

Art Since the 1960s: California Experiments **July 15, 2007–September 14, 2008**

Art Since the 1960s: California Experiments is part of *Collection Histories/Collective Memories*, an ongoing series that focuses on the intersection of major movements in contemporary art and significant moments in the museum's history during the past 40 years. Featuring key artists, related documentation, and interpretive materials culled from the museum's archives, *Art since the 1960s: California Experiments* chronicles experimental and experiential artistic practices that emerged in the 1960s and have continued to flourish through the 1990s. This illustrated gallery guide highlights specific works in each section of the exhibition.

Conceptual Art

Conceptual artists questioned the very nature of art, developing an approach to their work that was rooted in ideas rather than in producing traditional objects. Exploring the relationship between language and form, these artists often stretched the definition of art by incorporating media not commonly associated with the visual arts—audio and videotapes; sound and light; or written plans, instructions, and specifications. Rather than emphasizing formal elements or the mark of the artist's hand, this art was an inquiry into the meaning of art, why something is considered art, and the nature of art and materials.

From 1966-68, John Baldessari created a series of text-based paintings, hand-lettered by professional sign painters. The canvases contain written extracts from his own notebooks, art manuals, and the essays of contemporary critics, including art writer Max Kozloff. In *Voluble Luminist Painting for Max Kozloff* (1968), words used by Kozloff in a 1968 *Artforum* article have been taken out of context and artfully arranged by the artist on the canvas. With wit and irony, Baldessari reverses the artist/critic relationship, using the tools of the art critic to make the painting, and focusing the viewer's scrutiny on the critic's words.

Vija Celmins explores various modes of representing reality as she transfers the essence of an object into artistic form. Unlike many California artists in the 1960s, Vija Celmins looked to nature. Working from photographs, the artist depicted highly detailed images of the ocean, moon surfaces, and other natural sites. For *Untitled (Ocean)*, she focused on a horizontal band of waves photographed near her Venice Beach studio. Void of surfers and swimmers, the image captures the ocean as an infinite, timeless expanse. Making such an image required long and careful attention to detail, and Celmins saw such a work as a "record of mindfulness."

Pop Art

California pop artists began to represent their state in terms of its popular culture and urban environments, focusing on growing commercial and entertainment industries, its increasingly suburban built environments, and its youth and car cultures. An avid motorcyclist, artist Billy Al Bengston adopted painting techniques related to motorcycle and car design, reflecting the clean, highly polished surfaces of the California Finish Fetish movement. *Birmingham Small Arms I (B.S.A.)* depicts the logo of a British motorcycle company inside an abstract halo form. The vivid yellow references the lustrous beauty of motorcycle design and the glowing headlight of a bike at night. A racer himself, Bengston reveled in the hyper-masculinity of this subculture while also focusing on the abstract beauty of the machines' forms.

Andy Warhol, initially became known for his pop icons of Campbell Soup cans, Brillo boxes and other objects of commodity culture. In the late 1960s, responding to the criticism that his work was not serious enough, Warhol began his Death and Disaster series that appropriated sensational images of car crashes,

race riots and executions from mass media sources. His *Electric Chair* from 1971, derives from a photograph of the electric chair used in 1953 to execute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg convicted as Soviet spies at the height of the Cold War. The artist crops the photograph to emphasize the isolated image of the empty chair against a dim background where a sign on the wall reads "silence." Warhol's use of appealing, pastel colors, applied in a painterly manner, creates a stark contrast between the horror of execution and the aesthetic appeal of the silkscreen print. One of Warhol's most well-known and political images, the grim image of the *Electric Chair* fueled the continuing debate about capital punishment.

Assemblage

The origins of assemblage originate in the early 20th century with the collage work of Cubist artist Pablo Picasso and the assembled, "ready-made" found objects of Dada artist Marcel Duchamp. At that time, the integration of non-traditional, everyday materials such as frayed rope, photographs, or newspaper clippings into a work of art was considered a radical act defying convention. These new hybrid, aesthetic works simultaneously retain parts of their original identities and often allude to the experiences of each artist's own life and era. By the 1950s, artists had advanced the medium of assemblage as a vital new means for expression, particularly in California.

George Herms, who began working in the post WWII period, creates witty, resonant assemblages often comprised of previously discarded books, ticket stubs, car parts and photographs. Influenced by the improvisational nature of jazz, Herms takes this random detritus and transforms it into multi-layered works that reveals his broad knowledge of history and culture, his Beat sensibilities, and interest in the mystical. *Portrait of Marcia Jacobs* (1963) is an assemblage of worn objects and scraps that pays homage to Herms' friend and collaborator Wallace Berman, who occasionally used this female pseudonym when making his work.

After moving to Los Angeles as child in the 1930s, East Coast transplant Berman grew up in the West Coast jazz-infused, Beat cultural scene, accumulating ideas and materials to create assemblages, ranging from junk sculptures to his journal, *Semina* (1955-64/1972). This hand-printed collection of poems, photographs, and drawings by Berman and other artists embodied his philosophy that art was inseparable from life. Often the journal featured images of his family and friends, such as the cover that depicts Shirley, Berman's wife. Although *Semina* reached only a small, select audience, the publication proved influential: a generation of artists claims him as an influence.

Betye Saar, born in Los Angeles in the 1920s, creates assemblages that reference her own life and reflect her interest in memory, history and the African-American experience. Until the late 1960s, printmaking dominated Saar's work but after viewing the beautifully tattered bits and pieces within American artist Joseph Cornell's constructed boxes, she began using assemblage. *Miz Hannah's Secret* (1975) is a collection of found objects and photographs in a wooden box with a lock. This potential closure deepens the mystery and secret nature of this cache of symbolic objects.

Installation Art

Installation art encompasses seemingly disparate objects and materials--painting, sculpture, text, media, light, and sound—to evoke complex and multiple associations, thoughts, longings, and moods. Installation art is not confined to gallery spaces; it can transform specific interior or exterior sites. These specifically demarcated places and structures provide opportunities for viewers to temporarily lose themselves in a perceptual experience or a totally immersive environment. The artists involved in installation art are not part

of a coherent movement, but share common interests and materials, constructing meaning even from the most ephemeral objects and ideas. Often comprised of layers of ideas and information, the value and meaning of the installation is Gershwin's beloved 1935 American located in the viewers' experience and perception.

Alexis Smith's *The Promised Land for Peggy (From Porgy and Bess)* (1981), inspired by George folk opera, is an enormous collaged narrative, using stage directions, actual quotes from the play, large painted motifs, found objects, and sculptural elements—lending a theatrical air to the total installation. Smith's work recalls the traditions of Arthur Dove's collages and Joseph Cornell's assemblages, whose work she studied on the advice of Robert Irwin, one of her teachers at the University of California at Irvine.

James Turrell's artwork includes light and space installations as well highly ambitious earthworks or land projects. Turrell's *Roden Crater* project located in Arizona's Painted Desert is a 30-year work-in-progress that transforms an extinct volcano into a massive observatory, specifically designed to view celestial phenomena. Working with cosmological influences ranging from Stonehenge and the Mayan calendar, to his personal Quaker-based faith, Turrell's art prompts greater self-awareness through silent contemplation and promotes spiritual connection through the perception of light in a given space.

Neo-Conceptual Practices

Employing ideas and techniques gleaned from the first generation of Conceptual artists, artists of the 1990s created works that grappled with both personal identity and contemporary social issues. Appropriation, language, information as subject matter, and social critique are just some of the tools they used to launch dialogues around these issues. By using these Conceptual strategies, this new generation of artists began to propose fresh paradigms for producing artwork and demanded that contemporary art accommodate a broader range of voices and subject matter. Many of these diverse artists challenge stereotypes related to race, gender and sexuality.

Working in various media for over twenty years, Southern California sculptor Charles Ray creates unsettling works that frequently demonstrate a deadpan humor and playfulness, along with a conscious effort to disorient and then reorient the viewer's perspective. Ray's *Self-Portrait* (1990) confronts and baffles the viewer with its mix of strange, yet recognizable elements. At first glance, the piece appears to be an ordinary store mannequin, but it is subtly distorted in its scale to suggest a slight dysfunction. Ray has commented, "The mannequin is very simple. Take the head off a standard mannequin, put mine on, neutralize it the way they do, sand it down to where it barely looks like me." Sporting Ray's own clothing, the sculpture is an unusual hybrid of something found and something created, something common and something alien.

The photographs of Catherine Opie explore the rich terrain of cultural portraiture coupled with the long-standing tradition of documentary photography in the United States. The directness of her portraits seems to cut straight through to their subjects' core, presenting their essence to the viewer. Her self-portrait, *Bo* (1991) at the right, part of a series of photographs Opie took within the gay and lesbian leather community, is provocative and confrontational, addressing issues of self-representation and identity. Wearing a fake moustache and dressed in drag, Opie has said of this work: "I don't make myself look this way to get attention, I do it because it's an expression of having control over my own body...It's not like I'm playing a character with Bo—he just gives voice to another part of my mind that I know is there."