

Knight, Christopher. "State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970 at OCMA." *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 2012, p. D1, 11.



The eruption of Conceptual art as a major force is the subject of "State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970," a rambunctious Pacific Standard Time exhibition at the Orange County Museum of Art. In some senses it forms a narrow prologue to the Museum of Contemporary Art's wide-ranging PST entry, "Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981." That show charts the collapse of a linear, monolithic artistic mainstream and the spread of more diverse, pluralistic art forms throughout the state. Conceptual art was its bellwether.

However different the two shows are, they do share something in common: A viewer will be struck by a near absence of color in the galleries, in favor of the prominence of black and white. There are a couple of reasons for this.

One is the pointed distinction many artists were making with contemporaneous Color Field painting, touted by the establishment as art's Next Big Thing.

In 1964, New York critic Clement Greenberg rounded up 31 American and Canadian artists for a sprawling Color Field show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (Greenberg preferred the term "post-painterly abstraction," which he used as the exhibition's title, but it meant the same thing as Color Field.) The show traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, two influential outposts where the New York mainstream was often embraced.

Although LACMA's show included some first-rate California artists, such as Sam Francis and Emerson Woelffer, they were added to the roster by a LACMA curator, not chosen by Greenberg. His show was widely seen as representing the voice of authority, which rankled in a newly anti-authoritarian era.

Among nearly 200 works by more than 60 artists at OCMA, you'll be hard-pressed to find stretched canvas and paint anywhere. The lone exception is a John Baldessari text-painting that lists 36 evocative art-words, including "penumbral," "stereometric" and "reductive." Painted by a commercial sign-painter that Baldessari hired to do the job, this decidedly non-Color Field work is black and gray.

More common, as far as materials go, is Eleanor Antin's "Representational Painting" -- a grid of 18 photographs and a video, all black and white. They show the artist applying makeup to her face, carefully watching the results unfold on a live television monitor. The work is a wry feminist take on a rather different kind of painting from what Greenberg had in mind -- one through which women have been culturally represented for centuries. And "Representational Painting" takes a pointed swipe at abstract art.

Theatrical and witty, it also zeroes in on a modern phenomenon that, by 1970, could no longer be ignored: Throughout society, cameras had become the principal tool for making images. Today it might be difficult to remember, but photographs once languished in art's ghetto, a specialist's medium with a history typically seen as a sidelight to art's mainstream.

Looking back, there's a special irony that reverberates against Pacific Standard Time, which explores the state's art history. Photographers have played leading roles in California's art. In the 19th century, Carleton Watkins was the state's first great artist; the mantle fits Edward Weston for L.A. in the 'teens and '20s. The entrenched perception -- until recently -- of California as an artistic backwater can partly be attributed to photography's former second-class status.



The show includes several perceptual installations. Barbara T. Smith's funny phallic forest of plastic stalagmites, accompanied by a big fish-eye photo and pointedly titled "Field Piece," lights up at random as you move through it. Bruce Nauman's simple triangular room, illuminated by the nauseating yellow light once common in deserted urban areas at night, is physically alarming. Stephen Kaltenbach's "Raised Floor" is just that -- a floor raised about 5 feet so that it blocks a doorway entry, only allowing passage into the space with your eyes.

Yet photo-based Conceptual art dominates the show. The artists in "State of Mind" embraced what the camera could do.

Ed Ruscha published his own flat-footed photo books, such as "A Few Palm Trees" and "Thirtyfour Parking Lots," upending landscape photography. Linda Mary Montano documented her impromptu San Francisco street performances in front of bemused or befuddled passersby.

Gary Beydler inserted snapshots of a trip along the Pasadena Freeway into the center of a stationary-camera film, pitting static images against motion pictures. At a zoo, Bonnie Sherk recorded herself having lunch next to a jungle cat in an adjoining cage, giving a surprised audience a restless urban twist on the philosophical conundrum of the lady and the tiger.

Lots of videos, including Susan Mogul's reverse-strip-tease and various William Wegman stand-up (and sit-down) comic monologues, are also in the show. All these very different works have in common an utter disinterest in photographs as carefully lighted, finely printed objects or in video images as technically elaborate, corporate TV productions. The ubiquity of cameras, the emergence of inexpensive commercial and self-printing technologies and the development of portable video technology all conspired to separate these works of art from the established artistic ghetto of camera tradition -- both artistic and commercial.

The show's entry is flanked by two terrific installation works. Encompassing Northern and Southern California, they signal what is articulated in galleries devoted to specific themes, such as "Mapping the Environment," "The Body" and "Psychological Space."

"The Sound of Ice Melting" by Bay Area artist Paul Kos is a media-scrum of eight microphones leaning in close around two 25-pound blocks of ordinary frozen water. The mikes are hooked up to loudspeakers through a Yamaha sound mixer.

I heard not a peep during the time I watched the ice slowly melt. However, I suppose at some point, depending on the melting pattern, it might make a rumble or even a crash. But the quiet tension between anticipation of a dramatic, end-time event and the silent, almost meditative experience of time's ordinary passage made its own psychic noise -- especially in relation to the composition's suggestion of modern media frenzy.

Across the way, L.A. artist William Leavitt likewise connects the sound of water, here bubbling inside a wooden box, to a loudspeaker through a microphone and a mixer. The speaker is tucked inside a low mound of potted and artificial plants, creating a fictive island of refuge. The movie sound stage and the television studio are two of the work's ancestors -- "Gilligan's Island" in the gallery.

A witty nod is also aimed at the then-new sculptural phenomenon of land art, built in deserts, country fields and other remote outposts, far from domestic and urban realms. Most people experience land art in photographs, rather than in person. Like Kos, Leavitt had media in mind.

*Photos: Paul Kos, "The Sound of Ice Melting," 1970/2011, mixed media; Barbara T. Smith, "Field Piece," 1968-72/2007, mixed media. Credit: Chris Bliss Photography/OCMA*