was inconsistent prior to 1969. In the years from 1969 through 1973, two successive curators, Hal Glicksman and Helene Winer, focused the museum's efforts to support emerging art in Southern California. This dynamic period in the museum's history featured experimentation from some of the leading exponents of light and space art, conceptual practice, Finish Fetish and performance.

In 1999, McGrew formalized the museum's commitment to fostering new, risk-taking work when she initiated its current Project Series. At the time, other institutions in Southern California exhibited emerging artists, but programming was intermittent, and in many cases, no publication accompanied the exhibit. Since its start, the Project Series has shown 42 artists — three each year. McGrew works with each artist in the series to design a unique publication that, McGrew says, serves to "provide critical scholarly information and extend the artist's and the museum's ability to reach a broader audience."

One of the most compelling aspects of the museum's dual focus is the way it allows for discourse between artists, and across the historical/contemporary divide. The juxtaposition of James Turrell's profoundly encompassing Ganzfeld installation, "End Around," with Evan Holloway's project series installation in the spring of 2008, crystallized the clash of high and low and provided an intergenerational dialogue between Turrell's minimalist perceptual work and Holloway's head-spinning installation. In this context, one might wonder if the distinction between

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Above: Steve Roden, *bowrain*, 2010, at Pomona College Museum of Art, photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Inset (forefront): Folke Köbberling & Martin Kaltwasser, *Cars Into Bicycles/Californian Dream*, 2010, at UCR Sweeney Art Gallery, courtesy of Jack Hanley Gallery, New York

OUT OF BOUNDS continued

"historical" art and "contemporary" art is absolutely necessary. For curators, historians and critics, it may be, but, as James Turrell has quipped, "all art is contemporary."

Another instance of a remarkable exchange between artists and across eras occurred with Steve Roden's multi-pronged exhibit, "when words become forms," which consisted of the installation, "bowrain," inspired by Buckminster Fuller, and "contact," a group of paintings Roden created in response to a collection of postcards owned by the late abstract painter, Frederick Hammersley, and conceived of by Roden as part of an unfinished conversation with Hammersley.

Across town, at the Pitzer College Art Galleries, Ciara Ennis serves as Director/Curator. Ennis' curatorial practice tends toward conceptual work, new media, photography and installation. Ennis, who earned her MA in curatorial practice from the Royal College of Art, London, favors what she calls, fittingly, a "European contemporary curatorial practice." She aims for the lyrical and poetic rather than setting out to prove a thesis; she works to create exhibitions with unusual points of departure and multiple levels of access. Although Ennis expects a sophisticated art audience, she also suggests, almost paradoxically, that her audience need not be fluent in contemporary art practices in order to appreciate an exhibition, saying that each exhibition should be "visually exciting, and then all the other layers start revealing themselves as you get into the exhibition."

Ennis places a high priority on showing an internationally diverse group of artists, with the objective of expanding the prevailing critical discourse. "Narrowcast: Reframing Global Video 1986/2008," an exhibit which she co-curated with media artist Ming-Yuen S. Ma, and which drew from a group of artists working in environments as far flung as Guatemala, Poland and the Niger River Delta, is an apt example of Ennis' curatorial approach. Individual pieces in the show ranged from the ephemeral, to the political, to fictionalized biographical narratives; most importantly, "Narrowcast" engaged with work seldom seen in the Los Angeles area.

In January 2009, when she was just over a year into her tenure, Ennis initiated a project space in one of the two galleries at Pitzer, with objectives similar to those articulated by McGrew: to consistently show emerging artists and to produce an accompanying publication to help advance scholarship and document the artist's work. The result has been a number of wonderfully intense installations and exhibitions from

emerging and established artists including William Ransom, Nuttapol Ma, Karen Lofgren, and most recently James Gilbert and Jennifer Vanderpool.

Coming to the Pitzer Art Galleries this fall, Gabi Scardi, an independent curator and art critic based in Milan, will collaborate with Ennis to co-curate "Synthetic Ritual," an exhibition that draws from Southern California and international artists working in various media to explore ritual in the context of an advanced technological society.

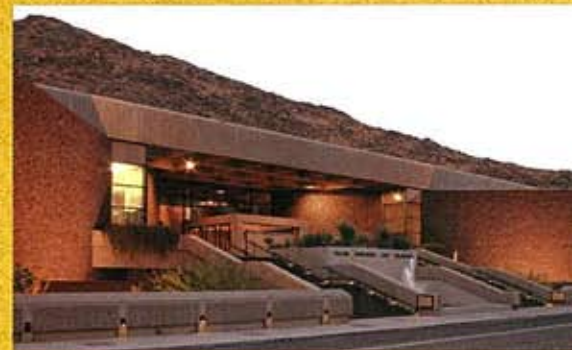
In the heart of the hinterland, Tyler Stallings, the director of the UC Riverside Sweeney Art Gallery, organizes exhibits that tend to function as open-ended investigations of broad cultural themes. Stallings says he organizes group thematic shows, like "Re:Cycle: Bike Culture in Southern California," referring to a recent exhibit at the Sweeney, "to address cultural touchstones." As such, Stallings' shows deal with social or political themes, and incorporate artists who engage on a social level.

Stallings' interest in cultural touchstones comes from his wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, and from his interest in questioning assumptions. Although the division between popular culture and fine art has been breached repeatedly, Stallings still finds this compelling territory. His impulse is to "redefine what art is, and to challenge the tastemakers, and the larger institutions which canonize and determine what art is."

Stallings plans exhibitions to position the Sweeney to be, as much as possible, the first, or one of a few organizations to address a particular topic, or to add a unique take on an existing area of critical study. "Your Donations Do Our Work: Andrea Bowers and Suzanne Lacy," which was at the Sweeney in 2009, was a unique opportunity to bring Bowers and Lacy together to establish an interchange about different generations of feminists. Stallings considers the show a continuation of what was begun by the "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" exhibition at MOCA, which examined early feminist work, and the Brooklyn Museum's "Global Feminisms" show, which explored the feminist work of younger artists since 1990. "What you hadn't begun to see yet," suggests Stallings, "was this intergenerational dialogue through exhibition," presented at the Sweeney.

Each of these organizations, the Pomona College Museum of Art, the Pitzer College Art Galleries, and the UCR Sweeney Art Gallery, provide consistently creative contemporary art programming. Though they are geographically set in the Inland Empire, each engages in critical discourse aimed for sophisticated art audiences, not just in the IE, but in Los Angeles, and beyond. ☐

EAST OF EAST PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM



EVEN for Angelenos, who are used to commuting, drive time to the Palm Springs Art Museum can be lengthy. And while PSAM tends to serve communities within a two-and-a-half hour commute — a large chunk of Southern California — the museum actually reaches a much more far-flung audience: PSAM's deep list of members and well-to-do donors hail from across the country.

While PSAM has been around since 1938, it became an art museum in the 1950s, when affluent visitors to the Palm Springs area stocked their vacation homes with art. PSAM was the only suitable destination in the Coachella Valley for gifts of art and/or collections on loan.

In the past several years, the museum has organized a number of noteworthy exhibitions, including Bill Viola's "The Crossing," loaned from the Dallas Museum of Art; "Robert Mapplethorpe: Portraits," guest curated by Gordon Baldwin (formerly with the Getty Museum); and "Wayne Thiebaud: 70 Years of Painting." "70 Years" is just the kind of programming that gives PSAM a unique edge; it was organized and jointly curated by the museum's own staff: Thiebaud expert and PSAM Executive Director, Dr. Steven Nash, and PSAM Deputy Director for Art and Senior Curator, Dr. Daniell Cornell.

In recent years, the museum has steadily increased its collecting in contemporary art; a recent gift added 116 works by 75 artists. Its permanent collection includes works by Anselm Kiefer, Jim Dine, Larry Bell, Michael McMillen, Ed Moses, Pae White, Ed Ruscha, Robert Mapplethorpe, Steve Roden and Karl Benjamin. So even if it is a two-and-a-half hour drive — and what a drive it is, through the austere beauty of the desert — as one of the gems of the Inland Empire, PSAM is well worth it. ☐

Above: The Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs at the base of the San Jacinto Mountain, photo by David Glomb