

Artweek



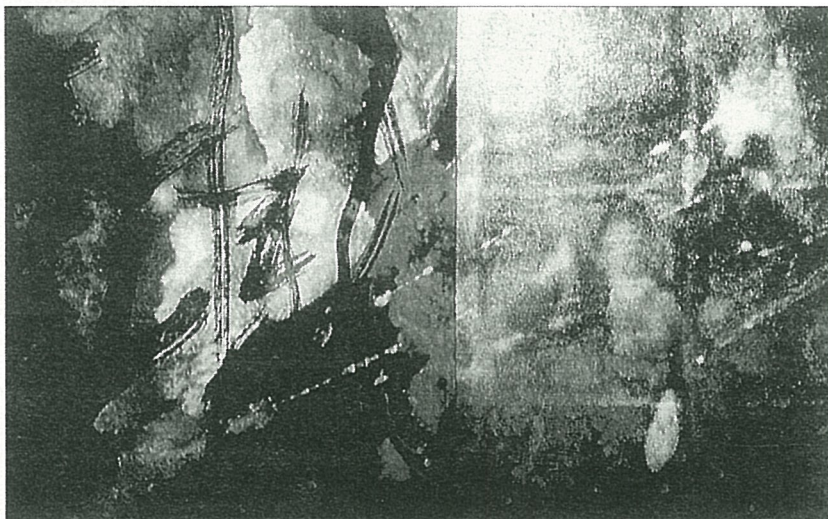
■ Western art schools ■ Roni Horn ■ Lucy Puls ■ Tim Hawkinson ■ Paul Wonner

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Artweek



Lampo Leong, *Encountering Divinity*, 1996, acrylic, mixed media on canvas, 45" x 71", at the Pacific Heritage Museum, San Francisco. page 28

4 Peripheral Vision

by Meredith Tromble

5 On Point

by Mark Van Proyen

12 Features

The Mobile Desert
by Suvan Geer 12

The Monochrome Reborn
by David DiMichele 13

Fragments: Notes on Poetry and Art
by Ben Mitchell 14

From coal mines to land mines: a conversation with Conrad Atkinson
by Penelope L. Shackelford 15

A conversation with Alan Rath, sculptor
by Meredith Tromble 16

17 Art Schools

A listing of college and university fine art programs located in the Western states

26 Reviews

Northern California

'Deep Forest: When Urgency Becomes Form' at four walls
by Diane Roby 26

'The Jewelry of Ken Cory' at CCAC
by Cheryl White 26

'Alchemy' at New Langton Arts
by Casey FitzSimons 27

'Shining Stars' at the Pacific Heritage Museum
by Amy Berk 28

Lucy Puls at the California Museum of Art
by Sandy Thompson 28

Southern California

Tim Hawkinson at Ace Gallery
by Richard Smith 29

Paul Wonner at the Art Institute of Southern California
by George Tapley 30

'VisAlchemical' at UC San Diego
by Rick Gilbert 30

Edward Dugmore at Manny Silverman Gallery
by Collette Chattopadhyay 31

Marnie Weber at Rosamund Felsen Gallery
by Christopher Miles 32

Oregon

Tom Rudd and Margo McCafferty at Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center
by Lois Allan 33

Washington

'Springs Eternal: Artists' Reflections' at SeaFirst Gallery
by Frances DeVuono 34

Departments

News 2
Previews 6
Calendar 7
Competitions 36
Classifieds 39

Cover: Jessica Dunne, detail of *Synchronized Lights*, oil on canvas, 53" x 63".

page 12



© Angelique Antoniou, "Old Good-byes", photograph, 11" x 14", 1993.

HUMAN PRESENCE

March 8 through April 3
Reception: Sunday, March 8, 1 - 3 PM

Angelique Antoniou, Leslie Crofford,
Rip Cronk, Janice Lloyd Govaerts,
Sara Wylie Walsh

THE DEFINED EDGE

April 19 through May 15
Reception: Sunday, April 19, 1 - 3 PM

County of Los Angeles **Century Gallery**
13000 Sayre Street, Sylmar, CA 91342
(818) 362-3220 Monday through Friday 10 - 5,
Saturday 12 - 4

Established in 1977, the Century Gallery is administered on behalf of the County of Los Angeles by Los Angeles Mission College. Slides and exhibit proposals are welcome and reviewed on a continuous basis by the director and curatorial staff.



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You'll never waste water if you've ever had to pump all your water from a well," remarked my mother, watching me wash dishes one by one with a squirt of soap and a rub under a stream of hot water. We were in a good mood with each other, and her remark, instead of provoking a frenzy of ridiculous self-justification (El Niño is coming! It's my responsibility to deplete the water table!) summoned an image of my mother at age ten, her small hands bitten red with the weight of a sloshing, swaying, way-too-heavy bucket.

Since that day, that image appears when I step up to the sink, and the dishpan has been in heavier rotation. Perhaps I was sitting too close to the sink today, but it also swam to the surface as I sat at the kitchen table scratching notes and trying to think about judgment, criticism and the making of art. Among the artists I know, open judgment and criticism are almost taboo. As a consequence, many of us suffer from a lack of meaningful conversation about our work. Is there anything in my experience of a small criticism lovingly given and received that could help?

Before I could pursue that question, I had another in a long chain of experiences of criticism as a minefield. I sat talking with a local sculptor at HIS kitchen table. We were sipping serendipitously named Tea of Inquiry and taping a lively conversation for publication in the local paper. "How about the work of (famous German artist)?" I asked. "I was surprised you didn't mention her when you talked about art that is important to you."

Have you ever felt a conversation stop on a dime? That was the effect of my question. "No, no." Silence. More surprised than anything, I probed further. It was not until I turned the tape recorder off—and handed it to him so he could guard the control buttons—that I elicited the information that he had a profound distaste for her work. And he was reasonably articulate about why. He was also adamant that, however illuminating his opinions might be, he would not publicly criticize another artist.

A complicated mix of courtesy, self-interest and shyness stilled his voice until we officially entered "private space." As an artist, I admired and appreciated his courtesy to a colleague. As a writer, I regretted that he was unwilling to share his criticisms—which were indeed illuminating—publicly. As a shy person, I understood why—because his criticisms illuminated not the work of the other sculptor, but his own. To understand what he rejected in the work of the other artist was to see what was left out of his own. His criticisms were revealing in a way that his enthusiasms were not, although both were of interest.

Criticism exposes the critic. And, even worse, it draws critical attention in return. Praise may be welcomed, but

criticism gets the real energy. Even a hint of disagreement can touch off an avalanche of reaction. I once overheard someone describe a critique I had been at, bemoaning the brutal treatment of his work. Had we been in the same room? Surely I would remember comments so scathing. What I took to be mild comments had been perceived as SCUD attacks by the artist concerned.

The student's colleagues seemed to be in for whatever retaliation he could muster. A few volleys of discussion with hurt feelings mounting on all sides and, I suspect, everyone in the room would be dying to get away from each other. Any idea which had managed to get out would be lost in a fog of emotion—that was how it often worked when I was in school.

At least in a classroom, the circuit of feedback can close, even if in a flash of stuttering sparks. Beyond the classroom, the flow of critical information gets even dicier. Experience has taught me caution when congratulating friends on great reviews of their work. Their feeling may be that a doubting sentence in the next to the last paragraph has ruined their life. And, sadly, discussion often stops there. It's no one's fault, exactly, but touchiness is the evil twin of sensitivity, and no one is immune from the defensive feelings that close discussion down. The moment with my mother was especially precious because it was rare, a moment when, by some gift of circumstance and love, we were open to each other's opinions.

Of course, the pain caused by reviews is surpassed only by the pain caused by no reviews.

Feeling like the proverbial tree

falling in the forest, the tree no one heard, is a cause of depression for many artists. Direct, thoughtful criticism can be an incredible gift. Just as my mother's words helped me move a little bit closer to living my ecological ideals, an apt comment can help an artist move a little bit closer to making their best art.

One wise teacher told me that you have to work at getting an honest critique. He compared it to peeling an onion. In conversation, someone offering comments will usually begin with an innocuous statement. If you are receptive, ask questions, help them strip off layer after layer of politeness, you may reach their undiluted response—potent information, an opinion with savor, feedback you can use.

But even artists who meet colleagues and critics with listening ears have trouble getting feedback, in part because of our intellectual sophistication. We've learned that standards are relative; that worldviews are provisional; and that objects have no intrinsic meaning. The word "quality" is tainted; no one feels qualified to be a judge. It's as if, in the search for meaningful judgment, we're standing on a ledge which crumbles under our feet. Even if some works seem more successful than others, we are

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continued on page 34

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