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ART

# Sixties sculpture relieves summer doldrums

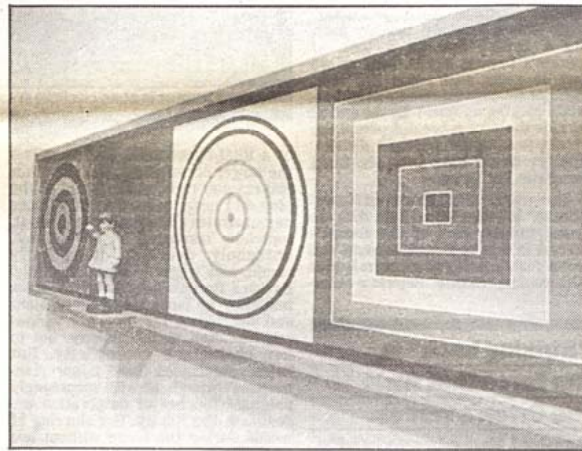
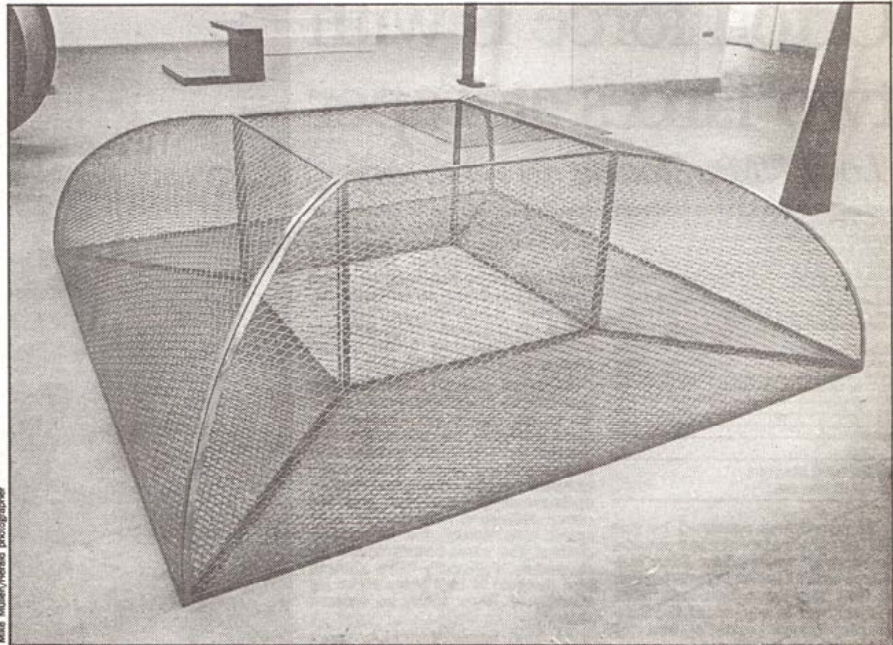
By Christopher Knight  
Herald art critic

"Sculpture of the Sixties" is a first-rate exhibition drawn from a heavy period of contemporary American art. It's the kind of show one wants to return to again and again, so compelling are numerous of its individual pieces and so provocative are several of its juxtapositions. As we move deeper into the summer months — the usual dead season for the galleries — it's something of a relief to know the show will remain on view, at the Margo Leavin Gallery, until nearly the end of August.

The 1950s were emphatically dominated by painting. A single American sculptor — David Smith — had emerged from the pack as a worthy peer, so his welded and painted steel sculpture "Voltri Bolton" (1962) rightly performs the function of greeter at the Hilldale Avenue entrance to the show. Among the 30 works that follow are several fine examples from the multiplicity of directions sculpture was to take, including the Earth works of Robert Smithson, the fetishistic boxes of Lucas Samaras, the perceptual probings of Robert Irwin, the pop amusements of Claes Oldenburg, the conceptual weightiness of Bruce Nauman and many more.

A number of the works on view are among the earliest efforts in what would become the artist's signature style. Larry Bell's clunky, 1962 cube made of mirrors is among his first attempts at finding a means by which to bring light and reflection into sculpture. John McCracken's blazingly yellow stepped pyramid, recently seen in his retrospective exhibition in Newport Harbor, was among his very first lacquered sculptures. And unless I miss my guess, Carl Andre's "64 Steel Square" (1967) — the single finest piece in the show — is composed from the first batch of 3/8-inch steel plates that Andre used in making his pivotal, checkerboard floor pieces.

There are other rarities, too, such as Anne Truitt's transitional, painted-wood sculpture, "Green: Five" (1962), which neatly traverses the totemic and figurative emphasis of Smith's sculpture and the spare, repetitive geometry of subsequent minimalism. It's a small and understated gem. And certain works date from the artist's finest period, such as DeWain Valentine's lacquered fiberglass and polyester "Double Disk" (1966), whose tumescent, kissing forms might best be described as abstract-obsene.



**Look back in art:** This untitled steel mesh sculpture by Robert Morris, on view till Aug. 22, was created last year from the artist's original 1967 design. "You Don't Need a Weatherman," left, by Gary Bachman, uses a figurine of young John-John Kennedy saluting at his father's funeral, is in the placed in front of three reproductions of classic '60s paintings. It can be seen through Aug. 8.

from a dime-store greeting card, of a lower class, sneaker-clad hausfrau sporting three breasts. Elsewhere, Gary Bachman takes a 1964 souvenir figurine of young John-John Kennedy, posed in his famous military salute, and places it in front of three hand-painted reproductions of classic paintings from the period, by Jasper Johns, Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella. Each backdrop painting for the Kennedy figurine is a target.

Christopher Williams offers a framed, unaltered copy of *Daily Variety*, dated June 10, 1987, and opened to pages 12 and 13. Amid the usual run of articles about Nielsen ratings, studio appointments and videocassette releases are items of surreal tenor: a story about how journalists make only a third as many requests for secret FBI files under the Freedom of Information Act as do convicted criminals, or a small classified ad that happily announces, "Have riotous, humorous story — laughable sex, military incompetence, aerospace graft, political corruption, ill-concocted espionage and action." Everything for today.

The ghost of Marcel Duchamp lurks in the exhibition, for in most cases the simple shift in context from the newstand or gift shop to the art gallery, or from the mass-produced throwaway to the handmade collectible, confers the value of meaning on

Then there are works that raise provocative questions, such as Robert Morris' beautiful "cage" for empty space. Made from steel mesh, the industrially fabricated 1967 sculpture is a landmark work, of which at least two early versions are known: the one on view in the show was created from the original plans, yet fabricated only last year (it's dated 1967-96). Minimalist sculptors often designed works that could be made in a foundry or machine shop by someone else, in order to devalue the sanctified touch of the artist's hand in a work of art. So, what — if anything — does the nearly 20-year gap between Morris' first cage and this seemingly identical one really mean? Would it look most at home in a museum gallery devoted to classic minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, or in one devoted to the new simulationist art of the 1980s, in which existing objects are straightforwardly

cloned?

This segue from the rambunctious 1960s into the peculiar 1980s sets the stage for a second provocative exhibition, this one installed in the Leavin Gallery's Robertson Boulevard space and featuring work by a dozen younger artists. "Nothing Sacred," organized by artists Cindy Bernard and Brad Dunning, began life as a simple show of humor in art, but was subsequently refined to focus on art-world inside jokes: Most of the work upends established values and rhetoric in art, its history and criticism.

It's an often screamingly funny show. What makes it so is the frequent appearance of a disorienting mix of high hilarity and sinister undercurrents.

Julie Wachtel's triptych, "Over Resolved," pairs two images of an African fetish, seen front and back, with a raucous caricature, straight

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these items. The rearrangement makes them very funny, while simultaneously revealing just how harrowing the ordinary comings-and-goings of contemporary life can be.

If you doubt it, check out Liz Larner's sculpture, "Margo Leavin: Three Breaths and an Inoculation," in which the dealer's breath was captured in a petri dish encased in a totemic shrine. Now a strange, grayish-purple mold is growing in that dish, having taken on a mutant life of its own.

<b>What:</b>	"Sculpture of the Sixties"
<b>Where:</b>	Margo Leavin Gallery 817 N. Hilldale Ave., West Hollywood
<b>When:</b>	Tues.-Sat. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Aug. 22
<b>What:</b>	"Nothing Sacred"
<b>Where:</b>	Margo Leavin Gallery 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood
<b>When:</b>	Tues.-Sat. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Aug. 8
<b>How much:</b>	Free
<b>Info:</b>	273-0603