



Tony Berlant, *There and Back*, 2010, Found and fabricated printed tin collaged on laser inkjet printed plywood panel with steel brads, 70 x 53 in. (177.8 x 134.6 cm), Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. 310.822.4955

## Los Angeles Gets Its Place in the Sun

BY SUSAN MICHALS

“The pleasure that artists get from making art is really inexplicable—even to ourselves.”

—ARTIST, TONY BERLANT

Los Angeles has always been a boomtown. Back in 1911, the Nestor Company opened the first film studio in what would soon become Tinseltown, on the corner of Sunset and Gower. Not long after, pioneering directors, Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, (among others) found themselves in risky yet incredibly exciting territory. Here was a chance to create a vision, set a stage, and make a statement—which they did, with movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *Birth of a Nation*. Within a short period of time, Los Angeles, with its temperate climate and inexpensive costs, generated a new creative hub—and the genesis of the motion picture industry.

A century later, Los Angeles is still a place where dreams can become reality. It is true; it hardly ever rains. It also is accurate to say that virtually every other waiter happens to be an actor. But there’s a reason why this town also is a hotbed of creativity—and that creativity extends well beyond the entertainment industry. Outside the confines of the studio system, the contemporary art scene has been thriving within the city limits for decades, regardless of the external world’s acknowledgement of its artistic legacy, let alone its capabilities. Perhaps it has to do with the second city perception of L.A. versus New York, or the aforementioned focus on entertainment. Or maybe the fact that the city itself is so spread out.

In Hollywood, perception is everything—and the contemporary art scene is no different. Let’s face it—until recently, the Los Angeles contemporary art scene has been a bit underrated and under-represented. But in the last few years in particular, a shift has started to occur. Heavy hitters are moving west—Jeffrey Deitch left New York to take the directorial position at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), and major players like Matthew Marks and Perry Rubenstein are setting up camp in town within the next year. But probably the biggest turning point in 2011 is just about to happen, when a veritable trifecta of artistic accomplishment, both new and old, will be blanketing the city from Venice to Pasadena. Beginning October 1, the Getty Foundation will launch *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980*, a celebration of Los Angeles contemporary art that concludes with a series of more than forty concurrent exhibitions. At the same time, two major art fairs, Art Platform and PULSE, will hold court downtown. “They’re certainly making a lotta hoopla out of it,” said longtime Southern California artist, Ed Moses, when talking about the Getty undertaking. “Los Angeles is maybe coming into some attention in an international way; it’s always been considered an outpost. [But then again] the art scene is always looking for a new place and a new artist.”

Mr. Moses is certainly accurate in his assumption—suddenly all eyes seem to be front and center on Southern California’s contemporary art scene. But what is causing it?

### PACIFIC STANDARD TIME DEBUTS

Previously there have been three major exhibitions mounted chronicling the importance of Los Angeles and its artists. The first was *Sunshine and Noir: Art in L. A. 1960-1997* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark; the second was *Los Angeles 1955-1985:*

*Birth of an Art Capital*, which took place at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2006); then in 2008, the Moderna Museet (Stockholm) presented *Time & Place: Los Angeles 1957-1968*. Collectively, these three exhibitions made a solid statement that L.A. undoubtedly was a city to be reckoned with, understood and identified. With *Pacific Standard Time* (or *PST* for short), a citywide exhibition that encapsulates 60 cultural institutions, Los Angeles has its first ever retrospective of the contemporary art scene on its own turf, something that has been years in the making. Tony Berlant, an artist who lives and breathes (and of course, works) in Los Angeles, felt that “Just in principle alone, the concept of the show is fantastic; it makes the whole community very aware of its own history in a way it never has been.” (Various periods of Berlant’s work will be on display throughout the city, including a solo exhibition, *Works from 1962-1964*, at L.A. Louver through October 8; *Is What It Is*, a piece from 2011, is reproduced on this issue’s back cover).

Many in the art community see *PST* as a turning point for the city; an opportunity to make a market in Los Angeles that until now has not gone full bore. That particularly hit home with Ann Philbin, the director of the Hammer Museum, who feels it is imperative to draw a line in the proverbial L.A. sand. “It is important to understand that while *Pacific Standard Time* might be helpful in further establishing L.A. as one of the world’s art capitals, at its core [it] is an important scholarly endeavor aimed at chronicling the history of art in Los Angeles in the post-war period.” This exhibition in its artistic bandwidth goes well beyond who most people might recognize as the quintessential Los Angelenos—names like Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and Dennis Hopper. Franklin Sirmans, a curator and the department head of contemporary art at the L.A. County Museum of Art—not to mention another recent transplant—is excited about people getting to know some of the other artists who were part of this seminal time period. “Take Noah Purifoy,” muses Sirmans. “You may not be aware of his work now, but you will be after *PST*. He’ll have several works at the Getty, several works at the Hammer; he co-founded the Watts Towers Art Center. He was an integral part of L.A. He passed a few years ago, but his estate is out at Joshua Tree—an enormous sculpture garden with hundreds of pieces. [And] people like Maria Nordman—who is part of one of the *PST* shows that we are exhibiting. [*Maria Nordman Filmroom: Smoke 1967 – Present*] She was very important to late '60s/early '70s' Los Angeles and was a woman, who in that time, a lot of the history is described as all men, so it’s really important to see what she was doing.”

Al Moran, who owns the OHWOW Gallery, is another gallerist who has set up shop in Los Angeles and is a strong supporter of what *PST* will bring to the table. To him, the historical significance is unparalleled. “To have so many public and private institutions dedicating themselves to mounting a survey of art in Southern California for that specific period is proof positive that this has been an art mecca for some time now. I think Ferus Gallery was such a huge influence on the second half of the 20th century; and what Walter Hopps and Irving Blum did was only rivaled by what Leo Castelli was doing in New York City.” *PST* takes on the entire embodiment of a movement – including the art schools. Many a student came out



Ed Moses, *Holmby Home*, 1952, Crayon and tempera on board, 25 1/2 x 29 in. (64.8 x 73.7 cm), ©Ed Moses, Courtesy of the artist and Alan Shaffer Photography.

to Southern California and then, never left. Maria Arena Bell, MOCA Board Co-Chair, also weighed in on the importance of this historic endeavor: “Part of [*PST*] is a rediscovery of the important art scene that was really begun here in the '60s with key L.A. artists, many of whom who were also teachers, [as well as] their students... and their influence is the underpinning of L.A.’s art scene.”

### THE ART FAIRS: WHO, WHAT, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, WHY

In conjunction (but not affiliated) with *Pacific Standard Time*, Art Platform (from MMPI, the people that brought you The Armory Show) will take over the L.A. Mart from September 30 through October 3, and PULSE (Ramsay Fairs LLC) will launch simultaneously at L.A. Live. While both are in close proximity to each other (at least by New York standards), one will have to drive or take the shuttle bus to see both. So why are these important fairs debuting just now? “Over the past six or seven years, with our fairs in Miami and New York, PULSE has become an integral part of the American—and even global—art community and market,” states Cornell DeWitt, Director of PULSE. “However, it was certainly with the launch of *Pacific Standard Time* that brought everything into focus and the timing gelled.” DeWitt sees the L.A. market as a ground-up movement. “Take the example of Miami: After the arrival of Art Basel, several high-profile galleries opened up shop there as a response [Perrotin being the most obvious example], and that didn’t really work out—it was a top-down, market-driven process. In L.A., it has been more organic growth, involving the entire art community, so I think it is a much healthier growth, and thus bodes well for L.A. in the long run.”

But the question remains: Does Los Angeles have the collector base to sustain three fairs a year? (The third being Art Los Angeles Contemporary in January). “If there are enough customers to fill three art fairs of contemporary art in Los Angeles that would be great news to me,” said a hopeful Sirmans. “The high quantity of quality work being made here is undebatable.” Adam Gross, Executive Di-



Top: **Noah Purifoy, *Untitled (Assemblage)*, 1967**, Mixed media, 66 x 39 x 8 in. (167.6 x 99.1 x 20.3 cm), Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Museum Purchase, the William A. Clark Fund and Gift of Dr. Samella Lewis, 1993.3.C, Courtesy of the Noah Purifoy Foundation.

Bottom: **Lezley Saar, *Lady Audley*, 2011**, Acrylic and photographs on fabric on panel, 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm), From the *Madwoman in the Attic* series, Courtesy of Merry Karnowsky Gallery. +1 323 933 4408

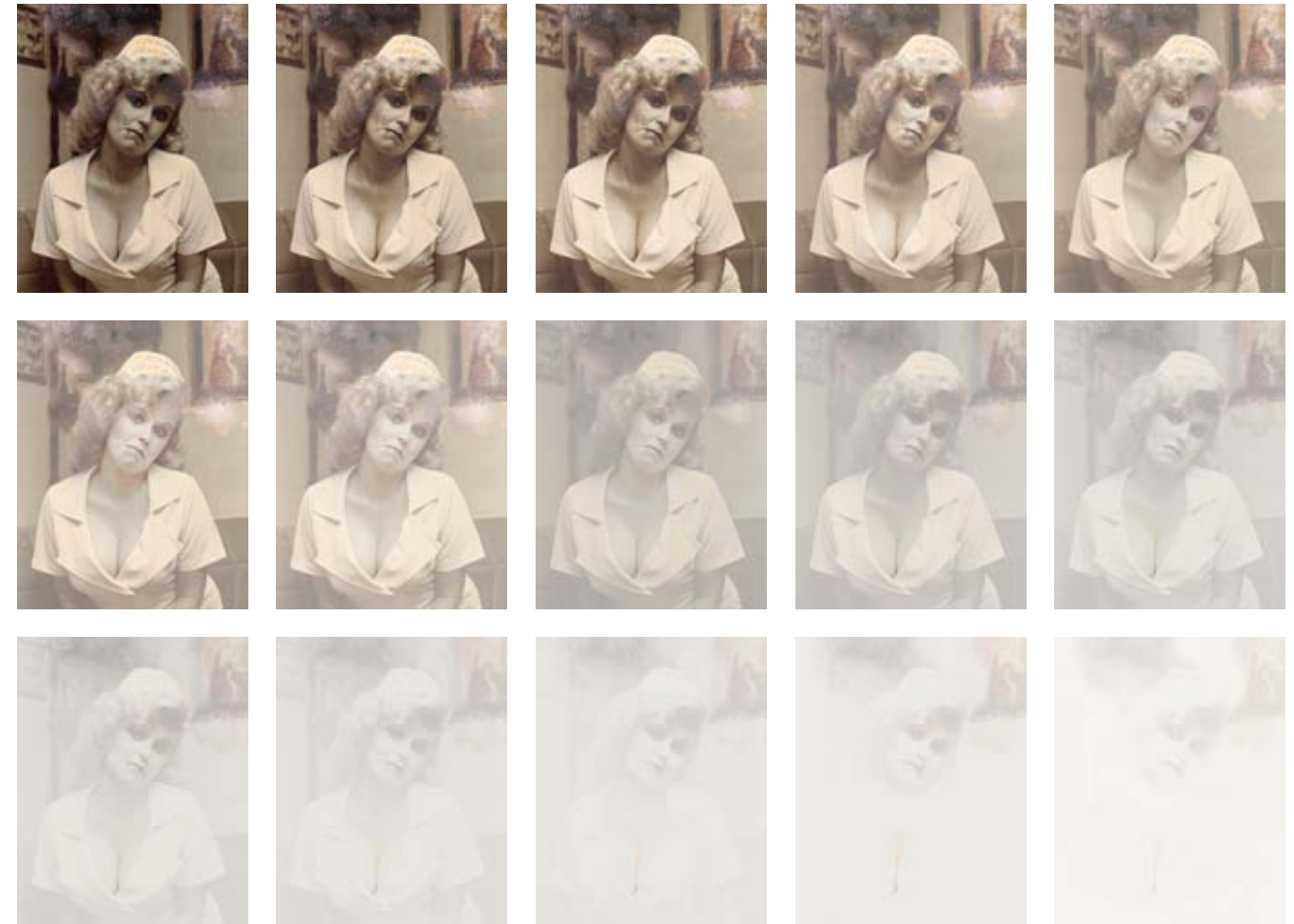
rector of Art Platform, is confident that the art fairs will shine, even though many are posturing in that purgatorial ‘wait and see’ mode. “Between the Armory Shows and Art Platform’s VIP lists alone, there are over 18,000 people—every important collector, consultant and curator in the world—people that are very aware of what’s happening in L.A. They’re interested to come to see what we—and the other entities—have to offer.” Gross may be right. Between the three fairs, there will be literally hundreds of different artists on view—giving this all the pomp and circumstance of a world’s fair. “The spectacle of an art fair—it’s an event—a destination,” says a hopeful Gross. “Look at Art Basel Miami Beach. Or the Crystal Palace in 1851 in London. It’s our ability to aggregate that kind of content and make it available to a broader audience that is so important.”

Local gallery owners, like Merry Karnowsky (who will be exhibiting Lezley Saar) see the potential. “The art market here is dynamic and economically viable; I see this as only the beginning.” Beau LeBasse of LeBasse Projects [who will be showing L.A.-based artists, Joshua Petker and Nate Frizzell] also is optimistic, but well aware of the pre-conceived notions of Los Angeles’ infamy and lack of recognition. “L.A. has received its fair share of criticism in the past,” says Basse. “But this city boasts great museums, a number of well-respected galleries and a more relaxed lifestyle than New York. So if you have the option, who wouldn’t want to live and work here?”

#### A LONG TIME COMING

When the high cost of living hit New York as Rudy Giuliani took office, young artists and those without any sort of financial wherewithal found themselves out-priced; even the outer boroughs had become outrageous, and Hoboken—let’s face it—that was out of the question. Gallerist, Perry Rubenstein, states: “For me, it was very clear that while New York’s importance remains indisputable, it was certainly no longer the only option. And it became [or has become] progressively obvious that, given the values of New York real estate, it created far fewer options for the creative community to either live and/or work. Hence the rise of both Berlin and Los Angeles.”

Artists now needed to set themselves up in a place that was still recognized as a cultural hub, still an urban locale and still had people with money to spend. In other words: Southern California. “The west is where the last turf stands free and clear,” says art advisor, Stefan Simchowitz. In 1960s Los Angeles, rent was cheap and space was endless. And then of course, there was the beach, which artist, Ed Moses, feels is an important factor not to be dismissed. “Surf’s up! I believe that one of the factors is the beach and that ocean—there was a critic who many years ago reviewed my work and said what happened was the compression from Europe after World War II went to New York... and then they came over here and the Pacific Ocean was actually the only barrier for them to go any further. They’re compressed to this coast and California was the place to be because, well, Alaska’s too cold.” But what once was affordable in many sections of L.A. has now become the opposite. Moses further expounds on the current housing landscape: “The beach is great, but unfortunately not many artists can live in Venice anymore (where many originally settled in the 1960s). This area is too expensive for artists to migrate into unless they come with money. I’m sort of the ‘Last of the Mohicans’ down here, same with guys like Tony Berlant, who is in Santa Monica, but he’s been there for years. Now [the artists] are all up in Silver Lake, Hawthorne, Inglewood, or they go downtown, or to East L.A. It’s cheaper, but the weather’s horrible.”



**Zoe Crosher, *Disappearing Nurse No. 1-15*, from the *Vanishing of Michelle duBois*, 2010**, Pigmented Ink on Museo Silver Rag, 29 ½ x 22 ½ in. each (74.9 x 57.2 cm), © Zoe Crosher, Image courtesy of the artist and Perry Rubenstein, Los Angeles. +1 310 395 1001

Despite the weather conditions, it is the great amount of untapped talent that also has brought out another level of migration—the New York high-end gallery owner. Larry Gagosian set a precedent by opening his Beverly Hills location in 1995 (which he expanded in 2010) and L&M Arts has set up shop in Venice. As previously mentioned, Matthew Marks is headed further east, taking over a space in West Hollywood on Santa Monica with plans to open in January 2012—a plan three years in the making. (Marks’ first show will be new paintings by Ellsworth Kelly). Perry Rubenstein also has opted to go Hollywood, but instead is opening a gallery on Highland Boulevard during Oscar Week, 2012. Rubenstein had been back and forth for years, interacting with both the existing and the burgeoning community on a variety of projects. “It became very clear [to me that] Los Angeles was no longer a simple side show or another outlet. It was becoming the main event.” (Rubenstein will be showing one of his first L.A. artists, Zoe Crosher, at Art Platform, and plans are in the works for a major exhibition next year.)

#### NEXT UP

So with this huge conglomeration of art and commerce and creativity converging simultaneously, will Los Angeles finally get its place in the sun? Only time will tell.

Perhaps, since everything starts with an artist, it is best to end with one as well. Tony Berlant had this parting comment to make about Los Angeles, right here, right now. “I think the main thing about L.A.’s future as an art center is what it brings to the table culturally. It’s not about the museums, because that’s just a manifestation. It’s not about the galleries, either, because that’s just a manifestation too. Los Angeles is a vibrant place. If you come here from out of town and look around, it just looks like endless balmy weather in the suburbs. Its power, as a catalytic center in all areas of human activity may not be readily apparent, especially if you use New York and European cities as a model. But it gets better every year, because there’s more and more cultural diversity—little enclaves of culture around town that all rub together; it’s never been this interesting as it is right now.” □

BASED IN LOS ANGELES, WRITER, SUSAN MICHALS, COVERS SUBJECTS RANGING FROM ART AND CULTURE TO THE EVER-EVOLVING WORLD OF CELEBRITY. OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, SHE HAS CONTRIBUTED TO *VANITY FAIR ONLINE*, *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, *MADAME FIGARO* AND *THE DAILY*.