

Reconsider- ing Marva Marrow's *Inside the L.A. Artist*

After years of acquiring books, I seem to have accumulated a short-stack that are best filed under the category of "artist portraits." Most of these books are typical inasmuch as they feature brooding portraits of white men. Hans Namuth's *Artists 1950-'81* features photos of the New York school in a severe, black-and-white style, and Arthur Mones's *Artists in Photographs* (1981) is very similar.

Photographing the L.A. Art Scene 1955-1975 takes a broader, more candid view, featuring photographs by Charles Brittin, William Claxton, and Edmund Teske, amongst others. Mostly photographed in situ, gender roles are made evident through charming photogenic poses. The most severe example of grand Modernist tropes strangely takes place in a book featuring many postmodern artists: Gianfranco Gorgoni's *Beyond the Canvas* (1985). This large 14-inch folio features severe, mannered, and heroic full-bleed images of masculine artistic behavior. There are two women artists in this 300-page book. African-American artists are not featured once in any of the above-mentioned volumes, but are featured exclusively in *Black Artists on Art, Vol. 1 and 2* (1969, 1971) by Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy.

Out of all the books I own on the subject, one item in particular stands out: *Inside the L.A. Artist* by Marva Marrow, published in 1988. Marrow seems to break these prior notions of how an artist represents himself or herself to the world. Her portraits touch on elements of camp and are highly staged to the point of theatricality. The book has long been a curiosity for people who have known and studied under the artists featured; the more youthful personas displayed in the pictures fascinated those of us who have been students of these artists.

Today, with even more time having past since its creation, the book has become increasingly fascinating to me. The willingness for the artists pictured to be complicit in Marrow's elaborate staging certainly takes you by surprise. Yet it was the '80s, a time of full-tilt postmodernism and elaborate sources of expression. You can't help but get the sense that the overall gestalt was one of humorous self-awareness and a celebration of a more confident, optimistic time.

While many "serious" L.A. artists of the time are not pictured here (i.e. Michael Asher, Chris Burden, and Charles Ray), the number of storied artists in the book is notable. Baldessari, Hockney, Irwin, Ruscha, Turrell and others were willing participants in Marrow's often fantasy-like imagery. As you flip through the book, the playful images continue to surprise.

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., Marianne Boesky in New York, and Shane Campbell in Chicago

Baldessari poses in a “stick em up” gesture; Gronk has his trousers pulled out from the pockets; D.J. Hall poses with a piece of cake; George Herms uses one of his found objects as a horn; a young Jim Isermann looks like a surfer with locks of bleached blond hair; John McCracken dramatically strikes a Hieroglyphic pose; Baile Oaks emerges naked out of one of his sculptures; Betye Saar fans herself in a fashion that mimics her forms; Alexis Smith poses on her desktop with a target practice figure; De Wain Valentine wears a tuxedo; and Tom Wudl gives his dog a treat.

In the decades prior, this kind of playfulness was largely absent from the image of the artist, replaced instead by typical depictions of brooding males. Although several artists Marrow photographed are pictured in a more stoic fashion (notably Mike Kelley and Robert Irwin), the vast majority seem to be playing her game, engaging the camera as a form of self-expression beyond the artwork. Artists’ statements are also included, with only Richard Diebenkorn and Mike Kelley refraining. The statements only add to the complexity of the situation, as the ideas of many of these artists are essential and important. Kelly’s absence of a statement, paired with his more somber pose becomes a sign point in the book.

I came of age in the ’80s and vividly remember people going to extremes in regard to fashion and self-expression. As a teenager I myself was swept up in this vibrant eclecticism. The fatigue and disenchantment with the 1970s was very real and palpable at the time, and the expressive outburst that followed was yet another example of a culture desiring something new. Marrow’s book is a celebratory and inclusive touchstone of this cultural rebirth at its mid-’80s zenith. In all of this festivity, the need

for the subjects to take themselves too seriously is muted. Even when they do, Marrow gets around the tension somehow with her angles and configurations. There are more smiles than blank stares in her book, with the conservativeness of conceptual art and minimalism being moved aside by craft, color, theatricality, neo-classicism, and neo-expressionism. Looking back on the book almost thirty years later you can clearly feel the urgency of something different and totally new. Marrow’s book exemplifies this clearly, if nothing more.



1
Mike Kelley photographed
by Marva Marrow. Marrow,
Marva. *Inside the L.A. Artist*.
Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith,
1988. Print.

2
Alexis Smith photographed
by Marva Marrow. Marrow,
Marva. *Inside the L.A. Artist*.
Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith,
1988. Print.

3
Laurie Pincus photographed
by Marva Marrow. Marrow,
Marva. *Inside the L.A. Artist*.
Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith,
1988. Print.

4
John Baldessari photographed
by Marva Marrow. Marrow,
Marva. *Inside the L.A. Artist*.
Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith,
1988. Print.



5

Lita Albuquerque photographed by Marva Marrow.
Marrow, Marva. *Inside the L.A.*
Artist. Salt Lake City: Peregrine
Smith, 1988. Print.