

Knight, Christopher. "Under the Big Black Sun at MOCA." *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2011, p. D1, D4.



A big new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary art is a "how'd that happen?" show. Before the 1970s, painting was the proud king of the art hill. Sculpture was a specialty item, photographs resided in a ghetto. Prints and drawings were bagatelles, and art's content-boundaries were rigorously policed. But art today is so diverse in subject, content, materials and form that it would be mostly unrecognizable as art to a time-traveler from the past.

How'd that happen? At the Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo, the Pacific Standard Time show "Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981," has an audacious premise: Much of what we take for granted in the diverse panoply of recent international art first emerged in California nearly 40 years ago. Take so-called relational art, a ballyhooed 1990s phenomenon in New York and Europe in which artists acted as social designers of communal events, like a makeshift soup-kitchen for cooking lunch or an outdoor cocktail lounge at a biennial. A full generation earlier, Allen Ruppersberg opened a cafe near MacArthur Park and a hotel on Sunset Boulevard, both as artworks, while San Francisco-based artist Tom Marioni brought enough beer for 16 friends to socialize in a gallery at the Oakland Museum, then left the furniture and empty bottles on display as the exhibition. Intermittently, Marioni has been doing "The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art" ever since 1970. Both artists are in MOCA's show with other work -- mixed-media collages and another beer-bottle sculpture, respectively. The show, in fact, is huge. Some 500 works by 139 artists are included.

That's sensible, if daunting, since it chronicles the explosive emergence of pluralism in art. Pluralism, rather than a single movement like 1950s Abstract Expressionist painting or 1960s Finish Fetish sculpture, recognizes that artistic energy is broad and diverse. The century-long linear march of Modern

art styles, never very convincing, finally fell apart.

What caused the crack-up? The title -- "UBBS" for short -- gives a clue, coming from a 1982 album by L.A. punk band X. The show focuses on the period's disturbing social and political climate. Its dates bracket Richard Nixon's ouster from the presidency in 1974 and Ronald Reagan's unlikely inauguration in 1981. These two California Republicans, their presidential tenures coinciding with the statewide emergence of a Democratic majority, are emblematic of a conflicted time.

Curator Paul Schimmel pitches "UBBS" as a story of artistic diversity erupting from social upheaval. His show opens with a savvy display of Nixon's resignation speech and Gerald Ford's controversial pardon order, absolving the disgraced leader of legal threats. Surrounding paintings and sculptures focus on trauma, grief and decay.



Terry Schoonhoven's big, fanciful mural shows downtown Los Angeles underwater, presumably following a devastating earthquake, looking across the Central Library's ruined park toward a shark-infested sign for the Bank of California. Ed Ruscha painted the white Hollywood sign pitch black, as seen in shadow from behind, looking out toward a crimson sky that is either a smog-enhanced sunset or an apocalyptic fire.

Robert Arneson's monumental ceramic head of George Moscone, the San Francisco mayor murdered with Harvey Milk by a homophobic assassin, is held aloft on a pedestal festooned with harsh graffiti. Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison made a large ecological map to chart degradation of waterways around Sacramento.

Bruce Nauman's blunt triangle of steel beams, suspended precisely at eye-level to obscure the sight of an inverted iron chair hanging within its brutish and confined space, evokes the dirty secret of torture. A melodramatic portrait by Llyn Foulkes shows President Reagan weeping torrents of blood, a stone Cycladic head -- the kind found at ancient Aegean funeral sites -- bolted to his face by a Cyclops' eye and a

golden ruler.

These works assemble a litany of social, cultural, personal, environmental and political travesty -- some more persuasively than others. The grim nexus is further elaborated in four contextual projection screens scattered through the galleries, showing movie and TV clips and still photographs of news events -- everything from the fall of Saigon to the murder of John Lennon. Together, the art and current events aptly suggest that an elemental dismay fueled the artistic innovation characteristic of pluralism's wide-ranging diversity.

True enough -- but too reductive. At least two other factors also mattered.

One is economics. Between 1973 and 1975, severe recession signaled the end of America's postwar boom. Singular styles like 1950s Abstract Expressionism and 1960s Minimalism were easily branded for sale in the marketplace. But when a market goes bust, openings occur. California, never a commercial or institutional powerhouse in art, was ripe for a 1970s pluralist explosion.

The other factor is populism. Pluralism was to art what concurrently expanding civil rights for blacks, women, Chicanos, gays and lesbians were to society. The media-mad '60s consolidated something new in the United States, as art began to find a larger audience. Newcomers were open to more than what the narrow master-narrative offered.



That mass-media hook also fit California, especially Los Angeles. Check out William Leavitt's sculpture of a movie-set fragment, in which a manacle dangling from a fake-stone prison wall implies a monster on the loose. Or Jack Goldstein's altered, blood-red film-loop of the MGM movie-logo, in which an endlessly

roaring lion is haloed by the Latin phrase *Ars gratia artis* -- "Art for art's sake."

Pluralism is sometimes mischaracterized as meaning "anything goes." In reality, not everything does go. Instead, subjects, themes and forms that were once marginal suddenly found room to breathe. Art neatly packaged for critical and commercial consumption lost traction.

Literary narrative turns up, as in Alexis Smith's appropriation of crime novels for environmental collages. Exuberant decoration arrives, exemplified by Kim MacConnel's brightly painted fabric wall hangings. Women's work is out in force, as evident in Eleanor Antin's unabashed use of girlish paper dolls to tell a harrowing tale of political intrigue in a terrorist airplane-highjacking.

David Ireland altered his own house into a live-in installation. Art's domestic possibilities emerge, rather than its public and institutional commitments as displayed in commercial galleries and museums.

In countless works the elegantly composed, luxuriously printed "art photograph" is replaced by an unprecious, homemade snapshot aesthetic. (The technical innovation of personal video cameras helped.) Color, touted by the master narrative as the next-big-thing by way of Color Field abstraction, gets replaced by the sober dominance of black and white throughout the show.

Rather than "anything goes" advocacy, this specific diversity reflects what establishment forces, weakened in the 1970s, had kept out of art's lexicon. Freud called it "the return of the repressed," and it returns here with a vengeance. The show, sometimes spinning out of control, occasionally loses focus. But in good pluralist form, it's not without a diverse abundance of individually absorbing works.