

Los Angeles in the 1940s: Post-Modernism and the Visual Arts

by Paul J. Karlstrom

VERY LITTLE WORK HAS BEEN DONE on the subject of art in Los Angeles during the 1940s. Informed historians of American art may have a vague notion of general activity in southern California during the war decade, and some may even be familiar with the names of a handful of artists associated with the area. But even those few scholars specializing in California art seem to have neglected, until recently, a period far more interesting and culturally significant than had been heretofore realized.¹

In fact, the literature on the subject of California art (there is no survey that deals seriously with southern California, let alone L.A. in the 1940s) is so thin, and attention paid so recent, that a clear profile of the decade has yet to emerge. Although we now see the period in broad outline, the details have yet to be interpreted within context. The first task, then, is to identify a few key artists and describe their artistic environment in a way that gives recognizable features and personality to an anonymous silhouette. Once these main characteristics are identified, it is possible to consider L.A. art as a phenomenon within the broader development of twentieth-century modernism. Only then can we begin to evaluate its relative significance and possible contributions.

The second assignment, within the context of the broader themes of traditional and popular culture, is to attempt to determine what is unusual or unique about Los Angeles in the 1940s and how the visual arts either reflect or contribute to the broader cultural environment. We begin with the thesis that the arts do indeed reflect time and place and, furthermore, that L.A.

in the '40s has (partly due to the presence of European emigré intellectuals) an extraordinarily rich place in American cultural history, one which has been understood only in fragmentary ways. For example, there has been very little effort to relate fine art to the entertainment industry, despite enormous attention (often superficial) devoted to Hollywood and the movies.²

The real question is to what degree, and in what specific ways, does an emerging popular culture — one which appeared quite spontaneously and at an early date in California — affect traditional fine art ideas, expression, and forms. What is the relationship between the two and how has it operated in American social/cultural life? These are important and intriguing questions, ones which now occupy a new generation of critics and Americanists and are changing the ways in which we view art and culture.³ At this point, however, the best we can do in connection with our specific topic is to briefly describe the existing artistic situation and suggest a few possible points where the boundaries between high and low, between traditional and popular, are blurred if not eliminated entirely.

Before proceeding any further, I would like to suggest that the cultural situation in southern California made of Los Angeles — almost from the beginning — a *post-modernist*, rather than a modernist, city. Without proposing a complete definition of the elusive and by now much abused term post-modernism, I would call your attention to the eclecticism, fantasy and sense of humor, colorism, and random “grazing” among historical styles that characterizes an approach to architecture and design that had been established for decades in the Los Angeles urban environment.

We are all familiar with the typical “L.A. — Bizarre” style: commercial establishments fabricated in the shapes of hotdogs and hats, giant doughnuts and pumpkins. This picturesque and eccentric fairy tale quality persisted as a local aesthetic, one which is echoed in more serious (“high art”) structures such as the wonderful Art Deco Richfield Building (demolished: Morgan Walls and Clements, 1928) and Frank Lloyd Wright’s California period houses, the most theatrical of his career. As architectural historian David Gebhard has pointed out, no other region in the

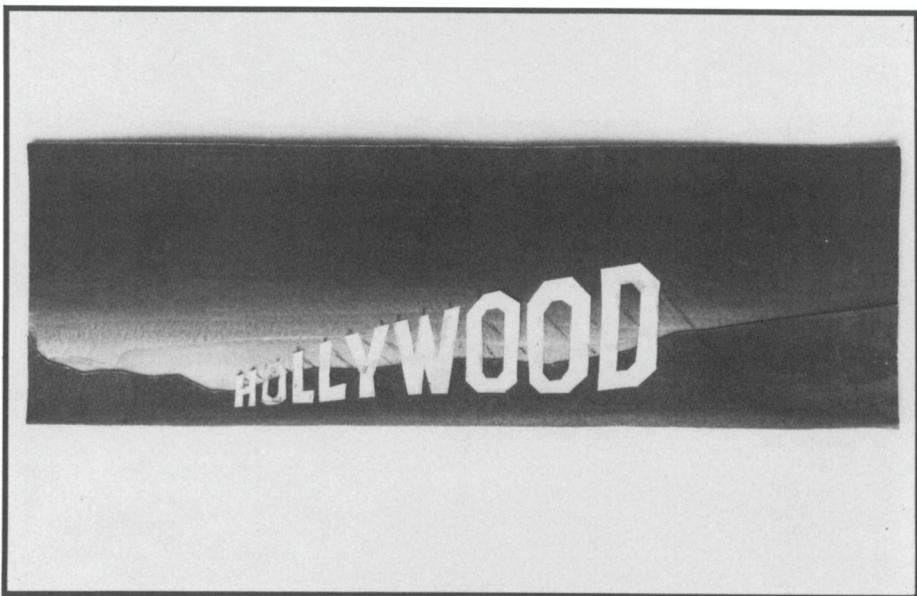


Grauman's Theatre in Hollywood, a classic illustration of so-called fantasy style, c. 1940. Courtesy Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

country was as open to the “imagery of the new.”⁴ Fantasy and the picturesque are essential parts of the Hollywood film, popular culture, and the Los Angeles ambience. Revivalism, playfulness, eccentricity, and color are basic qualities of post-modernism. This nontraditional aesthetic could, and did, take any number of forms in Los Angeles. But the important point that I would now like to pursue in painting is that no city seemed better suited to spawn an unself-conscious reaction against doctrinaire European modernism with its ethical imperatives and commitment to high culture.

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In New York, or even San Francisco, Abstract Expressionism gives the post-war period a strong stylistic identity. The 1940s in Los Angeles art, on the other hand, has been treated as a creative non-decade, sandwiched between the government arts projects and the emergence of the internationally acclaimed “L.A. School.” Critical attention was devoted to the achievements of



Edward Ruscha, *Hollywood Study* (1966), tempera and collage on paper (6 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches). Courtesy of the artist.

the late 1950s and the 1960s and has overshadowed earlier developments and has discouraged investigation of cultural continuity. In one of the few books on the subject, *The Sunshine Muse*, the author states that “pre-war Southern California produced little important art, and the main gain was the hard-won beginning of modern art’s cultural acceptance.”⁵

Presumably, the same would be said of the 1940s, which is generally viewed as a conservative period with the figurative expressionism of Rico Lebrun at one extreme and the reactionary Society of Western Artists on the other.⁶ In any event, the accepted view is that art in southern California came of age with the Ferus Gallery group and the art “boom” of the 1960s. Everything that went before was mere preparation. But is that really the case? Is it not possible to identify trends and patterns that, at least in retrospect, constitute an art history uniquely suited to its region?

It is true that, in comparison to developments in the north, art activity in Los Angeles seemed to be fragmented, conservative, and devoid of ideological underpinnings and stylistic

direction. Bay Area art of the late 1940s has a major figure, Clyfford Still, an important venue, California School of Fine Arts, and a significant "movement," Abstract Expressionism, which give the period a single identity and historical coherence lacking in the south. Los Angeles seemed to enjoy a great deal of artistic activity, but no art-historical personality emerged from this pluralism. Furthermore, no individual or movement seemed dominant enough to impose a single personality — despite the presence of prominent artists such as Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Man Ray, Lorser Feitelson, and Rico Lebrun. There are a number of possible explanations for this situation, from the area's lack of a strong visual arts tradition and supporting institutions to urban sprawl and the absence of a true bohemian center in which ideas are generated and exchanged.⁷ But of these the most fruitful for the purpose of this discussion has to do with the *positive* aspects of the very factors which would seem to inhibit the emergence and growth of traditional form of "high-art" culture: community indifference, rootlessness, flexible standards, and indistinct boundaries.

As a matter of fact, these negative characteristics were not limited to southern California. They have played a role in the development of American culture in general. Los Angeles was but a more recent and, because of Hollywood, more visible example of the phenomenon. However, in at least two ways the situation in Los Angeles may well have been unique. First of all, there existed a young society which put an unprecedented premium on entertainment and recreation as a way of life. Secondly, as the paradigm of the modern city, Los Angeles by this time had come to embody (physically and psychologically) change, freedom, and mobility — the very ingredients essential to modernist sensibility and the rise of an art based upon popular culture. A value system, contributing to and fed by "the industry" (one which was built on illusion, artifice, and the interchangeability of levels of experience) developed; and inevitably, along with a clearly associated life-style, it informed the attitudes and work of a generation of local artists. This is best seen by the 1960s in the work of Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha, and David Hockney. And it is as evident, but in a far more subtle way, in the light pieces and environments of Robert Irwin,

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DeWain Valentine, or James Turrell. The impact of the industrial and social southern California environment on these artists, all of whom display a healthy disregard for traditional categories, has been documented and extensively discussed.⁸

There are, then, two unusual aspects of the cultural ambience of L.A. in the 1940s. Given the relationship of movies and the entertainment industry to the area's life and economy, the role of popular or mass culture takes on a greater significance than it might elsewhere. Furthermore, the demographics of this rapidly expanding region, especially after the war, and the reasons for people settling in southern California, would tend to reinforce a basic leveling of cultural values. Most of the population did not come from the art centers of the east; and when they did, they were seldom representative of those levels of society which were accustomed to (and presumably would demand or require) the cultural amenities.⁹ Despite pockets of distinguished musical, theatrical, and related intellectual activity, popular culture and disposable aesthetics, seen in architecture and other aspects of the urban environment, came to dominate the southern California scene, providing it with a low-brow image that for many it still has.

The second unusual feature, which paradoxically stands in dramatic contrast to this general cultural environment, was the presence of a spectacular group of European artists and intellectuals, most of them emigrés from Hitler and the Nazi occupation. Along with these refugees were others, both European and east-coast American, who were in Hollywood to sell their various skills (usually writing, dramatic, and musical). This remarkable creative community, which at one time or another included a disproportionate share of the world's talent, has often been treated as an historic anomaly.¹⁰ (For some reason, it seemed perfectly appropriate for a similar community to appear simultaneously in New York City where European-style tradition and high culture were already well established.) In contrast to New York, the emigré presence in L.A. is viewed as having had little lasting impact on the cultural life of the community. The soil was barren, the climate inhospitable, and the population transient. As Arturo Toscanini was reported to have said, "California is Italy without soul."

The actual results of this presumed incompatibility may be more complex and surprising than has been acknowledged. Aside from the fact that many of the greats who settled in southern California during the 1940s actually liked their adopted home and pursued productive careers there, the interaction of the traditions which they represented and the lively world of mass culture in which they found themselves ultimately created an idiomatic Los Angeles art.¹¹ Each, in a sense, was modified by the other, opening up and pointing the way toward new possibilities, producing a unique mixture of social and creative forces at work in southern California.

Because of the lack of fixed boundaries and traditions, and paucity of institutions (Hollywood was undeniably the most important of these), the open and expanding community of Los Angeles in the 1940s provided an unusually rich and fresh creative environment for those artists who made their way west. That is not to say that they appreciated it as such.¹² However, the high seriousness and moral obligation that were part of the European heritage had negative as well as positive aspects. Europeans who found themselves in America, and particularly on the west coast, were relieved of some of this burden, allowing them to consider sources (and subjects) which may not have occurred to them previously. Outside the arts, the best examples of this phenomenon are probably found in the area of the social sciences in the work of Theodore Adorno and his colleagues. Europeans seemed far more able to appreciate, or at least be fascinated by and exploit intellectually, American culture at the popular level.¹³

The 1940s were, of course, dominated by the war; and for the duration, art activity in southern California, as was the case elsewhere, decreased or was redirected. Most of the area's artists served in the armed forces or some other related activity.¹⁴ Temporarily, issues of conservatism versus modernism were set aside as the arts were enlisted in a common cause. Unable to participate directly, modernists such as Peter Krasnow, Knud Merrild, and Hans Burkhardt recorded the great conflict through changes of content and style in their work.¹⁵ The point is that the war affected the development of the fine arts as surely as it



Hans Burkhardt, *Hiroshima, Fear of Tomorrow* (1947), an oil on canvas (32 x 40 inches). Courtesy Jack Rutbert Fine Arts, Los Angeles

determined the content and mood of Hollywood movies. On the one hand, in painting individuals responded to global upheaval in personal ways; on the other, the popular form, film, reflected direct and indirect pressure to serve the national ends by forming public opinion. Herein, of course, lies one of the great differences between the two forms, between traditional and popular culture.

Still, neither was exempt from the political forces that so dramatically shaped the creative climate of the period and infused American society with a regrettable degree of insularity, intolerance and paranoia. As Stefan Kanfer so effectively chronicles in *A Journal of the Plague Years*, Hollywood was singled out as a particularly fertile arena for "red-baiting."¹⁶ Congressional investigative focus on the entertainment industry, specifically radio and the movies, was, in effect, an acknowledgement of its power to affect American thought and life. Los Angeles, through the movies, projected an image which con-

tributed powerfully to America's self-conception. Distributed throughout the country and the world, the image was also consumed locally. And for this reason, the House UnAmerican Committee (HUAC) was correct to turn its attention to Hollywood as an effective mechanism for the dissemination of ideas, Communist or otherwise. In part as a result of this unwelcome attention, and the environment it created, post-war southern California became a fairly heated battleground for the war on Communist-inspired art and "subversive" abstraction. The art world of Los Angeles in the 1940s was basically conservative, and in alliance with anti-Communist crusaders, the dominant landscape school and academicians mounted an attack on the outnumbered and struggling modernists. The nature of the charges were absurd enough to be, in retrospect, laughable.¹⁷

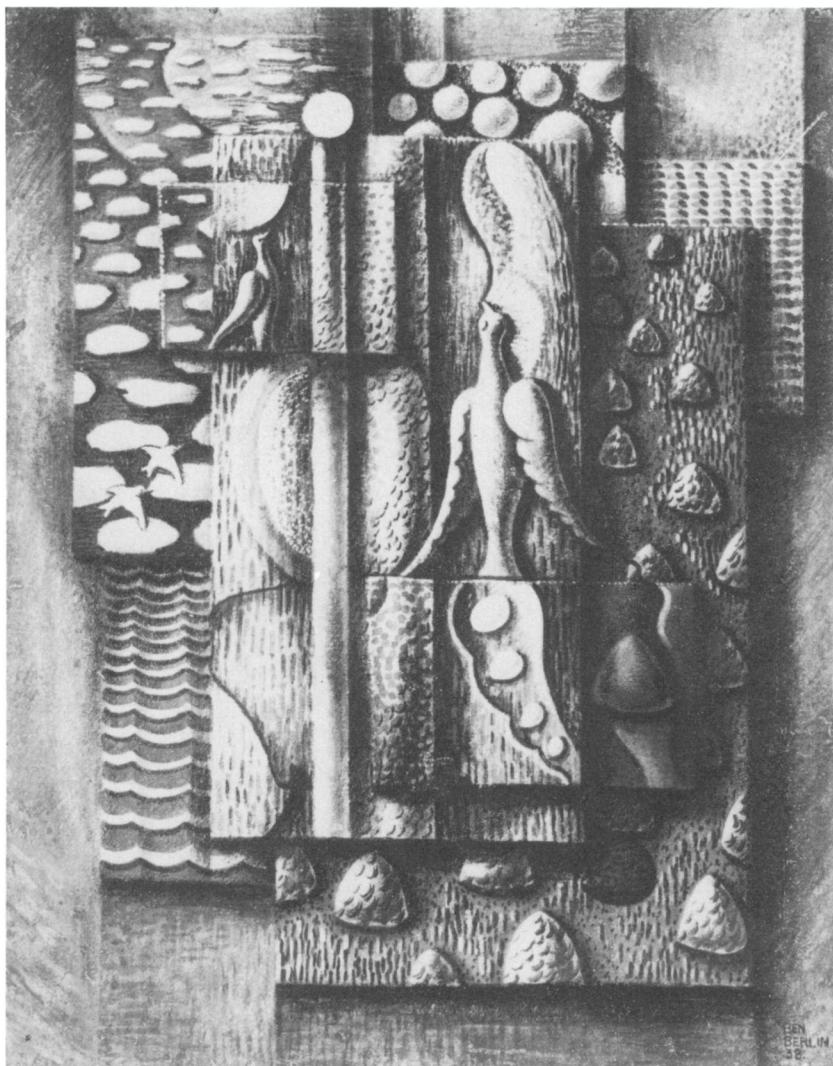
Obviously, circumstances were, in several important traditional respects, less than ideal for experimentation in the fine arts, and indeed other expressions fared much better. It can be (and has been) argued that Los Angeles' important contribution from the 1930s was in the areas of architecture, design, and other "applied" arts, not painting and sculpture.¹⁸ It has also been suggested, despite frequent claims to the contrary, that L.A. absorbed and developed rather than created new forms in architecture and design. For example, Modern and Moderne were not invented in Los Angeles, but few, if any cities can boast such imaginative examples. Somehow, architecture and design, more naturally than painting and sculpture, bridged the gap between fine-art tradition and southern California imagery based on the life-style and popular culture. Architect Richard Neutra blamed Hollywood for lowering standards of taste. But, as has been pointed out, Hollywood film simply drew upon what it had at hand, thereby reinforcing rather than creating current taste and fashion.¹⁹ In this respect, Hollywood "distributed" southern California imagery (architecture and life-style) to a receptive international audience.

However, whereas most creative folk who market their skills in the film industry went west, painters and sculptors, almost without exception, congregated in New York City. Novelist Lion Feuchtwanger's advice to Brecht that Hollywood was cheaper than New York and you could make more money there did not

apply to the likes of Mondrian, Ernst, and other artists who gravitated to New York at the same time.²⁰ However, a respectable and thoroughly sophisticated community of modernists developed in and around Los Angeles despite the odds. Most, in fact, were well established by the thirties and some even earlier. For example, when Ben Berlin arrived in 1919, he could already join forces with others of similar interests. In 1923 he exhibited with Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Boris Deutsch, Nick Brigante, Morgan Russell, and Max Reno at the first Group of Independent Artists exhibition. The modernist "tradition" in painting and sculpture did not arrive with the emigrés but in fact was represented by this small group of advocates two full decades before the war. By 1940, Los Angeles had a population of one and a half million, the freeway system was mapped out and the Arroyo Seco leg under construction, architecture and design were at their high points, and a dedicated coterie of progressive artists were struggling to find a place in the sun for international modernism.

The importance of Los Angeles as an early modern art center is frequently overlooked. In the person of Stanton Macdonald-Wright, the city had one of the founders of Synchromism, introduced in Paris by Americans. In 1934, Lorser Feitelson, Helen Lundeberg, and Knud Merrild founded Post-Surrealism as a home-grown southern California (soon state-wide) art movement which attracted national interest and attention. They drew upon international Surrealism, one branch of which led to Abstract Expressionism in New York; but theirs was a literary and theatrical expression (akin to the illustrative style of Dali) that, in retrospect, seems appropriately related to the cinema. In a similar manner, the romantic Surrealism of Rico Lebrun and Eugene Berman (another set designer), which dominated the decade in Los Angeles in terms of influence, provided another challenge for the indigenous Eucalyptus School.

At any rate, despite differences in forms, directions, and current art-historical stature, a handful of Angelenos were sophisticated participants in the evolution of modern ideas. From this vantage point, the chief players of the 1940s seemed to have been Macdonald-Wright, Lorser Feitelson, Rico Lebrun, Man Ray, Knud Merrild, Hans Burkhardt, Oskar Fischinger, and (at



Ben Berlin, *Birds, Sky, Water and Grass* (1938), casein on fiftex (30 x 23½ inches). Courtesy Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles.

the very end of the decade) John McLaughlin. Each practiced a form of modern art that, in varying degrees, reflected something of the creative environment in which they worked. It would be convenient to be able to say that the work of these and a handful of others shared certain characteristics and stylistic features that define a southern California modernist school. That was not the case. However, there are several themes that seem to emerge in connection with advanced Los Angeles art of the period. A preoccupation with light and movement, for example, informs the work of several key figures, suggesting a most attractive connection to the Hollywood film.²¹

Although the link is well worth nothing, it would be a mistake to try to understand L.A. art entirely in terms of the cinema. A far more fruitful line of inquiry involves an increasing openness to nontraditional sources (including film), materials, and combinations of elements. The result of distance from the artistic centers, chiefly New York, and relative immunity to current stylistic and ideological influences, this "freedom" took several forms. As early as the 1920s and concurrent with the first appearance of the modernists, there arose a group of conservative landscape painters whose work, especially in watercolor, showed characteristics that came to be associated with the "California School."²² An intriguing possibility suggested by one of the school's leading representatives, Millard Sheets, is that what made the art distinctive was precisely the lack of traditions and stylistic movements in Los Angeles. The artists had to resort to nature and their environment, rather than other art, for their inspiration and subjects.²³ This quality was apparently recognized by eastern critics at an early date. Sheets, who enjoyed a national reputation, reflects the best of the California landscape style. Although not part of the story of modernist experimentation, his high-level professionalism and example as a successful artist in Los Angeles were important contributions to the area.

Although the California School represented a powerful indigenous presence by 1940, a more fecund response to the freedom offered by Los Angeles' removal from the entrenched art establishments of the east and Europe is seen in the efforts of those who developed their art with an eye to international modernism. Macdonald-Wright and Feitelson should share credit

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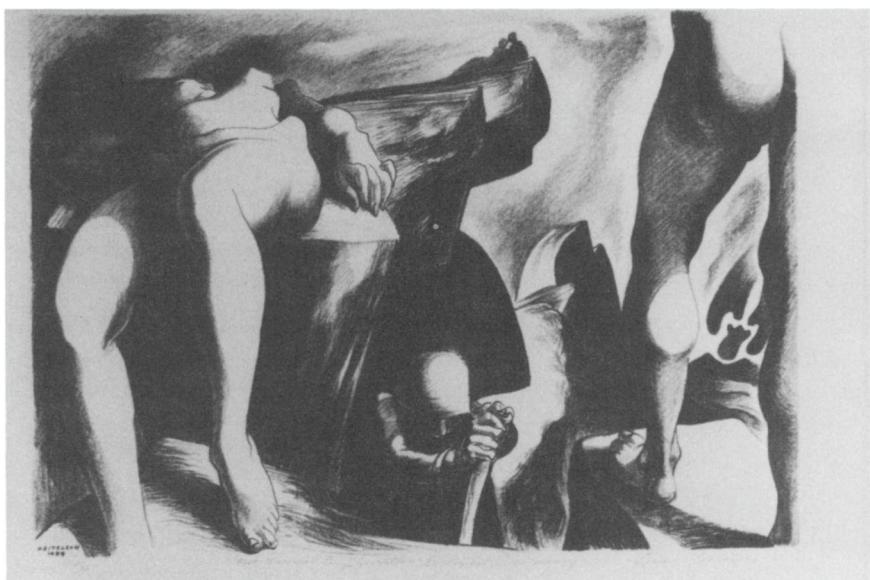


Millard Sheets, *Angel's Flight* (1931), an oil canvas (50½ x 40 inches). Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. L.M. Maitland.

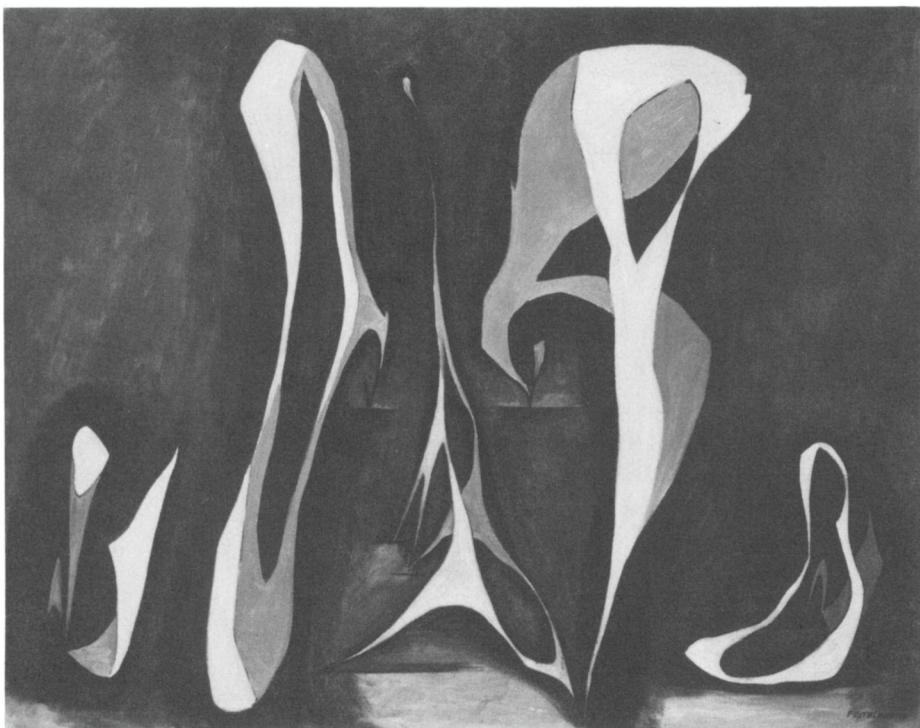
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as *the* pioneering figures in California art. As has been pointed out, both established movements based on modernist thinking and goals. Macdonald-Wright's notions of color harmony, developed with Morgan Russell in Paris about 1913, actually had much in common with Symbolist correspondences between the arts (music and painting), not to mention the contemporary work of the Orphists and Futurists.²⁴ This, of course, had little to do with art in California. However, it may be significant that, after returning to Los Angeles in 1919, Wright experiments with color wheels and a color machine, collaborating with ceramicist and movies special effects pioneer, Albert King. For Wright, and other artists working in and around Hollywood, the technical innovations of filmmaking and the medium itself may have affected their work more than has been realized.

As was the case elsewhere, Cubism and Surrealism were the modern trends, and Los Angeles had its followers of each. Along with Wright, Lorser Feitelson was the best-known California modernist, and the two of them helped pave the way for local



Lorser Feitelson, *Post-Surreal Configuration: Biological Symphony* (1939), lithography (12 x 17½ inches). Courtesy Toby C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles.



Lorser Feitelson, *Magical Forms — Mirabilia* (1945-1946), oil on canvas (35 x 45 inches). Courtesy Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles.

acceptance of modernist culture (although neither could be described as radical). Feitelson and his wife Helen Lundeberg founded Post-Surrealism in what turned out to be America's first organized response to European Surrealism. The California variety differed considerably by emphasizing the rational (classical union of form and content) over the irrational dream imagery of Surrealism.²⁵ Feitelson was attracted to the Italian metaphysical paintings of De Chirico and Carra, both of whose work has, significantly, a sense of theatrical narrative and stage-set space. The degree to which this type of decision is related to cinema in the Post-Surrealist work of Feitelson and other Angelenos has yet to be determined. But the connection at certain other points seems quite probable. For example, Dr. Susan Ehrlich has pointed out in the "Magical Space Forms" series of 1948 — in the strong black and white contrasts, eccentric

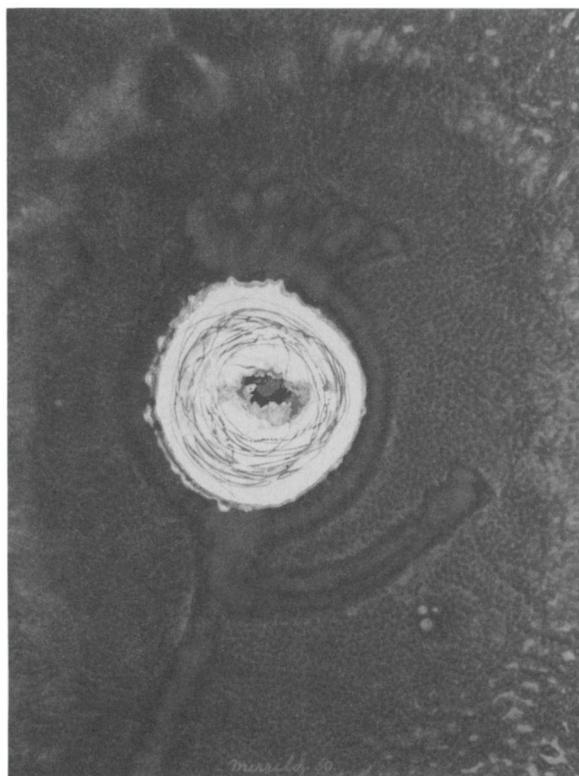
perspectives, off-balance shapes, and figure ground reversals — an instability that recalls film noir. According to Ehrlich, the artist was aware of these expressive cinematic devices which effectively communicated the tensions of the McCarthy era. A similar echo of film noir may be encountered in the work of June Wayne and others, such as Jules Engel, working in and around the film industry.²⁶ At the very least, a strong element of romantic surrealist fantasy occurs in both visual art and film of the time. And the influence of film noir specifically on painting would be a tantalizing area of investigation. At this point it is premature to draw conclusions about general stylistic correspondences. However, film as a popular medium has influenced, and been influenced by, fine art. The interaction between the two is especially evident in the creative world of southern California: films aspiring to be art; painters irresistibly attracted to the impact of mass-audience movies.

Rico Lebrun was a major figure in Los Angeles art who, through his own teaching at the Jepson School and through his students Howard Warshaw and William Brice, set the tone for the late 1940s and 1950s. This “tone” was highly moral and subjective, involving a strong narrative quality in which drawing and other academic devices are enlisted in the service of humanism. Lebrun, too, had contact with Hollywood and even was engaged to teach animators at Disney to draw animals for *Bambi*, another example of how artists in Los Angeles moved from one world to another, from traditional to popular, with relative ease. Although Lebrun’s lofty conception of art would seem to mitigate against an unholy alliance with film, he produced at least one important work with cinema in mind (as did Huxley, Brecht, Schoenberg, and other famous Southland residents). The *Crucifixion* cycle (completed in 1950) was, in fact, designed to be filmed; and the specific ways in which these cinematic goals affected the work’s execution and style appear in other works as well.²⁷ However, despite these significant and revealing digressions, the work of Lebrun and his circle represented the best kind of traditionalism available in Los Angeles in the 1940s. One must look elsewhere for a meaningful dialogue between traditional and popular attitudes and forms.



Rico Lebrun. *The Magdalene* (1950), tempera on masonite (63 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 inches). Courtesy Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

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Knud Merrild, *Flux Flower* (1950), oil (flux)/canvas mounted on wood (16½ x 12 inches). Courtesy Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Los Angeles.

One artist to look to would be the Danish emigrant, Knud Merrild. A member of Feitelson's Post-Surrealists, he went further than either Feitelson or Lundeberg in terms of freedom of invention. Merrild supported himself as a house painter and decorator, and his abstractions incorporated both the colors and material of commercial paint. Although no one will press the point of art-historical precedence, Merrild deserves recognition for anticipating Jackson Pollock with his "flux" paintings of the late 1930s and '40s. Equally interesting, however, was Merrild's assemblage activity in which he selected and combined various materials to create three-dimensional construction. Both these constructions, and the drip paintings created with commercial material, owe something to the freedom and openness of the Los Angeles creative environment.

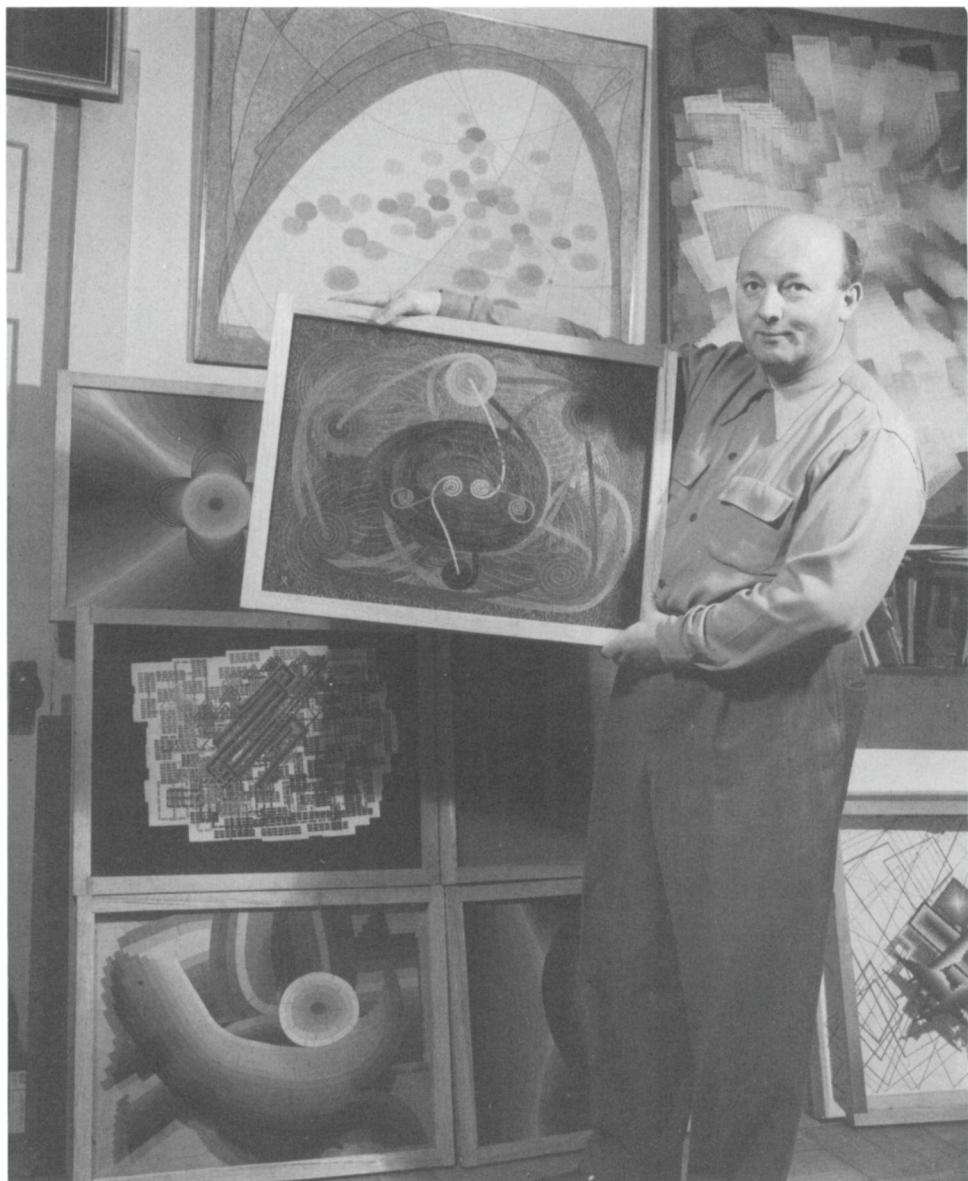
A more sophisticated disregard for any rules or conventions

was the hallmark of Man Ray, an internationalist and American founder of DADA who spent most of the '40s in Hollywood as a refugee from occupied Paris. Because of his prominent position in the history of modern art, Ray's presence in southern California must be noted here despite what appears to be a minimum of influence, one way or the other. The critical question is what effect did Los Angeles have on an artist who was already wide-open to popular culture and delighted in incorporating the most unlikely elements in his work. In fact, there was a perceptible response in Ray's ironic comments on southern California physical culture and other oddities.²⁸ But in balance, the impact was negligible; Man Ray returned to Paris in 1950 having enjoyed the company of some interesting people while waiting out the war in a comfortable climate. From the standpoint of the development of art in Los Angeles, Man Ray was simply a casual visitor who left no mark. Ironically, the attitudes which he represented — breaking down barriers between media and combining ideas and materials in new ways — were precisely those which stimulated later art in Los Angeles.

Abstract Classicism, Feitelson's second major "movement," was introduced to an international audience by Jules Langsner's exhibition in Los Angeles and London.²⁹ Despite the admirable contributions of John McLaughlin (the best artist working in southern California in the post-war period), and some of the other hard-edge painters, the Los Angeles area had yet to produce a body of truly influential work. But, as a number of critics have claimed, the innovative contributions of Los Angeles may well be outside painting in its traditional form.³⁰ Ceramics, assemblage, and design in general come to mind. Light, the use of new media, and matter-of-fact Pop imagery (distinct from the self-conscious New York variety) are all part of what amounts to a portrait of a place. One should add to the list movement and illusion, both from film and auto culture, along with commercial-industrial tools and process.

If this is the case, the most important artist of all may well be Oskar Fischinger who arrived from Germany in 1936 with a reputation for abstract film animation. Fischinger is just now beginning to receive the attention he deserves beyond film critics and historians, recognition which, ironically may have been

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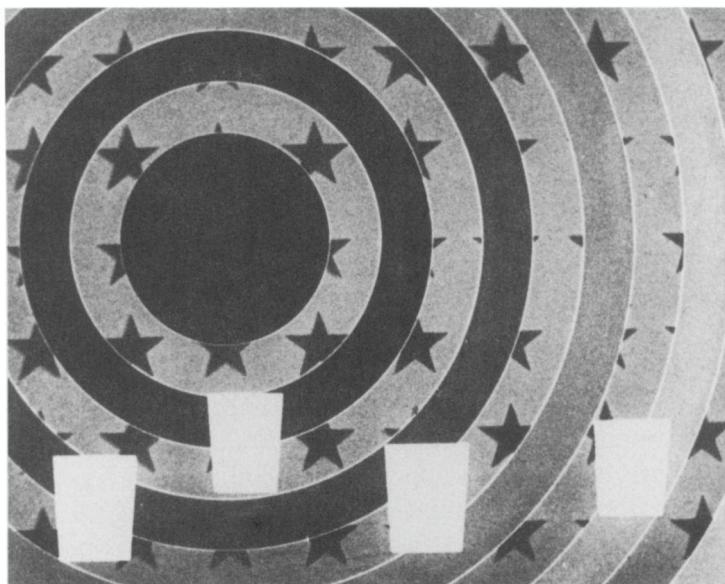
Oskar Fischinger with some of his original works, 1947.
Courtesy Elfriede Fischinger, through Lou Jacobs, Jr., Los Angeles.

delayed by his identification with art cinema.³¹ Fischinger's films and paintings are both extremely experimental and eclectic, resulting in a body of work which critic William Moritz calls "one of the most important and distinguished achievements in modern art."³² Whether or not one would be willing to agree with this assessment, Fischinger's artistic accomplishment becomes increasingly impressive the more one examines it. And it does so in precisely those areas which we have suggested as characteristic of the creative situation in Los Angeles. After a frustrating experience at Disney creating abstract sequences for *Fantasia*, Fischinger turned to painting and invention while continuing his film experiments under the difficult patronage of Hilda von Rebay and the Guggenheim Foundation.³³ The Guggenheim grants, and local support from Galka Scheyer, allowed Fischinger the freedom to pursue experimentation, which was the basis of his art. Two factors seemed to make possible a development that went beyond conventional expectations: societal breakdown of the war and a lack of structure in Los Angeles. A delicate balance of isolation (independence) and support seemed necessary for radical imagery and ideas to unfold. For Fischinger and a few others at the time, L.A. offered this balance.

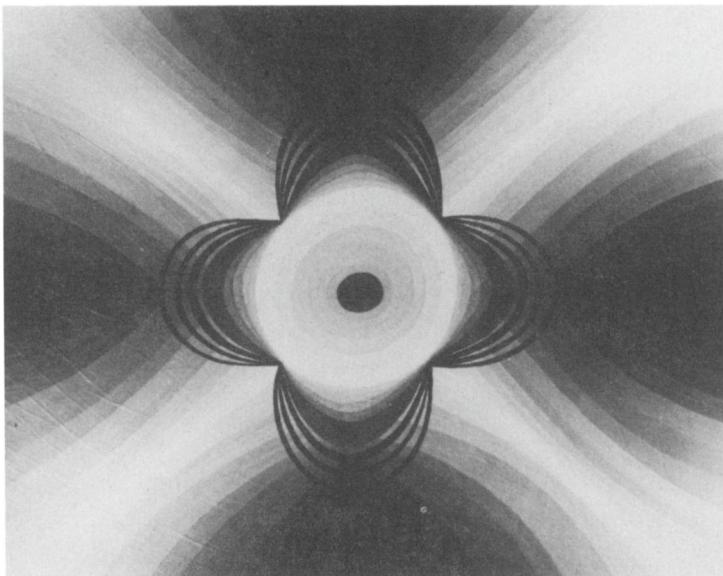
Given the proximity of the film industry, it should not be surprising that abstract film constructed much of the important visual activity in Los Angeles. Artists moved back and forth between animation and painting, carrying influences as bees transport pollen — an image which is entirely appropriate. An underlying attitude of exploration, seeking new and different means to express ideas about sound, color, shapes, and movement is seen in a variety of artists of the 1940s — ranging from Stanton Macdonald-Wright to Fischinger and the Whitney brothers. This fascination in L.A. with a union of the arts, as in cinema, provides the basis for an unusual body of theoretical writing and inventions.

Fischinger's "American March" (1941), done immediately after his work on *Fantasia*, is particularly relevant in its high art/low art fusion of painting and animation techniques. This conscious stylistic statement carries the theme of the painting, America as the melting pot. Hard-edged, outlined figures painted

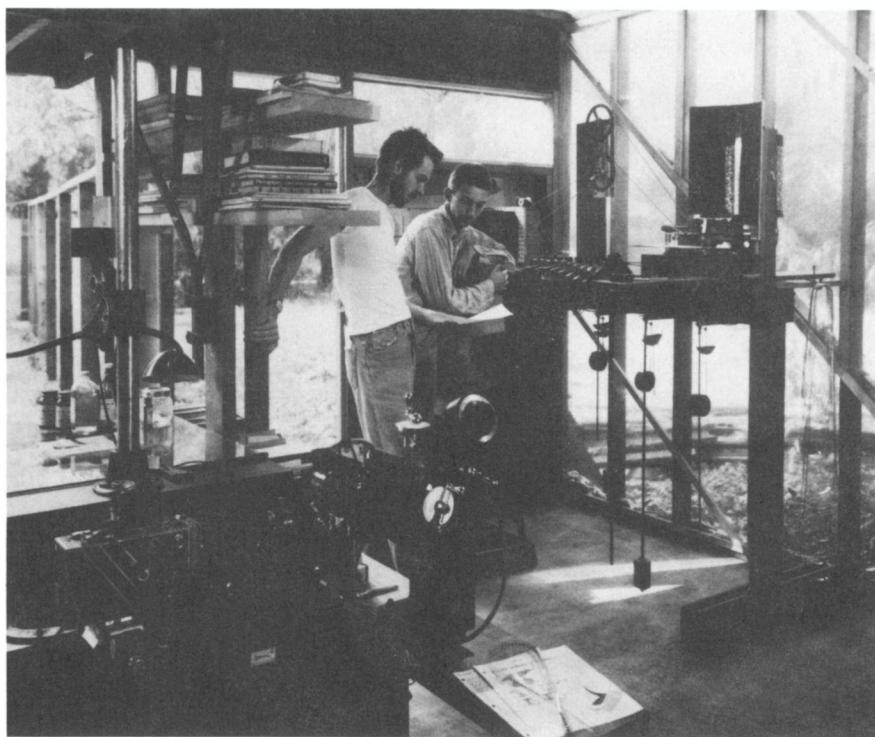
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A painting by Oskar Fischinger from the motion picture,
American March (1941).

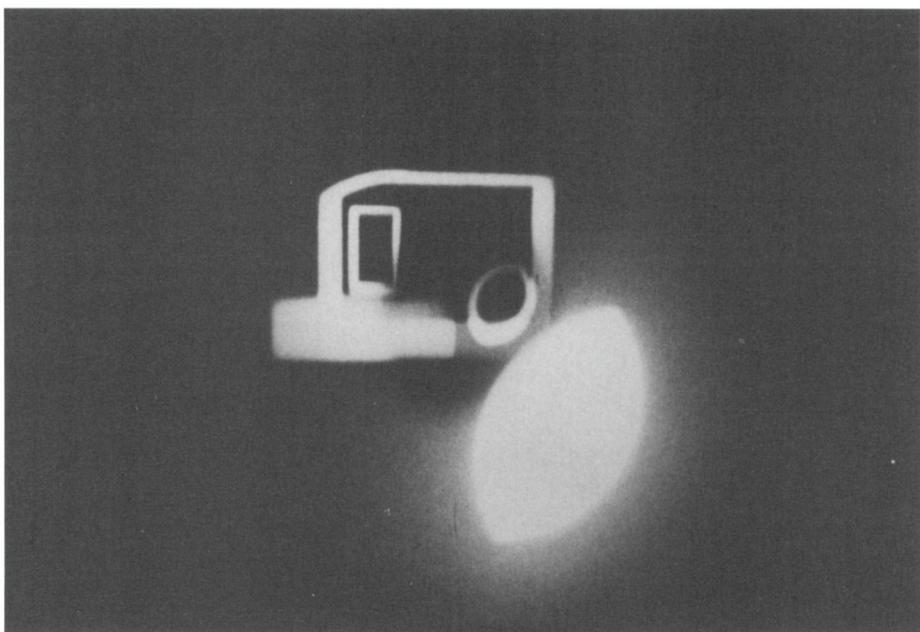


Oskar Fischinger, *Motion Painting No. 1: J.S. Bach* (1947).
Courtesy Elfriede Fischinger, Los Angeles.



John and James Whitney in their studio, 1948. Courtesy John Whitney, Pacific Palisades.

on animation cels become part of the meaning of the film as the outlines and other elements melt.³⁴ In painting, a similar melding of categories occurs in “Motion Painting No. 1” (1947), a major work about motion and change which fuses (literally: each figure is hand-drawn in an eleven-minute filmic synthesis) painting and film. Fischinger’s experimentation knew no bounds. Entirely open to ideas, he tried every material and device available to achieve his abstract and humanistic ends. Free from tradition, and working alone in relative isolation, he was free to try anything. As a result, he elevated methods of commercial/popular art to fine art status and, in so doing, was one of a few artists who took full advantage of a creative climate conducive to breaking down barriers. James and John Whitney, in some ways, wandered even further from tradition in creating their audio-



John and James Whitney, *Five Film Exercises* (1943-1944).
Courtesy James A. Whitney, Studio City.

visual music. Feeling that music was too dominant in Fischinger's non-objective films, they invented a "pendulum system" to directly transcribe sounds. This optical printing and pendulum composition was the basis for their revolutionary "Five Abstract Film Exercises."³⁵ When first screened in Los Angeles and New York the films, seen as shockingly radical, were described as electronic music and neon images from the "science fiction future."³⁶

This science fiction (film fantasy) aspect of Los Angeles modernism, along with an almost total disregard for convention and tradition, seem in retrospect among the salient features of abstract film-making activity. After further investigation, we may find that experimental film, in the hands of painters such as Fischinger, constitutes the most noteworthy contribution of the decade. The abstract combination of shape, color, movement, and sound represent a kind of cinematic fusion of traditional and popular art. Furthermore, it employed the technical and commercial devices readily available in the film industry. This

innovative disregard for categories, a hallmark of our time, came to characterize subsequent developments in Los Angeles.

Among these is a post-modernist sensibility that seems particularly well suited to southern California. An interesting recent observation is that “modernism’s asserted distinction between high culture and popular culture is regarded as untenable... (and) Post-modernism recognizes that ideology has now secreted itself among the images we consume, and that it is no longer worth the effort to hold ideas separate from the daily practice of life to which they supposedly refer.”³⁷ The ideal environment for the cultivation of such attitudes existed from the beginning in youthful, free-form, non-traditional Los Angeles. They began to emerge in the 1940s in the work of a few independent artists who indicated some of the directions which were followed by those who established the “L.A. School.” Post-modernism then, with its eclectic openness to diverse sources, affection for “low-brow” popular culture, and willingness to unashamedly enjoy the decorative and sensual may well be the genuine Los Angeles “style” and contribution.

NOTES

¹ Among those who have turned their attention to the visual arts in southern California through the 1940s, Susan Ehrlich is the leading authority. Dr. Ehrlich was kind enough to share with me parts of her dissertation on the subject, including important information which will appear in a book now in preparation and will provide the foundation upon which other studies will be built.

² This oversight, quite surprising in light of the role played by the movie industry in southern California, is being remedied in the work of Ehrlich and William Moritz, both of whom conscientiously look for those points where commercial/popular forms (i.e. animation) intersect traditional fine art forms (i.e. easel painting) in the work of a single artist. See, for example, Moritz’s “The Films of Oskar Fischinger” in *Film Culture* (New York, 1974). However, neither has yet examined these developments within the total cultural picture of a unique urban environment.

³ The central role of “Pop” in American culture has been increasingly recognized over the past decade or so. Certainly its importance became evident in connection with popular music, first jazz and then rock and roll, as an American export. And the way we recognize its visibility as a national characteristic is in the foreign perception of American life. *Time* magazine acknowledges it as such in a recent issue devoted to America. See “Pop Goes the Culture,” *Time*, June 16, 1986. The basic points differ very little in more serious studies of the intellectual community, such as James Atlas’ informative “The Changing World of New York Intellectuals” in *The New York Times Magazine*, August 25, 1985. Both quote, for example, the California critic Greil Marcus, whose enthusiasm for Chuck Berry as well as Gustave Flaubert is representative of the democratic approach of his generation.

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⁴David Gebhard and Harriette von Breton, *L.A. in the 30s* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City, 1975), p. 39.

⁵Peter Plagens, *The Sunshine Muse* (New York, 1974), p. 117.

⁶This group, which evolved out of the right-wing Sanity in Art movement, attempted to promote its own representational conservatism by identifying modernism and abstraction with Communism. In the process they came close to destroying the L.A. County Museum's valuable 'Annual Exhibition of Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity' program. See, among others, Plagens, *The Sunshine Muse*, Chapter 2. A general discussion of the phenomenon appears in William Hauptman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum*, 12 (October 1973): 48-55.

⁷Almost every article on Los Angeles art points out the lack of a centralized community, always in a negative way. The assumption is that close and frequent contact between artists is essential to creative activity. In this respect, Los Angeles is contrasted to New York, Paris, or even San Francisco. In fact, the importance of cafe or "art-bar" society to the production of serious art has never been conclusively demonstrated, at least as to being essential. Nonetheless, the assumption that social interaction between artists stimulates ideas and work is widely held: Plagens acknowledges that "Los Angeles has no Greenwich Village, Tenth Street, or North Beach — although Venice has become an 'artists' quarter' of a sort . . ." (p. 28).

⁸Contemporary criticism devoted to southern California art of the 1960s and the "L.A. Look" (often called finish-fetish) is as considerable as writing on the 1940s is scarce. In fact, the L.A. Look is the subject of the pivotal chapter in Plagen's book, and the phenomenon is generally regarded as the high-point in California art, that which brought Los Angeles into the international scene. See in addition to Plagens, *The Sunshine Muse*, Chapter 8, Jan Leering in *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976).

⁹For a discussion of the patterns of population growth and reasons for immigration see Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island in the Sun* (Santa Barbara, 1973).

¹⁰This view reflects an attitude towards Hollywood/Los Angeles that precludes the presence of serious culture and fine art. A prejudice that dies hard even in the face of evidence, this generally eastern perspective has a moralistic and disapproving side to it, one which protects cultural status quo. The phenomenon is mentioned in several books on the southern California emigrés, including John Russell Taylor's very readable *Strangers in Paradise* (New York, 1983).

¹¹Among those who adjusted well to their new home were Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann, Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Werfel, Billy Wilder and many others in the film community. The prevalent view was that these (mostly European) intellectuals were fish out of water in Los Angeles, and they were miserable as a result. However, there is evidence that even the inveterate complainer Brecht was preparing to stay in southern California at the moment his summons by, and testimony to, HUAC made him decide to leave the country. See Bruce Cook, *Brecht in Exile* (New York, 1982).

¹²Negative pronouncements on Los Angeles, many of which are eminently quotable, became the fashion among intellectuals, especially writers (Dorothy Parker and Faulkner come immediately to mind), who distrusted the place and the industry which employed them. However, as Tom Dardis has so ably argued in his study of five major writers' Hollywood years, despite their complaints, they were often sustained (Faulkner) and even provided with subjects to which their art could respond (Fitzgerald, West). See Dardis, *Some Time in the Sun* (New York, 1976).

¹³Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America, from the 1930s to the Present* (New York, 1983). Also see H. Stuart Hughes, "Social Theory in a New Context," in *The Muses Flee Hitler* (Washington, D.C., 1983).

¹⁴In her as yet unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Five Los Angeles Pioneer Modernists" (University of Southern California, 1985), Susan Ehrlich discusses the war-time activity of a number of prominent southern California artists. See also Ehrlich, "Los Angeles Painters of the 1940s," *Journal*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, No. 28, 1980.

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¹⁵ Peter Krasnow, for example, responded to the war by brightening his palette as an antidote. His turn to abstraction, primary shapes, and color was a conscious effort to bring light and order to a chaotic world. Ehrlich (unpublished dissertation) has described a similar shift in several other artists' works as well. For a brief treatment of Krasnow and his work see Joseph Hoffman in *Peter Krasnow: A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphics* (Berkeley, 1978).

¹⁶ Stefan Kanfer's *A Journal of the Plague Years* (New York, 1973) concentrated on HUAC and the entertainment industry. In his prologue he writes: "Show business is not hermetically separated from its national environment. But it does obey laws and bend to pressures that exist in no other stratum of American life, and I believe that performers and writers are frequently more accurate seismographs of their era than politicians and statesmen" (p. 9).

¹⁷ Following the lead of Congressman George A. Dondero (Rep., Mich.), reactionary vigilantes went to considerable length to uncover Communist content in abstract and even representational paintings. Among the "un-American" works exhibited at the 1947 L.A. County Museum of Art annual exhibition were a painting entitled "Little Red School House" and a still life by William Brice supposedly displaying a Russian bear and hammer. Such subversive "symbols" were everywhere apparent to members of Sanity in Art Society and the California Art Club who picketed the 1947 show.

¹⁸ See Gebhard, and Breton, *L.A. in the 30s*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁰ Quoted in Cook, *Brecht in Exile*, p. 39. With the exception of those artists who could work on a set design (Salvador Dali did the famous dream sequence in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* in 1944-1945), musicians and writers were far more in demand in Hollywood. New York provided a more traditional and familiar environment for European emigrés.

²¹ Among them, as pointed out by Ehrlich and others, are: Jules Engel, Rico Lebrun, June Wayne.

²² Among the artists of the California School, mostly members of the California Watercolor Society founded in Los Angeles in 1921, were Millard Sheets, Phil Dike, Rex Brandt, Barse Miller, and Emil J. Kosa, Jr. Their work was characterized by regionalism or American scene painting content, to which it was also related stylistically. For a discussion of the group see Janet B. Dominik, "*California School*" from the *Private Collection of E. Gene Crain* (Gualala, CA, 1986).

²³ In a recent interview conducted by the author for the Archives of American Art, Millard Sheets emphasized the lack of "models" (books, reproductions) available to him and his associates in the earlier years of their development. He believes that this relative innocence of vision contributed to a distinctive quality in the art of the California School painters. Interview with Millard Sheets, Gualala, October 28 and 29, 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁴ For a discussion of Wright, Synchromism, and experiments with color abstraction in general, see Gail Levin, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York, 1978).

²⁵ See Diane Degasis Moran in *Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective Exhibition* (San Francisco, 1980), for an account of the development of Post-Surrealism and the fundamental differences between the California version and its European counterpart. Moran points out the superficial similarities along with the widely divergent goals of the Feitelsons' Subjective Classicism of the mid-1930s and the irrational aesthetics of Surrealism (pp. 12-13).

²⁶ Jules Engel's dual roles as a fine and commercial artist make of him an interesting study in cross-influence. A pioneer animator who founded UPA and worked on *Fantasia*, he was also a disciple of Oskar Fischinger and, like his mentor, moved back and forth between media. Susan Ehrlich has noted, correctly it seems, devices of animation facets resembling acetate cels; flatshapes; layered backgrounds — transferred from the film studio to his Cubist/Orphic gouaches. This kind of interaction and mobility begins to suggest an L.A. approach.

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²⁷ See Rico Lebrun, "Notes by the Artist on the Crucifixion," in *Rico Lebrun: Paintings and Drawing of the Crucifixism* (Los Angeles, 1950).

²⁸ Appropriate example from 1940s are reproduced in Arturo Schwarz, *Man Ray* (New York, 1977). See especially pp. 108-113.

²⁹ See Jules Langsner, *Four Abstract Classicists*, Los Angeles County Museum, 1959. The concept for the exhibition may have originated with Peter Selz (see letter to the author published in the *Journal*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 11, No. 5 (April-May 1975); in any event, he and Langsner recognized an indigenous form of abstraction counter to that prevalent in the East. In his catalogue essay, Langsner described its characteristics and introduced the term hard-edge painting, which Lawrence Alloway picked up when the exhibition traveled to London.

³⁰ See Jan Leering, *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era*, p. 48. Peter Voulkos is the critical figure in breaking down barriers between media and the art/craft hierarchy.

³¹ The chief authority on Fischinger, the Whitney brothers, and the abstract film avant-garde in Los Angeles is William Moritz. Among his studies are "The Films of Oskar Fischinger" in *Film Culture*, 1974, pp. 37-187 and "You Can't Get Then from Now," *Journal*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, No. 29 Summer 1981, 27-35. Moritz's most recent, and comprehensive, treatment of "synesthesia" appears in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles and New York, 1987), pp. 297-311.

³² Moritz, *Film Culture*, p. 79.

³³ For a full account of this fascinating relationship between the artist and Baroness von Rebay, see Moritz's "You Can't Get Then from Now," p. 23 ff. Moritz also describes some of Fischinger's inventions, among them the Lumigraph designed to play light images (color drawing in the air), intended as less expensive alternatives to film: *Film Culture*, pp. 74-75.

³⁴ For a full discussion of this and other aspects of Fischinger's innovation, see Moritz, once again in *Film Culture* or in *The Spiritual in Art*.

³⁵ The Whitney brothers are discussed by Moritz in "You Can't Get Then from Now," p. 35 ff. The pendulum composition system is described in John Whitney's *Digital Harmony* (Peterborough, NH, 1980), pp. 138-150.

³⁶ William Moritz in Whitney's *Digital Harmony*, p. 138.

³⁷ Denis Donoghue, "The Promiscuous Cool of Postmodernism," *The New York Times Book Review*, June 22, 1986, p. 37. A provocative anthology of recent critical writing, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis (New York, 1984), provides some idea of the confusing variety of meanings assigned to post-modernism as a cultural term. Readers will find chapter IV, "Theorizing Postmodernism" (pp. 167-235), especially germane. It is helpful to recall that Charles Jencks has pointed out, in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York, 1984), that the primary dualism involves "elitism and populism" (p. 6) — or high and low art. The melding of the two is essential to any definition of post-modernism.

