

Art for Art's Sake: L.A. in the 1990s

When I returned to Los Angeles in 1996 from the Bay Area I was not so aware of the commercial aspect of the art scene. Being that the early '90s was a time of identity art and mediums such as video and performance, I was under the impression that contemporary artists made an income from grant applications and teaching positions. My assumptions were correct, as this was much the case in the early '90s. While I had frequented some galleries in San Francisco such as Paule Anglim, Rena Bransten, Four Walls, Haines Gallery, and The Luggage Store, I mostly thought of contemporary art as existing in the schools, nonprofit spaces and institutions.

Like many other L.A. artists of my age, *Helter Skelter* at MOCA, in 1992, changed my understanding of what was possible in art. I viewed the exhibition at the age of 23 and it was an important experience for me. It became a motivation in becoming an artist. When I returned four years later to attend UCLA as a graduate student, I was returning to the city where I was born. I was your typical L.A. kid of the 1970s and '80s. I grew up on the Westside, my father was theatrical agent, and I participated in the teenage debauchery of the '80s (from the Cathay de Grande to the "Less than Zero" lifestyle). It seemed that everything that was L.A. was inherently ingrained in me. Besides

spending time at the UCLA Warner Building and living in Venice Beach, I spent most of my time buying records (to both collect and resell) and going to the 15 or 20 relevant galleries that existed at the time.

It sounds funny to say 15 or 20 relevant galleries, but you truly could count them on your hands and feet. ACME., Angles, Blum & Poe, Christopher Grimes, Dan Bernier, Gagolian, Louver, Margo Leavin, Marc Foxx, Pace, Patrick Painter, Patty Faure, Regen, Richard Telles, Rosamund Felsen, Shoshana Wayne, Thomas Solomon's Garage, and a few others I am forgetting. These were the days before Chinatown. The concept of a commercial gallery was foreign to many of the young artists of Los Angeles. I remember a friend from high school standing in the courtyard of the steel buildings of "Baby Bergamont" (home to ACME., Bernier and Foxx) being thoroughly confused. In an excited and opportunistic voice he exclaimed, "where do I sign up to show here?" I believe he thought of it as the equivalent of a recreation center or some kind of civic-sponsored space where he could simply slot himself in to participate.

A part of me misses the naïveté of those days where a line between teacher and student existed, and gamesmanship and careerism were not nearly as commonplace. This seemingly changed overnight and

Anthony Pearson has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and at Midway Contemporary Art (Minneapolis). Recent group exhibitions include *Second Nature: Abstract Photography Then and Now* at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (Lincoln, Massachusetts), *The Anxiety of Photography* at the Aspen Art Museum, and *Arthouse* at the Jones Center (Austin, Texas). Pearson shows with David Kordansky in L.A., Shane Campbell in Chicago, and Marianne Boesky in N.Y.

by 1997 the rush was on for young art. The promotion of a new group of sculptors out of UCLA would change the face of things, eventually resulting in substantial articles ranging in publications as varied as *Spin* and *Artforum*. Bruce Hainley and Dennis Cooper recognized the group while they were still students. These artists would soon go on to have representation and later participate in the *Mise en Scene* show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in summer 2000.

One catalyst for this new exceptional sculpture was an artist run space called Room 702. Located on Melrose and Heliotrope, the space was run by UCLA grad Brent Peterson and artist Mark Grotjahn. Early shows by the painter Kristin Calabrese and sculptors Evan Holloway, Jason Meadows, and Pentti Monkkonen, highlighted work that made a huge impression at the time. It was here that Peterson and Grotjahn first sold works by the young artists to the handful of prominent L.A. collectors. This was an exciting event at the time given that this kind of thing was unheard of. As a wider audience was starting to emerge, many of the scene's dynamics shifted. Friendships were both gained and strained and the notion of what it meant to be an artist changed dramatically. Work that was once made for oneself and one's peers was now being presented to a much wider audience. People were paying attention to art students, not only grads but also undergrads. At UCLA, the reception of both Monkkonen and later Eric Wesley highlighted a situation where substantial gallery shows were being given to artists who were in their early 20s.

Another artist-driven space of the time was Dave Muller's Three Day Weekend. Muller would invite large groups of his artist and friends to do temporary exhibitions on three-day

KRISTIN CALABRESE

RECENT PAINTINGS

DECEMBER 11, 1999 — JANUARY 22, 2000
OPENING RECEPTION FOR THE ARTIST
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 6-8 PM

JASON MEADOWS/ JORGE PARDO

FEBRUARY 14 - MARCH 21
OPENING RECEPTION:
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1998
7-10PM

BRENT PETERSEN

6150 WILSHIRE BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90048
TEL 213-931-5467 FAX 213-931-5428

PENTTI MONKKONEN

FEBRUARY 7-MARCH 1
OPENING RECEPTION
SATURDAY FEBRUARY 7 7-10PM

ROOM 702
702 N. HELIOTROPE DRIVE
LOS ANGELES
90029

EXIT MELROSE FROM THE 101
CORNER OF MELROSE AND HELIOTROPE
4 BLOCKS EAST OF NORMANDIE
GALLERY HOURS:
SATURDAY 11-6 & SUNDAY 1-6
OR BY APPOINTMENT
213-666-7761

weekends throughout the year. These shows were relaxed and inclusive, and as a result a who's who of the art scene. Grassroots and more non-commercial, the exhibitions would typically take place in Muller's residence and other low-key wayward venues. Both the nonprofit and commercial gallery scene seemed sort of mannered and bureaucratic in the light of Muller's venture. Three Day Weekend was participant-driven and never formalized in such a way as to prevent it from being fluid and primarily centered around artists.

The frenzied promotion of artists both in and out of school culminated in the unlikely event of Calabrese doing a major exhibition at Gagosian, Beverly Hills, in December 1999. Her exceptional black and white paintings of interiors were displayed throughout the exclusive gallery. The artist was a year out of school and many of her peers that evening found the event to be surreal. These were the same paintings that hung in the Warner studio just a year before. Calabrese reflected on the show and the fallout that came from it on Michael Shaw's *The Conversation* podcast in 2012. Calabrese stated, "I sold most of the things and people wrote terrible stuff. It was weird when people said I didn't really deserve it, I felt like there was a lot of career backlash showing at Gagosian so early."

In the coming decade Chinatown would emerge as a more likely place for young artists to show out of school. The first and second generation of galleries included China Art Objects, Goldman Tevis, Black Dragon Society, Daniel Hug and David Kordansky. These gallerists were closer in age and stature to the artists who they represented, allowing for a more synergistic and egalitarian power relationship between artist and dealer.

I would be eight and a half years out of school before I would have my first solo show in Los Angeles with Kordansky in December of 2007. I was 38 at the time. In the prior years, my more subtle work was rejected by most of the galleries in town. I was not a youthful figure and my work was always more conceptually driven and reductive. Still, all that happened in those early years framed both my understanding and sensibility. I feel fortunate to have been in Los Angeles at such an instrumental time. Today I can't really relate to young artist's assumption that the gallery system is readily available to them. I have seen both frothy and dry markets and always feel that art is made for the artist in the most primary sense. Those early days give me inspiration that the mystery and intrigue of art is still the motivation. I derive this inspiration from the innocence of that time.

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Kristin Calabrese show card from Gagosian Gallery (2000). Image courtesy of Anthony Pearson.

2

Jason Medows/ Jorge Pardo show card from Brent Peterson (1998). Image courtesy of Anthony Pearson.

3

Pentti Monkkonen show card from Room 702 (1999). Image courtesy of Anthony Pearson.