

## WEST OF EDEN

BY RICHARD KALINA

A passion for self-invention has long marked the American psyche, and nowhere has it seemed more pronounced than in California and, in particular, Los Angeles. Hunter Drohojowska-Philp's crisp and cogent account of the L.A. art scene of the late '50s and '60s, *Rebels in Paradise*, shows us a town where contemporary artists had the dubious privilege of starting pretty much from scratch. It was no easy matter to create a viable advanced art world in a city so conservative that in 1963 the trustees of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art rejected Edward G. Robinson's first-rate collection of Impressionist work because of the actor's progressive politics. Less than 10 years earlier, the trustees of that same museum allowed the purchase of a small Jackson Pollock painting only if it were to be kept in the curator's office and shown to the public (presumably on rare occasions) for "educational purposes."

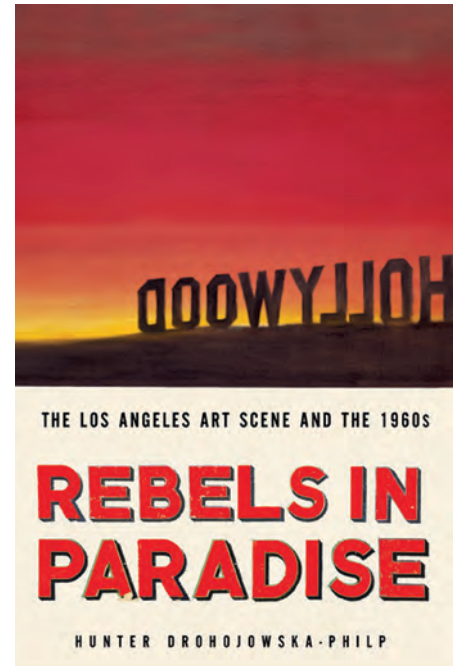


Joe Goode, Jerry McMillan, Ed Ruscha and Patrick Blackwell in their shared studio, 1959. Photo Joe Goode.

L.A. might have been provincial, but the weather was great, real estate near the beach was cheap, art schools and teaching gigs abounded, and if you played your cards right, you could get a shot at the celebrity and glamour that were such tangible presences in the city. By the late '50s, young artists were moving there and, importantly, staying. They felt happily (although sometimes defensively) estranged from New York, finding it too cerebral, too rooted in art history and European tastes. They wanted to create something that was legitimately their own, not just a regional variant of a preexisting style. Pop art and Minimalism hit the world in the early '60s, about the same time that a number of strong Los Angeles artists emerged. These new approaches seemed to suit the L.A. ethos, and the local artists felt as entitled to explore that terrain as anyone in New York or London.

One of the advantages of a small art world, like that of the early Abstract Expressionists on Tenth Street in New York, is that everyone pretty much knows everyone else. Drohojowska-Philp, who previously wrote a life of Georgia O'Keeffe, teases apart the tangled web of connections that bound L.A.'s artists, dealers, curators and collectors. She nicely lays out a shifting landscape of discovery, cooperation and rivalry, anchoring her story around certain key players and institutions.

The Ferus Gallery figures prominently, and Drohojowska-Philp tells us much about its early owners, Walter Hopps and Irving Blum, and its core artists, Ed Kienholz (who founded the gallery in 1957 along with Hopps), Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price, Craig Kauffman, John Altoon, Ed Moses, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell and Ed Ruscha. (Joe Goode, Ruscha's friend from Oklahoma City, was



**Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s**, by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2011; 288 pages, \$32.50 hardback, \$16.99 e-book.

closely associated with the Ferus group but did not show there.) She devotes chapters to the dealers Virginia Dwan and Nicholas Wilder, to the light artists Irwin, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler, and to the conceptually oriented work of John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman.

*Rebels in Paradise* has a light, almost breezy tone, but Drohojowska-Philp delves into thornier social issues as easily as she conveys the excitement of, say, the nearly simultaneous openings of Andy Warhol's show at Ferus and Marcel Duchamp's retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum (in 1963, the year that the Robinson collection was rejected by LACMA). Using Judy Chicago as an exemplar, she shows us the difficult time faced by women in an art world where many players doubted their capacity to be artists at all (and where a 1964 group show at Ferus, featuring Moses, Irwin, Price and Bengston, could be titled "Studs" with no apparent irony). Drohojowska-Philp also

## IN BRIEF

### CREATING CALIFORNIA STYLE



**Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980**, edited by Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips and Rani Singh, with Lucy Bradnock, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2011; 352 pages, \$59.95.

Illustrated with photos and other rare materials from the Getty Research Institute, *Pacific Standard Time* seeks to correct the bias of art historians who have long overlooked Southern California in favor of New York, and to demonstrate the widespread influence of the region's artists on the major art movements of the 20th century.

**Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900-1970**,

by Thomas S. Hines, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 2010; 756 pages, \$95.

In his revisionist study of 20th-century California building design, urban historian Thomas S. Hines provides the architecture of the period with both regional and international context.



**The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century**,

by Richard Cándida Smith, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; 264 pages, \$39.95.

Beginning with the completion of Sam Rodia's Watts Towers in 1921, California's burgeoning art scene broke away from the art establishment of New York and Paris. As the West Coast art world grew more inclusive and democratic, Smith explains, tensions arose around the increased involvement of minority groups and women.

**California Design, 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way**, edited by Wendy Kaplan, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2011; 360 pages, \$60.

This accompaniment to the LACMA exhibition "Living in a Modern Way" examines the nationwide influence of midcentury California design. The movement, with its accompanying casual lifestyle, affected everything from architecture and furniture to fashion and ceramics. The volume focuses on hybrid indoor and outdoor living, the embrace of materials like fiberglass that were originally developed for military use and the influence of Mexican and Asian cultures.

**California Video: Artists and Histories**, edited by Glenn Phillips, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2008; 320 pages, \$39.95.

Tracing the history of California video art since the late '60s, *California Video* captures the medium's elevation into the realm of fine art through illustrations, essays, recent interviews and previously unpublished video transcripts.

**Proof: The Rise of Printmaking in Southern California**,

edited by Leah Lehmbeck, Norton Simon Museum/Getty Publications, 2011; 256 pages, \$60.00.

The founding of L.A.'s Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1960 marked the beginning of a revival of fine art lithography and its significant impact on postwar American art. Through essays and illustration, *Proof* examines the artistic and academic climate that gave rise to the midcentury printmaking movement in Southern California.

**Julius Shulman's Los Angeles**,

by Christopher James Alexander, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011; 72 pages, \$9.95.

This diminutive volume's 60 architectural photographs by Julius Shulman (1910-2009) reflect the visually striking development of modern Los Angeles. Panoramic urban vistas and modernist domestic interiors show the city growing and changing through much of the 20th century.



Judy Chicago with her sculpture *10 Part Cylinders*, 1966. Courtesy Through the Flower Archives.

explores the increasingly uncloseted gay scene that centered around the English transplants David Hockney and writer Christopher Isherwood, as well as Isherwood's partner, the portraitist Don Bachardy. She gives due coverage as well to the art that sprang from the political ferment of the 1965 Los Angeles riots and the art community's early opposition to the Vietnam War.

While the L.A. artists may have fashioned a workable milieu for themselves out of very little, they did it with sufficient flair to attract some young hipsters from that crucible of stylish invention and fantasy, Hollywood. Dennis Hopper, who had achieved a measure of fame from his roles in *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant*, was married in the '60s to Brooke Hayward, the very well-connected daughter of actress Margaret Sullavan and producer Leland Hayward. Hopper became a part of the art scene and brought along friends like Dean Stockwell, Peter Fonda, Russ Tamblyn and Troy Donahue. Hopper was a savvy collector, a painter of some skill and, notably, a talented photographer. His photographs of the L.A. art world, a number of which are reproduced in the book, form an important record of the time. The artists, particularly the Ferus group, were an attractive lot. Tanned and fit (often from surfing), with a coterie of pretty girls around them, they seemed, much like their counterparts in Hollywood, to embody a certain relaxed and youthful American glamour. It was a good life and, contrary



to the moralizing movies of the day, mostly free of tragic comeuppance.

Drohojowska-Philp puts more emphasis on biography and institutional history than she does on an analysis of the art itself—not an unreasonable focus when the institutions were in formation or flux and the people were so interesting. And few were more compelling than Walter Hopps. A fourth-generation Californian, son of an orthopedic surgeon and a mother trained as a Jungian analyst, Hopps was attracted to art early on. As a teenager visiting the Los Angeles home of Walter and Louise Arensberg on a high school trip in 1949, he was so taken with their collection of Duchamps (they were the artist's main American patrons) that he was invited back and soon became a regular at their house. That early interest paid a dividend 14 years later, when Duchamp was persuaded by the young man's deep knowledge to let Hopps curate the first museum retrospective of his work, at the then not terribly significant Pasadena Art Museum.

Hopps shone as a curator. He was a visionary—passionate, creative, and blessed with an extraordinary visual memory and an uncanny ability to spot talent. Artists loved him. He was, however, a terrible administrator (who nevertheless

regularly got appointed to managerial positions.) Impractical in the extreme, Hopps was maddeningly elusive: his staff at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where he became director in 1970, had buttons printed up saying “Walter Hopps will be here in 20 minutes,” and his boss at a later job at the Smithsonian was wont to say that if he could ever find Hopps, he'd fire him.

At Ferus, Hopps formed an unlikely partnership with Irving Blum. A native New Yorker, Blum was cool-headed, professional and focused. After buying out Kienholz's share of the gallery in 1958, he persuaded Hopps to reduce the number of artists, found an outside investor and, in the same year, moved the gallery to more impressive quarters on North La Cienega Boulevard. Blum and Hopps thus provided an early and strong commercial base for the L.A. scene to build on. Other dealers were also important, particularly Virginia Dwan, who was able, thanks to her inherited holdings in the 3M Corporation, to present daring but money-losing exhibitions.

Drohojowska-Philp charts the increasing cross-fertilization of the Los Angeles art world by people and works from other places—particularly New York. As the '60s went on, L.A.'s natural allure was augmented by the presence of forward-thinking museums and a growing group of wealthy and knowledgeable collectors. New York artists wanted to show there, and Blum, Dwan and Wilder helped make that happen. The opening in 1966 of the technologically cutting-edge print workshop Gemini G.E.L. provided an additional incentive for artists to visit, and the city's credentials as a home for serious art were burnished by *Artforum's* 1965 move from San Francisco to offices above the Ferus Gallery, where the publication remained for two years before decamping for New York.

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John Altoon, ca. 1960s.  
Photo Joe Goode.

One of the virtues of *Rebels in Paradise* is that it puts the art scene in a wider cultural context, taking time, for example, to discuss the interactions of the artists and dealers with architects like Frank Gehry (Drohojowska-Philp gives us a nice snapshot of his early career) and fashion designers like Rudi Gernreich, the inventor of the topless bathing suit. The L.A. cultural world of the time was big enough to be interesting and small enough to get a handle on. (Of particular benefit is the extensive timeline that opens the book.) While *Rebels in Paradise* doesn't aspire to scholarly status or aim for the sheer exhaustive heft of so many recent histories, it is still well researched, clearly organized and cleanly written. Drohojowska-Philp gives readers a palpable sense of starting afresh. Los Angeles was an exciting place in the '60s, and her book makes you wish you had been there. o

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Announcement card for Ken Price's 1961 show at Ferus Gallery. Photo Pat Beer.

