

# She Wanted Adventure

Dwan, Butler,  
Mizuno, Copley

“Everyone wanted to show at Riko Mizuno,” artist Jack Goldstein recounted, reminiscing in 2003 about the early Los Angeles scene. But he found the collective reverence for Mizuno somewhat baffling—he “could never figure her out[...] She never did anything; she just sat in the back and drank coffee.”<sup>1</sup> That she “never did anything” seems highly unlikely: she stayed in the business from 1966 into the 1980s, hosted performances that resulted in arrests (Chris Burden), and helped artists cut holes in her walls and ceilings (Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin).

More plausibly, Goldstein doesn’t remember what she did, just as most official histories don’t account for it. The legacies of Mizuno, along with three other risk-welcoming female gallerists at the time—Eugenia Butler, Claire Copley, and, until recently, their predecessor Virginia Dwan—have largely been preserved by comments like these, dredged up from oral histories, the evidence of their influence more anecdotal than formal.

The catalogue for the Getty’s 2011 *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980* showcase of noteworthy SoCal art mentions Ferus and its operations 68 times, compared to 20 mentions for Dwan, Copley, Mizuno, and Butler combined. One of the problems with this is that it deprives those looking now for more experimental, nurturing kinds of art worlds or models—such worlds have existed,

if fleetingly, but how could one be expected to know?

Artist Maxwell Hendler, who showed with Eugenia Butler Gallery in 1969, has theories about why Ferus Gallery outstripped the others at the time in terms of its presence in the historical record: Ferus front man, Irving Blum, “is probably the greatest marketer of art the world has ever seen” and Ferus artists were the first in L.A. to treat art making “as a career.”<sup>2</sup> It helped, too, that when *Artforum* began, it shared Ferus’ building, and its initial editor, Philip Leider, championed the gallery (“it seemed every month we had a Ferus guy on the cover,” said Leider in the 1990s).<sup>3</sup> If history is written by winner publicists, Blum won. And then his model took off, becoming its own streamlined monster, in which hype and calculation are paramount.

When Virginia Dwan opened her gallery in Westwood in 1959, “it was very scary,” said Blum, in a 1977 interview.<sup>4</sup> “But I simply held my ground and didn’t permit her any excess...” He worried she might steal away his artists as well as the few collectors buying contemporary art at the time—the art fairs and over-text-message sales that now liberate certain local spaces from such fears were still far away.

In contrast to Blum, Dwan has rarely given interviews since she absented herself from the gallery business in the 1970s. She talks about art, not usually herself, when she does talk. When she spoke on the stage at LACMA in March of this year, she said, “I have a real distaste for talking about art. I like the gestalt of the work, the whole experience of the thing.”<sup>5</sup> Since history, and herstory, is a narrative, bowing out of the talking part can

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mean bowing out of the whole thing. Women were working “in the shadow of men,” said the poet Aya Tarlow of 1950s and 1960s Los Angeles, adding that certain ambitious women emulated men in an effort to emerge from said shadows. Those who didn’t were less likely to succeed, their behavior too at odds with extant formulas.<sup>6</sup>

Dwan used her portion of her grandfather’s \$3 million fortune to open her space. The first show was of paintings by lesser-known abstractionist Shim Grudin, but by 1961, her gallery had become an incubator of sorts—she brought French artist Yves Klein to Los Angeles in 1961, where he explored Malibu and experimented with torches as painting tools on the beach. He had just had a show of only his IKB (International Yves Klein Blue) monochromes at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Dwan pushed him to exhibit everything: monochromes, fire paintings, body prints, performance documentation.<sup>7</sup> She seemed disinterested in streamlined products.

Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely used illustrated postcards to plot the work they would do upon arrival in Los Angeles from Paris in 1963. “I will make you lots of beautiful [monsters] for the show,” wrote Saint Phalle, on a delicate drawing of a T-Rex.<sup>8</sup> Then, when they arrived, Dwan found them a warehouse in which to work and accompanied them to scrap yards. Besides Dwan’s swimming pool, Saint Phalle installed a wall she’d made in the Malibu hills, in the way she made all her walls: covering an assemblage of found objects with paint-filled balloons, then shooting at the balloons with a rifle. Tinguely chained a cannon he’d built to Saint Phalle’s wall, and, in Dwan’s words, once “gleefully” fired it into the sea. “For me, it was a grand adventure,” Dwan wrote in 1990. “I did not approach this art as a movement.”<sup>9</sup>

Since she did not approach art as a movement, she didn’t promote it as such. She commissioned an essay for her pop art show *My Country ’Tis*

1. Richard Hertz, *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts mafia* (Ojai: Minneola Press, 2003), 27-28.

2. Corazon del Sol and Leila Hamidi, Interview with Max Hendler (conducted 2011, unpublished).

3. Amy Newman, *Challenging art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho, 2004), 118.

4. Oral history interview with Irving Blum, May 31-June 23, 1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

of *Thee* in 1962, that emphasized historical continuity: “The ‘new patriots of American art’ are not ignoring the poetry and structure of the last hundred years, though they may seem to be,” wrote Gerald Nordland.<sup>10</sup> “Like every generation, they must find their own idiom.” As critic Jessica Dawson pointed out in her 2011 essay, “Whatever Happened to Virginia Dwan?”, Dwan’s peers—specifically Ferus co-directors Irving Blum and Walter Hopps—positioned the pop art they exhibited as a radical break from the past.<sup>11</sup> But downplaying historical hierarchies, as Dwan did, made the playing field seem more lateral and spacious, full of room for experiment with or without advancement.

There’s no recorded proof that Dwan inspired Eugenia Butler to push the gallery-as-laboratory model even further. But Butler, who shared a space with Mizuno before opening her own gallery, certainly did push, and the lives of two of these women taking the most risks as gallerists in the late 1960s significantly overlapped. Butler’s granddaughter, Corazon del Sol, discovered that Butler had worked for Dwan at the beginning of the 1960s when she found in her grandmother’s limited archive a drawing by Tinguely and Saint Phalle. Butler, like Dwan (and unlike others in the city: Ferus, Rolf Nelson, or Nick Wilder), had an international roster from the start. The health department tried to shut down Butler’s 1970 show of Icelandic artist Dieter Roth, *Staple Cheese (A Race)*, in which cheese transported overseas in suitcases bred flies in the gallery. As part of his 1969 exhibition *Shutting up Genie*, the itinerant artist James Lee Byars forbid Butler from entering her own gallery for a five-day period.

When Claire Copley opened in 1973, she planned an ambitious show with Argentinian artist David Lamelas,

but then had to reschedule after her business partner, Francois Lambert, abruptly left the fledgling gallery. Her letters back and forth with Lamelas are about trying to make it work anyway, to fund and produce something beyond her means.<sup>12</sup> Many of her letters to artists are like this, negotiating logistics that push her resources to their limit. As part of his 1977 exhibition, *Exchange*, Michael Asher proposed that Copley and Morgan Thomas, who also had an eponymous space, switch locations for a month; the two gallerists kept track of and corresponded about their expenses (Copley made some international calls on Thomas’ line). But the cost consciousness felt like a negotiation rather than impediment. Bas Jan Ader exhibited his ambitious *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975) before he disappeared on his ill-fated voyage across the Atlantic; William Leavitt showed his theatrical tableaux. When Copley closed, unable to continue shouldering the expense, Terry Allen wrote to her, “I Kiss You On Your Perfect Writing Hand,”<sup>13</sup> spreading the few words out across four typed pages. Affection is palpable throughout the correspondence, the gallerist and her artists friends trying together to beat inhospitable economics.

Where Copley’s archive still has formality—letters on letterhead, transactions documented in typed pages—Riko Mizuno’s archives, also at the Getty, consist almost entirely of postcards. “Fucking naked in the sand 10 feet from the water with gin and tonics balanced on our head,” wrote Jud Fine, in a holiday greeting sent from a beach vacation. Vija Celmins also wrote to report on her vacations, and shows in other cities, the weather, or her health. “The gallery was part of life,” said Celmins in 2012.<sup>14</sup> Mizuno, who lived upstairs, famously let Ed Moses remove much of the

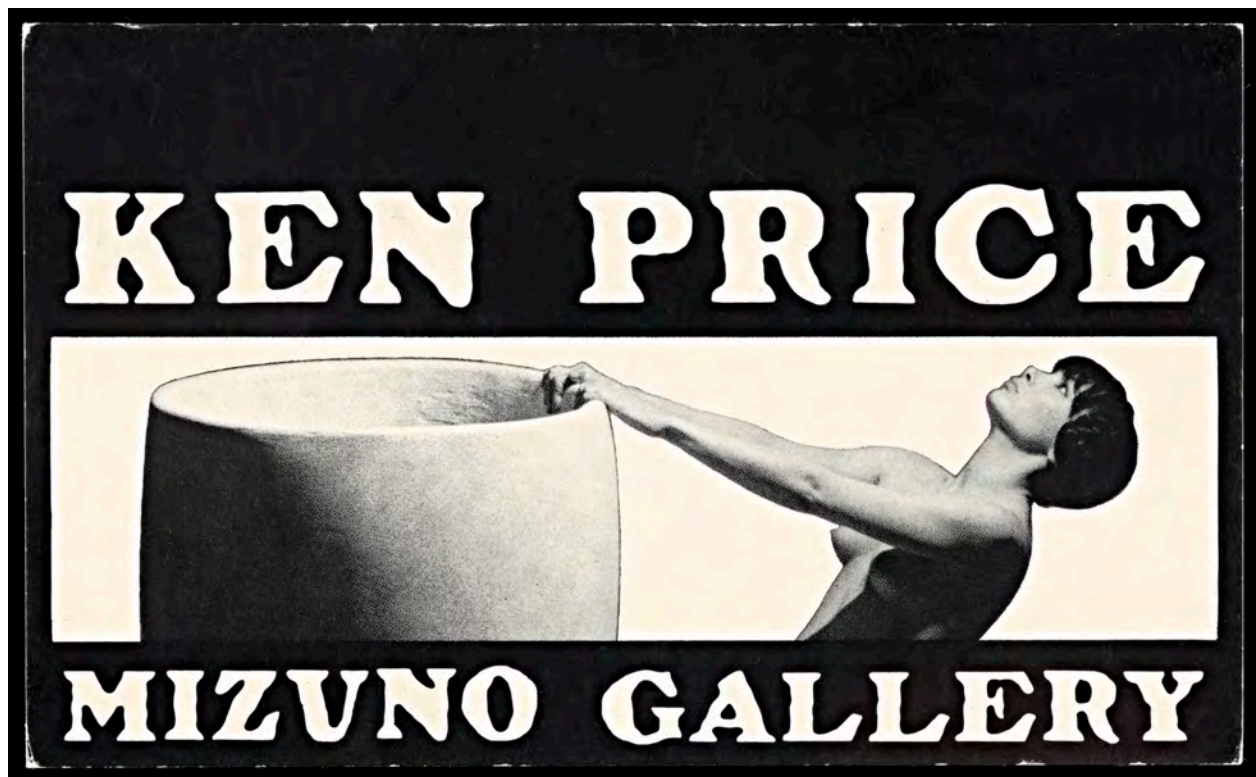
5. “Virginia Dwan in conversation with James Mayer and Stephanie Barron” (lecture, LACMA, Los Angeles, March 16, 2017).

6. Margaret Haines, *Love with Stranger X Coco* (Los Angeles: New Byzantium, 2012), 20.

7. James Meyer, with Paige Rozanski and Virginia Dwan, *Los Angeles to New York: Dwan Gallery, 1959–1971* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 20160).

8. *Ibid.*, 134–135.





1  
Eugenia Butler and Monty  
Factor. Image © Malcolm  
Lubliner Photography.

2  
Invitation to Ken Price  
exhibition (1972). Image  
courtesy of The Mizuno  
Gallery Records and  
The Getty Research Institute.  
Gift of Riko Mizuno.

3  
Virginia Dwan at the  
exhibition *Language III*,  
Dwan Gallery, New York  
(1969). Image courtesy of  
Dwan Gallery Archive.  
Photo: Roger Prigent.

4  
Edward Kienholz, model,  
Eugenia Butler, and Rudy  
Gernreich at Eugenia Butler  
Gallery. Image © Malcolm  
Lubliner Photography.



exhibition space ceiling, so just the beams remained. Robert Irwin, also an avid writer of postcards to Mizuno, saw the ceiling and offered to build skylights. “Riko had the most pristine, beautiful space anywhere because of all of the artists who contributed to it,” observed Tom Wudl in 2003.<sup>15</sup> That such leniency made the space more perfect is a testament to its owner. “She wanted adventure,” said Ed Moses in a 2012 video in which Mizuno briefly appears but then leaves the room when the flattery makes her uncomfortable.<sup>16</sup> She and her peers remained disinterested in trumpeting their own significance even as artists they’d supported graduated to stardom.

In his posthumously published memoir, Ferus co-founder Walter Hopps recalls the time an artist came to him and suggested he seduce Virginia Dwan. Then they could merge their galleries, and he could use her funds to support his roster. In relaying this story, Hopps fails to mention the

specificities of Dwan’s program.<sup>17</sup> The woman, in his telling, is a swayable support figure. Likely notions of this sort fueled the marginalization of Dwan and her successors. But it’s more gratifying to think their exclusion was their own subversive doing: refusal to play the boys’ way left them in a realm that repels the same old storyline. Now it’s for us to hone different narrative tools, to make use of the models that they left us with.

9. Ibid., 246.

10. Gerald Nordlund, in *My country 'tis of thee* exhibition catalog for Dwan Gallery (Los Angeles, 1962, in records of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

11. Jessica Dawson, “Whatever Happened to Virginia Dwan?,” *X-Tra*, 14, no. 2 (Winter 2011).

12. Letters between Claire Copley and David Lamelas, 1973. The Claire Copley Gallery Records and the Getty Research Institute.

13. The Claire Copley Gallery Records and the Getty Research Institute.

14. Riko Mizuno, *Vija Celmins, and Ed Moses speak about the Mizuno Gallery* (2009; Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute), video.

15. Hertz, 45.

16. Riko Mizuno, *Vija Celmins, and Ed Moses speak about the Mizuno Gallery*.

17. Walter Hopps, Deborah Treisman, Anne Doran, and Edward Ruscha, *The dream colony: a life in art* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2017), 82.