

The School of L.A.

A major exhibition at the Centre Pompidou surveyed the art made in Los Angeles between 1955 and 1985, providing an invigorating look at the rogue energy of the West Coast scene during that legendary period.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

I spent a good part of the fall of 2001 sitting in Paris cafés reading books about Los Angeles architecture. At the time, this struck me as highly ironic, given Paris's legendary status as a cultural magnet. It then occurred to me that my own quirks reflected a broader shift in the contemporary art world; away from New York and toward Los Angeles (not to mention London, Berlin or Beijing), as a new paradigm of a decentered art world. Even pre-9/11, I had wanted to get out of Manhattan for a while. But now here I was in the City of Light, feeling that I had to get up to speed on L.A. art history. As far as the period of the early 20th century was concerned, L.A. seemed particularly strong in the areas of architecture, design and the movies (but that is another subject).

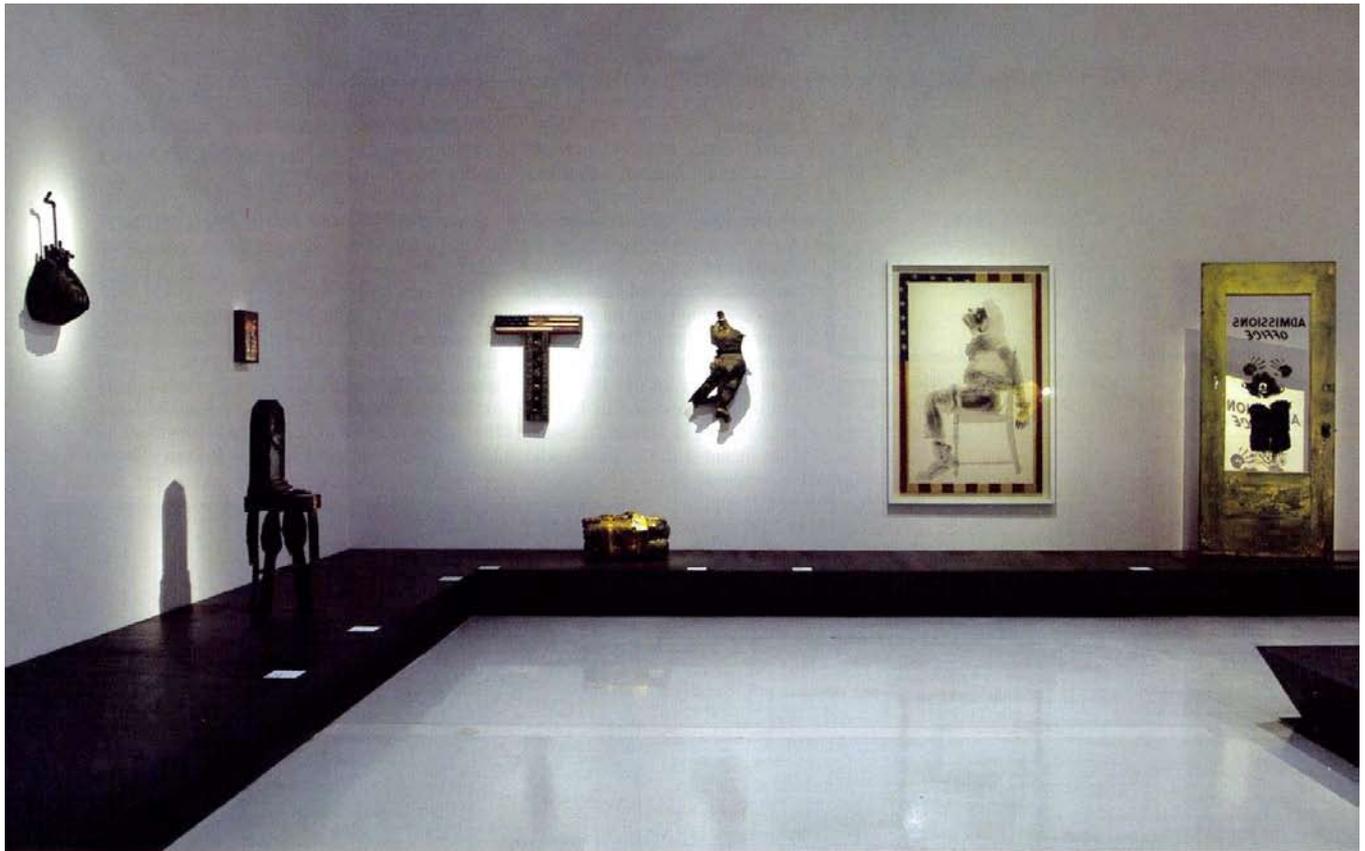
Little did I know at the time that a curator at the Centre Pompidou, Catherine Grenier, was already planning an exhibition about art in Los Angeles, and her efforts bore fruit last spring. "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital" might have been one of those bland catchalls, almost like a TV travelogue, that tries to convey the essence of a city in a condensed time frame. Instead, it turned out to be a surprising and invigorating, if diffuse, art-historical survey. This show seemed intent on establishing a mythic narrative, even as it subverted it. Though only loosely chronological and intermittently revisionist in its inclusions (Grenier pretty much cleaved to the party line of contemporary art heavy-hitters), the show looked and felt like a brisk French historical primer, full of fun facts, pertinent dates and colorful personalities. We got to witness the emergence of figures like Ed Kienholz, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, David Hockney, Ed Ruscha, Lynn Foulkes, Vija Celmins, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, Bill Viola, Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, Matt Mullican, Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, Jim Shaw, Charles Ray—all in a newly synthesized reconstruction of the "local" context.

Grenier curated some very good shows while at the Pompidou; this was her last, and she left for the Ministry of Culture before the show was over. Her "The Pop Years," seen in the summer of 2001, was encyclopedic and revelatory in its international scope. Similarly, her sweeping reinstallation of the permanent collection in 2005—"Big Bang: Creation and Destruction in 20th-Century Art"—highlighting broad humanistic themes like primitivism and archaism, sex, war, melancholy and reenchantment, was also a surprise hit, and suggested all kinds of unities and continuities in the iconog-





View of "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital," showing (left to right) two sculptures by John McCracken, Ken Price's sculpture Pink Egg, 1964, Billy Al Bengston's paintings Humphrey and Busby, both 1963; at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Rear wall and plinth, left to right, three works by John Outterbridge with David Hammons's *Injustice Case*, 1970, and *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969; at the Pompidou.

Black artists' work of the '60s and '70s—such as David Hammons's *Injustice Case*, which invoked the Bobby Seale trial—was shown with earlier work by Ferus Gallery artists.

included in the show, as was Viola's 1983 video *Anthem*, which was given its own room.

What a great work, I thought, seeing *Anthem* for the first time in the Paris show: so taut, poetic and disciplined. The imagery of a Korean-American school girl screaming her head off under the Piranesian vault of L.A.'s Union Station—intercut with slow-mo footage of the city's archaic oil rigs, close-ups of an open heart beating in the midst of an operation, and a luscious cantaloupe being sliced—has in retrospect an unforgettable air of grandeur. *Anthem* provides a glimpse of a major artist's oeuvre in formation, and, together with early works by Baldessari, McCarthy and Kelley was quite a lesson in artistic development.

Grénier's show had one of the best first rooms I can remember. Three works with lots of red in them were pitted against one another: Ruscha's *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962), with the 20th Century Fox logo half-painted, half-penciled in; John McCracken's shiny, abstract, horizontal wall relief (untitled) from 1973; and Jack Goldstein's film *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975), which features the roaring lion on a red ground without the lettering. Immediately, boundaries between film, painting and sculpture, abstraction and figuration, appropriated Hollywood imagery and high modernist content were erased, and a new kind of "total work of art," laid-back, laconic yet content-heavy, was put forth: thereafter, everything seemed possible.

A succession of galleries breathtakingly alternated between messy and clean, which made for a sweeping visual sense. Yet this kind of thesis-antithesis presentation is by nature not historically accurate. Within each room, there was considerable chronological leeway. For example, in one gallery devoted mostly to assemblage, black artists' work of the '60s and '70s was placed side by side with earlier work by artists generally associated with the Ferus Gallery. The artists of color included here—David Hammons, Betye Saar, Joe Bereal and John Outterbridge among them—were repre-

sent by very strong assemblage works, often with anti-American iconography. Bereal's *Focke-wulf FW 109* (1960), a hanging scrap-metal sack with a swastika on it, was named after the legendary German fighter plane of World War II. Hammons's *Injustice Case* (1970), with its body-printed image of a bound and gagged figure on a transparent support framed by a cut up American flag, brought back the era of the Bobby Seale trial. (I'd never realized Hammons started in L.A.) These pieces effectively upstaged better-known works by Kienholz, George Herms and Wallace Berman on view. (As I learned from director Alfred Pacquement's introduction in the catalogue, the museum has had a commitment to Kienholz's work since the '70s, and the Centre Pompidou owns an important installation, *While Visions of Sugar Plums Danced in Their Heads*, 1964, which was also in this room.) Berman's work (including examples of *Semina* magazine, photographs, collages and the film *Aleph*, shown on a small monitor), in particular, deserved more space to unfold. (The traveling show "Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle" was recently curated by Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna for the Santa Monica Museum of Art [see *A.L.A.*, Apr. '06]. Though the exhibition is not coming to Europe, its excellent catalogue was on sale in the Pompidou bookstore.)

Next came a "clean" room devoted to Finish Fetish, which also included many works by artists not associated with that movement. Here two of Billy Al Bengston's heraldic abstractions, *Humphrey* and *Busby* (both 1963), looked superbly crafted and suggested abstracted sentinels; the chevrons at the center of each hint at some lurking macho, militaristic content. Next to these, two early ceramic sculptures by Ken Price, *Red* (1962) and *Pink Egg* (1964), looked just as impeccably licked and abstracted, if more late Surrealist in their biomorphic forms. Across the way, Judy Chicago's *Bronze Domes* (1968) on a mirrored table-scape seemed with hindsight to suggest breasts or bras on display. (One of Chicago's plates from *The Dinner Party* of 1979 was included in the later feminist section, where it stole fire from the more pallid productions of other artists who, beginning in the 1970s, worked out of L.A.'s Women's Building, of which Chicago herself was a founder.)

Then followed the world of '60s abstract and figurative painting, which included the work of

Llyn Foulkes, David Hockney and Ruscha, among others. Foulkes's *Cardinal Rock* (1969) recalls a blowup of an Yves Tanguy moonscape. (Interestingly, the catalogue reproduces a shot of Foulkes's work on view at Darthea Speyer's Paris gallery in October 1970, and it has been in the Pompidou collection since 1978.)

The selection of late '60s video and Conceptual art included at least one very scabrous work, Bruce Nauman's *Black Balls* (1969), in which the artist is shown smearing his testicles with black paint. Here, too, were early works by Douglas Huebler, such as *Variable Piece #1 (Paris)* of 1970, which incorporates a map of the city. In this gallery, there was one masterpiece of early video art that I had never seen before, Baldessari's *I Am Making Art* (1971), in which the artist slowly waves his arms around, as if in a trance, seeming to bestow art upon the empty studio. Next came a welter of '70s work, where things got at once documentary and oddly disembodied.

In this section there was a considerable *terrain vague* between documentary and art videos, and the two genres began to intermingle. One episode of Jean-Marie Drot's French TV series "Le Raid Americain" (1976) presciently covers the '70s L.A. art scene, featuring many interviews with artists and starring a stunningly glamorous and franco-chattering Barbara Rose as commentator. (Having watched this video soon after seeing the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in June, I found Rose's performance, and her visual similarity to Sherman's early self-disguise, particularly hypnotic.) Elsewhere you could tune in to video interviews of such mythic figures as Joan Didion, James Ellroy and Hockney talking about L.A. In our age of reality TV, these period documentaries have taken on the allure of art, and in the show, even such powerful artifacts as Chris Burden's *Documentation of Selected Works* (1971-74), a black-and-white video of his excruciating early endurance and high-risk performances, tended to pale by comparison.

A particularly strong experimental film component was essential for Paris, with its championing of cinema as the *septième art*. Missing, though, was any representation or discussion of the French Nouvelle Vague directors' early critical writings about Hollywood "film noir." (This was pointedly not an exhibition about either the Hollywood system or its influence in France.) An unlikely linchpin of Franco-American alliance was Kenneth Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954-78), in the Pompidou collection. In this

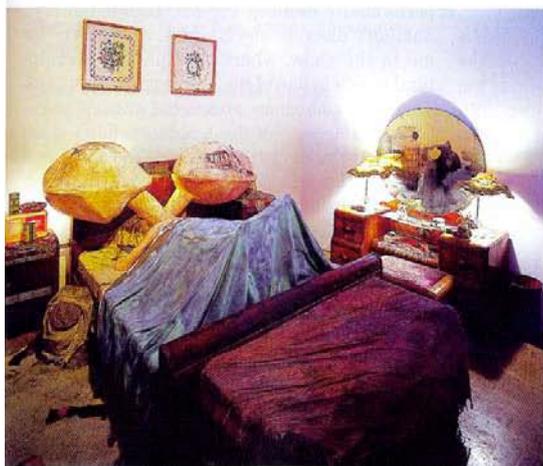


John Baldessari: *Kiss/Panic*, 1984, oil-tinted black-and-white photographs, 80 by 72 inches overall. Toni and Martin Sosnoff collection.

George Herms: *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, 1961, mixed mediums, 68 by 28 by 20 inches. Menil Collection, Houston.



context, the film seemed to stand at the nexus of the French and American avant-gardes; it's one of those mythic works that seems to unite past and present, West Coast and European sensibilities. At times it looks like a '20s silent film, at others like Jack Smith's '60s *Flaming Creatures*. The film spans a good part of the era in question and attests to myriad links between the seemingly disparate cultures of Paris and L.A. In 1954, when Anger began to make it, he had already been touted at the Cannes Film Festival (in 1949), and by the time he finished it, Los Angeles had a fully developed underground film scene of which Anger was



Eduard Kienholz: *While Visions of Sugar Plums Danced in Their Heads*, 1964, mixed-medium installation, 70% by 141% by 106% inches. Centre Pompidou. Photo Philippe Migeat. © CNAC/MNAM/RMN.

Judy Chicago: *Bronze Domes*, 1968, mixed mediums, 38 by 30 by 30 inches. © ADAGP, Paris.





Michael McMillen: Mike's Pool Hall, 1977, peephole diorama, 9 by 20 by 20 inches.

the prized avatar and bad-boy guru, who had authored *Hollywood Babylon* (Volume 1 was first published in France in 1959 but not did not see print in the U.S. until 1975). With its thrumming rock-music score and its imagery of men in neo-18th-century wigs and court costumes, drag queens, magi and ephebic blondes, the film is redolent of both Versailles and the Hollywood Hills. It camps all the standard Hollywood studio tropes and sends up the high-serious French Surrealist canon as well; it's definitely a post-Cocteau statement, deeply informed by the maker of *La Belle et la Bête*, who championed the young filmmaker early on. Anger's authority today feels at once fresh and archaic; the film stars such mythic figures as Anaïs Nin as the Moon, and its narrative is based on the Aleister Crowley book also titled *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. At Beaubourg, you could buy a postcard with the image of a leather boy from Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964; not in the show), and muse upon the director's enduring fashionability. (He was also in *Day for Night*—a François Truffaut film that served to title the 2006 Whitney Biennial.)

In the context of the show, I could see how Anger's example must have been seminal for the early performances and films of Paul McCarthy, represented here by the outrageous, polymorphous and onanistic video *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight* (1975), which documents an early performance by the artist, bewigged, strapping on a dildolike sliced-open sausage, prancing around in a black-lace negligee and pantomiming an orgasm in the mud. (Another very strong piece—remember how good McCarthy was at the outset?)

Spawning a tradition of campy outrageousness, Anger's *Inauguration* was played in a loop in the show with Norman and Bruce Yonemoto's under-known, hour-long video *Garage Sale* (1976). With its story revolving around Goldier Glitter, an ex-member of the Cockettes, a San Francisco-

since the late '60s. Kienholz's work, of course, is also at the origins of the diorama esthetic, but the tendency toward corridors and false rooms in the '70s became even more marked in the show, with excellent examples of otherwise disparate works by William Leavitt, Michael McMillen and Eleanor Antin. The installation of Antin's *100 Boots* (1973) was visible only by peeking through a door that was cracked open. There you saw an old sink, a mattress on the floor and a lot of boots; the most powerful sensation was the smell of rubber.

Next to this early work by Antin (a legendary figure whose oeuvre deserves to be better known outside the West Coast), Mike Kelley's visionary early installation *Monkey Island* (1981-83) looked almost antiseptic, although the presence of a few beer cans on the floor (mysteriously placed under wire covers) did suggest how this generative installation-performance might have kicked ass at the time. (The work's bowtie-shaped canvases also rhymed with the shaped-metal constructions of Robert Therrien nearby.) Kelley's importance today—tangible even in a relatively static early work, *Performance Related Objects* (1977-79), which the Pompidou has recently acquired—was continually reaffirmed.

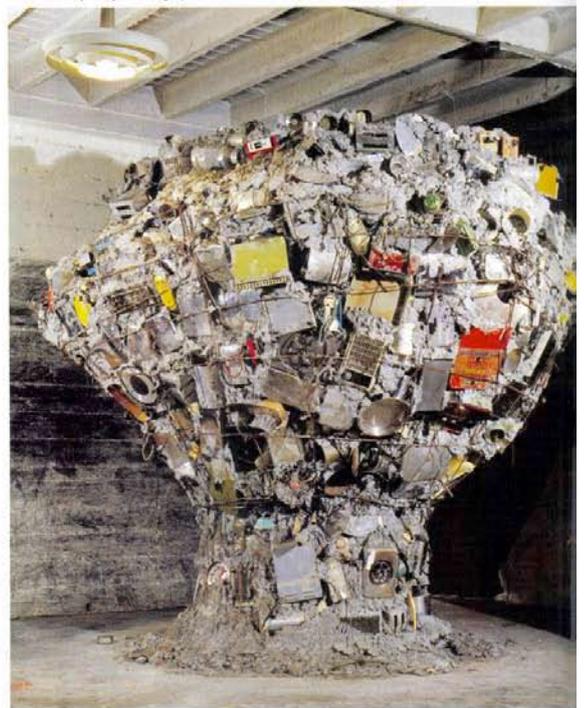
Was sculpture an issue in this show? Not really, except insofar as it contributed to the "total work of art." I would be hard-pressed to say

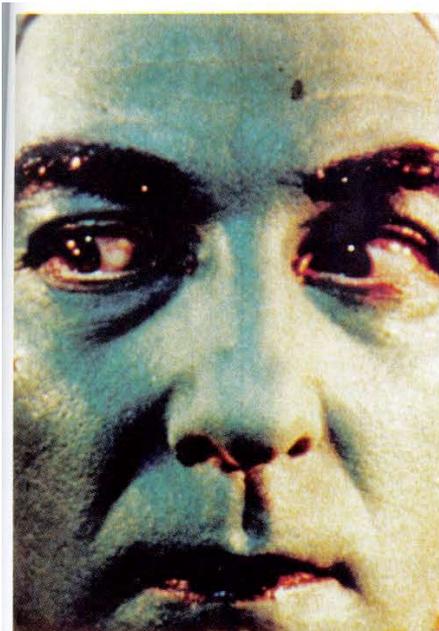
based transvestite group, the video's unforgettable imagery includes, among other sequences, two kittens getting nuked in a microwave. Screening *Garage Sale* in an American museum would be unimaginable today, and it suggested that Anger's legacy is more alive than ever.

This was a show of dioramas and peep-holes, everywhere suggestive (though nothing is made of it in the catalogue) of the seminal influence of Duchamp's last work, *Etant donnés*, on all kinds of art who were the sculptors in the lineup. Is Mike Kelley a sculptor? Is Jeffrey Vallance's *Blinky the Friendly Hen* (1978-89), that strangely visceral, real-life chicken documented in a full corridor of paraphernalia, a sculpture, found object or relic? (All of the above, and more, I'm tempted to say.) The assemblage esthetic blurs all such distinctions from the outset; then Finish Fetish blurs the line between art and craft. A signal sculptor such as Nancy Rubins was present only in one film of an installation, *Big Urn* (1977-78). Allan McCollum, later to become a conceptual object-maker, was represented by the very early Mardenesque *Constructed Painting* (1970-71), and Charles Ray by one still-life sculpture, *How a Table Works* (1986). In fact, the works in the show tended to militate against the idea of static sculpture, giving precedence instead to the performative prop or socially relevant tool. Peter Shelton's abstracted body sculptures of the mid-'80s often look as if they might be worn. (A catalogue photo of the transparent resin *Clearbelly* of 1983-87 depicts just such a performative event at the L.A. Louver Gallery). Shelton's discrete objects were a discovery for me in the show, where they packed a sculptural punch in one of the last rooms, shared with Therrien's ambiguous, abstracted work.

Several aspects of the L.A. story didn't come through with enough resonance. The Light and Space section was just too crowded and cramped; the kind of subtle sensation engendered by such works couldn't unfold properly in the show's conceptual-circus ambience. The decision to put

Nancy Rubins: Big Urn, 1977-78, electrical appliances, rebar, mixed mediums, 12 feet high; shown on video at the Pompidou.





Kenneth Anger: Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome, 1954-78, 16mm film, approx. 40 minutes. Centre Pompidou.

Bruce and Norman Yonemoto: Garage Sale, 1976, video, 21 minutes.



several of Larry Bell's glass cubes on a unified low plinth was also a mistake, which seriously messed with the sculptures' integrity as discrete objects (his smaller cubes are typically shown on *individual* pedestals, as one 1965 photo in the catalogue of a Pace Gallery installation demonstrates). There were also a few signs of prodigal waste. Did there really have to be two red works by John McCracken in the show, two tondo works

by Robert Irwin, two totemic assemblages by George Herms?

Similarly, the feminism section of the '70s seemed overly confined in a gallery devoted to the Women's Building. Although I enjoyed watching documentation of performances by Nancy Buchanan, Rachel Rosenthal, Barbara T. Smith, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, the limiting of feminism to such figures seems wrongheaded,

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Kenneth Anger's example must have been seminal for the early work of Paul McCarthy, represented here by the outrageous performance film, *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight* (1975).

Paul McCarthy: *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight*, 1975, video of performance, 44 minutes.



L.A./Paris

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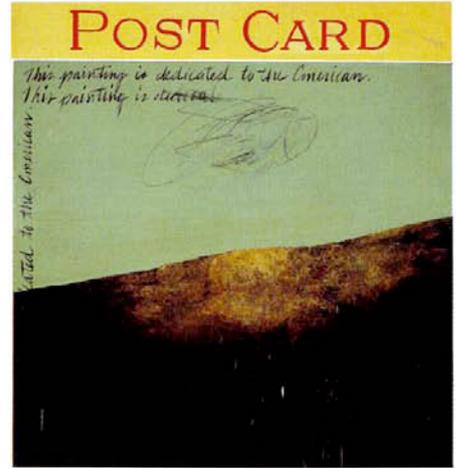
especially when feminism exploded through all kinds of art—not just video and performance—at the time. Even worse, the reduction of the role of Chicano art to a couple of early '70s photographs of the ASCO group's agitprop seemed tokenistic.

In the '80s part of the show, the emphasis on conceptual work by Christopher Williams, Stephen Prina and Larry Johnson—while it sort of coalesced thematically around that old French Revolutionary chestnut, the death of the hero (also made humorous with Blinky the Friendly Hen in its coffin nearby)—really failed to capture the variety of work made by L.A. artists in that era. Still, it was good to see Prina's *Aristotle-Plato-Socrates* (1982), an extended text-and-photo piece that includes, notably in the French context, a large photo blowup of Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Socrates*.

Many important figures, such as Helen Lundberg, Lorser Feitelson, Charles Garabedian, Maxwell Hendler, Karen Carson and Kim McConnell, to name only a few who do not fit Grenier's agenda, were omitted. The inclusion of a few off-key choices, such as Steven Arnold (a photographer of campy black-and-white tableaux in the '80s who also worked in San Francisco), made for a major-minor bouillabaisse. Arnold's work did make sense at the end of the show with that of Anger and the Yonemoto brothers.

The exhibition did not provide a cross-section of, say, what was happening in L.A. in 1955, or 1985 for that matter. That is more the task of the catalogue, which is laid out as an extended timeline, complete with excerpts of period journalism. That timeline is fascinating, but in fact it's rather unwieldy to use if you can't remember the date of a given work or show. Such quibbles are minor, though, compared with the tremendous amount of fun visual information compiled in the book, everything from reproductions of Raymond Chandler book covers to *Chinatown* film posters. The essays, on the other hand, tend toward the dead; Grenier's is telling from the French point of view; Howard N. Fox's is all too thorough, attempting to cover the entire period in review; and David E. James's provides only an introductory glimpse of the L.A. experimental film world, which could do with a lot more filling in.

The catalogue's strength is essentially aleatory; you just want to dip into it at any point and start swimming. Open it to page 132, for example, and you'll be in 1964, where you'll find, opposite a photograph of model Peggy Moffett in couturier Rudy Gernreich's topless swimsuit and a Ferus Gallery poster for a group show called "The Studs," a very good article written for *Vogue* by Henry Geldzahler, in which he proclaims that "As far as contemporary art is concerned, Los Angeles slowly but surely is making its way into the second-city spot." How prophetic, you want



Lyn Foulkes: *Post Card*, 1964, oil on canvas, 63½ by 62¼ inches. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.

to say; Geldzahler was writing in the same year that his great friend David Hockney first arrived in L.A. □

"Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital" was on view at the Centre Pompidou, Paris [Mar. 8-July 17]. The catalogue is available in French and English versions. The show did not travel.

Author: Brooks Adams is a Paris-based critic.