

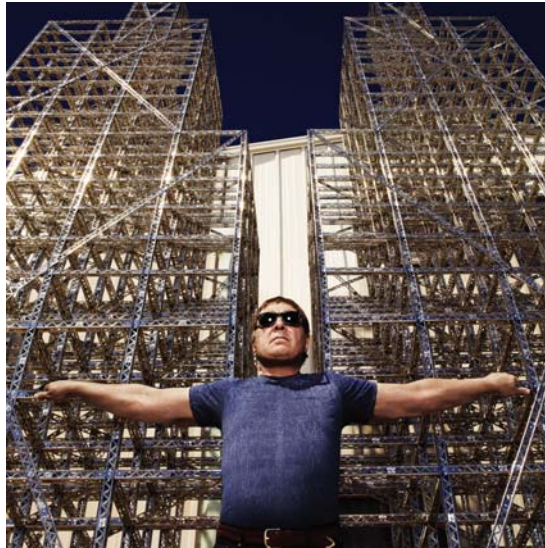
LA ARTWORLD

By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

Photography ROBBIE FIMMANO

There is a belief that art is universal—a belief, more often than not, perpetuated by New Yorkers who just happen to live in the city where universality comes to roost. But like the popular axiom about politics, art happens on a local level. Sure, the final product might eventually hang just as nicely in any white-walled space from Moscow to Abu Dhabi (that’s the point of white walls), but all art originates in a specific place with its own social obsessions and regional leanings. Some of the most provocative, potent art being created in the United States today isn’t coming out of New York City but clear across the continent in Los Angeles—and what’s more, those artists aren’t simply raising up their canvases like sun reflectors for NYC approval. It used to be that Ed Ruscha was the lone dignitary forced to represent the entire Southern California scene—his backward Hollywood signs and epic fires raging on vacant landscapes almost suggesting what little cultural value the environment held. But today, thanks to L.A.’s own community-building efforts, artists have moved far out of Ruscha’s shadow. Emerging talents mix with art history’s radical pioneers. Hollywood and consumer culture are consistent references, but so is the terrain of the city itself, where the sprawling geography and jutting horizontals allow for productions that would be physically or psychologically impossible in the compartmentalized verticality of Manhattan. Experimental galleries and non-profits have exploded. Innovative collectors willing to take risks—and with more wall space than their East Coast counterparts—have risen the stakes. Contemporary art in Los Angeles is not new. But there is no question that in the last few years, a new sense of manifest destiny has electrified the city’s art scene. If art is in essence a conversation, Los Angeles, at the very least, is an opportunity for a new way of talking. It sounds completely different than anywhere else. It sounds very much like the future.

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Chris Burden, Mixed-media Artist, Sculptor, Performance-art Icon

The violent, provoking, groundbreaking performance and duration works by Chris Burden in the 1970s didn't simply redefine the direction of art (although it did just that by questioning the role of the artist, where art was held, how dangerous it could get, and if viewers were really innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire). Burden's loaded performances arguably predicted cultural issues— and the viewer response to them—that ranged from escalating gun violence (Burden famously had a bullet shot into his arm in a performance in 1971) to consumer car worship (he also crucified himself on a Volkswagen). Today, residing with his wife, artist Nancy Rubins, in Topanga Canyon, Burden seems less interested in his role as an L.A. art icon to a young generation increasingly returning to performance art than he is in the raw, hyper-masculine, large-scale sculptures that have been consuming his practice for the past two decades. Currently, his warehouse studio, which sits on eight acres of rugged land, is overtaken by his latest ode to car culture: Called Metropolis No. II, the piece is a bigger, faster, and more epically labyrinthine version of a sculpture he created in 2004. This second rendition is a fully motorized boy fantasyland where roughly 1,200 specially produced Matchbox-style cars circulate around undulating tracks every 40 seconds: That means about 100,000 cars an hour fly through this Burden maze at such a velocity that it is impossible to follow a single car. "It's like freeway noise in miniature," Burden explains. "The sound adds another level of anxiety. And there are also trains for additional motion, although those are slower than the cars." The result is like a roaring mechanical waterfall for commuters in a J.G. Ballard dystopia. Burden, whose wilderness of vintage streetlamps permanently adorns the plaza of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, hasn't stopped working on his other architectural monuments: two stainless-steel Erector set towers stand guard in front of his studio. He's also currently devising the engineering details for the construction of a miniature zeppelin air balloon.