



Men's Fashion Spring 2008

SoCal Color

LIGHT, SPACE AND SURF HAVE SHAPED A GENERATION OF L.A. ARTISTS UNAFRAID TO DAYDREAM IN TECHNICOLOR. **By Kristine McKenna**

For much of the 20th century, Los Angeles was perceived as a kind of paradise. And for the first 60 or 70 years of the century, the perception was deserved. Perfumed with the scent of orange blossom, it was a place of wide-open spaces and untamed canyons, its rhythm set by the ocean, pulsing like a heartbeat to the west. We all know what happens to paradises, of course — they get lost — and the golden age of Los Angeles receded many years ago. It's just another world city now: crowded, polluted and in a hurry.

The ecstatic beauty of the place was a very real thing for a while, though, and it played a central role in shaping the work of L.A.'s first generation of contemporary artists during the 1950s and '60s. Most of them had studios at the beach, where the sky was flooded with sun year-round, and they were comfortable with the sensory overload of natural beauty that surrounded them. You can see that in the materials and colors they gravitated toward, and in the mood of their work.

Leading the charge were Robert Irwin, Ken Price, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kauffman and Ed Ruscha. "Modernism was a puritanical movement that banished many forms of sensuality and pleasure, but I've never understood that kind of thinking. I mean, what's the point of life?" says Price, who grew up near the beach in Santa Monica and began in the '60s to produce clay sculpture in every shade of the rainbow, from psychedelic purple to a lime so intense it almost vibrates, finished with extraordinarily beautiful patinas. Bengston lived next door to him then, and like Price he didn't care if his work was dismissed as decorative — a quality *verboten* in art once modernism settled in to stay. Bengston wanted his work to be visually dazzling, so he mastered the use of industrial spray-painting techniques and lacquers to create canvases of lustrous color with isolated images — valentine hearts, irises, sergeant stripes — floating at their center. The work exudes a sleek glamour evocative of L.A. At the same time, Kauffman was staking out related terrain with sculptural wall works that used the industrial process of vacuum-forming. Characterized by seamless surfaces and sensual curves, they are the embodiment of the finish-fetish style that emerged here in the '60s, and they are unapologetically gorgeous.



Whereas Kauffman's work pivoted on rich, saturated color, Bell's was about light. He achieved his first masterpiece in 1962 with a simple, perfectly constructed cube fashioned out of glass and chrome. Bell's cubes have oddly magical properties; they change as you look at them, bending and refracting light, and occasionally they appear to house a cloud plucked out of the sky. It's work that can only be created in a place with time and space for daydreaming, and L.A. used to be that kind of place.

It certainly was for Irwin, a pioneering figure in the California light and space movement that also includes Douglas Wheeler and James Turrell. Dispensing with conventional art materials, these artists sculptured lyrical environments out of nothing more than light itself and hammered out a style with palpable ties to the sea of light that washes over L.A. Irwin's evolution has taken him deeper into landscape and light, too; in 1992 he designed the 134,000-square-foot parcel of land that constitutes the central garden at the Getty Center. He also devised the landscaping for Dia:Beacon, the sprawling temple of high minimalism in New York's Hudson Valley. The gardens are continually replanted so they're always in bloom, and Irwin "applies" the colored flora and fauna with the same precision he'd bring to a painting.

Ed Ruscha's art draws on the mood, rather than the light, of the city. Since 1958, he's been producing paintings of words floating in abstract space; they exude a cheeky effortlessness that's the embodiment of cool. Ruscha's art never breaks a sweat and has a casual, off-the-cuff charm that belies the considerable skill that goes into it. Ruscha is a gifted colorist, too, and his work has the visual appeal of a beautiful girl in a convertible: you want to stare at it simply because it looks sensational.

The art world put beauty on the back burner during the '70s and got down to serious things. Rigorous conceptualism, austere minimalism, aggressive performance pieces — art was hard work in the '70s, and it wasn't supposed to be fun to look at. It prepared the ground for the artists that emerged from L.A. in the '80s — Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw, Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon — all of whom make work rooted in a sense of anxiety. However, the warm afterglow of the aesthetic that coalesced in L.A. in the '60s never cooled completely. Traces of it can be



California dreamers Clockwise from top left: Ed Ruscha, "Ripe" (1967); Doug Aitken, "The Mirror #11" (1998); Billy Al Bengston, "Gold Hill Dracula" (1969); Craig Kauffman, "Untitled" (2007); Lari Pittman, "The Sounds of Belief, to an Atheist, Are Very Touching" (1988). Opposite: Ken Price, "L. Green" (1964).

seen in the riotous palette that's central to paintings by Lari Pittman. And, moving on a generation, vestiges of it are apparent in work by Doug Aitken. Raised in southern California's coastal community of Redondo Beach, Aitken began surfing as a teenager, and the ocean is a subtext in several of his pieces. For his 1997 video installation, "Diamond Sea," for instance, Aitken filmed in a restricted area of the Namibian desert in southwestern Africa. The site of massive diamond mines that had been exhausted by the turn of the 20th century, the area has been closed to outsiders since 1908. Consequently, it's an untouched paradise of virgin beaches, sand dunes that stretch into infinity, herds of wild horses, low horizon lines and vast skies; these are among the sights we see in "Diamond Sea."

Aitken is currently at work on "Lighthouse," a piece that expands on ideas introduced by L.A.'s light and space artists. Commissioned by a collector in Dutchess County, N.Y., the piece is in production on the site

of a home the collector plans to build. Aitken is filming the environment that will no longer exist once the house has been completed. Shot during all four seasons, the film will be projected at night onto a neutral facade of the house, functioning as a sort of echo of the landscape the house erased. A lyrical montage of trees and foliage, a stream, rustling leaves, clouds and sky, "Lighthouse" is built from four of L.A.'s main ingredients: land, light, color and water. Aitken may leave southern California to make his work, but traces of the city can be found in much of it.

The stereotype of L.A. as an oasis of natural beauty and good-looking people with not much on their minds has little to do with the city today. However, non-natives persist in seeing it that way. What remains of the southern California fantasy may only be an L.A. state of mind, but it's still intoxicating. ■