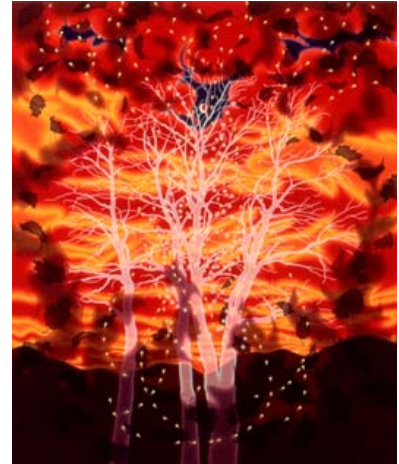


Eden's Edge: Fifteen LA Artists Exhibition Catalogue Essay

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Great cities nurture rich mythologies of their existence. Literature, film, and art probe into and hint at truths somehow unique to each city's place, time, and culture. And so Los Angeles—like New York, London, Paris, and Berlin, to name some of the most prominent examples—has accrued a mythic character: larger than life, and grander. This fraught distillation sustains dreams and anxieties, settles into the subconscious of those who live here as well as those who do not, shapes a sense of who we are and what possibilities we may have.

The mythic Los Angeles veers between paradise and hell, a place of boundless prospects and ruined dreams. The Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena and Disneyland in Anaheim, the Hollywood spectacles of the Oscars and *American Idol* conjure blithe enchantments and hopeful fantasies of Los Angeles. Earthquakes, especially the inevitable “big one,” seasonal fires driven by the Santa Ana winds, the Watts riots, the Manson family murders, the Rodney King beating, all stand as testaments to the city's damnation. Innumerable films—the list is endless—have constructed our understanding of Los Angeles. They, too, ricochet between the sunshine and toned bodies of Venice Beach (*Gidget*, 1959, and sequels into the 1960s, *Beach Blanket Bingo*, 1965), bubbly, insouciant materialism (*Clueless*, 1995) and a world of sordid shadows and bleak souls: the fallen film star (*Sunset Boulevard*, 1950), the depraved land developer (*Chinatown*, 1974), corrupted police (*Internal Affairs*, 1990, *L.A. Confidential*, 1997) the cold-blooded, Faustian film producer (*The Player*, 1992). Even in relatively descriptive, straightforward, and interpretive analyses of the city, a similar typological divide develops. Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) celebrates southern California for the verve and invention of its built environment. Mike Davis begins his book *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990) with the epigraph-like chapter title “Sunshine or Noir?” and then chronicles the failed physical and social ecology of the region, promises that were betrayed.



Myths and clichés, once well established, are exceedingly difficult to undercut or rearrange; in some ways they become self-perpetuating. The Edenic myth, played out in the last century in Los Angeles and California, has been basic to American's sense of self since the beginning, from the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers. The nineteenth century particularly gave rise to sects and communities intent on manifesting a vision of paradise on earth. But the Edenic myth now exists only in residual form, even in California. Los Angeles, as we move into a new century, is not the city it was in either the first half or the second half of the 20th century. Demographics and cultural diversity have changed drastically in the past thirty years. Today's density of development and traffic congestion were unimaginable when the freeway system was largely put in place during the 1960s. The quality and range of cultural institutions has improved dramatically in even the past ten years and continues to develop rapidly. Los Angeles has become a mature city.

At this point in the city's history, all of the old tropes have become badly shopworn and threadbare. To my mind they can only exist as inadequate fragments, palimpsests upon which the vivacity of the present is either projected or shadowed. The outdated stories may continue to be played out or reenacted, but so many other possibilities exist that the potential to realize something new is less impeded here than in most places. Of course, this idea of reinvention does play into long-held myths about life in the city. But today very few would believe that it is possible to have an unformed, uninflected starting point, to be blind to all that has been built up, or to ignore the history that has accrued in the region. Although Los Angeles is no longer a *tabula rasa* for dreams, it is still a city with more leeway in terms of space and cultural restrictions than almost any other city in the world.

A relatively recent attempt to survey the art of Los Angeles, *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997*, organized by the European curator Lars Nittve, began to grasp the complexity, variety, and intensity of culture in Los Angeles through its visual art production. While taking the heading from Mike Davis's book as his point of departure, Nittve in his excellent introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition characterizes art in L.A. as "like the city itself—i.e., heterogeneous, multidimensional, insistent, and evasive at the same time." Among the several essays in the catalogue, my colleague Russell Ferguson, then on the staff at the Museum of Contemporary Art, described the art of Los Angeles over a forty-year period as "a dazzling variety of artistic production" and emphasized that "the city always seems to slip out from

under the mass of clichés, false dichotomies, and jeremiads with which it has been burdened.”¹ The *Sunshine & Noir* exhibition was brought to Los Angeles by the Hammer Museum, its only American venue after a European tour.

Now, ten years later, the richness and complexity of culture in Los Angeles is even greater, and the number of visual artists working here is vastly multiplied, and the approaches to art production are myriad. Artists no longer feel the tug to leave L.A. for New York or some European capital to stimulate their intellectual and creative lives or to secure their reputations or financial stability. Los Angeles is firmly established as one of the most dynamic, creative centers for visual artists of any city in the world. Yet, I first became familiar with many Los Angeles artists and their works in New York or in Europe, and several artists included in this exhibition have seldom or not shown in Los Angeles, or they have not been broadly recognized here. Perhaps the infrastructure that supports artists has not kept pace fully with the artists themselves.

So, how now to take stock of some of the art being made here? Over the past eighteen months of my living in Los Angeles, I have become interested in art here that grapples with the complications and ambiguities, that recognizes the undertows but also the exuberance, of life in this city—which is not dissimilar to the condition of the country as a whole. Issues began to emerge in my mind that were shared by several artists in whose work I was interested. I recognized that these artists were engaged with a dedication to craft, expressed in refined detailing and the melding of a rich array of materials; exquisite surfaces; and exuberant physicality. While the works of art varied greatly in medium and effect, there was a common strategic ground upon which sources both high and low were synthesized, and disparate materials and mediums mixed; and works were often created from fragments and pieces. The art conjures highly fantasized, imagistic worlds in which ambiguity is courted, and threatening and/or transcendental states of mind and being are projected. The collective attitude toward landscape and figure is one of fractured, composite reality, in which forms and images are on the edge of metamorphosis, transformation, splintering or slipping, recombining, or mutating.

As I began to review recent critical writing on several of the artists included here, observations made by various writers about seemingly disparate artists began to articulate shared concerns that transcended the artists’ distinct practices. Writing of the ceramic sculptures of Ken Price, a critic noted that “tensions between humour and threat, sex and toy, decoration and disease can

leave viewers unsure and uncomfortable in their own movements.” Lari Pittman’s paintings were identified as having “radical scale shifts, mixed and matched styles, jumbled, discontinuous spaces, a multihued but rarely blended palette, a grab bag of techniques...and appropriate imagery and ornament, the more offbeat the better.” Jim Shaw’s work was described as a “recycling of cultural detritus...a reservoir of flotsam and jetsam drawn from surrealist installation, comic books, photorealist painting, commercial illustration and everything in between.” A critic declared that Liz Craft’s sculpture “salvages the idea that identity is reformulated daily—as the self and its surroundings actively intermingle, piecing fragments and details together in provisional, but functional sequences.” Analyzing Matt Greene’s paintings, an author noted that “each of Greene’s landscape compositions is a unique permutation of this quasi-kaleidoscopic system of multiple horizons and nonlinear perspective...with glints of *trompe l’oeil* that are quickly snuffed out by too many depths, bursting and receding like diseased and proliferating organisms.”² This kind of language—richly associative, bristling, filled with unresolved concatenations—came up consistently in appraisals of the artists in this exhibition.

All of those chosen track a persistent consciousness of the contradictions endemic to life in Los Angeles, and more broadly to contemporary American culture. For the lifestyles of Los Angeles are no longer strictly local but permeate the culture at large. Yet the contributing conditions are distinct; there is no other city that shares all the formative factors that make Los Angeles. Here there is an insistent, nagging sense that the land itself is unstable, the knowledge of tectonic plates that periodically split and rearrange the landscape. Often the city is experienced from a speeding car on an expressway, and far from a homogeneous environment, the urban character insistently transforms itself within minutes, a mutating collage of almost instantaneously shifting constructed and natural landscapes. The media environment of film, television, video, and emerging electronic image displays is pervasive; a world of flickering, incessantly moving images no matter what the medium.

In short, these conditions conjure an intuitive and ambiguous sense of the possibility of unexpected change, of states of consciousness that break and fold into one another. Phantasmagoric and surreal visions abound. Divisions between mind, body, and landscape meld, morph, and rupture. There is little sense of a whole; geographic, social, and cultural scenarios abut and slide between each other. Violence is latent but at times explosive, while beauty can be sumptuous and ubiquitous. Sexuality if not blatant often lurks within or below the surface.

These are not totally new conditions, but the scene does continue to mutate, the history to evolve, the sense of identity to realign, and the landscape to re-form.

Eden's Edge has been organized more or less chronologically around the amount of time the artists have been working. The exhibition establishes a generational continuum, integrating newly emerging practitioners with their more established peers. Each is represented when possible by artworks made within the past ten years, or for younger artists more recent examples, with the goals of including pieces that act as complements and counterpoints to each other and of creating visual and conceptual conversations that reverberate in fresh and engaging ways. Each artist has been given his or her own discrete space.

Several artists have begun to show their work only recently or within the past five years, while others have been working for fifteen, twenty or more years. They live and work all over the Los Angeles area, from Santa Ana to Leimert Park to Burbank to Venice. (Price recently began working solely in Taos, New Mexico.) But most work near downtown or adjacent areas—Silver Lake, Echo Park, East L.A., Highland Park—which now contain the primary concentrations of artists in the L.A. Basin.

The jumping-off point for the exhibition is the recent ceramic sculpture of Ken Price, who has been exhibiting art for more than forty-five years. His work is followed by a room of paintings by Lari Pittman, in turn followed by a room of sculpture, drawings, and paintings by Jim Shaw, both of whom have been showing their work widely since the mid-1980s. These three artists form the foundation for the exhibition with their interest in the highly crafted handmade object, with ambiguous but richly evocative imagery, and with forms that appear to be unstable, mutable. In the final gallery of the exhibition hangs one large sculptural work by Jason Rhoades, who died suddenly in the past year. Rhoades, who began exhibiting in the early 1990s, had intended to create a new installation for this gallery. Instead, a single monumental sculptural work has been selected, exemplifying the materials and themes of his recent output. In every case I selected, in close consultation with the artist, pieces that spoke clearly to the essential character of their art but manifested as well the issues at the thematic core.

The exhibition has been planned as a journey in which subjects and themes, materials and formal treatments will reverberate, ricochet, and overlay each other, not unlike the way the artists themselves approach their own work. It is not sequential or programmatic in conception,

and it is not about tracing particular lineages of influence. My hope is that the encounter with the works of each artist will encourage a deeper consideration of those of the others, about the material aspects of the works, the kinds of images and themes that are discovered, the linkages between the life of Los Angeles and the art made here.

Within this exhibition is embedded a layered template of artmaking in Los Angeles over the past fifty years. The artists have spun off their works from multiple precedents and influences. Assemblage, which has a rich history going back to the 1950s and 1960s, is amply evident, as in the work of Jason Rhoades, Mark Bradford, Matthew Monahan, and Elliott Hundley. The obsession in the 1960s with highly finished surfaces and luminous colors is echoed in Sharon Ellis, Ginny Bishton, Matt Greene, and of course, Ken Price, whose work was peripherally related at the time. Funk art of the 1960s and 1970s finds resonance in Jim Shaw and Liz Craft. The women's art movement of the 1970s regains footing in the work of Rebecca Morales, Anna Sew Hoy, Stanya Kahn and Harry Dodge, and even Monica Majoli.

Art in California has never had the cool intellectualism of art in New York or of modernism in its most mainstream form as defined through The Museum of Modern Art. By contrast it has been looser and rougher around the edges (assemblage, for example), rejecting tight, formal rigor in favor of a more expressionistic, personal aesthetic. Or it has been polished to the point that critics deride it as decorative—colors too high-keyed, materials too slick. Frequently, the art contains an abundance of images that are more personal, more psychological, more sexual, more socially directed than within classic modernism. Handcraft, diversity of materials and disregard for traditional categorical distinctions of medium and genre distinguish art in California. In short, there is more sensuality, more playfulness, more narrative, more unrepressed personality than was typical of art on the East Coast. These same issues find resonance today with contemporary art from all over the world, a post-modernism that is so pervasive that the term and its meanings are no longer even specifically addressed. Perhaps this explains in part why, at last, art from Los Angeles has been recognized for its importance and influence in Paris, the city at the center of the birth of modernism, where a major survey of Los Angeles art was presented last year at the Centre Pompidou.

Many of the threads in *Eden's Edge* that tie together the artists and their works have been noted but deserve fuller discussion. Craft and handwork are obsessions in much of what's seen here. Each of Price's forms are singular, handmade, the surfaces composed of many layers of

paint that are then meticulously sanded down to reveal those layers as polished, flickering beads of color. Majoli works in the opposite way, building up layer upon layer of watercolor to lend density to the surface and intensity to tone, but again is stratified, implying almost geological forms. Pittman is renowned for his astonishing techniques that create a ravishing array of finishes, in which the hand is like that of a magician making effects impossible to comprehend, and the surface of which the hand seems not to have touched. Shaw's drawings in particular are mesmerizing for their detail and complexity. Ellis and Greene build up layers of paint to create exceptional luminosity, but in Ellis's case those layers are seamlessly melded, while in Greene's paintings they become palimpsests and architectonic structures for holding the figures. Morales works in almost old-master fashion with the finest detailing and layering of color on calves vellum, creating *trompe l'oeil* images that appear to be masterly collages. Bishton pieces together hundreds of photographic fragments, like the finest miniature mosaics. Bradford collages and sands his surfaces to make exceptional, rich, painterly effects. Hundley suspends hundreds of intricate elements, often including small handcut photographs, composed into massive, dense compositions, which while complex have overarching structural coherence.

Allusions to or images of landscape and figure multiply and permeate the work of every artist in the exhibition. With Price, the sculptures allude equally to stylized and abstracted elements of the body and forms of the landscape. In the large drawing by Shaw, businessmen's faces contort and melt into indeterminate masses, mounted over a single drawing of orgiastic figures rendered as a topiary frieze. In the paintings of Greene, figures and landscape fuse. Bishton's collages begin as photographs of plants and flowers taken on long walks, which are cut into tiny bits and then reassembled to form meandering, amorphous gardens or landscapes. Of course, many works are more straightforward in their references. Majoli's figures clearly are men; perhaps less clear is that they are clothed in rubber suits, some suspended by ropes and chains. Ellis's landscapes are highly stylized, hallucinogenic scenes clearly alluding to the sky, sea, earth, and vegetation of southern California.

Yet, in all of the works included here, the forms and figures are essentially unstable, caught or suspended in momentary stasis, just before changing, before transforming and metamorphosing into yet other images or forms. Again, Price's sculptures are touchstones, as each element appears to ready to slide or bend, a product of untamed natural forces, of erosion, gravity, or both. Majoli's drawings appear to be almost dissolving, floating, equally susceptible to and defiant of gravity. Bishton's collages are like minute petals floating on water that could

rearrange themselves with a whiff of air. Monahan's drawings are almost kaleidoscopic, and in fact, they are made by symmetrical recombinations of printed images. The sculptures of Sew Hoy are both rock forms that have dissolved and organic growths that potentially could metastasize. Pittman's paintings most powerfully elide figure-ground relationships, with all parts equally interpenetrating each other.

Covert and overt narratives, stories, allusions saturate most of the artworks. Those by Shaw come from his extended investigation over many years to give form to his dreams, ripe with violence and sex, distortions and incongruities. Craft's sculptures imply states of being outside any quotidian reality. Greene's paintings are hallucinogenic tales whose titles set the scene. Whereas with Pittman, generally the works are untitled but phantasmagorically laden with complex, indecipherable situations in which his characters appear as complicit actors. The video work by Kahn and Dodge is the most specific narrative, but one staged and collaged, in which the viewer is implicated as voyeur, and the protagonist is surely an alter ego.

The work of the artists in *Eden's Edge* is reflective of the reality of contemporary Los Angeles: dynamic, open-ended, richly imaginative. Material culture here is lush, colorful, sensual. There is a sense that fantasies can still be played out. But the tension in the human psyche between the creative and nurturing and the destructive and selfish sides, between ambition and indulgence, cannot be resolved. Extravagant richness and bleak dead ends of poverty coincide without ever meeting. One can neither avoid the reality of ravaged dreams nor lose the sense that new fortunes await. So it has been with every great metropolis of the world throughout history. My assessment is that Los Angeles has joined their ranks, neither a place of unbridled promise nor of shallow emptiness. Artists here are reckoning with the most basic of situations—our existential condition—in all its complexity.

Notes

1. *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997*, exh. cat. (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1997), the quote from Nittve is on p. 8, those from Ferguson on pp. 210, 209.
2. On Ken Price: Lance Esplund, "Learning Curves," *Modern Painters* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 99; on Lari Pittman: Christopher Miles, "Lari Pittman: Regen Projects," *Artforum* 39, no. 8 (April 2001): 143; on Jim Shaw: Mason Klein, "Jim Shaw: Metro Pictures," *Artforum* 39, no. 10 (June 2001): 184; on Liz Craft: David Pagel, *Art/Text*, no. 59 (November 1997–January 1998): 91; on

Matt Greene: Rachel Kushner, "Rotten and Blissful: The Forests of Matt Greene," in *She Who Casts the Darkest Shadow on Our Dreams* (Los Angeles: Peres Projects, 2004), unpaginated.

Suggested Further Reading

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Image Credits: Sharon Ellis. *Fire*, 2002. Alkyd on canvas. 40 x 34 in. Collection of Laurel Cutler Israel & Theodore J. Israel Jr. Collection. Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery.
Liz Craft. *Ballad of the Hippie*, 2003. Bronze and peacock feather. 78 x 32 x 29 in. Private Collection. Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.
Lari Pittman. Untitled, 2003. Acrylic, oil, and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas on wood panel. 102 x 76 in. Collection of Eileen Harris Norton. Courtesy of Regen Projects, LA.