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EDITORIAL	Culture on the Coast	<i>Gifford Phillips</i>	22
ON THE WEST COAST	Circle of Styles	<i>John Coplans</i>	24
	Bay Area Figurative	<i>Paul Mills</i>	42
	West Coast Collector: Wright Ludington	<i>Henry J. Seldis</i>	46
	San Francisco Sculptors	<i>Mary Fuller</i>	52
	The Bay Tradition in Architecture	<i>David Gebhard</i>	60
MUSEUMS	Thomas Gilcrease and Tulsa	<i>Francine du Plessix and Cleve Gray</i>	64
PREVIEW	The Negro in American Art	<i>Marvin S. Sadik</i>	74
BOOKS	Focus on the Far East	<i>Francine du Plessix</i>	93
ART CENTERS	New York: The Season Surveyed	<i>Hilton Kramer</i>	108
	Cross-country: Four Cities		116
THE WORLD OF ART	Visit New York Visit New York	<i>Mildred Constantine</i>	124
	Ruskin the Lost Leader	<i>John Russell</i>	132
SPECIAL FEATURES	New Stone Gardens	<i>Isamu Noguchi</i>	84
	Regional Accent: Decorative Arts of New Hampshire		90
	Boxes		98
	Print Review: Summertime USA	<i>Cleve Gray</i>	103
	Rediscovery: The Pottery of Artus Van Briggle	<i>Robert Koch</i>	120
	Auction Trends: The Guggenheim To Sell Fifty Kandinskys		138
COVER	Painted—and pasted—by California artist Billy Al Bengston, who shows at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and at Martha Jackson in New York. The front cover abstraction is now in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. W. Hopps, III. The circle of artists on the back cover are among Bengston's fellow-artists at Ferus.		

CIRCLE OF STYLES ON THE WEST COAST

While San Francisco retains
“a blandly concealed hostility” toward modern art,
Los Angeles is emerging as a frontier art center
“where the artists have developed an aggressive
and high-spirited arrogance
that only young and talented men can have”

*Frank Lobdell: 15 April, oil, 1962.
Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.
Saturnine expressionism.*



JOHN COPLANS

A record of what actually occurred in San Francisco during the immediate postwar years is virtually non-existent. All we really know is that, focused around Clyfford Still and, to a lesser extent, Mark Rothko, at the California School of Fine Arts, such faculty members as Clay Spohn, Hassel Smith, Edward Corbett, David Park and a variegated group of younger people—many of them returned G.I.s—became closely involved in a whole new attitude toward painting and as a result turned out an extraordinary body of work. (Hassel Smith, for example, was in possession of his fluent linear abstract-expressionist style as early as 1947.) San Francisco was on the inland side of the Bay at the University of California. The two schools were, more than anything else, physical tokens linking these artists together in the face of a generally indifferent, if not an actively hostile, social and public milieu. So much so, that by the early fifties a whole stream of this first generation left the Bay area for the East or Europe, notably Jon Schuler, Edward Corbett, Ernest Briggs, Edward Dugmore, John Grillo, John Hultberg, Claire Falkenstein, and Sam Francis.

Hassel Smith, David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell, Jim Weeks, Jeremy Anderson, Elmer Bischoff, James Budd Dixon, John Saccaro and Jack Jefferson stayed (some to continue teaching at one time or another), but whatever serious recognition was eventually given to some of these artists has come from Los Angeles, New York, London and Paris rather than San Francisco. In fact, such has been the indifference of San Francisco, and in particular its public institutions, that it is only in Los Angeles that a representative body of the best work of Diebenkorn, Smith and Lobdell can be seen. As a result, with the exception of the late David Park's work (organized by the Staempfli Gallery and posthumously shown in depth in 1962 at the Oakland Art Museum) it has fallen to Southern California's Pasadena Art Museum rather than to one of San Francisco's three museums to have accorded these artists retrospective exhibitions—Diebenkorn in 1960, Smith in 1961, and Lobdell scheduled for fall of 1964.

A crucial handicap to the subsequent development of the art of the area has been this blandly indifferent attitude of the museums toward their responsibilities. Despite two municipally supported museums, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor and the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, and one private museum, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the very first viewing of the New American Painting within the area was only when a local benefactor personally arranged and paid for the Ben Heller Collection to be shown at the Legion of Honor in 1962.

JOHN COPLANS, *British painter who came to California three years ago, is now the Editor-at-Large for Artforum magazine.*

As Hassel Smith remarked, at a panel on the exhibition at the Art Institute: "Ten or fifteen years have passed, during which time this painting (Pollock, Guston, Kline, Newman, de Kooning, Gorky, Rothko, Tworkov, Reinhardt, etc.) has shaken up the Western world. Nevertheless, San Francisco and its museums have not made any effort to show us these paintings. When I went to the Legion, I noticed that for the first time in my experience, painters, with paint on their trousers and shoes, were out there to look at the show . . . and how many painters go to the Legion? Not many. There is nothing to see. Well, now they are showing us something . . . finally. I must admit that living in San Francisco, I have never seen two big Pollocks."

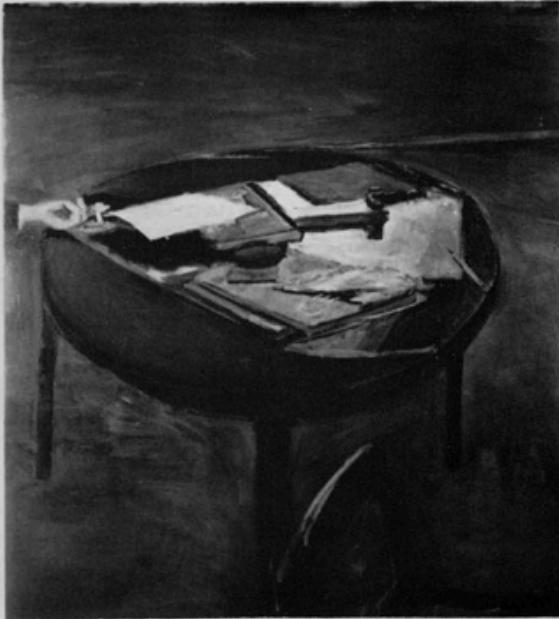
Partly owing to the wholesale exodus of so many interesting artists, including Still, the excitement of discovery of the first generation was to be tempered in addition by the fact that David Park, very influential as a teacher, abandoned early in the fifties the mythopoetic imagery of abstract expressionism for a return to a solidly-cored figuration. But it is doubtful if Park's solitary example would have had such an influence if there had not been inherent in abstract expressionism, as it developed in the Bay Area from 1946 onwards, a concentration on the duality of tension that can exist between the vista of surface light and color and the actuality of paint. This is not surprising since the milieu completely lacked both the sophisticated background and the tradition of non-objective art that both tempered and informed the collective evolution of abstract expressionism in New York. However abstract the style was thought to be in San Francisco, it was never non-objective, and remained consistently modulated by a continual degree of secondary reference to figuration, particularly landscape. So much so that Hassel Smith, for example, slides in and out of figuration at will, often working on figure paintings side by side with his more familiar open-plane calligraphic style. Frank Lobdell likewise; his direct drawings from the nude are spatially connected to his current style of painting. His versatility is well illustrated here.

Thus, even apart from Park, there was always a certain fragility to the style, lent to it in part by this duality of its leading proponents. Even Diebenkorn reflected aspects of landscape in his most lyrical, high-keyed abstractions of the early fifties. But if Park's change was early and almost dialectically programmed, Diebenkorn's switch to figuration was hesitant, gradual and instinctive. (James Weeks, a first-wave painter, was always a figurative artist, but Bischoff rapidly followed Park's decision.) The example of these artists was to influence a number of the younger artists of the second wave, notably Paul Wonner, Joan Brown, Jerrold Davis, Roland Petersen, and Nathan Oliveira.



Hassel Smith: *North of Montana*, oil, 1961. David Stuart Galleries, Los Angeles; below, Smith's *All-American Girl*, oil, 1962. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. M. R. Needleman, courtesy of Dilexi Gallery, San Francisco. Zooming open-plane calligraphy.





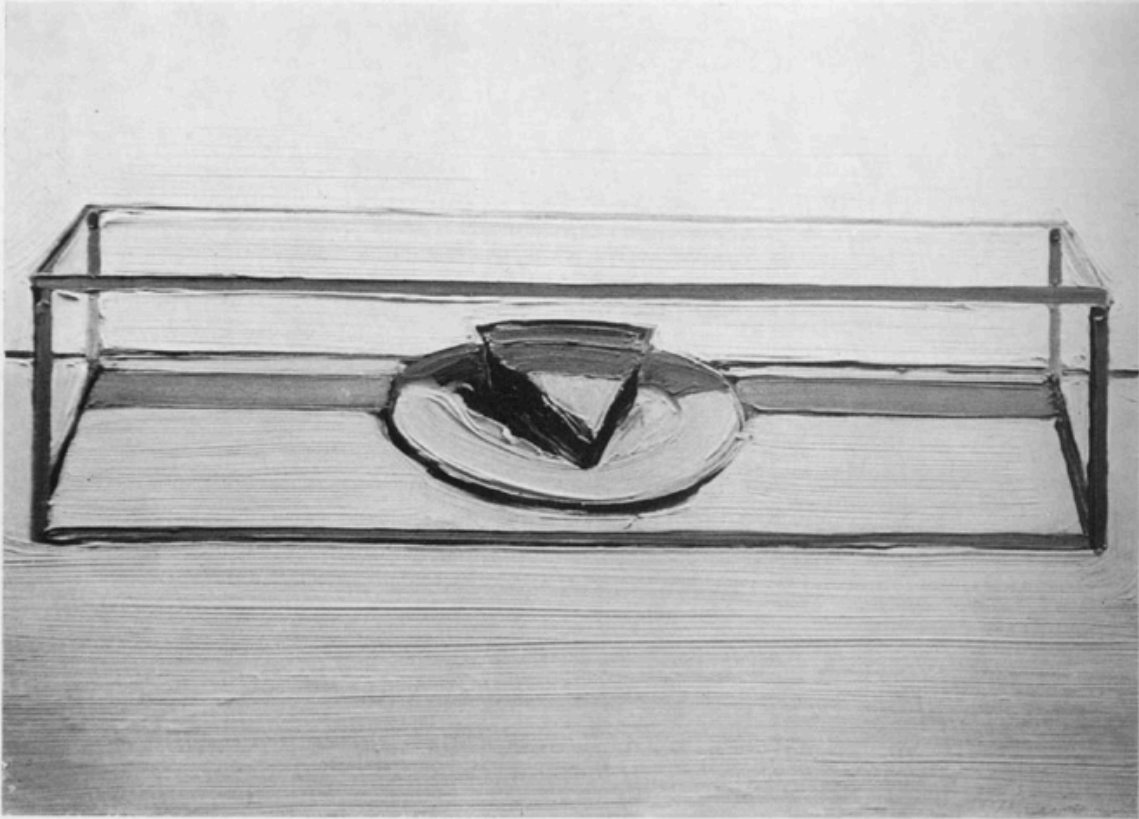
Richard Diebenkorn, top: Round Table, oil, 1962. Poindexter Gallery, New York; and his Urbana #5, oil, 1953. Collection of Gifford Phillips, courtesy of Poindexter Gallery, New York. Lyrical and high-keyed.

Oliveira is probably the most talented artist of the younger branch of these figurative painters, but one detects in him a certain lack of nerve. This hesitancy to over-reach his own very natural talent combines with a sophisticated eclecticism. Very influenced by Francis Bacon, he turns his shrill and scabrous hysteria into something sweeter and more palatable. At the same time he constantly excavates (currently it's Eugene Carrière), with the result that his art, despite a certain admirable quality of rhetoric, lacks a biting visual ambition.

This could hardly be said of Diebenkorn who has consistently been a daring artist; he alone of the older generation had a lot to lose in abandoning abstract expressionism. If certain recent works, in particular his nudes, are unconvincing, his still lifes have a genuine and touching vision. Despite the nostalgia of Diebenkorn's subject-matter he brings an extraordinarily penetrating and intense quality of vision, a deep scan infused with a high degree of ambiguity; his still lifes slide into landscapes, burstings out of their scale. This quality of vision hardly marks the work of the remainder of this group, who either use a snapshot technique—a casual scan or, like Roland Petersen, a complete dispassion that never really particularizes. Their figuration seems to be systematic rather than a product of an intense visual awareness.

The greatest problem that arises in viewing the work of these Bay Area figurative painters (other than Diebenkorn) is that one is uncertain of their ambition—other than to paint figuratively. But granting their predilection for this style as the product of an overwhelming temperamental bias, as a group they betray a curious ignorance of (or perhaps a fierce resistance to?) nearly every radical innovation that has affected this mode of seeing since the advent of impressionism. Implied in their art is the belief that they can operate from a moderate position. As a result, their art lacks acuity of vision or a visionary obsessiveness; at the most there is a token modernism rather than an acute painterly perception. This modernism, such as it may be, is not derived from a fresh vision or new insights, but by applying residual effects of paint manipulation derived from the most modern manner, abstract expressionism.

One of the only artists contemporaneous with this second generation to touch upon and finally bring a coherent visual tension between paint and subject-matter is Wayne Thiebaud. With a consistent interest in figuration (he has admired Diebenkorn intensely over the years), finally manifesting itself recently in some exceptional still-life painting of mass-produced edibles—pies, hot dogs, layer cakes, bowls of soup, hors d' oeuvres, and the like, he



*Wayne Thiebaud: Caged Pie, oil, 1962.
Allan Stone Gallery, New York.
Exceptional still-life painting.*



*Nathan Oliveira: Seated Figure with Pink Background, oil, 1960.
Alan Gallery, New York.
Human-condition painting.*



*Robert Hudson: Untitled construction, 1963.
Lanyon Gallery, Palo Alto, Calif.
Savage vitality and extraordinary technical ability.*

is one of the few artists in Northern California with an unusual particularization of vision.

A genre painter of some distinction, he manipulates his paint within the abstract-expressionist vocabulary, but without the drip or overlay of dragged brush effects. This serves to rinse and clean his surfaces to admit a distillation of light and a clarity of atmosphere as a metaphor of the artificially lit, air-conditioned, aridly hygienic supermart and the plastic-surfaced, neon-signed, glass-boxed restaurant. His best paintings to date consist of serial images of foodstuffs—with identical qualities in the paint; he visually puns the sickly surfaces and bright colors of these mass-produced foods.

After the departure of so many of the older figures a second wave of artists developed at the same institutions on each side of the Bay. From the San Francisco side came Julius Wasserstein, Roy De Forest, Seymour Locks, Wally Hedricks, Nathan Oliveira, Dick Faralla, David Simpson, Deborah Remington, all currently working in San Francisco, and many who subsequently left: Sonia Gechtoff, James Kelly, Richard Brodney, Lawrence Compton, etc. Berkeley played a larger role in the evolution of this second wave: Jay de Feo, Paul Wonner, Bill Theo Brown, Fred Martin, Jerrold Davis and Roland Petersen all emerging from there.

Those who remained as abstract expressionists—Wasserstein, Remington, or peripheral latecomers such as Sam Tchakalian—rehashed such first-generation painters as Corbett or Dugmore. Others, rejecting figuration, floundered in their attempts to tie into a creative area. Without personal confrontation of New York painting and esthetic expansion, the difficulties were overwhelming. De Feo, a very talented artist, some two years before her work was shown at the Museum of Modern Art's 1959 "Americans" exhibition, had already reached an impasse, and was to continue working the same painting endlessly for the next five years. Hedrick became a proto-pop artist by accident. In rejecting Still's notions of mythism that saturated the milieu he resorted to tracing ironic commentaries onto radios and refrigerators. But eccentricity as an anti-art gesture was insufficient to break the deadlock. Fred Martin collaged the most minute of poetic illuminations, the horizon of his ambition shrinking within himself. De Forest evolved a personal vocabulary of whimsy and humor that never transcended its provincial vernacular level.

An artist of this generation who seems to have broken out of the dilemma is Tony DeLap. His recent work, consisting of concentrically stepped forms in shallow recession, is housed in containers of glass, stainless steel and plastic. Irradiated with light, the interior forms, painted in dark saturated colors, pulsate. The whole



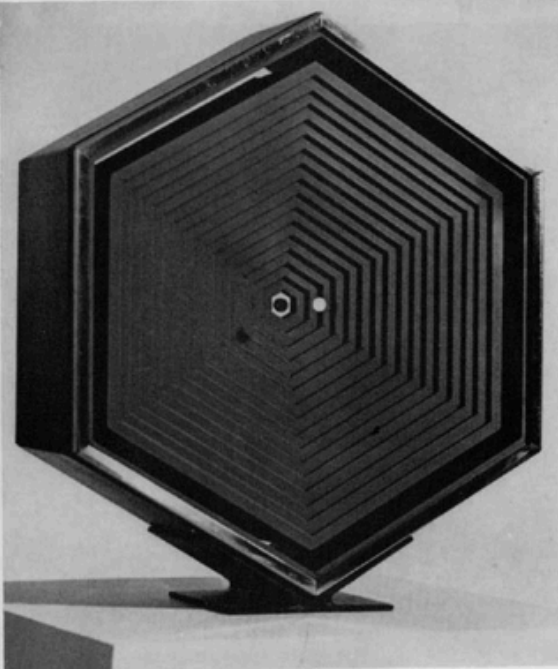
*Joan Brown: Noel at Table with a Large Bowl of Fruit, oil, 1963.
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred P. Cohen,
courtesy of Staempfli Gallery, New York.
Punchy, racy vigor.*

mutual interest and inspiration in figuration. Neri works in painted plaster-of-Paris and brings the abstract-expressionist vocabulary of paint handling onto his surfaces. Both his work and that of Joan Brown are marked by an almost startling quality of sloppiness mixed with a punchy and racy vigor. Another artist of this group, William Wiley, also employs parody, satirizing his own evolution and interest as a painter. To a large extent their oddball sensibility might have remained simply a refreshing local oddity were it not for the emergence of neo-dada and pop art, which in some measure parallels what these people are doing.

Gathered around Peter Voukos at the University of California is another, younger, group of sculptors arising out of the California clay movement: James Melchert, Ron Nagle, Michael Frinkiss, Stephen de Staebler, etc. [see a previous Coplans article in *Art in America*, No. Six 1963]. They maintain similar overtones of willful clumsiness in their sculpture, but this is as much due to a total rejection of the tradition of slick craft pottery surfaces as a similar interest in notions of "funk." Voukos' recent shift into bronze now reflects their current individual attempts to explore beyond the structural possibilities of fired clay by brutal juxtaposition of bronze, clay and timber.

The hospitality of the various schools in the Bay Area to the younger artist, whether at Berkeley, (the University of California), Oakland, (the California College of Arts and Crafts) or, most important of all, the San Francisco Art Institute (which until a short time ago was the California School of Fine Arts) is often thought of as the most positive aspect of the milieu, but, unfortunately, once weaned these artists tend to hang around the schools in a prolonged adolescence. Their inability to create a forceful ambience of their own as independent individuals is probably due to an almost complete lack of an audience that identifies itself closely with contemporary art by any real level of positive patronage. Such a situation contrasts strongly with Los Angeles, where there has been a tradition, for almost thirty years, of identification with art by possession. Apart from the wealthier collectors who have assembled massive and important collections of Old Masters as well as modern art, there is a cluster of younger people who, despite limitations of means, purchase art continually. At the same time, notwithstanding resistance in the past by trustees, museum officials have often forced the pace—despite a continuous series of dismissals—by exhibiting the most important works of the American or European avant garde. The entrenched museum administrations in San Francisco, on the other hand, have made few attempts in the last decade to enforce change and as a result have enjoyed a dubious tenure. In short, in Los Angeles there has been action and turnover combined with a belief that art and com-





*Tony DeLap: Crow, construction painting, 1963.
Dilexi Gallery, San Francisco.
Subjective and sensuous constructions.*

*Opposite page
Peter Vouklos: Red River, painted and fired clay, 1962.
David Stuart Galleries, Los Angeles.
Capricious and emotionally charged sculpture.*

effect of the combination of the expanding fields of color and the sensuous sheen of glass, metal and plastic is capricious and highly subjective. But Delap also brings to Bay Area art a quality of visual acuity—a very personal visual exactitude—that is almost completely missing in the milieu.

Each year at the Winter Invitational of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor a few of the better artists were juxtaposed against an enormous yardage of pathetically indifferent painting; what was absent in quality was made up for by quantity. In the hands of unconcerned museum officials the San Francisco Annual declined. The Annuals of the early 1960s were so appalling that in 1963 the outraged artists in desperation were forced to take it back into their own hands to try and revive it.

In 1963 the little Art Center at Richmond drew attention to the perpetual starvation of the area by mounting an exhibition of Jasper Johns, the very first time a post-abstract-expressionist artist of the New York School had been shown in the area.

A third and younger generation of artists developed at the California School of Fine Arts: Manuel Neri, Joan Brown, Alvin Light, Robert Hudson, William Wiley, Carlos Villa, William Geis, Arlo Acton, Victor Moscoso. Where the second generation was hopelessly compromised by their knowledge of the *fact* that New York was the avant garde and by their ignorance of what New York painting was really about, this third generation began with a rejection of New York and the more serious aspects of abstract expressionism. Underlying their work is the notion of “funk”—originally a jazz term used to denote an “unknowing” quality; it has been adapted by this generation as a gesture of their deliberate removal from the esthetic consciousness of the Still era. To be “funky” is to be completely casual and informal, deliberately dumb and corny, free-wheeling and spontaneous. A crudity of juxtaposition and a sloppy attitude toward craft and materials informs their work. As much as anything else, it is an attempt not only to vitalize their work, but also to protect themselves from falling into a dull provincialism, slickness, or a debilitating habit of “good taste.”

As a result, their work at best is marked by an aggressive vitality and impudent brashness. They maintain a precarious balance between willful perversity and plastic intelligence. Hudson, a sculptor in welded iron, has a savage vitality combined with an extraordinary ability to crush, shape, twist and fold huge masses of iron. There are strong overtones of parody in his work; his surfaces are painted in thick Bay-Area-type impasto; within these surfaces are the most delicately worked membranes, some of his forms referring back to origins of vulgar decoration.

Manuel Neri and Joan Brown (husband and wife) share a

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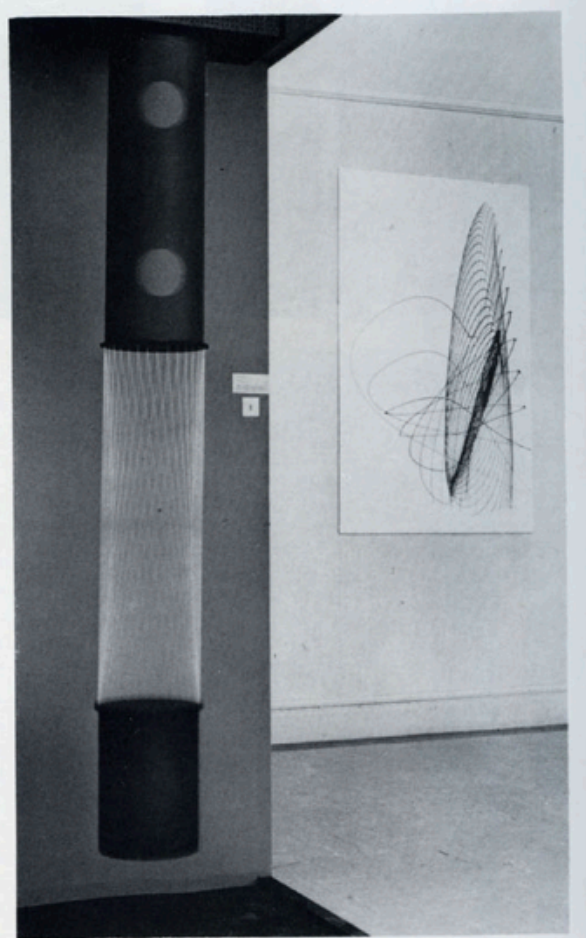
merce is not only compatible, but a vital necessity to the artist. If, as a result, the very worst of painters have sold a great deal, the better artists have assumed their turn would come, and it has. In San Francisco the situation is depressing. There is almost no expectancy of selling and a defensive rationalization has set in that to sell a work of art is not quite fastidious, not really desirable.

San Francisco has all the charm of a merry-go-round, but the horses monotonously circle without going anywhere. Despite its dreams of culture, the blandly concealed hostility of the environment toward modern art is insidious, stifling and energy-sapping. In the face of it, only the most inner-directed artists can sustain themselves.

There were no fake dreams, false promises or even pretensions in Los Angeles. The situation for art was aggressively bad—this was the challenge. There is curiously little feed-through or continuity from the early days of Southern California art—nothing really took root until the assemblage movement. There were of course two artists of significance living within the milieu since the twenties: Stanton MacDonald-Wright, pioneer of synchronism, and Lorser Feitelson, but both tend to be isolated figures. However much Feitelson's hard-edge art is admired, he has had almost no influence in any direct way on shaping art of the current scene, and MacDonald-Wright is an anomaly, practicing his revived synchronism.

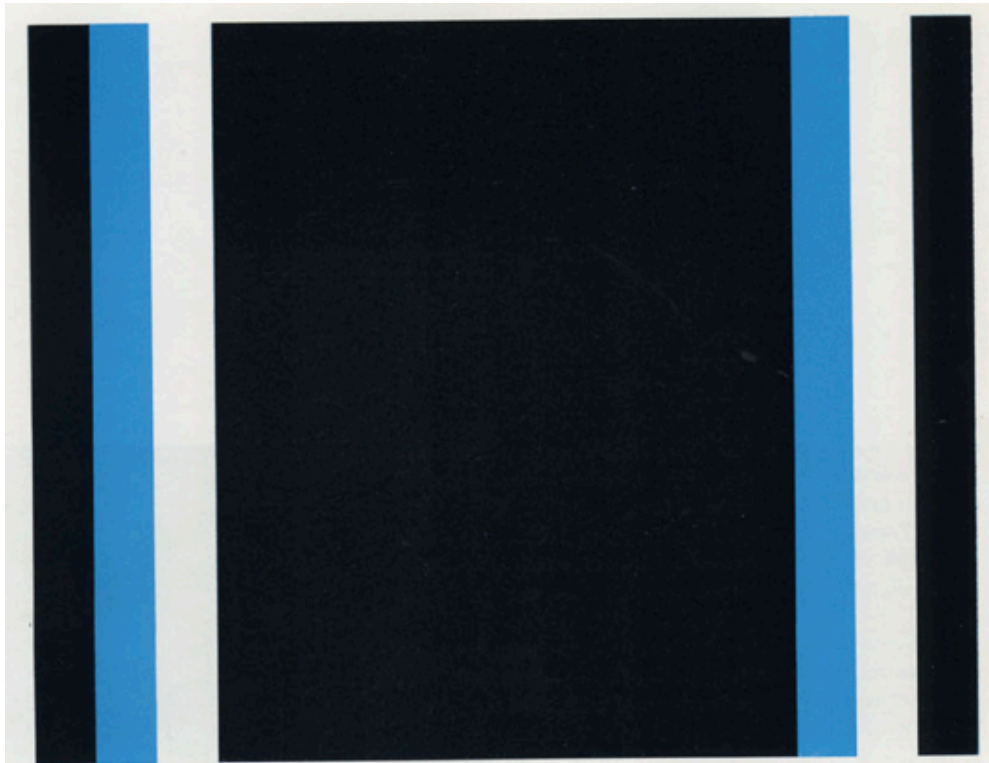
Helen Lundeberg came into prominence in the thirties but the earliest germinal hard core of any importance was such men as Newt Merrild, Ben Berlin and Charles Tracy, all deceased. Merrild, a Dane, released into Southern California the high craft of the constructivist spirit and, even though there was no direct contact, he is a link to the forms that many younger artists are engaged with today. He worked in wood and paint, with a clearly defined but evocative geometric image full of overtones of the hard biomorphic forms of Arp and Miró and the hard-line drawing of Max Ernst. Sophisticated enough to have picked up his forms before his arrival in America, he immediately responded to Los Angeles and used high bright color and whimsy in a tough, hard, formal framework. Peculiarly, if Merrild has any claim to fame, it is rather for his "flux" paintings—a trajectory application of freely-flowing paint—of the late thirties and early forties. Tracy was a surrealist writer and painter, a friend and colleague of Clay Spohn and Alexander Calder in Paris in the thirties. These three artists brought the first sophisticated touch of European art of the thirties into Los Angeles.

Friendly with this group—he worked on the W.P.A. with them



Charles Mattox: String Twister, left, construction, 1962, and Auto, drawing, 1946. Lanyon Gallery, Palo Alto, Calif. Mechanics, motion and visual wit.

*Opposite page
Lorser Feitelson: Red and White, oil, 1962. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Craig Ellwood, courtesy Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles. The geometry of the curve.*



*John McLaughlin, top: #12, oil, 1963.
Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles.*

Neutral form, indeterminate color, dematerialized paint.

*Eduard Kienholz: The Four Bears, mixed media, 1962.
Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.*

Furious and operatic assemblage.

—was a younger artist who now lives and works in the Bay Area, Charles Mattox. If nothing more, his association with these artists amply confirmed his own deeply felt intuitions, for Mattox had been fascinated since childhood with machines and the extraordinary qualities inherent in motion. Early in the forties he constructed a number of hand-operated machines with strong overtones of purism, and a drawing machine which once set in motion endlessly drew the most extraordinary rhythmic patterns. (He antedates Tinguely's keen interest in this direction by more than a decade.) Dormant in San Francisco for a number of years, Mattox recently re-emerged with a fascinating exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Despite the dry seriousness of his constructivist framework and his concern with the science of mechanics and motion, Mattox's machines are full of visual wit and humor, so much so, that he almost seems to parody that compelling bent of the American mind and psyche that marks them as the greatest engineers of production the world has seen, but which also manifests itself at the most absurd levels of gadgetry.

The immediate postwar years in Los Angeles were marked by the formation of a strongly entrenched and powerful Establishment that at heart was extremely conservative and academic. It arose out of the visit of Eugene Berman, the arch-romantic surrealist of theatre decor who became the mentor of Rico Lebrun, Lebrun having left New York to settle in Southern California at that time. Lebrun's students and the artists that came into his orbit as part of this establishment were William Brice, Keith Finch, Jan Stussy, Howard Warshaw, John Paul Jones, Sam Amato, James McGarrell, Suo Serisawa and Morris Broderson. In Lebrun's hands the style drifted away from surrealism into cuboid aspects of Picasso's *Guernica* mixed with Mexican mural painting, but with a banal and obvious allegory ponderously structured by heavy, solidly formulated Picassoid draftsmanship and the most academic of color. The most interesting artist to emerge from this establishment is James McGarrell, though of late his work has fallen off. Also of interest, but chiefly as a printmaker, is John Paul Jones, while Morris Broderson presents the most lugubrious aspect. (It has also produced a much younger generation that includes Roberto Chavez, Louis Lunetta, Eddie Carrillo, Charles Garabedian and Aaron Goldberg. They have tried to develop some spirit out of eclecticism by splicing such painters as de Chirico, Beckmann, Blake and Matisse into a peculiar figurative juxtaposition—a deliberate mixup of styles. They are rather like, but not anywhere nearly as good as, some of the younger British folksy pop artists such as David Hockney.) They also have an old-fashioned W. P. A. mural collectivist spirit of collaboration, with



Ben Talbert, top: *Untitled box construction*, 1960. Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.

Inside is the toughest erotic narrative.

Wallace Berman: *Panel, construction*, 1947–57. Collection of the artist.

Man's fears, joys and nightmares.



Craig Kauffman:
Dee-Dee, construction, 1963.
Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.
Surreal abstraction formalized.



John Mason:
Black-Brown Totem, clay, 1963.
Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.
Expressionist clay monolith.

sometimes each artist working on a different part of a painting. They maintain a spirit of folkism and primitivism—an enforced and very artificial naïveté in an attempt to escape from their dilemma.

One artist of that generation who has stood apart with a completely independent attitude is John McLaughlin. Both he and Lorser Feitelson established the tradition of rigorous hard-edge painting in Southern California (the very term “hard-edge” originating in Los Angeles and first used by the critic Jules Langsner). McLaughlin is one of the very few Southern California artists of an older generation who has commanded the respect of the younger artists in Los Angeles. He was one of the earliest American painters to sever deliberately the rigorously structured form from neo-plastic and constructivist programs. By 1948 his laconic rectilinear style had crystallized (he started painting in 1938) and was marked by a number of clearly recognizable components: neutral form, indeterminate color, dematerialized paint and a preference for large, simple shapes. All four of these characteristics link, in one way or another, to a general shift in American painting over the last decade. McLaughlin was an essential link to providing younger painters with alternative forms and ideas to those of abstract expressionism.

The California assemblage movement stems from one artist, Wallace Berman who, in 1947, with very little formal art training, began to draw with hard, bizarre, naïve and vulgar American surrealist overtones. In these drawings he projected all the underground vernacular of the jazz world and the dope addict, sometimes reconstructing portraits of jazz musicians such as Joe Albany and Charlie Parker, or erotic fantasies with overtones of magic realism mixed with bebop and surrealism. By 1949 he was working in a furniture factory and moved absolutely naturally into assemblage sculpture by putting odds and ends from the factory together with photographs, drawings and word images. Berman is a major link to the existential and surrealist poets, dramatists and writers, and helped establish assemblage as a poetic art with strong moral overtones in California. The genuine and very real spiritual overtones in his work are mixed with an incredibly raw existential wit, expressed with great simplicity and directness.

There is a strange and compelling mixture of awareness and complete innocence in Berman that almost defies verbalization. He has had only one exhibition, which took place in 1957 at the old Ferus Gallery; it was closed by the Los Angeles police and Berman was arrested, convicted, and fined for inciting lewd and lascivious passions. He never exhibited again. Instead he began to print, with a hand press, an envelope-type container called

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“Semina” (so far there have been eight issues), loosely filled with poems, photographs and drawings either by himself or artists and poets he admires. Berman had a strong and direct influence on Robert Alexander, Edward Kienholz, Ben Talbert, Bruce Conner and George Herms—the whole movement beginning in Southern California around him and spreading to San Francisco.

Talbert’s work is concerned with the toughest form of vulgar narrative, the highly erotic issues of pornography. As such, it is virtually unexhibitible and consequently hardly known. Kienholz, as against the highly religious overtones of Berman, Herms and Conner, is atheistic and secular. He betrays no interest in esthetics, his work is operative and imperative, viewing situations with alarm and fury.

Southern California is a natural receiver of drifters, men who come and go and often completely disappear again. John Reed is a typical example. He came, worked as a junk assembler of pathetically absurd discards from machinery, and disappeared from view. Conner came in from Kansas and met Berman and Herms at the time they were living in the Bay Area. Up to that time he had worked in an essentially flat form of collage. His meeting with Berman induced a decisive change. Adopting the nylon stocking as a container and a veil he began to work in the most ethereal of poetic symbolism. He is esthetically sophisticated, a beautiful draftsman and an interesting film maker. Herms is a Christian eccentric with a refined mystical and poetic sensibility very unconcerned with esthetic issues. Southern California assemblage, completely autonomous, is full of rich narrative and the closest development to a true surrealist root in the American vernacular. In this context some mention is necessary of Simon Rodia’s extraordinary Towers at Watts since they are not only the single phenomenon that spans every period mentioned so far—Rodia started them during the twenties—but are also undoubtedly known to most of the artists mentioned; and if they never directly influenced anyone, they at least were an inspiration that broadened and deepened the scene for all.

Another curiously independent artist who appeared on the Southern California scene as an influential teacher was Emil Bistram. He had a kind of non-cubist (in the Lebrun sense) approach to painting allied to a very definite open-mindedness to non-objective painting. His students and followers were Gilbert Hendersen, Paul Sarkisian, William Millare, Jane Cunningham and Milo Lee. They were aware of Clyfford Still’s activities up in San Francisco (Gilbert Hendersen in particular) but there never was any direct contact. This group became vestigial abstract-expressionist painters, Hendersen paralleling some of Motherwell’s developments via Miró and Matta.

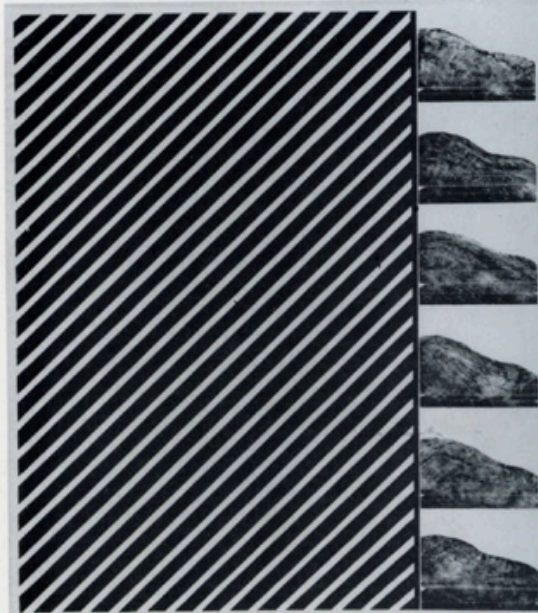


*Bruce Conner: Crucifixion, construction, 1959.
Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.
The most ethereal poetic symbolism.*

In the early fifties the New American Painting began to trickle into Los Angeles. There were two important exhibitions: at the County Museum in 1952, "The American Vanguard in Paris," and at the Pasadena Museum a group exhibition of Pollock, Tworkov, Kline, Reinhardt, Tomlin and McNeil. These two exhibitions were to have a profound effect on the development of art in Southern California. They precipitated a sense of crisis in a number of painters of the Lebrun establishment, who broke away. Among these were Richards Rubin, John Altoon, Craig Kauffman, Edward Moses and Robert Irwin, all of whom took an independent line of development. To them should be added Peter Voulkos, a ceramicist from Montana and his colleague John Mason, and—both very much younger—Kenneth Price and Billy Al Bengston. Apart from the assemblage movement, from this moment onward these artists were to constitute the beginnings of a solid core of development that was to lead to the most adventurous painting and sculpture in California. Whatever shift in sensibility occurred in the light of this new painting—at least in the early stages—it was primarily that of exploration, absorption or adaptation of the vocabulary to individual needs. The two ceramicists, Peter Voulkos and John Mason, were the first to take the plunge into something quite startlingly unfamiliar by applying the most radical of techniques to fired-clay sculpture. Voulkos' emotionally charged and capriciously piled fired-clay monoliths were completely innovative and an important clue as to the possible extension of the vocabulary.

Craig Kauffman's exhibition of 1957 provided another step. In this work he abandoned the abstract-expressionist overlay of brush marks without moving over to the hard-edge flat painting of Newman or Reinhardt. He made a break into something more arbitrary by plotting out a series of flat, irregular colored shapes with boundaries, onto a white ground. What was beginning to occur was a sense of venturesomeness that would allow all sorts of new craft techniques or forms to be employed. In other words, there was a break with sacrosanct traditions as to what the painting technique or sculptural form or material had to be. Probably the assemblagists helped to stimulate this, for they were remarkably free of any sacred cows. (The Bay Area, in comparison, maintains a very traditional approach to this issue.)

Thus, in the mid-fifties something new and unique had the chance of growing, but in a center that was increasingly sophisticated, particularly in regard to non-objective art. At the same time a tremendously varied amount of information was being fed into the milieu by the growing number of commercial galleries and the two museums that were jointly exhibiting the widest range of con-



Lynn Foulkes: *Junction 410, construction*, 1963.
Rolf Nelson Gallery, Los Angeles.
American Gothic.

Opposite page
Kenneth Price: *B. T. Blue, painted and fired clay*, 1963.
Collection of L. M. Asher Family,
courtesy of Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.
The ominous and joyful.

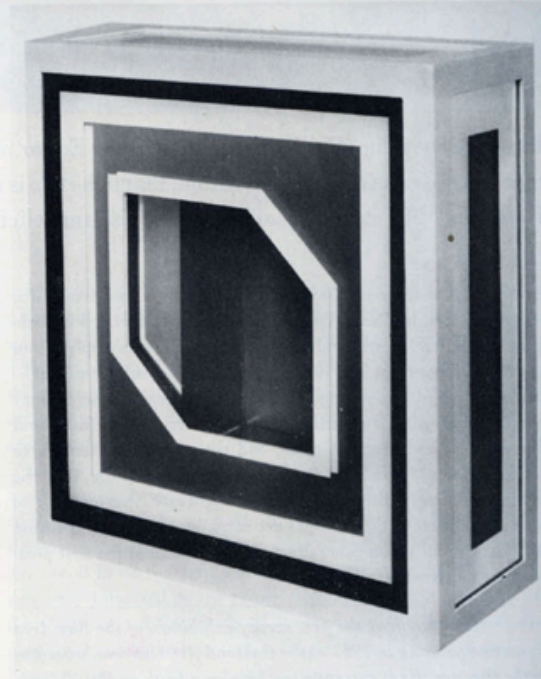
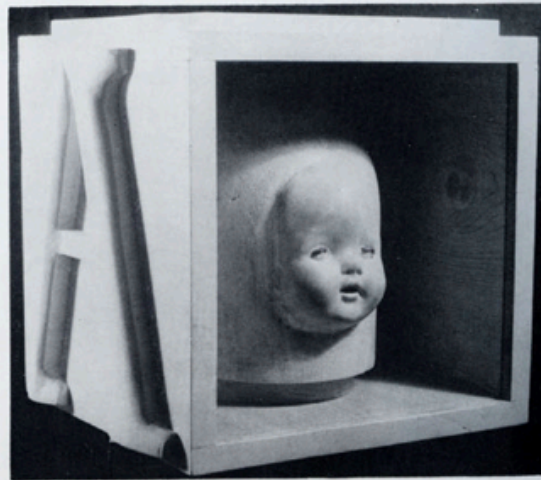
will juxtapose the most weird of primordial forms with the most brilliant of colors to create a strange interplay between the joyful and the ominous.

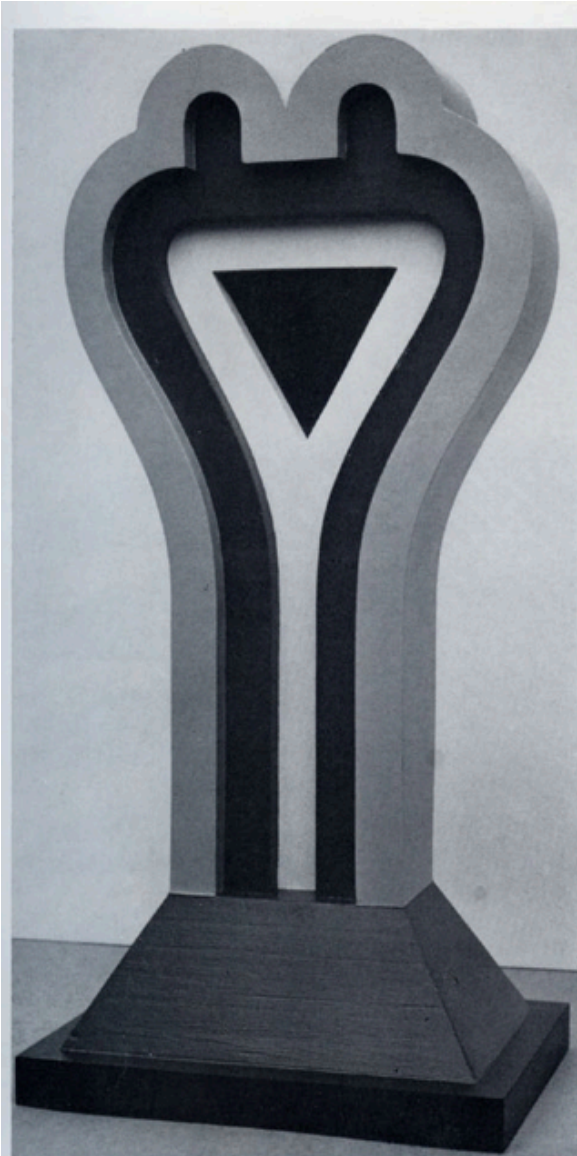
Irwin is a visionary with the most intense moral fervor which gives him an enormous sense of excitement about being an artist here and now. This is backed by an acute sense of vision that becomes a visionary obsessiveness, yet despite his moral fervor and the apparent rigorous simplicity of form, his work is extraordinarily lyrical. One of the attitudes that characterizes these three men is their ability to work as artists without raising questions of doubts. Completely missing from their work, for example, are the metaphysical hesitations that are apparent in Jasper Johns. There is little doubt that in the future it will be obvious that these artists (and many of the younger generation) are creating a level of empirical art that is unambiguous, high spirited and totally hedonistic. This is part of what now distinguishes the art of Southern California.

A whole wave of very young painters has also emerged, among them, Larry Bell, Lynn Foulkes, Joe Goode, Ed Ruscha, Ron Miyashira, Lloyd Hamrol, Richard Pettibone and Charles Frazier. Like any such group they vary immensely in quality, but it is interesting that despite their admiration for artists like Bengston, Irwin and Price, they should be so completely independent. In being informed by the attitude of their seniors they themselves have been able to strike out on their own. This in itself marks the beginning of Los Angeles as an art center of importance with something quite new emerging. Whether or not it is too early at this point to assess these younger artists is immaterial—they obviously need more time—but they have in many cases reached a surprising level of maturity. Bell, for example, works by choice in the most untractable of materials—glass. Uncompromising and uncooperative, it is a material that permits of no arbitrary gestures or mistakes. With it he constructs work of extraordinary sophistication, so much so that the question of his extreme youth is immaterial; given an artist of any age as the maker, these works would compel our attention. What then marks these artists is the rigor of their ambition and the extreme lengths they will go to—in every way—to match it.

*Charles Frazier: Alphabet Block, wood construction, 1963.
Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.
Ambiguity as the subject of assemblage.*

*Larry Bell: Lux of the Ferus, mirror and glass, 1963.
Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.
The most intractable of materials.*





*Lloyd Hamrol: T. F., painted wood, 1963.
Collection of Henry T. Hopkins,
courtesy of Rolf Nelson Gallery, Los Angeles.
Whimsy in a hard and formal framework.*

temporary art. As a result young artists were maturing relatively early, in particular, Irwin, Price and Bengston. This was also partly due to their notion of unqualified professionalism. To them, it was of primary importance to be an artist first and foremost, and completely without an indentured service to some kind of a livelihood that had nothing directly to do with the actual production of a work of art. And by this they particularly meant without having to join any entrenched faction or teaching regime. This attitude was to have a powerful influence on a major part of the following generation—individuals who rarely stayed in art school for more than a year or two (only long enough to grasp as imperatively and directly as possible what they needed) and left within a couple of years without a degree. This is in marked contrast to the same generation in San Francisco, who endlessly hang on at the art schools for five, six or seven years to complete the MA. degree program and then remain, in many cases, as teachers.

What these artists have developed is an aggressive and high-spirited arrogance that only young and talented men can have. It is a frontier sensibility—anything a man can stake out for himself is his own; he doesn't have to wait to inherit. In this sense Bengston (see Cover) has met some of the vernacular—not the art vernacular—but the life vernacular, head on. He adds to his painting some of the brittle gloss, vulgarity and gaudiness of Los Angeles, the new shiny surfaces that call attention to themselves, very different from the pattern of worn-down or dirty surfaces of a big Eastern urban environment. If Bengston has any fault it is a rigorous keenness of eye that will betray him. He will produce quickly and if his failures are never great failures, they are the failures of a too-rapidly paced activity. There is a great sense of the present in Bengston's work as well as a notion that he can take anything—a heart, or a flower, or a chevron, and he can paint it with lacquer or spray, or work on a metal surface, or a canvas, and present images full of the most tightly controlled sensuality. Of these three artists Bengston is the most purely hedonistic.

Price is also completely uninhibited by any tradition of technique, form or style. He can delve right back to the roots of what he admires most in Miró or Brancusi, adapting it to his needs in such a way that it remains clear of the issues of eclecticism. This lack of a sense of the burden of ancestry also permits him to use—with an incredible sense of excitement—any of the inherent, rather than esthetic, properties of the environment. Despite an arduous training in ceramics (he went to Alfred University in New York, oldest ceramic school in the country) his powerful range and intensity of color is from the application of coat after coat of thinly sprayed industrial oil lacquers, though he will sometimes revert to, or mix in, glazes. The same spirit is evidenced in his shapes. He

