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How L.A. grew its own art

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For those of us who are not native to Los Angeles yet live here (some for more of our lives than anywhere else), there is a compulsion to define Los Angeles, to get control in some manner of this ever-changing city that is distinguished as much by its sprawl as its particulars, by its air and light as its buildings and institutions, by its self-made individualists as its patchwork of ethnic communities.

It is in this spirit of examining dichotomies that, beginning in October and for the six months that follow, Los Angeles and its surrounding communities will be home to "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980," an enormously ambitious attempt to make sense of the ephemeral and tangible through exhibitions at more than 60 museums, galleries and various other sites from Santa Barbara to San Diego. The project will also reach Pasadena and Pomona, as well as Palm Springs, with a 10-day arts festival slated for its mid-point in January.

This enormous undertaking, initiated and overseen by the Getty Research Institute (GRI), makes the case for the many ways in which Los Angeles has been a partner, catalyst and home to a unique, prolific and influential artistic vision. "Pacific Standard Time" is nothing more or less than a declaration of the importance of Los Angeles to the narrative of post-World War II American art. Its ambition is not only to reset how the art world views Los Angeles, but how we, who live here, view our own city — beyond Hollywood, Rodeo Drive, the freeways and the beaches.

The project's genesis dates back about a decade, according to Andrew Perchuk, GRI deputy director. Perchuk and Rani Singh, a GRI senior research associate, as well as the GRI's then-director Tom Crow, who left in 2007, all arrived at the Getty around 2000. Crow was a California native, and all three were interested in learning more about the art of Southern California. In what might be described as a "Big Yellow Taxi" moment, they realized "people were dying, and the history was fast disappearing," Perchuk said.

"The Getty Research Institute [launched] a big oral-history research project to capture the first-person perspectives of the artists, curators, collectors, dealers and other people in the art scene. At the same time, Nancy Kienholz [widow and collaborator of Ed Kienholz] and [the now-deceased painter and museum director] Henry Hopkins approached the Getty Foundation to encourage them to preserve the paper record, the archival record." The Getty subsequently commissioned a survey of archives related to Southern California. The institutions holding those archives were then able to make proposals and receive grants from the Getty to catalogue and make accessible their collections to scholars. The Getty also started collecting heavily in the archival area of the postwar years.

"We realized that we had uncovered so much interesting and new information ... that we came up with the idea of a series of exhibitions," Singh said. They brought that idea to a number of institutions, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and the Hammer Museum.

It quickly became clear, Singh said, that "Everyone had very interesting ideas and a very deep wealth of information and exhibition material. ... It very quickly snowballed into something [where] no one [exhibit] was overlapping in any way or stepping on anyone else's toes. Everybody's idea was unique and specific, and they had eked out their own corner of the story that is Los Angeles."

The Getty gave grants in two phases, one for research and planning and then for the actual exhibitions and publications. The result is a citywide collaboration, the likes of which Los Angeles has not seen since the 1984 Olympics. Although it will be nearly impossible to attend every exhibit or event related to "Pacific Standard Time," it will be hard not to be taken with the extent of creativity and artistry born in the region.

"Pacific Standard Time" will explore the hard-edged pop art (think Ed Ruscha) and assemblage works (Ed Kienholz)



From left: Edward Kienholz, "Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps," 1959; photo by Susan Einstein. Wallace Berman, "Untitled (Faceless Faces with Kabala)," 1963-70; photo by Ellen Labenski. Larry Bell, "Untitled," 1969.

that made a name for Los Angeles in the 1960s, as well as the minimalist (such as Robert Irwin) and conceptual (Chris Burden) artists who followed them; the émigré architects (including Rudolf Schindler) who put their stamp on postwar L.A.; and the Chicano, feminist and African American artists who struggled to have their work acknowledged.

The Museum of Natural History, LACMA's first home (then called The Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art) will show California artists from 1945 to 1963, while the Getty Museum's own exhibit, "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970" will feature an overview that, Perchuk said, "finds an interesting way to present some old favorites, some great paintings by David Hockney and Ed Ruscha, some rediscoveries like the amazing resin paintings of Ron Davis, and some [work] not particularly well recognized even in its own era, like some of the assemblage [by] artists like Ron Miyashiro." The GRI will focus on how artists such as Wallace Berman, George Herms, Chris Burden, Judy Chicago and John Baldessari disseminated their messages to the public. MOCA will present "Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981," the most comprehensive survey of that period in Los Angeles art to date, bracketed by the resignation of Richard Nixon and the election of Ronald Reagan.

The Hammer will offer the work of African American artists in the postwar era, while The Autry National Center of the American West will exhibit the work of Mexican American artists such as Hernando Villa, Alberto Vades and Roberto Chavez; the Chinese American Museum will present the work of Chinese American architects in Los Angeles during the period; the Craft and Folk Art Museum will feature the work of living-legend enamellist June Schwarcz. And the Grammy Museum will focus on the music scene here from 1945 to 1970. The list goes on and on, literally, and can be examined in great detail at pacificstandardtime.org/participants.

There will be special regional weekends, shuttle buses, special T-shirted volunteers.

This thing is huge.

Yet as vast as "Pacific Standard Time" will be, it is also going to be personal. It is about artists and the prisms through which they view the world; it is about inspiration, cross-pollination and the personalities that have made Los Angeles a place where artists chose to work. What I learned in reading just the press materials for "Pacific Standard Time," and through my conversations with Getty officials, is that in order for artists to make Los Angeles their own, they needed not just a sense of community, but also support — collectors who would become champions of their work, as well as art dealers and, ultimately, museums to show their work. By that measure, one of the least heralded but most important catalysts to the Los Angeles art scene was Stanley Grinstein, one of the founders of Gemini G.E.L. (Graphic Editions Limited); he and his wife, Elise, have often been hailed as "the godparents of the L.A. art scene."

Recently I met Grinstein in his art-filled Brentwood home, where he recounted for me his own involvement in the scene here.

Grinstein, born in 1927, grew up in Seattle. "We always went to the Seattle Art Museum, but we didn't take it too seriously," he recalled. He had some relatives who were, in his words, "Bohemian" — and he got a sense that that was where the parties were. His whole family moved to Los Angeles when he was 16, and he went to USC.

"Even at USC," he said, "we knew about the art scene." He married Elise, who painted and held art classes.

Grinstein went into the forklift business and became active in the Young Men's Club at Cedars-Sinai. As he tells it, one day, someone came around and told them that many of the Jewish organizations in the city were looking for new leadership and offered to expose them to their choice of organization. Grinstein chose the Westside Jewish Community Center, in part because at the time he lived nearby, in Carthay Circle.

The JCC, Grinstein said, "turned out to be very interesting." Every year they held a fundraiser, an art fair of sorts drawn from various artists and galleries. "We had a group that was very into art," he said. For many, it was an introduction to contemporary art. Among the artists who participated were the conceptualists Allen Ruppersberg, Bruce Nauman and Michael Asher.

At the same time, curators were reaching out as well to develop new collectors. Grinstein and his wife took classes in contemporary art from Walter Hopps (co-founder of the groundbreaking Ferus Gallery and, later, director of the Pasadena Art Museum) and from Hopps' wife, Shirley.

Collectors Fred and Marcia Weisman recommended the Grinsteins join the contemporary art council of LACMA, when the museum was still housed in Exposition Park. Jim Elliott, who later went on to UC Berkeley, exposed them to such experimental, multimedia artists as John Cage.

Elise was on the new talent committee, and she and Eugenia Butler were going out to meet young artists in their studios.

The Grinsteins became more involved in collecting and purchased a major painting by Josef Albers.

Somewhere around 1965 they became friendly with the sculptor Larry Bell. For the gala opening of the new mid-Wilshire LACMA, the Grinsteins invited Bell as their guest. Doing so gave them the seal of approval among artists.

The Grinsteins tried having dinner parties with artists, but they were a failure; the artists were concerned the Grinsteins

would just be using them to show off to their friends. So, instead, they decided to have parties for the artists to invite their friends. There was no set pattern, but they happened pretty much once a month, and there was always some excuse for them — an artist was having a show in town, or they would make up a reason. One of the more legendary parties was one in honor of a sumo competition in town, where the sumo wrestlers showed up.

Over the years, a fair amount of artists were known to overindulge a bit, but never to excess (although one did have to be tied up when he became enraged over his wife leaving the party with someone else). The only bad thing that happened was that a small work by Wallace Berman once disappeared during a get-together (and it has never resurfaced). The Grinsteins hesitated over telling Berman, with whom they'd become close. When they finally did, all he said was, "Boy, someone must have really wanted it!"

Sid Felsen was an accountant whom Grinstein had befriended in college — they were both members of the ZBT fraternity at USC, when Felsen was there as a returning veteran. Felsen took art classes from Grinstein's wife and was part of their art group. He also did a lot of tax returns for artists. Felsen and Grinstein were approached about opening an art auction house, but they decided against it. Still, they wanted to be closer to the artists. "One day, we said to each other: 'Maybe prints? Maybe we could do prints out here, ' " Grinstein recalled.

They had brought a lot of prints to the Westside Jewish Community Center. Grinstein had come to know Ken Tyler, who was a master printer at Tamarind Lithography Workshop. He invited him to a Christmas party and asked if he wanted to launch a print center that he would back, along with Felsen. Tyler agreed; now all they needed was the artists.

They began by approaching older artists, such as Edward Hopper, who offered a plate to restrike an existing work, which they refused (Grinstein says he regrets that now — he surmises he would have gotten Hopper to do something to the plate), as well as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who said yes, in principle, but they were busy and told them to wait (Rothko never did any prints for them). At that point, Grinstein turned to Tyler and suggested they try Albers, whom Tyler had worked with and whose work Grinstein collected. Albers said yes. But it would take a year before the print was done.

The delay gave them time to look elsewhere. The Surrealist Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky) was staying with the Grinsteins, and although by this time he had become bitter, they got him to do some prints; they also got some from social-activist artist Ben Shahn. For a while they tried to entice some of the Mexican and Chicano artists, but without success.

When the Albers print finally came out, it sold well — at \$100 a print. Still, they needed a \$10,000 bank loan to keep things going. Felsen didn't quit his accounting job for many years, and Grinstein never gave up the forklift company.

A turning point occurred when Robert Rauschenberg decided to visit Los Angeles in the spring of 1967. The artist had been taking a break from painting after showing at the Venice Biennale and had started a roller-skating dance troupe (Rauschenberg actually performed on roller skates with the Judson Dance Theater). Rauschenberg wanted to make wings out of steel, and Grinstein, being in the forklift business, was able to get the artist what he needed. Grinstein then asked if Rauschenberg would come to Los Angeles and make some prints here. He agreed.

"That was our breakthrough," Grinstein recalled, "Once he came out, we had a direction, and all the other Castelli artists came out. That put Gemini G.E.L. on the map." When Jasper Johns agreed to do a series at Gemini, Gemini became financially viable.

As Grinstein explained, "When you went to New York, you could go to Max's Kansas City the first night and see half the art world there." In Los Angeles, there was no equivalent outside of a group of artists who showed at the Ferus Gallery hanging out at Barney's Beanery.

East Coast artists began to come to Los Angeles to work at Gemini, and they met local artists either at the print studio or at one of the Grinstein's parties, and thus the scene grew. Early on, Gemini made works with Sam Francis, Ruscha, Robert Graham, Larry Bell and Wallace Berman, among others. Grinstein would often turn to artists such as Chuck Arnoldi and Laddie John Dill (who worked as an apprentice printer at Gemini) to start the word of mouth about a party.

Grinstein feels that from the beginning Los Angeles had a lot to offer the artists. "There's the light — some people say that art is how you deal with light." Grinstein also believes that the studio space available to artists impacted the very conception of their art here. Finally, he feels there was some benefit for artists who chose not to be in New York — they could create outside of the spotlight. Grinstein became close to many of them, including Wallace Berman, whom he found to be a spiritual soul, a pure hippie (Berman died young, the victim of a car crash). At the entrance to Grinstein's home stands "Topanga Seed," by Berman.

Grinstein also gave financial support to artists, opening up house accounts at art supply stores in the area to pay for their supplies. When Judy Chicago started to do environmental constructions, Grinstein gave her one of his forklifts to make the work. He also let several artists work out of his forklift company's site, including Judy Chicago and Mark Di Suervo.

Equally important, Grinstein and Felsen stood by artists at all phases of their careers, and both Gemini G.E.L. editions and the Grinsteins' own art collection reflect that. Grinstein essentially let the artists be part of his family. Man Ray,

Allen Ginsberg and Philip Glass would only come to Los Angeles if they could stay at the Grinsteins' house. As Glass said, in a documentary being made about the Grinsteins, a clip of which can be found on YouTube: "They were not bystanders. ... Their activities were aligned with development, preservation of art and the encouragement of artists to come and work here. They weren't just hosts to the community; they were actively involved in it."

Looking back, Grinstein now says: "I was proud of all the artists — we felt so lucky each time they made a work for us."

For "Pacific Standard Time," Gemini G.E.L. is offering a chronological exhibit of their output. Like the full collection of shows that will proliferate around the region for "Pacific Standard Time, they tell the story of how art made a home for itself in Los Angeles. Just as a great work of art forces us to engage with it, redefining our notions of art and art history, "Pacific Standard Time" has us rethink Los Angeles itself as a source inspiration and creativity, as home to postwar American art.

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