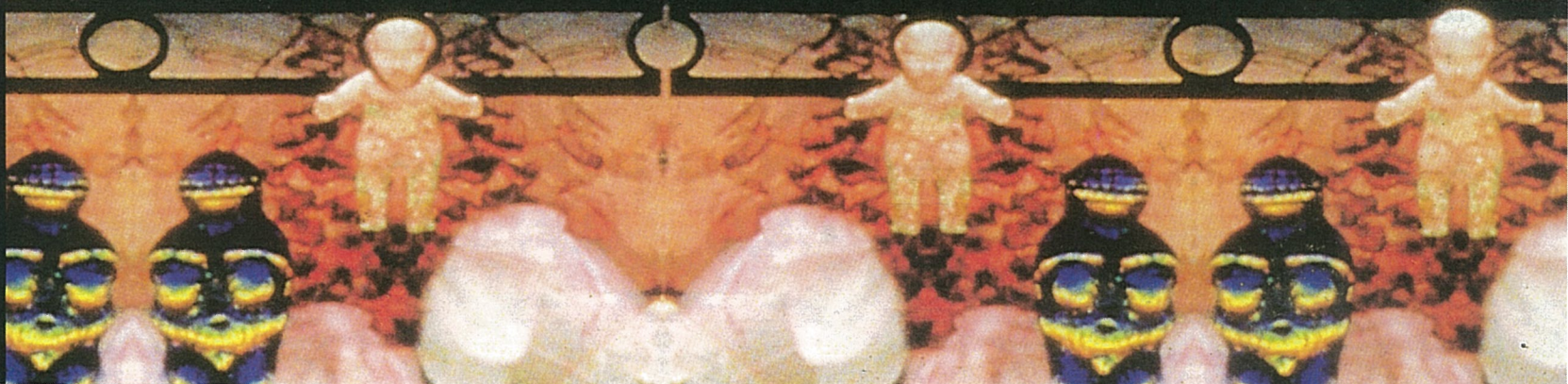


Artweek



■ Making Art History ■ Genara Banzon ■ Todd Schorr & Kathy Staico Schorr

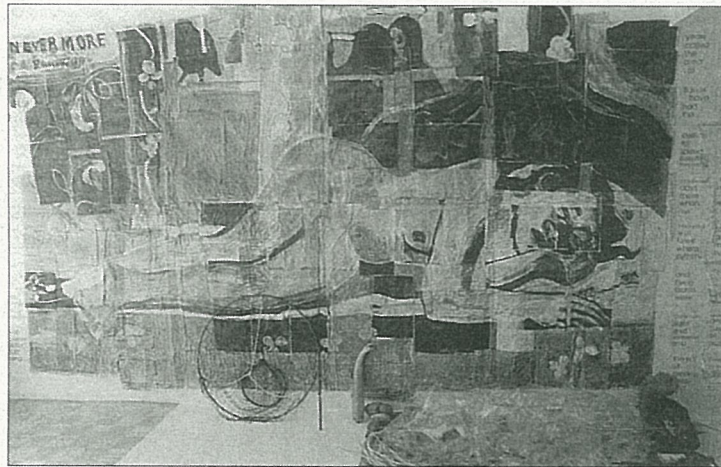
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COMING ATTRACTIONS

In the 19th century, exhibitions featured paintings hung in crowds, covering every inch of wall from floor to ceiling. Will 20th century conventions of display seem just as dated to 21st century eyes? *Artweek* takes a look at "The New Exhibition" in the November special section.



Genara Banzon, detail of *Meditations: The Anatomy of History*, installation, at Washington Square Gallery, San Francisco. page 20

4 From the Corner

by Ron Glowen

'It's Raining (Wo/men)' at Terrain

by Terri Cohn 21

5 Memo from LA

by Victoria Martin

Marie Sarni and Fredric Hobbs at Ebert Gallery

by Frank Cebulski 22

13 Making Art History

Thoughts on 'Cultural Selection' by George Tapley 13

A conversation with Paul Karlstrom, regional director of Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian by Meredith Tromble 14

A conversation with Janet Bishop and John Weber, curators by Meredith Tromble 14

A conversation with Moira Roth, art historian by Patricia Sanders 15

A conversation with Richard Barnes, photographer by Steven Jenkins 17

History's new game by Mary Hull Webster 18

19 Reviews

Northern California

'Clothed in Memory' at Joseph Chowning Gallery 19

Genara Banzon at Washington Square Gallery by Victoria Alba 20

Susan Ginnever, Lisa Goldschmid and Diane Stevens at Sanchez Art Center Gallery by Debra Koppman 20

Southern California

'Dry' at Miller Fine Art by Christopher Miles 22

SIGGRAPH 97 'Ongoing' at the LA Convention Center by Collette Chattopadhyay 23

David Lloyd at Chac Mool Gallery by David DiMichele 24

Todd Schorr and Kathy Staico Schorr at Merry Karnowsky Gallery by Shana Nys Dambrot 24

'Function and Narrative: Fifty Years of Southern California Ceramics' at the Long Beach Museum of Art by Charlene Roth 25

Oregon

'Notes from All Over: Messages from the Interior' at the Oregon College of Art and Craft by Lois Allan 26

Washington

'Southern Stories' at G. Gibson Gallery, and Arthur S. Aubry at the Seattle Art Museum by Frances DeVuono 26

Departments

News 2
 Previews 6
 Calendar 7
 Competitions 28
 Classifieds 31

Cover: Anna M. Chupa, detail of *Aengus*, 1996, Iris print on Translite Lightbox, 19-1/2" x 13-7/8", at SIGGRAPH 97, at the LA Convention Center. page 23

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A conversation with Paul Karlstrom, regional director of Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian

By Meredith Tromble

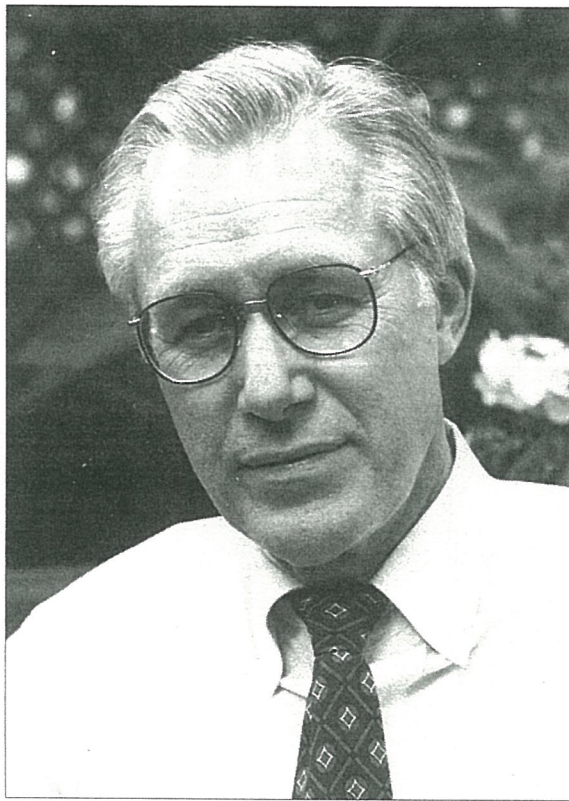
The most serious obstacle to approaching a history of art and culture in Southern California is the commonly encountered perception that there has been none," wrote Paul Karlstrom in a 1990 catalog essay. Karlstrom, as Regional Director of the Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian, has devoted his career to collecting the materials for such a history; not only for Southern California but the entire Western United States. In 1973, after receiving his doctorate in American Art History from the University of California, Los Angeles, Karlstrom was hired by the Smithsonian to establish the first West Coast office of the Archives. Over the next twenty-four years, he built the Archives into a great research collection for the study of West Coast art, conducting oral history interviews and courting artists and their heirs for gifts of papers. In recent years, his labors have born fruit in the form of several path-breaking books based on material from the Archives, including his own *On the Edge of America California Modernist Art 1900-1950* published by the University of California Press.

Artweek *What, exactly, is in the Archives? What kinds of materials do you collect?*

Paul Karlstrom To give you an example, we recently received the papers of Carlos Almaraz. We had conducted oral history interviews with him before his death, and his widow, Elsie Flores, agreed to donate both his papers and her own. He kept wonderfully illustrated journals—we should be so lucky more often. We deal with letters, photos; in his case, there's actually a manifesto for Los Four. There may be correspondence about Los Four. The Chicano art community—it's no big secret—is very contentious. There's a lot of rivalry and difference of opinion. That would come up. There's hardcore biographical material, a lot about his personal life and his sexual ambivalence. Love letters. These are the kinds of things we bring in. It's about the people, their relationships, and the world in which they live. I think that's where the art comes from. Looking at art is a wonderful experience but it's claiming a lot to believe that you penetrate the deep meaning by you, yourself, confronting a work of art. You need to know the individuals that make the work, their concerns and fears, the world in which they operate. That's how you have a chance of understanding the artwork.

AW *Why are documents important? What if all a historian has is a few interesting paintings?*

PK It's a big problem. To do good art or cultural history you have to have documents. I'm working with Mark Johnson and a group at San Francisco State on a biographical directory of Asian-American artists, and that's exactly the problem we face. In many cases these artists weren't exhibiting and all the paraphernalia that comes along with a mainstream art career is missing. This happens more often in what we call marginalized groups because it was just much more difficult for them to participate. If there are no documents and there are



Paul Karlstrom, regional director, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: Leo Holub.)

just a few paintings, the artist becomes an oddity. The story is unresolved. We would like to think quality, artistic effort and integrity will come to the top. But there's nothing that guarantees that at all.

AW *Ed Kienholz has been quoted as saying "When I first came to Los Angeles [in 1953] it was virgin as far as art was concerned," ignoring earlier LA artists like Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg. This dismissive attitude seems parallel to the African-American idea of an "oreo," someone who identifies with the powerful other in an attempt at demarginalization. Doesn't it seem like that's what's happening in Kienholz's comment?*

PK I think so. The historians, the critics, the newspaper writers, everybody's contributed to that. Although there have been a few champions of art here, like Peter Selz, for the most part the art historians and critics feel that their professional validity depends upon a connection with the center. With New York. Therefore their writing, their own enthusiasms and their interests skip over the people they know here.

Over the years I've asked the artists I've interviewed what they've gained and what they've lost by choosing to be in California. They all say their careers would have been better if they'd gone to New York. But more interesting, I think, are the opportunities that come with distance. Take Richard Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn said that some artists thrive on being right at the center where everything is hopping. He was different. He felt that it was too distracting. What he needed to do required this kind of a remove.

AW *Andy Warhol's first one-person show was in Los Angeles in 1962, but when the critic Arthur Danto discussed Warhol's chronology, he not only ignored that show, he wrote that Eleanor Ward at the Stable Gallery in New York gave Warhol "his first main show when no other dealer was willing to do that."*

PK Doesn't that bore you? I think Arthur Danto is terrific—yet he's got blinders on. For him the idea of "discourse" in the art world is the "Big D," it's like an engine that runs significant art activity. If you aren't

participating in what Danto describes as the discourse, it doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't count. That to me gets right to the heart of the problem. Because then history is distorted to serve the needs of the center.

AW *This relates to criticism you have voiced in other contexts, of critics who write "art history" based on their personal responses rather than on historical documents.*

PK It's about power. It's quite clear that the editorial point of view in my book is a challenge to New York centrism. The unified view of significance in our art history needs to be challenged because it's uninteresting and it's simplistic. It's limiting. Danto himself has said so but he doesn't follow through to see his own errors of thinking ... maybe he can't. We all want to feel that we're at the center of things. There's such an incentive for New York, which has the power of the museums, the galleries, and the press, to reinforce this. If they have to admit that interesting things have been happening elsewhere they may fear that they've missed out.

AW *Susan Landauer has suggested that, just as discoveries in science are often made by several people independently and simultaneously, ways of making art often surface in several places. She argues that contrary to the view that Abstract Expressionism radiated out from a point of origin in New York, it appeared in a number of places, including San Francisco, at about the same time.*

PK It's not so interesting that there was gestural painting blossoming at the California School of Fine Arts simultaneously with its appearance at the Cedar Bar in New York. What's interesting is that they're not the same. Modernism is much more complex and rich than the way it's been described.

Monolithic ideas of what it means to be an American are breaking down. Multiplicity is a more accurate reflection of how we find the world. Monolithic ideas about the history of art that lead to geographic marginalization are changing in the same way. I don't think the monolithic approach was sinister but it comes from bad history and maybe self interest.

Meredith Tromble is editor-in-chief of *Artweek*.

A conversation with Janet Bishop and John Weber, curators

By Meredith Tromble

Why are some artists collected and exhibited by museums while others are ignored? John Weber, curator of education and public programs, and Janet Bishop, Andrew W.

Mellon Foundation associate curator of painting and sculpture, shed light on this question with *Making Art Histories: On the Trail of David Park*, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through February 24, 1998. The exhibition's structure embodies their contextual approach to art history. Beginning with work by Bay Area artists active concurrently with Park, it continues with a comparison between Bay Area Figurative art and Abstract Expressionism, the dominant avant-garde form of Park's time. The third gallery

MAKING ART HISTORY

shows works actually collected by the Museum during the period, and the final gallery surveys Park's work.

Artweek *What inspired your curatorial approach to Making Art Histories?*

John Weber Museums are the institutions that visibly embody art history. Each exhibition is a way of constructing history. We wanted to make people more aware of the choices museums make.

Janet Bishop David Park provided an interesting example to look at how an individual artist's work is considered in the context of a museum. His career was very varied and yet he's known almost exclusively for his work from the 1950s

AW *What did you discover about how this canonical David Park came into being?*

JB In the 1930s he was working in a Social Realist style, influenced by people like Ralph Stackpole and Diego Rivera. He began painting abstractly in the '40s, then became dissatisfied with that mode of expression, at least in his own work, and made a famous trip to the Berkeley dump in the late 1940s to discard his abstract work. The perception of Park's work is partly shaped by the fact that the abstract work doesn't exist any more.

JW Eventually he gained legendary status because of the clarity of his rejection of abstraction. By the late 1950s a number of other strong artists followed Park in working figuratively. This came to the attention of Paul Mills, a young curator at the Oakland Museum, who did the first show of new figurative painting from the Bay Area in 1957. Park exhibited consistently and was successful throughout the '50s—he was hired by the University of California at Berkeley to be a professor. This is a man who didn't even finish high school.

AW *Why has Park become more well-known than someone like Clay Spohn, who also had a huge impact on many artists who were his contemporaries but is not much known now?*

JB Spohn's an interesting example. Like Clyfford Still, he had a cult following in San Francisco. His art is so varied and he worked in so many different styles simultaneously that his output is much more difficult to assess.

JW There needs to be a whole series of different things happening with an artist's career for them to be collected enough to achieve the degree of museum presence that Park has. Being a great teacher, having one good gallery, having one curator who likes you, is enough to get a piece or two into a collection but unless there's a whole series of people who are interested in your work, it fades into the background after a while. The personalities change all the time. There are different galleries, different collectors, different curators, different museum directors, different critics. Unless a significant number of these people and institutions act in concert, work won't get remembered historically for very long. The fact that Janet and I are going back to Park now is just one little element in a larger process. There are galleries that still have his work, and Nancy Boas, an adjunct curator from the Fine Arts Museums, is working on a biography and a show. There's more than one person involved. That's what you see in the case of an artist who makes it.

AW *Do you think that's because Park has something to*

say to us now?

JB Park's work still packs a punch. It's powerful work.

JW People can keep buying into it for the first time and going "Wow! That's a great painting!"

AW *Jay DeFeo's work has punch. But it's being looked at now, and work like Sargent Johnson's is being looked at now, in part because we've realized that a lot of artists were lost from our history because they were socially marginalized.*

JW It's interesting to consider why Jay DeFeo and Sargent Johnson are being looked at. Why are they

David Park, *Bathers*, 1954, oil on canvas, 42" x 54-1/2", from the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



recoverable? I think the reason is that no one else did work anything like Jay DeFeo's. The fusion of aesthetics that Sargent Johnson achieves in the '30s in his best work also doesn't look like other people's work. They came up with something. Some of the artists whose work is in the museum's vault were pretty good Abstract Expressionist painters but alongside a lot of other pretty good Abstract Expressionist painters. It's not that they weren't good artists. I think they were. But they are not as recoverable. You can't go to their work and say "There's nothing quite like this."

AW *Did Park actively cooperate with the historical process? Was there something he did to help ensure his place?*

JB He has a very devoted family. A couple of years ago we received a bequest from the estate of his widow, Lydia Park. There's been a commitment on the part of the family to preserve these works and have them in public institutions where they can be displayed instead of in private collections.

AW *Have you run across any examples where the family has counteracted the growth of an artist's reputation?*

JB Clyfford Still was an interesting example. His family is still in control of the works from his estate. His output was huge and there are hundreds of works that haven't been placed in institutional collections because there is such a strong desire to exercise tremendous control over the display of the work. This museum received a gift from Clyfford Still of twenty-eight paintings in the late 1970s with the stipulation that they would always be shown together and that they wouldn't be shown with other artists' work.

JW It marginalized his reputation. You can't show him alongside Pollock or de Kooning, for example. You can't show him alongside Diebenkorn. Ultimately it doesn't help his reputation.

This question of reputation is a slippery topic. While I was at the Portland Art Museum, I worked on a show of Carl Morris's work. He was born the same year as David Park and he used to be a very famous painter. In the '50s he was in eight Whitney annuals; he was on the cover of catalogs that included Pollock's and de Kooning's work. This museum owns four of his paintings. But today he's not well known. Historically, he fell off the map while Park stayed on it.

AW *Why did Morris fall out of art history?*

JW He was one of a number of very good abstract painters in the '50s. His later work was perhaps not as strong and history moved on. And he was living in Oregon. At a certain point it became harder to stay on the map if you weren't living in New York or California, especially New York. Morris is still known and treasured in the Pacific Northwest. That show was one of the things that got me thinking about art history, about who wins and who loses. You can be very present in art history for a while, then disappear. There are revisions; it's not forever. Geography has something to do with it. But that's okay, too, in a sense. We shouldn't have just one giant art history that's international and the same everywhere. We want to encourage people to think of history as an active process of assessing and looking and rethinking.

A conversation with Moira Roth, art historian

By Patricia Sanders

M

Moira Roth, Trefethen Professor of Art History at Mills College since 1985, belongs to a rare breed of scholar who is constantly reinventing herself—something she was doing long before

the word "reinventing" became a cliché. She has published extensively on Duchamp, performance art, women artists and artists of color. Two volumes of her collected writings are currently in press. Earlier this year she was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Women's Caucus for Art. Her changing interests have entered her teaching in remarkable ways—performances, student publications and videos—making her an inspiration to thousands during the last thirty years. Yet she is soft-spoken, quick to acknowledge the achievements of others, and famous among her friends for delicious meals she serves in her Berkeley home.

Artweek *So-called "standard" art history as we learned it as graduate students was a very exclusive version of art history, consisting of almost nothing but famous, white men. Yet as soon as you completed your dissertation, in 1974, you*