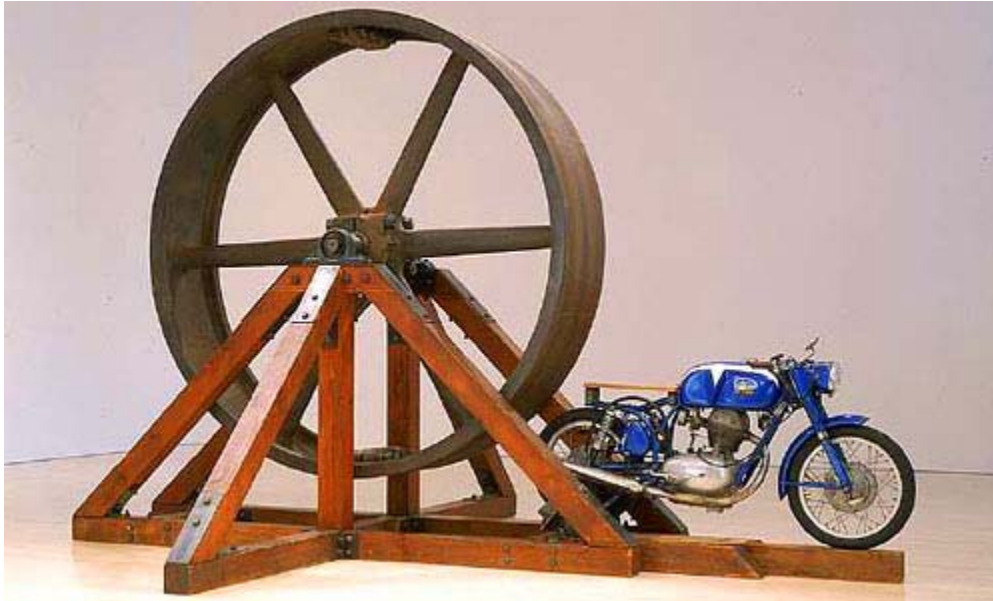


## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Los Angeles artists have quite a past



Chris Burden / Museum of Contemporary Art

**KEEPS ON TURNING:** Chris Burden used cast iron, wood, steel and a motorcycle in creating "The Big Wheel" in 1979, which will be part of MOCA's "California Culture" show.

**Overshadowed by Hollywood and mostly ignored by New York-based publishers, the region's artists have created a thriving art scene. The art world is noticing -- and delving into its history as well.**

Suzanne Muchnic

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In the eyes of the art world, Los Angeles is a city of the future. Forever re-creating its art scene with new galleries, updated museums, unconventional outposts and the latest crop of graduates from Southern California schools, L.A. seems to be a place where the only way to look at the arts is forward. ¶ But change is in the wind. More and more writers, curators, filmmakers and historians are digging into the origins and evolution of the cultural landscape. Whether focusing on small slices of Southern California or looking at L.A. in a statewide context, they are turning local art history into a hot topic. "There's an explosion of interest," says Susan Ehrlich, an art historian, independent curator and former West Coast regional collector for the Archives of

American Art. "The art schools and artists here are getting a lot of attention, and that leads eyes back to history." ¶ The phenomenon will become abundantly clear in October 2011, when -- in a coordinated effort -- four major institutions will open ambitious exhibitions on chapters of the region's artistic past. ¶ Andrew Perchuk, head of contemporary programs and research at the Getty Research Institute, is planning a survey of Southern California painting and sculpture from the late 1940s to the early '70s, to be presented at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Building a case for an alternative to the New York-centric view of contemporary art history, he will focus on Southern California's distinctive approach to Modernism, Minimalism, Conceptualism and feminist art.

"I'm a pretty good example of how views of Los Angeles' art history have changed," Perchuk says. "I grew up and spent my first 30 years in New York at the height of New York's parochialism, when it really was believed that if it didn't happen there, you didn't have to know about it. I came to Los Angeles in the late '80s and was just amazed by how remarkable the work being done was."

### **'Material culture'**

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, decorative arts curator Wendy Kaplan is organizing "California Design, 1930-65: 'Living in a Modern Way,' " a 300-piece traveling show of furniture, fashion, functional objects and graphic arts. Downtown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, chief curator Paul Schimmel is working on "California Culture," an eclectic compendium of inventive visual arts that flourished in the 1970s. And the Hammer Museum has engaged Kellie Jones, an art historian at Columbia University, to assemble a show about African American artists who worked in L. A. in the 1960s and '70s.

All four exhibitions are funded in large part by the Getty Foundation, the philanthropic branch of the Getty Trust, under the umbrella of "On the Record: Art in L.A., 1945-1980." A joint initiative of the foundation and the research institute, it was launched in 2002 "to document the history of advanced art in Los Angeles in the second half of the 20th century." The institute's principal role is to conduct oral histories and public panels that help tell the post-World War II story. The foundation provides support to museums, libraries and universities to preserve records of artists, collectors, museums, curators and dealers and make them available to scholars.

The Getty money -- several million dollars of it -- has jump-started a lot of behind-the-scenes research and closet-cleaning, much of it still in process. All this activity seems to have emerged from a confluence of forces: a coming of age, globalization and the Getty's increasing engagement with L.A.'s postwar art. Interest in the art history of a place sometimes thought to have no history has been growing for years -- at home and abroad -- as lots of independent projects attest.

One of the fall attractions at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm is "Time & Place: Los Angeles, 1958-1968," organized by Lars Nittve, the Swedish-born curator and museum director whose earlier creation, "Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997," traveled from Denmark to Germany, Italy and the U.S. from 1997 to 1999. Catherine Grenier, a curator at the Pompidou Center in Paris, made a big splash there in 2006 with "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital." Her primary motivator, she said when the show opened, was young French artists' infatuation with L.A.

Although critics complain that such exhibits feature the same prominent figures and reinforce cliches, a fuller picture is likely to emerge with new exhibitions and publications.

In Southern California, the Norton Simon Museum has revived memories of Marcel Duchamp's 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in a small show that runs through Dec. 8. Artists affiliated with L.A.'s Ferus Gallery in the mid-1950s and '60s are the subject of Morgan Neville's 2008 documentary film, "The Cool School," co-written by Kristine McKenna. Cecile Whiting's book, "Pop LA: Art and the City in the 1960s," appeared in 2006, and many other publications are in progress.

"Everyone should be remembered," says Lyn Kienholz, director of the California/International Art Foundation, who has taken on the herculean task of compiling "Los Angeles Art and Artists 1940-1980," an encyclopedia of more than 600 artists, galleries, art schools, exhibitions and related events. Staff members at museums and art schools are also busy, delving into their institutions' past. At LACMA, curator Lynn Zelevansky has detailed the museum's rocky relationship with contemporary art in a book about the new Broad Contemporary Art Museum. Across town, Otis College of Art and Design is celebrating its 90-year history in a two-volume publication, "Otis: Nine Decades of Los Angeles Art."

It's about time that all this history is being dredged up and recorded, the curators and authors say. The accomplishments of Los Angeles' artists have been obscured by the entertainment industry and largely ignored by the New York-based publishing industry. But the contemporary art scene has developed on its own terms. And globalization has helped to put L.A.'s leading artists on the world's map. Before the 1990s, when young artists found that they didn't have to live in New York to have big careers, only a few isolated figures -- such as Edward Kienholz, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy -- made the leap.

### **Global acclaim**

Zelevansky, who came to LACMA from the Museum of Modern Art in New York 13 years ago and travels widely in contemporary art circles, is among those who have noticed a big change. "People outside of Los Angeles suddenly realized what's been going on here," she says. "We are very chic and trendy in Europe and South America. Everybody thinks we are the place in the United States."

At the Getty, Thomas Crow, who led the research institute from 2000 to 2007, is credited with creating a larger presence for contemporary art. The library expanded its postwar holdings enormously, including a trove of video work amassed by the Long Beach Museum of Art, and Perchuk took charge of contemporary programs and research during Crow's tenure.

The Getty Foundation has always supported local institutions, but its involvement with Southern California art history has escalated in recent years.

Joan Weinstein, the foundation's associate director, says that 2002 was a turning point, sparked by a conversation with Lyn Kienholz and Henry Hopkins, a UCLA professor emeritus who has directed the Hammer Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Los Angeles became "an art powerhouse" in just a few decades, Hopkins says, and the forces that created that situation needed to be documented. "We felt that the Getty was in a position to do something really interesting in terms of scholarship about the Southern California area."

"In the past," Weinstein says, "there was a tendency to undervalue the history of Los Angeles art. We didn't pay attention to our own history, which we now realize is a very strong alternative to the development of Modern art in New York. I think because of that cultural amnesia, people weren't taking care of their records.

"Lyn and Henry came to talk to us about precisely that subject. Their interest converged with our awareness that a lot of Los Angeles history was in danger of being lost. It seemed the moment when we could jump in and do something," she says.

"We had done an electronic cataloging initiative in Los Angeles, which was getting collections online in various museums. Through that, we became more aware of deep collections of Los Angeles art and the fact that a lot of archival material wasn't available. Then we started hearing stories about individuals who had died and survivors who were inclined to get rid of the records."

Armed with a Getty grant, Lyn Kienholz's organization surveyed public and private collections to determine what material existed and how much of it was cataloged and accessible to researchers. That led to other investigations, including an ongoing study of African American artists and arts organizations, and two grants to the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA to assess community organizations' archives and start an oral history program.

In the last few years, the Getty Foundation has given about \$2.5 million in grants to catalog the archives of 10 institutions, including MOCA, CalArts and Scripps College, which has a major ceramics collection.

At LACMA, where various departmental archives will be merged, the project has turned up such things as an audiotape of a 1967 interview with artist Man Ray and a video of David Hockney driving a customized car through the museum grounds. And the grant has allowed the museum to put the catalog of its 1967-71 project, "Art and Technology," on its website.

Large institutions might be expected to have their archives in usable order for researchers, but that is rarely the case, Weinstein says. "There is such a backlog of archival material at public institutions. With our grants, we could prioritize this material."

And sometimes rescue it. A case in point, she says, is one unnamed organization "where all the records were in storage on pallets, stacked up but slated for disposal. The survey came just at the moment to save this material. Sometimes people just don't realize what they have."

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