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Style; Artquake

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I am amused by fancy art-world types who breeze into Los Angeles planning to "get" the scene in a few days. They would have better luck reading "In Search of Lost Time" over a long weekend. America's second-largest city sprawls -- physically, aesthetically, socially -- over nearly 500 square miles, so any attempt to nutshell the burg and its cultural bazaar takes on comic aspects. Note that the Pompidou Center's recent survey of Los Angeles art was called "The Birth of an Artistic Capital" and that Michael Govan, the new director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has declared Los Angeles the new New York, forgetting perhaps that Angelenos have never wished to be New Yorkers and that long before the 1955 birth date pronounced by the Pompidou, Hollywood was producing things as provocative, philosophical and influential as anything given the name of, well, art.

Sun, sand, great surf, a climate usually allowing a smooth shift from beachwear to cashmere pullover and until recently -- "recently" thanks to no major earthquake in more than a decade and brutalized New Yorkers' finding respite here -- relatively cheap studio and living spaces, all with easy access to the materials of the film, television and porn industries, explain why anyone, not just artists, would wish to live and work here.

"In the 50's there was no art scene in L.A. at all," Tom Marioni wrote some 30 years ago in his artist-driven publication Vision. Marioni, that great conceptual troublemaker, encouraged aesthetics to mellow, so that we can all now claim that "The Act of Drinking Beer With Friends Is the Highest Form of Art" (as his 1970 "social sculpture" was titled). By his estimation, "not until about '64 or '65 did L.A. become known as an art center." He also thought that the L.A. scene "burned fast and extinguished itself in 10 years," but perhaps a few too many brews combined with the weather in his hometown of San Francisco had fogged his perspective. You would have to ignore that by 1964 Irving Blum's Ferus Gallery had already put on landmark shows (including Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans") and that by 1975 Cal Arts was on fire: the institute could already claim as alums Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, Barbara Bloom, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein and David Salle. But they all quickly decamped to New York -- never mind that Robert Irwin, an L.A. native, and Ed Ruscha, a transplant from Oklahoma, had thrived out West long before their alma mater existed in Valencia. It was some combination of John Baldessari moving to L.A. to teach many of those first Cal Arts grads and, soon after, the Cal Arts graduate Mike Kelley not moving to New York, that significantly changed the situation.

Although such a synopsis jettisons all nuance, in L.A. it is not a confluence of museums, auction houses and galleries but the intense nexus of art schools (there are five major players, all vying to win the tartest students) and their renowned faculties (including, to cherry-pick one from each school, Mike Kelley, Catherine Opie, Thomas Lawson, Frances Stark and Larry Johnson) that remain key to challenging what art will be. Often, an early sign of artistic success in New York is when the artist no longer has to teach to pay the rent; for over 30 years, major artists in L.A. have continued to teach in addition to carrying on stellar careers. Contrary to the air-headed local stereotype, it's as if to be an artist worth the name means educating younger practitioners how to think critically about what is seen, an education the world, and image-obese America especially, too frequently has abandoned, since images are understood to be, I guess, transparent. (Dude, no way!) Combine this pedagogic tradition with the fact that one of the sharpest art journals anywhere, Afterall, is co-published here, and L.A. can shrug its shoulders.

Of course, no one wishes to be enrolled forever. It would be jejune to think that schools could, or should, provide more than the equivalent of a pair of Ray-Bans to guard against the UV rays of a

solar art market. Carefree without major auction action and no distracting art fair (or, at least, not yet), L.A.'s galleries thrive as a system in which smarts and fun are on almost equal footing with business. The reigning gallery style is brisk and low-key chic compared with Chelsea's grand, mausoleumlike airs, and its gallerists, with lower overhead, take relatively more risks, mixing things up with bright group shows by nongallery artists. New venues have been springing up like some genetically altered mushroom able to thrive in full sunshine. The already decentralized metropolis can now boast of galleries in neighborhoods from Culver City (the current center of buzz, if not always daring cerebration) to Chinatown and Santa Monica. Any thinking person would have to count David Kordansky's and Daniel Hug's galleries as well as Solo Projects and Sister, helmed, respectively, by Tom Solomon and Katie Brennan, as serious players. There is also Trudi, a brazen, vitrinelike alternative to the Wrong Gallery; the innovative nonprofit Outpost for Contemporary Art; and the inaugural sessions of the Sundown Schoolhouse, spearheaded by the indefatigable architect and catalyst, Fritz Haeg.

And, hey, the artist-impresarios Flora Wiegmann, Drew Heitzler and Justin Beal's new bar, the Mandrake, gives needed juice to the Culver City drag, a place not only to spotlight what's really on the local minds (the artist-curator Darren Bader's bicoastal shindig, "Grupe," started things off with a bang) or to test with friends the highest forms but also to sit in the corner, sloe-eyed, researching the timely goings-on.

L.A. has been nominated as an art capital before, and it will be again when the spotlight moves elsewhere. (Mexico City? Shanghai?) Gagosian Beverly Hills's Oscar-week opening remains the only heady swirl of art and industry in Tinseltown. Art making goes on despite it all, behind closed doors, which is why it matters. Party of one -- or plus one.

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