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Issue 45



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Letter from the Editor

This issue looks to L.A.'s artistic past to better understand our present. As Carla crafts a contemporary archive of L.A.'s art and artists, it's essential that we reflect on the city's—often spirited!—creative history. Across this issue, we tease out stories to unearth the practices that have shaped L.A.'s iconic legacy of freedom and experimentation.

Carla's offices are located in the same building that in the 1960s housed Gallery 32, a short-lived but groundbreaking artist-run space helmed by Suzanne Jackson. Karla Méndez recalls how Jackson's community-building work presaged the experimental ethos that now permeates L.A.'s creative culture.

This spirit of grassroots exploration was also proliferated by the experimental music nonprofit SASSAS in the '90s and early aughts, as it hosted intimate, freeform concerts that privileged ephemeral embodiment over polish and collaboration over singular authorship. Reuben Merringer traces this trajectory, investigating the precedents that inspired SASSAS and pointing to the reverberating ripples of these activations today.

Running parallel to some of these histories, Lita Albuquerque has been a longtime force in L.A. (and beyond); she pushes boundaries by reexamining the artist's role through site-specific work that repositions our relationships to time, our bodies, and the natural world. Jessica Simmons-Reid's on-site interviews with Albuquerque in the High Desert offer an intimate glimpse

into the artist's practice and deep connection with the natural world.

Another artist-mystic who has long lived and worked in L.A., Betye Saar, recently turned 100. At her centennial, she is still a student of the past and muses on what lived histories can teach us. "I don't know all those stories, but I have a feeling about them," she tells Evan Nicole Brown, speaking about the found objects she uses in her mixed-media assemblage works, and wondering about their past owners. "It's important to acknowledge the past because it influences the present and hopefully the future."

In the middle of this issue, we leap into the present with a look at the newly opened David Geffen Galleries at LACMA, offering two writers' perspectives on the building itself and what the experience of viewing the museum's permanent collection *feels* like in the space. While the building may be new, the encyclopedic collections it houses are not. Our writers offer critiques of the museum's "non-hierarchical" methodology, which collapses objects of diverse provenance and eras into each other at breakneck speed, often leading to more questions than answers.

My assumption as we began editing this issue—that L.A.'s art historical past would unlock truths about our present—doesn't reflect the whole picture. The boundaries between the past and present are, in fact, porous—as in the work of Todd Gray, the subject of this issue's photo essay: "Time is spatial...not linear, but radial." (Or, in the words of the late Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, "history as not a straight line but as more of a lasagna.") Time and influence are an ouroboros, converging, scattering, overlapping, untethering, and beginning again. History is a lasagna.

Lindsay Preston Zappas
Founder, Editor-in-Chief,
& Executive Director

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Blanca Koonce photographed by Josef Jasso.
Makeup: Valerie Vongarisk. Hair: Ryan Taniguchi.

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Damien Hirst, *Radiance*, 2018. Butterflies and household gloss on canvas. Zimmer Family Collection.

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Cover Image

Lita Albuquerque, *Stellar Axis: Antarctica* (2006). Pigment on fiberglass spheres. Image courtesy of the artist and Nevada Museum of Art. Photo: Jean de Pomereu.

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Lita Albuquerque, *Sol Star* (installation view) (1996).
Giza Plateau, Egypt. Ninety-nine ultramarine
blue pigment circles. Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Tarek Naga.

Somatic Mysticism

On Site with
Lita Albuquerque

In a small, untitled charcoal drawing from 1978, Lita Albuquerque envisions a hallucinatory desert landscape: A solitary mountain emerges from the horizon of an arid plain, bisected by a looming corridor of ultramarine pigment. This band of blue—in the drawing’s perspective, an elongated, receding triangle—stretches from the foreground to the peak’s base, where it greets another ultramarine triangle, this one a geometric portal into the organic body of the mountain. The composition depicts one of the artist’s speculative, unrealized earthworks, labeled as such in handwritten notations that contextualize the pigment interventions: “carve it out of the mountain / dig a trench in the ground”... haptic instructions incite an active engagement with the earth and recall actualized works such as *The Washington Monument Project: The Red Pyramid* (1980) and *Malibu Line* (1978/2024), which featured geometric land carvings filled with pigment. Yet the drawing also summons a more uncanny scene. The mountain might recall a nebulous UFO with a triangular aperture, the trough of pigment masquerading as an emanating beam of light. Here, the image’s twin connotations—geological form and celestial anomaly—point to the negative space between land and sky, illuminating the friction between embodied material reality and esoteric belief. Albuquerque’s work frequently inhabits this tension.

Albuquerque shared this drawing with me on a blustery afternoon in April in the Mojave Desert near Joshua

Tree, where she was completing a month-long residency at High Desert Test Sites, situated at A–Z West, an 80-acre compound that includes artist Andrea Zittel’s former house and studio. We were standing in a sun-drenched workspace in Zittel’s original, meticulously designed home, nestled among rambling boulder piles at the edge of the wilderness. Albuquerque was residing there with the artist Marc Breslin, her close collaborator, and was in the nascent stages of developing a new site-specific earthwork spread across two locations, one on the property behind the house, and another on a shrubby swath of land in Wonder Valley, a wild and desolate site 40 miles to the east. The finished piece will be revealed in November 2026, a few weeks after the opening of her solo exhibition at the Palm Springs Art Museum, which will include a site-specific rendition of *Spine of the Earth* (1980), her first-ever Mojave earthwork. We began our visit together in the same manner that she began all of her days there: by descending into a recessed rectangular seating area built into the ground outside, an elegant construction of Zittel’s original design that placed our sightline at earth level, cocooning us into the ground. A hummingbird flitted to the blood-red ocotillo blooms nearby as we gazed towards the mushrooming clouds on the horizon. “Each moment is different here,” she remarked, an observation that attends to life in general but is particularly resonant in the desert, where swift elemental changes—violent bursts of sunlight, sudden whirlwinds—can rewrite conditions in an instant.

Albuquerque, a luminary of the California Light and Space movement who rose to prominence in the 1970s, is known for paintings, sculptures, performances, videos, and earthworks that utilize light and pigment to map the interrelationship between humans and cosmos. She is particularly attuned to her surroundings and remains remarkably vigorous at 80 years old, beginning her workday with a series of meditative exercises that include

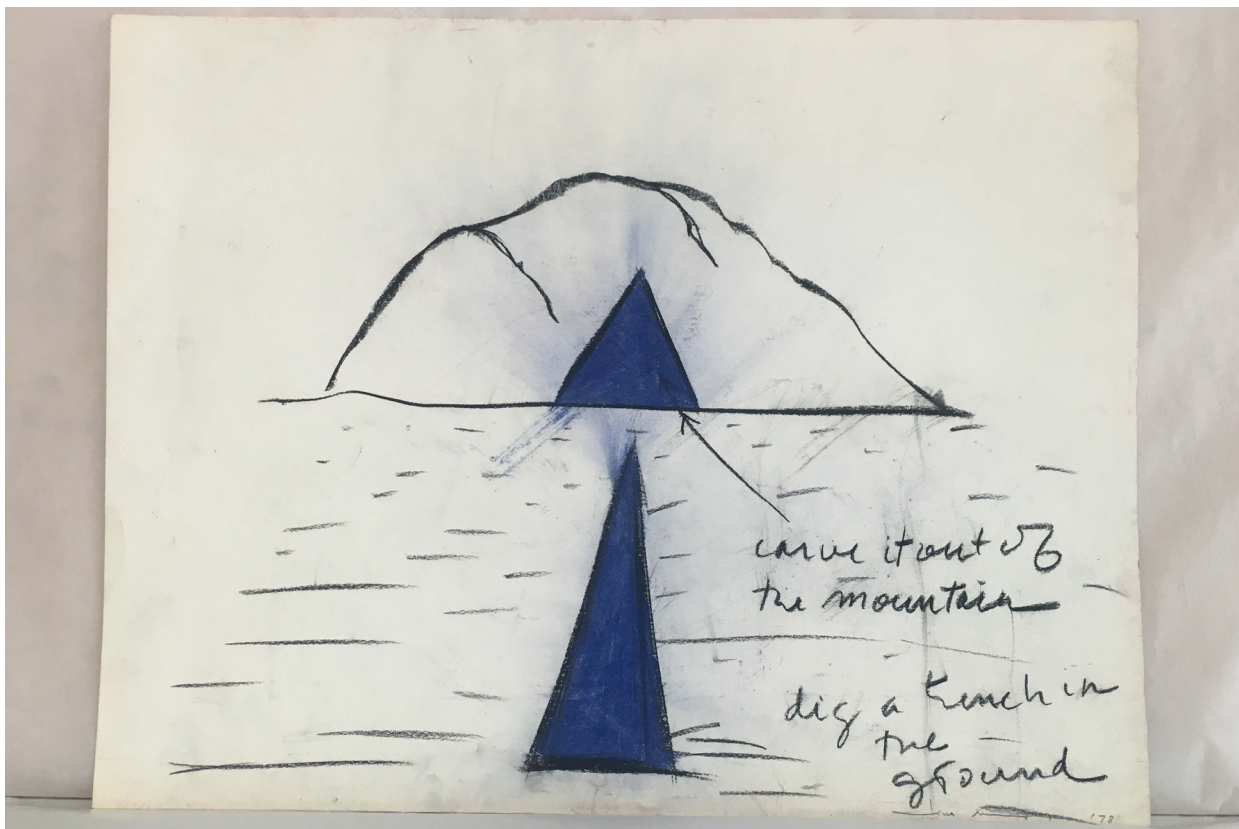
automatic writing, drawing, more writing, calisthenics, and when she's near the coast, an ocean swim—activities that merge somatic and linguistic output, hinting at the abiding concerns that run through her six-decade oeuvre. In a morning drawing session at the residency, she produced sketches of the surrounding landscape that echoed her earlier image of the mountain-turned-UFO. In one, an electric blue pathway reaches toward a craggy peak pierced by a triangle; in another, ultramarine orbs buoy above the terrain. On the paper she had written “the expulsion of light into matter,” a poetic proposition tethering tangible and intangible things, hinting at her use of language to uncork the ineffable.

Two months earlier in her downtown Los Angeles studio, Albuquerque read to me from her personal trove of unpublished writing, which, in addition to automatism, includes poetic incantations, prose experiments, and cryptic missives from dreams. She often conceives of characters who presage her own performances —“She had scratched into the earth furiously,”¹ for example—allowing her to imagine and later enact her own proprioceptive grammar. The words she shared were selections from her digitized writings that had survived the 2018 Woolsey Fire, the inferno that consumed her longtime Malibu home and studio. At the Palm Springs Art Museum, she will for the first time include several charred relics recovered from the conflagration—an elegiac embrace of the cinder as a symbol of death and rebirth and a solemn nod to the natural world's volatility.

Back at High Desert Test Sites, I asked about the orbs and Albuquerque led me outside. We followed a sandy footpath through the property, contending with a curtain of wind that overpowered our voices. It led us to a small wash at the base of spheroidal boulder piles, relics of erosion and ancient magmatic forces. She pointed to a distant peak and remarked that it would be the perfect site for the pigmented triangle she first envisioned in her drawing. Nearby,

glowing orbs of powdery ultramarine pigment dotted the clearing, each one a material and topographical experiment packed flush into the earth and then left to the elements. This specific hue is a hallmark of Albuquerque's work that has appeared in paintings, drawings, sculptures, and earthworks as far afield as Antarctica (*Stellar Axis: Antarctica*, 2006); Egypt (*Sol Star*, 1996); Switzerland (*Transparent Earth*, 2018); and Saudi Arabia (*NAJMA: She Placed One Thousand Suns Over The Transparent Overlays of Space*, 2020). The ultramarine registers, as she explained over the wind, as a primal memory in the body, stirring something inexplicable and deeply felt. Albuquerque told me she often “mines the body” for these latent forms of knowledge, an archeological sentiment that connects the matter of the body to that of the land itself, proposing each as a source of interred information.

Each circle of highly dense, tightly packed pigment appeared to be a portal into the earth, its circumference just large enough for my body to slip through. The first one we investigated rested below an alcove of stones; its surface had fractured into a matrix of fissures reminiscent of the branching faultlines beneath our feet. Albuquerque seemed satisfied with its quiet metamorphosis. The elements had displaced a thin dusting of pigment onto the surrounding sand, creating a spectral illusion that illuminated the indexical marks of the desert floor. The other portals, intermittently scattered about the landscape, remained shockingly unperturbed by the wind. For their placement, she drew inspiration from the surrounding creosote bushes, which, due to a biochemical process called allelopathy, grow in evenly spaced geometric intervals. Over time, these fragrant plants form clonal rings, dying and resprouting from the root crown in genetically identical circles, making them some of the oldest living organisms on the planet—kindred terrestrial companions for the artist's



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Top: Lita Albuquerque, *Untitled* (1978).
Oil stick and charcoal on paper, 22 x 30 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Lita Albuquerque.

Bottom: Lita Albuquerque at High Desert
Test Sites (2026). Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Marc Breslin.





Lita Albuquerque, *Spine of the Earth* (installation view).
(1980). El Mirage Dry Lake, Mojave Desert,
California. Pigment, 600 feet in diameter.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Lita Albuquerque.

uncanny blue spheres. Like the creosote's buried lattice of roots, Albuquerque imagined her ultramarine portals tunneling into the earth with "centrifugal force," converging deep beneath the lithosphere. Together we observed echoes of this imagery in the plethora of surrounding anthills, which formed mounds of concentric circles in the sand.

We spoke about planetary energy, cosmic attunement, plant drawings—lines left in the sand by flora billowing in the wind (forms of terrestrial language)—and the enigmatic wisdom of stones. When Albuquerque began her career, these esoteric topics were anathema to serious art world discourse. Later that evening, she reflected on her early days as a faculty member at ArtCenter College of Design, where she taught for 35 years, noting that she initially felt out of place amid a boy's club of peers who hierarchized semiotic theory over spiritualism. Still, over time she developed a rapport with her colleagues and eventually found her ground there. Now, the art world's recent institutional embrace of spiritual and hermetic practices (alongside the canonization of artists such as Hilma af Klint) has only sharpened the prescience of her somatic mysticism.

Approaching sunset, we ventured east to Wonder Valley to visit the site of Albuquerque's companion earthwork, which at the time consisted of a similar dispersion of ultramarine spheres. A vast, sparsely populated desert basin that abuts the mountainous Sheephole Valley Wilderness, Wonder Valley occupies a geographic transition zone that renders its topography distinct from the more arborous Joshua Tree. Our destination, a rugged tract of land enveloped by two saw-toothed mountain ranges, posed a particular set of challenges. First, Albuquerque had never developed an earthwork on a site that lacked what she referred to as "a vista," meaning that we could not view the entire installation from any given vantage point. Before this residency, she had also never embedded

her pigment spheres into the ground, a gesture that minimizes the discreet margin between the work and its site. Peppered with creosote that had catapulted in height since her first visit in November 2025, the undulating terrain was bifurcated by a sandy wash, its loamy surface sometimes caving beneath our feet. Unlike her previous Mojave earthwork, *Spine of the Earth*, a fugitive pigment drawing on a dry lakebed, the variable topography here did not yield a smooth canvas.

Each ultramarine circle had adapted to its environs differently; together, they suggested a constellation of emergent ecosystems—one had been newly infiltrated by an army of ants that circumambulated its edge. While I found this enthralling, the artist seemed dismayed. "This has never happened before," she remarked, and I quickly understood the delicate precarity of collaborating with the terrain. In other areas, she observed that the unrelenting sunlight had subtly blunted the pigment's chromatic intensity, a conundrum that will likely dictate the bounds of the work's fleeting existence. Even ephemerality isn't exempt from subjective criteria—a narrow window of symbiosis exists between marking the landscape and being consumed by it. She had much to consider.

On the cusp of twilight, the clouds spread into a vaporous canopy that resembled a bloom of ink. Later that evening, Albuquerque and Breslin traveled to Farrington Press, an off-grid printmaking studio situated in a secluded desert canyon—a turbulent excursion through muscular ravines and ancient groves of Joshua Trees, the trek a baptism for the artists invited to the site. Established in 2021 by artist and master printer Kyle Simon, formerly of Pace Prints, and his wife Sarah LaChance, the studio rests below the eponymous Farrington Observatory, an enigmatic structure built in the 1970s that the couple refurbished and now maintain. The mercurial conditions there impact every facet of the printmaking process, from the press's calibration to the



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Top: Lita Albuquerque installing
Stellar Axis: Antarctica (2006).
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Jean de Pomereu.

Bottom: Lita Albuquerque, *Sol Star*
(installation view) (1996). Giza Plateau, Egypt.
Ninety-nine ultramarine blue pigment circles.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Tarek Naga.



2026

Lita Albuquerque

Lita Albuquerque, *Cosmic Levitation* (2026).
Monotype from a steel matrix, 24-karat
gold leaf on paper, 28 x 38 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Farrington Press. Photo: Sarah Lyon.

paper's absorbency, necessitating a frontier-like ethos of resiliency and improvisation. The canyon's other-worldly topography often functions as an active material accomplice, making Albuquerque "an ideal artist" to have on site, according to Simon, who selects his collaborations carefully. "Every day, as soon as the moon came into view, she would run to the door. Using the nature around us was second nature to her," Simon explained, describing the press's four-day collaboration with Albuquerque.² Together, they collected sap from various species of native pine trees to refine as rosin for aquatints, produced atmospheric monoprints that incorporated gold leaf and powdered pigments, and experimented with soft ground techniques informed by the numerous gestural drawings that Albuquerque created of the observatory and surrounding terrain. She gazed at the waning moon, scanned the sky for UFOs, traced the amorphous shapes of rocks, and generated rubbings from the mottled surfaces of stones. Albuquerque described this way of working as both "ancient and new," harking back to painterly vocabularies from her earlier decades while simultaneously igniting new creative frictions, which she succinctly described to me as "guttural."

This guttural sensation seems to have reoriented Albuquerque's approach to the ultramarine orbs in Wonder Valley. When we spoke a few weeks later, she conveyed that this portion of the earthwork will shift forms entirely, now existing as a fugitive performance featuring her daughter Jasmine Albuquerque, a choreographer and frequent collaborator. She reflected that, while the orbs at High Desert Test Sites will continue to gestate as planned, the untamed Wonder Valley site entails a more embodied, transient approach—an interpretation no longer anchored by ultramarine pigment, a color connotative of psyche and sky, but rather by powdered crimson pigment, a hue that lodges itself in the

viscera of the body and more palpably invokes the innards of the earth.

Like so much of her work, this newly planned Wonder Valley performance stems from a piece of writing. It envisions a female character cutting into the surface of a red pigment-filled earth—a choreography evocative of her handwritten instructions in the 1978 drawing that approximates the levitating UFO ("dig a trench in the ground"). Together with her ultramarine orbs at High Desert Test Sites, which Albuquerque later likened to fallen stars embedded in the ground, these earthworks seek to parse our haptic connections to the cosmic unknown while simultaneously embodying the microscopic brevity of each passing moment. My own fleeting encounter with her orbs in Wonder Valley had passed. The terrain, now a desert but once a seabed, will transpose again. I thought of the circumambulating ants and our shared moment of chromatic reverence. "I allowed the desert to share what it has to say," Albuquerque reflected, "I listened, and I gestured back."

Jessica Simmons-Reid is a writer, artist, and critic based in Los Angeles and Joshua Tree, CA. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Carla*, *frieze*, *Momus*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *New York Times' T Magazine*. She is a 2024 recipient of AICA's Young Critics Prize.

1. Lita Albuquerque, unpublished document shared with the author, May 22, 2026.

2. Conversation with Kyle Simon, May 14, 2026

Sonic Overlook

Archiving SASSAS and L.A.'s Experimental Music Scene

Take a walk at night. Walk
so silently that the bottoms
of your feet become ears.
—Pauline Oliveros,
Sonic Meditations (1974)

Between Crenshaw and Culver City stands the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook (BHSO), a mound of trails and wildlife with a history rooted in both the natural and built landscape. First used by the Tongva people as a panoramic lookout, the park eventually became swallowed by oil fields before it was ultimately converted into a landscaped California State Park through restorative practices.

In 2017, this park served as the venue for a concert by Japanese sound art pioneer Akio Suzuki, his first performance in Los Angeles. Suzuki initially garnered attention in 1963 with a performance that involved throwing, in his words, “all sorts of junk” against a set of staircases at Nagoya Station, after which he was escorted away by the station’s public safety staff.¹ For the BHSO performance, he was joined by the younger Japanese visual artist, composer, and curator Aki Onda. The age difference lent a passing-the-torch dynamic to the night, as the two explored four separate locations on the Overlook through sound and listening, an intimate and rapt audience surrounding them at every stop. They created sound through interactions between banal objects like scrap metal, smashed soda cans, Suzuki’s “ANALAPOS”—an invented instrument

of metal cylinders connected by a steel coil—and the built terrain.²

The concert can be viewed in its entirety on the archived website of SASSAS, the sibilant acronym for the Society for the Activation of Social Spaces through Art and Sound, a music and sound art nonprofit that ran experimental concert programming in L.A. for nearly 20 years, between roughly 1999 and 2019. Concerts were free to the public when possible (which was most of the time), operating on the condition that participating artists were always compensated and concerts were documented.

It would be hard to grasp the nature of the intimate Suzuki concert were it not for the SASSAS archive, which now exists both as a public-facing website (sassas.org) and a collection of ephemera, artworks, and documentary media housed at the Getty Research Institute. For many performance-based practices, such documentation can be scant and of disparate quality. Sound is a transitory medium, and the ad hoc conditions in which such performances tend to take place make it extraordinarily difficult to trace a singular, coherent lineage of L.A.’s sonic history.

Some of the difficulty lies in the very spirit of West Coast experimentation, which resists reduction to a single lineage or narrative and is consequently difficult to document. Archives like SASSAS become increasingly valuable as L.A. continues to shift; neighborhoods flip, old haunts are razed and polished over. Having volunteered for SASSAS as my first post-grad school gig, and eventually working on the SASSAS archives in its sundown years—during which the organization faced pandemic-era budget challenges—I have since referenced them repeatedly for all sorts of reasons, often to simply remember the name of a certain park or shop that once served as a performance venue.

Founded in 1999 by post-conceptual artist Cindy Bernard, and operating until 2019, SASSAS programmed concerts and workshops



Phil Teele, Bruce Fowler, *Mapping sound.: Chung King Corpse* (performance view) (2009).
Image courtesy of the artists and SASSAS.
Photo: Wild Don Lewis.

featuring artists, musicians, and their work. Artists such as James Tenney, Mike Kelley, Tetuzi Akiyama, Pauline Oliveros, Glenn Branca, Roscoe Mitchell, and Kelan Philip Cohran produced concerts that ranged from sublimely harmonious musicality to Cage-ian emptiness. Though each concert was distinct, they all seemed to contain a spirit of kinship and chance, imbuing SASSAS programming with a mercurial quality that appealed to tricksters, dreamers, and sensualists.

In an exhibition text for SASSAS's 2019 anniversary installation *20 HRS / 20 YRS*, writer and curator Michael Ned Holte summed up SASSAS's "remarkable run": how it emerged from "the intersection of a small, but high-minded art world and a similarly narrow community devoted to experimental music and sound, often a tightly overlapping Venn diagram of interest."³ Perusing the archived website and its hundreds of participating interdisciplinary artists, one sees countless visual methods threaded together with an interest in how two invisible quantities—space and the vibrations filling it—can inflect subjective experience.

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Experimental composer and sound artist Alvin Lucier, who was heavily influenced by John Cage, argued for the value of listening over simply "making sounds happen."⁴ Along with fellow composer and performer Pauline Oliveros, Lucier began making site-specific sound work on a visit to San Diego in the late 1960s. *Chambers* (1968) involved players "sounding" seashells in a La Jolla canyon, using sound to "describe the outdoor space"⁵ by revealing what happens when sonic substances of various textures and viscosities are dumped into it. Throughout the piece, performers move sound through the environment, allowing architecture and portable containers to diffuse, filter, and reshape the audio as their paths cross. Oliveros likewise went on to explore sound through alternative modes

of listening, drawn to collective experience, writing "Sonic Meditations" intended for groups. Teaching at Mills College in Oakland and University of California, San Diego, Oliveros's influence on West Coast experimentalism is unassailable, and unsurprisingly, Oliveros and other pioneers appear in many forms across the SASSAS archives. For instance, in the 2001 performance Oliveros gave at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, she instructed viewers to "listen for the subtle rhythms of the body" before playing meditative disjunctive sounds on an accordion. "You're helping me to create this piece by the way you listen," she explained.⁶

SASSAS began with the simple intent to bring visual artists and musicians together in unlikely collaborations in non-hierarchical spaces, often using an "exquisite corpse" format that blended multiple solo performances with overlapping duets, as musicians rotated in and out of the designated staging area. During the six-hour concert *Welcome Inn Time Machine* (2012), multiple motel rooms in Eagle Rock's mid-century Welcome Inn were transformed to ad-hoc "micro-concerts" that could be experienced in sequence and simultaneously.⁷

Visitors were invited to wear "pyramid headphones" by the Los Angeles Free Music Society in one room, while Anita Pace performed Merce Cunningham-inspired dance experiments in two other rooms and the adjacent stairwell.

This is a running theme throughout the SASSAS archive: Performers and musicians were placed on the same level as the audience, resulting in highly intimate but wholly unpredictable encounters with sound. A 1998 concert at Angels Gate Cultural Center (a solo event organized by Bernard before she formalized SASSAS the following year) involved the creation of musical trios on the fly: Names were pulled randomly from a hat, and the musicians and artists then improvised in front of the audience. One placed artist Frances Stark on electric guitar alongside artists Joe Potts and Gabie Strong. These early concerts were



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Top: Vetza, Kira Vollman, *sound. at the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook: 20th Anniversary Corpse* (2019). Image courtesy of the artists and SASSAS. Photo: Wild Don Lewis.

Bottom: Akio Suzuki, *sound. at the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook: Akio Suzuki and Aki Onda* (2017). Image courtesy of the artists and SASSAS. Photo: Wild Don Lewis.



Top: Pauline Oliveros, *sound. at the Schindler House: Pauline Oliveros and Philip Gelb* (performance view) (2001). Image courtesy of the artist and SASSAS.
Photo: Sam Durant.

Bottom: Solid Eye (Rick Potts, Steve Gregoropoulos, Joseph Hammer), *sound. at the Schindler House: Solid Eye and Extended Organ* (performance view) (2000). Image courtesy of the artists and SASSAS.
Photo: Cindy Bernard.

aggressively interdisciplinary experiments in chaos and alchemy, artists often bridging generations.

The spirit of the West Coast experimentalism that emerged in the 1960s and '70s typified SASSAS's increasingly ambitious concert formats and workshops. This was evidenced by SASSAS collaborators like Oliveros or composer James Tenney, who influenced younger generations with shared philosophies on microtonal music and deep listening. Its spirit was informed by earlier projects; anti-professional, anti-commercial agents of chaos like the aforementioned LAFMS, a loose collective of "non-musicians" founded in the early 1970s by brothers Joe and Rick Potts as well as Tom Recchion, Fredrik Nilsen, and many others.

LAFMS has spawned many iterative offshoots over the past 50 years. Many performers and projects, like experimental drone collective Extended Organ, which included artists Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, performed at SASSAS concerts in the early 2000s. Joe Potts served on the SASSAS board early in its formation and hosted a monthly SASSAS workshop, "soundShope," at the Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock, where anyone could come and make noise with literally anything for a few hours. These sessions often transitioned almost imperceptibly from silence to mad-scientist-levels of cacophonous feedback as audio signal chains ran amok. This de-professionalized chaos, central to LAFMS programming, distinguishes it from 1960s and '70s East Coast conceptualism, which is often (perhaps inaccurately) perceived as more buttoned-up and clinical due to its focus on language and systems.

Critic Thomas Crow has argued that California art of this time developed as a heterogeneous alternative to New York's critical orthodoxy.⁸ New York critics such as Lucy Lippard defined East Coast conceptualism through the dematerialization of the object,⁹ and Rosalind Krauss frequently interpreted the city's artistic production through questions of signification,

representation, and systems of meaning.¹⁰ In California, by contrast, artists from Robert Irwin and James Turrell to James Tenney and Pauline Oliveros often treated perception, atmosphere, and embodied listening as artistic material itself. Though it seems like Light and Space would have little in common with LAFMS's amplifiers and noisemakers pounding and screaming at full volume, the preeminence of place and perception is the same.

But to boil it down to an East Coast/West Coast binary would ignore the dialogue taking place across countercultural circles at the time. One could easily draw a line between the antics of LAFMS and the No Wave or Fluxus scenes that emerged in NYC in the 1960s-'70s. Similarly, LAFMS was thrilled to take the piss out of the uptight perception of experimental music, embracing dissonance, formlessness, and a DIY anti-establishment ethos. The inherent desire of these artists to deconstruct or subvert seemingly traditional features of sound and music reveals a willingness to push beyond our notion of what music can be, thereby opening ever more corridors of creative production.

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It is said that James Joyce boasted that the Dublin of 1904 (specifically June 16, the date on which his iconic book was set) could be reconstructed from the pages of *Ulysses*. The SASSAS archives function much in the same way: a multi-layered cultural artifact rife with the poetic and factual, creating a sort of four-dimensional map spotted with glowing sites of activity. Though SASSAS earned a dedicated audience over the years, the legacy of Cindy Bernard's massive project would be at risk of disappearance were it not for its archival efforts. Concerts with historic sonic luminaries may only draw an audience of a couple dozen, but the audience of an archive is potentially endless. For Bernard, this aspect of the organization carries far greater

impact; as the city disappears and rearranges itself through various internal and external pressures like rising rents and industry precarity, SASSAS offers a window into views of L.A. that are disappearing, if they haven't already.

Like Joyce, SASSAS saw urban life as thrumming, ceaseless, and simultaneous, something to be elevated and loved. SASSAS's 10-year anniversary concert, *Mapping sound*. (2009), took place in 8 separate locations, including the defunct Eighth Veil project space and the old Amoeba Music on Sunset Boulevard. The organization's final concert, the five-and-a-half hour *20th Anniversary Corpse at Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook*, was a massive exercise in simultaneity, sound, and relationalism. More than 25 artists played in five locations around the park, concurrent concerts all held within earshot of each other, all free to the public. No center, no hierarchy. A simple diagrammatic musical score, written by Bernard herself. For five hours, sonic idiosyncrasy spilled down onto the L.A. basin.

In the attempt to map a definitive lineage of L.A. sonic history, instead one finds routes and imbricated strata, interacting and networked like our freeways: in constant motion, evolution, and adaptation. The SASSAS archive embodies a different way of listening and interacting with sound and space that invites visitors to consider the city as it is today. What spaces have yet to be activated, and how might that be done while those spaces are still around?

Many of the venues noted in the archives, like Sacred Grounds and most recently The Box, which hosted the SASSAS-produced 2017 premiere of James Tenney's *Changes*,¹¹ have shuttered and disappeared. However, newer spaces like non-profit Canary Test embrace sound as both physical and communal, and longer-running spaces like Coaxial, Human Resources, Automata, and others continue to program events that foster community and inclusion, celebrating performance practices while challenging norms. As with every

domain, the future is tenuous, but it will undoubtedly be mapped in some sonic form. And what form that sound will take will unerringly depend on the shape and qualities of the space itself and everything and everyone in it, adapting alongside our changing city. Sound, after all, is a vibration that requires another medium to carry it.

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Top: Akio Suzuki, Aki Onda, *sound.*
at the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook: Akio
Suzuki and Aki Onda (performance view)
(2017). Image courtesy of the artists
and SASSAS. Photo: Wild Don Lewis.

Bottom: Rick Potts, Joseph Hammer, Renee Petropoulos,
Joe Potts, Fredrik Nilsen, Ace Farren Ford, Tom Recchion,
Carla Bozulich, *sound.: 20th Anniversary Corpse*
(performance view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artists
and SASSAS. Photo: Wild Don Lewis.

6
Gallery 32

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32



Timothy Washington holding his painting
Silent Majority outside Suzanne Jackson's
Gallery 32 (1970). Image courtesy
of the Bob Helton Archive.
Photo: Bob Helton.

Communal Imagination

How Gallery 32 Made Space for Artists

Whenever I visit Los Angeles from the Bay Area, traversing the city's art spaces feels like a marathon shaped by the city's sprawling geography. Moving between galleries dispersed across different neighborhoods, I encounter not only the art itself, but also the communities, architectures, and social landscapes that inform it. The city's contemporary art landscape carries traces of earlier histories too, of artists and organizers who imagined cultural spaces as extensions of public life rather than escapes from it. Looking back across L.A.'s art history, we can find moments of growth, volatility, and expansion, often mirroring the ever-changing and, at times, volatile events that the city has seen (from the Watts riots to the East L.A. Walkouts). Decades like the '60s earmarked moments where the cultural landscape of the city was rapidly expanding.¹ But this expansion did not yet resemble the density or commercial visibility that defines the city's contemporary art ecology. Instead, L.A.'s cultural infrastructure was shaped by smaller, often precarious, artist-run spaces that not only carved out their own space in the landscape but also began to shape L.A.'s iconic spirit of collaboration and experimentation.²

The Los Angeles art world in the '60s was still in a formative stage. The city did not have a major, dedicated art museum until the opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1961, a relatively late development that underscored how young the city's institutional art

foundation remained in comparison to New York City or European cultural capitals.³ For many Angelenos, encountering art meant going to galleries, and by the 1960s Los Angeles had developed the largest concentration of galleries west of Chicago, many of them clustered along La Cienega Boulevard's "Gallery Row." Influential spaces such as Ferus Gallery, Nicholas Wilder Gallery, and Felix Landau Gallery helped establish the city as an emerging center for contemporary art by promoting movements like Pop Art, Light and Space, and Conceptualism, with exhibiting artists like Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Jasper Johns, John Baldessari, and David Hockney. Yet even as Los Angeles emerged as an important artistic center, it largely followed postwar trends within the American art world. Across much of the period, museums and commercial galleries privileged Euro-American Modernism and market-oriented practices that emphasized formal innovation and presentation over political or social engagement. Black artists remained largely absent from the city's leading cultural institutions, which often upheld a narrow vision of contemporary art rooted in neutrality and distance from civic struggle.⁴

It is within this context that artist Suzanne Jackson founded Gallery 32 in the late 1960s. Trained as a dancer, painter, and theater designer, Jackson was raised in San Francisco, completed graduate studies at Yale University, and toured South America as a dancer before settling in Echo Park in 1967. She began taking drawing classes at the Otis Art Institute with Charles White, where she befriended artists like Alonzo Davis, Dan Concholar, and David Hammons. The latter two encouraged her to open the gallery as a space to exhibit emerging artists, experiment, and be in conversation about the struggles they experienced.

Inspired by the philosophy of White, who believed that art could function as a vehicle for activism and social transformation, Jackson opened Gallery 32 in 1968 in the Granada

Buildings, a Spanish-style mixed used building that today houses organizations such as Los Angeles Review of Books and GetLit, design studios like Agency Artifact and West of West, and galleries such as O-Town House and Official Welcome. (Carla, too, has been working out of the building since 2025.) Located in the Westlake neighborhood, which at the time was positioned near Otis's original building and the Chouinard Art Institute (which later merged with the Conservatory of Music to become the California Institute of the Arts), Gallery 32 took up shop in the two-story Suite 32; originally serving as Jackson's living quarters upstairs and private studio downstairs.⁵ She transformed the studio into an exhibition space for fellow artists—many of them White's students—who had trouble finding opportunities within institutions like LACMA that refused to exhibit contemporary Black American artists.⁶ Funded largely through money Jackson earned teaching, the gallery embraced a distinctly DIY ethos that reflected both material necessity and political urgency. According to Jackson, many visitors, whether they were working or middle class, Black or white, felt safe coming to the gallery to see work they otherwise would not be exposed to.⁷

Though Gallery 32 was not exclusively a gallery for Black Americans—Jackson stated its guiding principle was showing “good work that was not being exhibited elsewhere”—it nonetheless became one of a number of small but critical spaces, along with Brockman Gallery, Black Arts Council, and the Watts Towers Art Center, where emerging Black artists like Hammons, Betye Saar, Emory Douglas, Gloria Bohanon, and Timothy Washington could present their work.⁸ A pivotal example is *The Sapphire Show: You've Come A Long Way*, a collaborative, five-day exhibition organized in 1970. Widely thought of as the first survey exhibition of Black American women artists in the United States, the show brought together artists like Senga Nengudi (then working under the name Sue Irons), Jackson,

Bohanon, Yvonne Cole Meo, Saar, and Eileen Abdulrashid. Its significance lies not only in that it was a historic “first,” but also in its refusal of the marginal position Black women occupied simultaneously within the mainstream feminist movement, Black liberation politics, and the contemporary art world.⁹ Though Jackson's records of the show have since been lost, some of the work believed to have been a part of it includes Meo's *Forbidden Fruit in Garden of Eden* (1965) and Nengudi's *Water Composition V* (1969–70/2018); Saar's *Taurus* (1967) is the only piece confirmed to have been in the original exhibition,¹⁰ which staged these artists as producers of critical visual languages that engaged memory, labor, gender, race, and structural injustice, concerns that were often sidelined in dominant artistic and political discourse.

Equally fundamental to Gallery 32 was its direct interaction with revolutionary organizing. Jackson and fellow artists like Bohanon, Nengudi, John Riddle, and Concholar would meet in the studio space, asking themselves and each other if there was such a thing as ‘Black art,’ and if so, how was it defined?¹¹ Rather than remaining purely intellectual exercises, these discussions shaped the ways the gallery positioned itself within broader movements for Black political and cultural liberation. The gallery opened its doors to the Black Panther Party, which staged a three-day exhibition of Emory Douglas's pastel works, including portraits of party leaders, poster designs, and illustrations for the Black Panther newspaper. Organized by Yvonne Carter as a fundraiser for the Party's children's breakfast program, the exhibition stressed the gallery's role not just as a site in which to exhibit work, but as foundational space for political education and movement-building.¹² Programming like this modeled a new structure in which a gallery could function simultaneously as an exhibition space and a public forum, in turn collapsing the boundaries between aesthetic practice and communal life.



Top: Annie Bianucci, George Evans Jr., and Suzanne Jackson in the courtyard of the Granada Buildings, home of Gallery 32 (1969). Image courtesy of Gregory Wiley Edwards. Photo: Gregory Wiley Edwards.

Bottom: *You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show* (installation view) (2021). Image courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

SHIT I HAVE TO DO!

LAUNDRY

BUY $\frac{1}{4}$ " stencil - $\frac{1}{2}$ " - 1"

3 orange crates - bathroom

Lecture 9th

make primary-secondary color cards
5 slides - Lawrence - white -

(Bob Helton - make slides from children's work)
call school for slide projector

SET DEADLINES - FRAMING - ENTRIES

Write Christmas EXHIBIT INVITATIONS

BUY PAPER FOR POSTERS - SIZE

SET DAYS FOR:

PRINTING POSTERS

ADDRESSING - STAMPING
(FOLDING)

MAILING

HANGING EXHIBIT

RECEPTION - HOSTESSES

} HOSTESSES
2 DAYS

Book keeping

- card on Leigh-Taylor -

Redd card on Concholar } FINANCIAL

ENTRIES IN RECORD JOURNAL (MONTHLY)

MAKE NEW MAILING CARD (ENTRIES)

BRING CHECKING UP TO DATE

GALLERY CARDS ON WORK SOLD

SEND STATEMENTS TO DAVID

STORAGE ROOM

KEEP NOTES ON TAXES

BORROW - KITCHEN FOR CHRISTMAS

RIDDLE

WAKE UP
296-1628

The radicalism of the gallery becomes increasingly clear when considering the resistance and intimidation from the police and FBI that surrounded certain exhibitions. During the opening of Douglas's show, police officers were stationed outside the gallery attempting to dissuade visitors from entering and redirecting them elsewhere if they stopped to ask for directions.¹³ Similarly, on the eve of an exhibition of Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor's charcoal portraits, the gallery received a bomb threat while the artist and Jackson were alone installing the work late one evening. According to Jackson, phone calls denounced the exhibition as unpatriotic because the drawings centered on oppressed people from around the world, like *Angela* (1970), a portrait of the activist Angela Davis and the portrait *Sharona* (1967).¹⁴ The gallery was perceived as a threat to the Euro-centric, white supremacist status quo that governed the art world, as attempts to intimidate Jackson and her featured artists were ultimately attempts to silence forms of critique and solidarity between the marginalized communities that the exhibitions made visible.

These examples expose the fallacy that art can be separated from politics. The hostility directed toward the space demonstrates how risky it was to support Black artists who challenged the status quo; the gallery's artists were shining a light on issues like urban decay and police brutality while also confronting U.S. imperialism and militarism abroad. To frame art as neutral or detached from civic life is itself a symbolic act that veils the power structures that determine whose work is seen or not seen—Black artists were often kept out of other spaces, leaving them unable to earn money by selling their art. Many of these artists participated in alternate ecosystems, often organizing exhibitions in Black businesses and spaces like community centers, churches, and even the homes of friends. Jackson's gallery was part of a movement that worked to move these artists into the mainstream,

though the resistance that met the gallery made sustainability difficult.

Less concerned with marketability and sales, the gallery prioritized intellectual exchange, political dialogue, and mutual support among artists. Yet it was exactly these commitments that set the space in a financially precarious position. In 1970 the financial strain of sustaining Gallery 32 had become increasingly difficult for Jackson to maintain, operating with limited institutional help, and relying heavily on Jackson's labor and teaching income.¹⁵ This scarcity of available resources reflected a cultural system that struggled to sustain spaces that challenged artistic hierarchies.

To understand the gallery's importance within the wider trajectory of L.A.'s art history is to understand how the city's global art identity was also formed through grassroots spaces like Gallery 32 that fostered investigation, community, and civil discourse. Today, Los Angeles is internationally recognized for its decentralized and community-driven art scene that is shaped by artist-run initiatives, activist organizations, and alternative spaces. For instance, Art + Practice, located in Leimert Park (a neighborhood long considered a cultural center for Black artistic life in Los Angeles), directly continues Gallery 32's legacy by providing free exhibitions foregrounding artists of color while also partnering with local foster youth organizations to offer social services and educational resources to marginalized communities. Meanwhile, Del Vaz Projects reimagines the domestic sphere as a site for artistic exchange and community formation by centering its programming within the home of its founder, Jay Ezra Nayssan. It highlights multiracial, international, and LGBTQIA+ artists whose work exists outside dominant frameworks, while its activities as a research collective and independent press further expand the possibilities of what an art space can be. These inventive models are two of many—the precedent set by spaces like Gallery 32 continues to impact and inform the

broader zeitgeist of experimentation and social engagement that permeates across Los Angeles's art spaces.

Gallery 32 exposed the impossibility of impartiality, illustrating that whose work is exhibited, whose histories are centered, and which communities are welcomed into cultural spaces are always political acts. What spaces like Gallery 32 understood was that the realities of living in Los Angeles, from the racial tensions and economic inequalities to its sprawling geography and activist movements, were not conditions to separate from artistic production, but forces that actively shaped it. The gallery embraced the social and political realities as material for dialogue and communal imagination. The collaborative and politically conscious art ecosystem now associated with Los Angeles predated its major institutions; the foundation was built through artist-run spaces that understood art as inseparable from the lived experiences, struggles, and goals of the communities surrounding them.

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Contact sheet portraying Suzanne Jackson
and the Granada Buildings by Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor.
© Suzanne Jackson. Image courtesy of the artist
and Ortuzar, New York.

Reframing the Landscape

Navigating LACMA's David Geffen Galleries

Olivia Gauthier
Tara Anne Dalbow

Exterior view of exhibition level,
David Geffen Galleries at LACMA.
Image courtesy of LACMA.
Photo: © Iwan Baan.

1

While driving back from a visit to the David Geffen Galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), digesting my experience of the new brutalist monument to the city designed by Peter Zumthor, I drove under a freeway overpass and was struck by its inset lights and lengthy curvature. Raised over the street, the expansive arc of concrete was uncannily mimicked by Zumthor's LACMA design. Touted as "a vision of what a global art museum might be in today's world,"¹ the new building—two decades in the making and costing three-quarters of a billion dollars—feels most legible as a sculptural representation of transportation infrastructure, an ode to the nineteenth-century invention of modern reinforced concrete and its impact on the landscape of a multicultural city like Los Angeles. Occupying the east side of the museum campus, the seamless one-story concrete building hovers some 30 feet overhead and curves across Wilshire Boulevard, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of some of the artworks from the street. Since the building plans were approved in 2019, the building has been polarizing, with some criticizing the aesthetics and others questioning how best to approach the redesign of the premier encyclopedic collection on the West Coast.²

It's been clear in reviewing others' reactions to the building plans that the debate hinges on the tensions between historical relevance and cultural innovation. If we view the role of museums as cultural arbiters and sites of cultural stewardship, the David Geffen Galleries are an example of how the unifying theme of architecture can create a link between the city and the museum collection as a catchall symbolizing the unification of the city's own diversity. The question becomes how successful this is.

One key argument against the new buildings has been a practical critique of its craftsmanship and its ability to securely maintain its collections.³ Ultimately, the conversation debates the theoretical and the practical.

Some feel, romantically, that the David Geffen Galleries idealize, uplift, and glamorize the aesthetics of an otherwise ubiquitous and un-sexy commuter passageway, recontextualizing it as a monumental, culturally significant symbol of the L.A. landscape. Others, more cynically, emphasize how this vision of the city comes from a non-local perspective; one could argue that the Swiss-born architect situates a cliché symbol of the city as the new locus of Miracle Mile, effectively erasing the legacy of the original Mid-Century Modern buildings designed by William Pereira, which had defined the Wilshire Boulevard landscape for decades.

There are redeeming moments across the finished campus that connect the new galleries to the original Pereira buildings: the return of Tony Smith's *Smoke* (1967) and Alexander Calder's original commission *Three Quintains (Hello Girls)* (1964), though these objects might be the only familiar friends in an otherwise completely upended museum campus. Gone is the regionalism of the mid-century modernism that Pereira cultivated throughout the city. For critics of Los Angeles claiming the city has "no history," unfortunately, the David Geffen Galleries miss an opportunity to connect to the history and legacy of architecture in the city, choosing instead to cater to a mindset that favors novelty over historical preservation, furthering a message that Los Angeles is a city unmoored from its own past. This all before even entering the building.

Once inside, the building's design continues to conjure a strong sense of transience in the way visitors move through it. Circumnavigating the flattened and sprawling maze of near-identical concrete rooms and exterior corridors, I found myself disoriented. As I weaved through the galleries, I overheard several visitors asking

gallery attendants which way the exit was. The flattening of the galleries resonates on a conceptual level; all the work appears on a single level, a conscious decision that resists nineteenth-century museology in its refusal to adhere to traditional art historical hierarchies defined by culture, region, and linearity. However, the results are a labyrinthine open concept plan that is more experimental in its statement than it is practical in its actuality. A wall text explains that the museum is “designed to encourage wandering,” suggesting that the museum-going audience could and should be their own authority over their viewing experience. While this mission is conceptually interesting, the effect is a cavernous, light-shifting tangle of galleries that are uneven in their scope and minimally narrativized, inviting the question of what a “global” audience prefers: subjective experience or objective authority.

Similarly, the building attempts a conceptual approach to lighting that at times is more compelling in theory than in practice. The museum wanted “light and shadow to work in dialogue,”⁴ and the building features floor-to-ceiling glass windows shrouded by Reiko Sudō-designed sputter-plated chrome curtains that filter light through various times of day, season, and weather.⁵ The shifting nature of the outside light poetically proposes daylight as another key characteristic of the building (and the city itself). But in reality, the lack of controlled lighting results in shadowy contrast, distracting glare, and a sense of theatricality that in many cases overpowers the art. I walked through a corridor of Thomas Joshua Cooper’s *Atlantic Basin* photographs (1987–2010) to see them eclipsed by the sun’s reflection that cast a glare off of the glazed frames, obscuring the images. An entire wall text is dedicated to promoting the building’s thesis on light in a gallery that claims to have works on view that respond to and reflect the light. Unfortunately, one must be there at the right time of day to see this claim come to fruition.

After my two visits to the new galleries I was left with a yearning for the old Pereira buildings and their mid-century modern design that carried a nostalgia of an older Los Angeles unburdened by globalization. The LACMA campus itself is a Frankenstein of different architectural styles which was arguably more interesting when the old buildings still existed, almost like an architectural history of the city itself. Now with the sleek, sculptural concrete Geffen building, the new LACMA proposes an aesthetic that appeals to a newer, more homogenizing global perspective that argues for new paradigms for art viewing. However, these paradigms seem to value aesthetics over substance and practicality.

Olivia Gauthier is a writer and gallery director based in Los Angeles. Her work has previously been published in *Art in America*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *BOMB*, and *Hyperallergic*. She holds an MA in art history from CUNY Hunter College.

1. “LACMA’s New David Geffen Galleries, Designed by Peter Zumthor, Open on April 19,” press release, April 15, 2026, <https://www.lacma.org/press/lacmas-new-david-geffen-galleries-designed-peter-zumthor-open-april-19>.

2. Christopher Knight, “LACMA, the Incredible Shrinking Museum: A critic’s lament,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2019; Robin Pogrebin, “As LACMA Gets a New Look, the Art Inside Will Change, Too,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2025.

3. A nonprofit group called “Save LACMA” began to advocate for a public voice even before the demolition of the Pereira buildings. Since the rebuilding has occurred, the group has been posting on their Instagram account with a focus on the concrete megalith’s apparent lack of climate control, raising concern for the conservatorship of the artworks on its walls. See [savelacma.org](https://www.savelacma.org).

4. Alexander Schneider, “Everything You Need to Know About LACMA’s New David Geffen Galleries,” *LACMA unframed*, May 8, 2026, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2026/05/08/everything-you-need-know-about-lacma-new-david-geffen-galleries>.

5. Alexander Schneider, “The Art of Transparency: Reiko Sudō’s Textile Innovation for LACMA,” *LACMA unframed*, May 5, 2026, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2026/05/05/art-transparency-reiko-sudo-textile-innovation-david-geffen-galleries>.



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Inaugural presentation in the David Geffen
Galleries (installation views) (2026).
© Museum Associates/LACMA.



Inaugural presentation in the David Geffen
Galleries (installation view) (2026).
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2

In his philosophical treatise *Poetics*, Aristotle aligns intelligence with the ability to perceive metaphor, to see “the similarity of the dissimilar.”¹ The curation of LACMA’s permanent collection in Peter Zumthor’s 110,000-square-foot inhabitable sculpture depends on this kind of associative, idiosyncratic thinking. It asks viewers to draw connections, spot similarities between what might appear divergent—even chaotic—in exchange for unexpected revelations and resonant meanings. Dispensing with traditional museological categories, works across mediums, geographies, and periods, arranged along a single wending plane, meet, challenge, and reframe one another. Organized loosely around the oceans of the world, sculptures, paintings, textiles, ancient artifacts, and decorative objects line the perimeter walls or rest on minimalist wooden tables. Others are gathered in intimate interior galleries—what one might think of as collecting pools—with the meeting points between them like eddies. Without oceanic markers or prescribed routes, you’re left to make your own way, following your own divining eye into territory that might feel radically open or confoundingly opaque, depending on your comfort with ambiguity and familiarity with art history.

The formal affinities are most readily legible. Diego Rivera’s *Flower Day* (1925) hangs beside the Mesoamerican sculpture *Goddess with Temple Headdress* (1325–1521 CE), whose stout, blocky form evidently inspired the Mexican painter’s volumetric approach to the human figure. A few doors down, the cylindrical women in Fernand Léger’s paintings create a similar rhythm. Elsewhere, the orange and fuchsia biomorphic curves of Craig Kauffman’s *Untitled Wall Relief* (1967/2008) echo Issey Miyake’s nearby molded resin bodice, *Plastic Body* (Fall/Winter 1980–81), while

the slick, lacquered finish anticipates the surface of Raymond Loewy and Studebaker’s classic car, *Avanti* (1963), stationed around the corner. In Lauren Halsey’s monumental gypsum wall relief, *Untitled* (2026), the car returns as an icon amid the hieroglyph-inflected figures and symbols chronicling the history of her hometown, Los Angeles. With each recurrence, resemblance reveals itself as variation, with motifs accumulating new perceptual and emotional weight as they transfigure under different temporal and material conditions.

The building itself offers its own pleasurable correspondences, perhaps none more affecting than the undulating folds of textile designer Reiko Sudō’s sputtered-chrome curtains lining the floor-to-ceiling glass panes that mimic the swaths of fabric draped about the Greek and Roman sculptures. When the sun begins to set, casting long, thin shadows across the floor, the steel, stone, and limpid light appear continuous. The building, a single, elevated plane, refuses the calcified hierarchies that customarily afforded paintings and sculptures (especially Western ones) privileged placement in museum layouts while quite literally marginalizing other cultures and disciplines. In their stead, an updated version of history emerges that accommodates a porous, reciprocal flow of influence and suggests a simultaneity of aesthetic development. Still, the lack of geographic and temporal coordinates means the conceptual stakes and the sociopolitical implications of the approach are often lost in translation.

Among the exceptions is “The Global Appeal of Blue-and-White Ceramics,” a display that gathers porcelain from across the seas and centuries, beginning with an Iraqi bowl from the Abbasid period (c. 801–900 CE) and ending with Stephanie Shih’s 梅國 (*Still life with chamoy and Dirty T Tamarindo*) (2025–26), a brilliantly saturated photograph of two vases, one Mexican one Chinese, overflowing with flowers, cacti, and candy. The presentation manifests the history of art as a perpetual game of telephone.

Functioning as a kind of visual key to the whole, it makes the migration of a formal language across continents easily comprehensible, proving that the right framing can engage and orient. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1923 that “fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another.”² Observing dozens of objects oriented around a central theme, it is easy to imagine that the many divergences are merely matters of translation.

Elsewhere, the intermingling of contemporary and canonical works carries a poignant political charge. It is, in part, harrowing to emerge from a passageway filled with Spanish colonial treasures—including casta paintings, like Miguel Cabrera’s *From Spaniard and Morisca, Albino Girl* (1763), which were used to enforce elaborate racial stratifications—to find rafa esparza’s large-scale adobe wall-relief depicting a Mexican migrant, their arms raised against a chain-link fence in *we are the mountain* (2019). Or, in the Atlantic wing, to see Winslow Homer’s *The Cotton Pickers* (1876), of Black American field laborers in the postbellum South, installed beside Betye Saar’s sculptural tableau *I’ll Bend But I Will Not Break* (1998), where a bright white cotton sheet suspended from the wall and appliquéd with the monogram KKK frames a wooden ironing board imprinted with an image of captured Africans packed tightly into a slave ship.

Though, these pairings, while heightening aesthetic and thematic relations, can disorient. With very little wall text and even less wayfinding, navigating the currents, pools, and intermittent eddies risks frustration. In a single sightline, for example, one might encounter a gold-ground devotional painting from medieval Italy, an assemblage-inflected grandfather clock outfitted with porcupine quills and rubies by a contemporary California-born artist, and a sepia-toned etching of an American bridge in the style of a Japanese woodblock print. In lieu of adequate labels, the museum

offers a virtual guide (accessible only through a QR code), which, while helpful, seems to undermine the embodied, intuitive experience that presumably justified removing the tombstones in the first place.

This layout requires viewers to act as interpreters, tracing formal and critical connections across six millennia of human production. At its best, it produces startling revelations. But such interpretations depend largely on prior expertise or at least an elementary fluency with art history; associative reasoning is a learned form of thinking, looking. The abrogated didactic framework was also a form of welcome. By withdrawing that invitation, the exhibition risks reinstating the barriers it claimed to dissolve, transferring the burden of explication onto the viewer without acknowledging who that might leave behind. Openness alone does not guarantee accessibility.

These are not irresolvable problems. One can imagine, for instance, one of the vast streaked and speckled concrete walls allocated to identifying different possible pathways or demonstrating this associative method: something not unlike the blue-and-white ceramic display where the cultural correlations are clarified. If the oceans are to remain the organizing conceit, subtle notations that distinguish them each from each other might allow for more, not less, curiosity. Constraints, by all accounts, foster ingenuity, creativity.

Translation, Benjamin reminds us, depends not merely on resemblance but on intelligibility. Small adjustments could steady more visitors amid the drift, without so much as slowing the current.

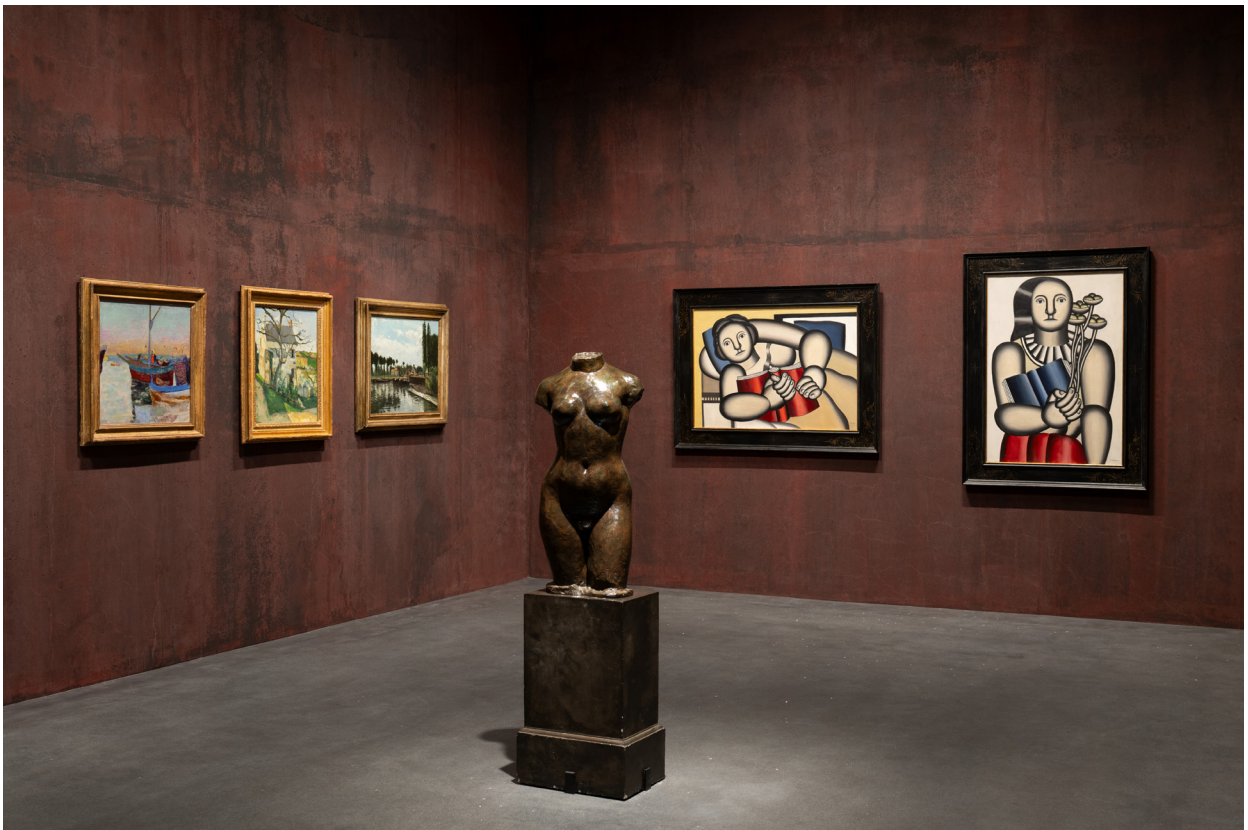
Tara Anne Dalbow is a writer living in Los Angeles. Her critical work can be found in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Artforum*, *Interview*, *Bomb*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *ARTnews*, *frieze*, *Momus*, *Art Basel*, *Artsy*, and elsewhere.

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 1459.

2. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 260.



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Inaugural presentation in the David Geffen
Galleries (installation views) (2026).
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Photo: Kristina Simonsen.

Interview with Betye Saar

Some seven years ago, during a spontaneous visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), I spent several silent minutes watching Betye Saar's video work *Eyeball* (1972)—a rare and experimental format for her—on a loop. Chaotically edited in quick cuts, the montage film features a menagerie of eyes collaged on top of one another, seemingly culled from myriad mass media sources and couched in mystical iconography. I realized then—with sharp clarity—how heavily Saar's work is concerned with seeing, being seen, and *the unseen*. Traditionally, a seer is a prophet, an oracle of sorts, whose spirit is preordained to visualize the future so that it may guide those who cannot envision it. This is, fundamentally, Saar's contribution to Black culture, to the history of woman makers in the West, and to the art world writ large.

That same day at MOCA, installed just beyond the static-filled screen showing her film, my gaze landed on Saar's seminal work *Gris-Gris Box* (1972), a narrow, vertical wooden box roughly the length of a xylophone. It is outfitted with a female doll figurine adorned with beads and feathers, framed by celestial ephemera including a crescent moon and planet-shaped globes, and surrounded by symbols that have been established as amulets of Saar's specific aesthetic lexicon: eyes, hands, hair, mirrors. This work is inspired by traditional West African gris-gris, versatile charm objects (often in the form of small, wearable pouches) that further developed as talismans used in Haitian Vodou (and Louisiana Voodoo) practices, designed to

protect—or bring good fortune to—the owner. Saar's pieces are often physically unimposing, yet filled with symbolic heft. Her juxtaposition of literal and conceptual scale creates a uniquely disorienting experience that causes the viewer to toggle between the present and the past, the interior and exterior, this world and another one.

Somewhat infatuated with the mixed-media assemblage, I asked my friend to take a film photograph of me standing right beside the work—the last shot on the roll. When I got it developed, the image was mysteriously cloudy and discolored as if it had been improperly processed, featuring nothing but my silhouette, the box's disfigured outline, and a strange streak of light illuminating the museum wall at right. I took this as an omen and embraced it as divine: the preservation of a moment that wasn't meant to be fully seen, only felt.

On July 30, 2026, Betye Saar would have turned 100 years old. Inspired by this centennial milestone, I've been reflecting on the impact her work has had on my relationship to representations of Black womanhood, our shared hometown of Los Angeles, and my own fixations on mythology, magic, ritual, and intuition. Saar's legacy as a folk artist—whose work imaginatively reuses and recontextualizes items traditionally coded as “Black” or “feminine” in order to challenge stereotypes surrounding race and domesticity—is singular. Even still, her acceptance into establishment institutions and mainstream conversations on contemporary art has been somewhat belated.

In many ways, we've caught up to Saar as dominant culture has grown increasingly more comfortable with alternative approaches to spiritual practice. Saar has long channeled an array of symbols, drawing from the visual vocabularies of various faith systems like astrology, African diasporic religions, and others. Saar often describes her



Image courtesy of the artist and
Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.
Photo: David Sprague.



Betye Saar, *Gris-Gris Box* (1972). Mixed-media assemblage, 29 × 8.5 × 2.75 inches.
© Betye Saar. Image courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

assemblages as containing traces of the found objects' anonymous once-owners—an energy that she imbues further with her own touch. She talks about her works with an unaffected freedom, making them seem like mixed-media gatherings of cosmically aligned happenstance, as if the things she collects simply arrange themselves into works of art. Magic comes to those who have faith in its possibility, and I have never doubted the conjuring abilities of Black women with something to say.

Born in Los Angeles, Saar spent her early years in Watts before her family settled in Pasadena, where she would develop her artistic sensibility in earnest—first taking art classes at Pasadena City College before matriculating with a degree in design from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1949, where her parents met as students decades before. Known for her mixed-media assemblage works that range from political and mystical to feminist and funny, her pieces poke fun at the madness of logic and critique race and gender-based prejudice through her animation of quotidian and forgotten objects into sacredness.

The artist's penchant for collecting ephemera began as a child: "If you're an assemblage artist, you don't throw away anything," Saar quipped during a Tuesday afternoon press preview at Roberts Projects in May. "Even now, if I'm walking down the street and I find a piece of paper that's really interesting...I still collect odd things and hope to recycle them into assemblage. Something has a little voice that says, 'Oh, take me home!'"

Most known for her assemblage and printmaking work, Saar's more obscured, earlier artistic work in the commercial and performance art worlds is the focus of *Let's Get It On: The Wearable Art of Betye Saar* (May 30–August 22, 2026), on view at Roberts Projects. This show, which doubles as a centennial celebration,

heavily features Saar's costume design sketches and creations for theater productions (namely at L.A.'s Inner City Cultural Center). The exhibition also includes hand-made objects (including decorative pennants) produced for her booth at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, which she started attending with her daughters in 1965, during the family's early days living in Laurel Canyon (where the artist still resides).

"Growing up, especially girls, they like to wear costumes and dress up and pretend to be other things, so that just seemed natural to me," Saar mused about her wearable pieces, often purchased from second-hand stores and reworked by the artist, having learned to sew from her mother who worked as a seamstress. "And then I found out if I present this in the right way, it can also be art."

Let's Get It On invites us into different aspects of Saar's practice as a young emerging artist. For instance, a vitrine is arranged with whimsically illustrated greeting cards featuring handwritten phrases like "Sinner or Saint (young is one of the things you ain't)," (spotlighting Saar's humor, which often lands with a wink), and a cluster of small enamelware objects representing the decorative arts business Saar cofounded with jewelry designer Curtis Tann in 1951 called Brown and Tann (Brown is Saar's maiden name). The exhibition also features jewelry Saar fashioned out of leather scraps (given to her by Alonzo Davis, cofounder of Leimert Park's historic Brockman Gallery), and some of her commercial artwork from the 1960s and '70s, including album artwork for jazz musician Bennie Maupin and book covers for poet and novelist Ishmael Reed.

This expression of her style through watercolor, collage, and illustration feels like an exciting departure from her better-known assemblage works. They offer another lens through which to view the evolution of her style, while

also revealing the reality of a working artist: to make a living, often one must explore different avenues of creation (or, pursue multiple streams of income) over the course of a career. “Anything that has to do with the arts is hard living,” Saar said. “I used to wonder: *Why is it so hard to be an artist?* [But] all the rest of the working people were jealous, because we could really do what we wanted to do. We could use our imaginations to do all sorts of things.”

As a folk artist and pivotal figure in L.A.’s Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s, Saar has lived long enough to see her position in the art world shift from exclusion to embrace. She saw beyond the status quo and restraints of the industry she inherited and was brave enough to imagine new futures, fashioning a sanctuary out of her creative legacy that continues to be a guide.

Evan Nicole Brown: Your art practice started with design [and] drawing greeting cards before evolving into assemblage. What did it feel like to find your voice, and to finally land on the medium that felt most aligned with you?

Betye Saar: Things came together for me when I saw the work of Joseph Cornell at the Pasadena Museum in 1967. He made these wonderful assemblages, essentially out of junk. They were beautiful and funny and fascinating. I thought, “Hey, I like old boxes and bits of metal. I collect stuff. I can do that, too.” I saw his work and realized that it was okay to make art out of anything.

ENB: How does mixed media assemblage invite viewers into your storytelling in a way that graphic design, illustration, or other mediums couldn’t quite achieve?

BS: I get most of my materials at swap meets and estate sales, and people give me old stuff. I’ve always felt that

old objects hold a power—they’ve survived, and they have a sense of the previous owner, they have a spirit. When I combine objects into my assemblages, sometimes their powers combine into a new entity. But it is also more personal as each viewer sees an object differently and might have a different interpretation of it. Its appeal is much more mysterious than graphic design.

ENB: Are there certain materials that tend to make you feel emotions like joy, confusion, sadness, curiosity? What are they and why do they inspire these emotions?

BS: My creative process begins with the materials. Usually it’s an interesting base, like a box or a table, and I think about what goes inside. Sometimes a particular object speaks to me and I find someplace for it to go. I guess my materials have a theme, like using a lady’s glove or vanity mirror makes the work about women. The tall ship symbolizes slavery. Clocks are about aging and the passing of time. Cages about freedom and constraint.

Everything belonged to somebody else before anyway, and it has that energy. And that energy on top of another energy. Am I creating another energy? Yes! I don’t know all those stories, but I have a feeling about them.

ENB: Speaking of your emotional landscape, it must be so exciting that your hundredth birthday is in July. What a blessing! You’re a Leo in the zodiac; you’re fierce, you have power, and I see that in your work.

BS: Yes, but I’m not thinking about that when I’m making the work. I know some artists do work like that, but I think that’s so silly—you lose the whole thing by forcing it, and by concentrating on something rather than doing it naturally.

ENB: How did you feel walking through the Roberts Projects show and seeing the range of work you’ve done across your life?

BS: That's my lifestyle! I'm a mother, I'm no longer a wife but I'm a daughter. I keep house, I make art, and draw pictures. I work in the garden, I like a variety of things to do in my life and always have.

ENB: Right, and the timeline installed in the exhibition shows how prolific you've been across several decades, cultural eras, and personal phases of your life. I was struck by some of the projects you were involved with in the '60s and '70s, during the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles. What was the lifestyle and community for Black artists like here at that time?

BS: What does Blackness mean? It's the color of your skin, it's a social upbringing, it's an attitude. It's mostly about the attitude. But labels are silly. I grew up in a racially mixed family, not that that was the important thing, but we never really talked about race. I don't think, until the Black revolution, people really talked about race. We just were.

ENB: Though some of your work is overtly Black and political, I also see how cultural mixing finds its way into your work; in your assemblage art you're often bringing together objects you've found from different places and owners, representing different cultural histories and styles.

BS: Right, it's about how you put it together. And it may say one thing to one person and another thing to somebody else.

ENB: How important is mythology to you—in terms of developing your own self-mythology as an artist, but also telling stories about Black culture and the world, more broadly?

BS: There's a power in the past, whether it's a tribal mask from Africa or an old vintage photograph. Someone once posed for that photo and held it and may have given it to someone they loved. The mask may have been used in some ritual to ward off the bad or welcome

the good. It's important to acknowledge the past because it influences the present and hopefully the future.

ENB: Have you noticed a shift in attitudes toward mysticism and spirituality compared to when you first started incorporating these images into your work, and making things like *Gris-Gris Box*?

BS: That's a tricky question, because the mystical images in *Gris-Gris Box* (1972) have been used for centuries: the constellations, eyes, et cetera. But now with technology, I think there has been some dilution of the power of these images and their concepts. You can buy a celestial mug on Amazon instead of laying on the lawn at night and looking up into the sky.

ENB: That's such a great point. How has the growing focus on technological advancement in society impacted your work—which incorporates so many antiques and objects from the past—over the years? Why have you decided to incorporate modern tech elements into some of your pieces at different points in your career, while still managing to tell stories of ancestral memory?

BS: Aside from occasionally using neon lighting, my work is decidedly low-tech. That said, I'm attracted to objects, and I've long been attracted to the beauty of computer parts, circuit boards, resistors and such. Ever since creating my artwork *Mojotech* at MIT in 1987, I've been collecting computer parts. It even goes back further to a movie I love called *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), in that I'm often attracted to an object for its shape and form and color and not what it is intended to be used for.

ENB: I see. That comes through in the way you tell stories with your objects—through reinvention. To my eye, you are a visual griot, telling stories of your travels, sharing commentary on current events, and keeping sacred rituals alive through your approach



Top: Betye Saar in her Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles studio (1976). Image courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Richard Saar.

Bottom: Betye Saar, *Kingdom of the Spirits* (1991). Mixed media assemblage. Image courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

to printmaking, assemblage, and other mediums. What role has text played in your practice? I know you often write and include poetry alongside your creations—how does that help further your creative mission, to combine words and images?

BS: I do like titles and how words flow and create an image or mood. I'm never at a loss for titles and never use "Untitled" with my artworks—well, maybe way back with some of my early prints. I have a little notebook that I write titles in and also a large envelope, because sometimes an idea comes to me in the early morning and I write it on a scrap of paper and put it in the envelope. Sometimes the title comes first and I create the artwork later. Sometimes I look through the notebook to help a work find its title. In my installation works, I usually have a line of poetry on the wall that helps explain what the piece is trying to convey, but I still prefer the viewer to interpret my work for themselves.

ENB: The way you give agency to the viewer to draw their own meaning from your work feels central to your practice, as does experiencing everyday wonder—like seeing beauty in things that have been forgotten, and witnessing magic in the mundane. Two places I've always considered non-traditional altars, in the sense that they feel energetically powerful, are my maternal grandmother's bedroom vanity and my paternal grandmother's rose garden. Do you have an altar? What does it look or feel like?

BS: I think my family would laugh and say that my whole house is an altar that is made up of mini altars. I'm a collector and I like to see my things. I have collections of mercury glass objects, "Tramp art," urns, blue things, red things. I like altars and their symmetry, so I tend to display my objects as such.

ENB: How would you describe your own personal oasis? What are the things you have there with you?

BS: My house is my oasis. I have my gardens and my tortoise. I have big windows to see out to the hills of my canyon, to see nature. I have my studios full of things to make art. I have everything I need.

This interview has been compiled from two conversations the writer had with Saar in 2024 and 2026.

Correction: An earlier version of this interview incorrectly stated that Betye Saar (1926-2026) celebrated her 100th birthday on July 30th. Saar passed away on July 26th at the age of 99. Carla dedicates this issue to her memory and the profound impact she made on L.A. art and culture.

Evan Nicole Brown is a Los Angeles-born writer, editor, and journalist who covers the arts and culture. Her work has been featured in *Architectural Digest*, *Dwell*, *frieze*, *Getty Magazine*, *L.A. Times Image*, *The New York Times*, *T Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Betye Saar holds more than 37 honors from the National Endowment for the Arts (1974, 1984); Studio Museum in Harlem (1989); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2019) and Academy of Arts and Letters (2021), among others. Saar has received five Lifetime Achievement Awards from the Congressional Black Caucus (2008); California African American Museum (2011); Edward McDowell Medal (2014); Museum of the African Diaspora (2017) and International Sculpture Center (2019).

In 1975, Saar's first solo museum show was held at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, where she was the first African American woman to have her art exhibited there. Early major solo exhibitions include *Black Girl's Window*, Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, CA (1972); *Betye Saar*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (1977); *Betye Saar: Rituals*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (1977); *Mojotech*, List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA (1987) and *Ritual and Remembrance*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles (1997).

Since 1961, Saar has been represented in more than 900 exhibitions. Saar's artwork is in numerous private collections and more than 90 public collections.

Artists in Motion

Featuring Todd Gray

Photos and interview
by Zachary Lucas

Los Angeles, and California at large, was built on dreams of exploration and expansion. Our city has always been fueled by communities of people with big ideas and makers with the skills and vision to bring them to life. As the city's composition has shifted with waves of migration, changing transit systems, and eras of cultural exchange, artists have been at the fore-front, documenting stories, unearthing buried histories, and inventing contemporary approaches to their chosen forms.

Across four issues of *Carla*, we will feature photographs of L.A.-based artists and their insights on what it means to create work while living in and moving around a city that is also in motion—these images, and these artists' insights, reveal how artists respond to a regional environment constantly in flux.

"I [want] to shine a light on colonialism locally [and give historical context] to what's directly underfoot," artist Todd Gray told us when we met at his studio in Leimert Park, a historically Black neighborhood in central L.A. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Gray interrogates local and global histories through his multilayered photographic objects, which often trace the long shadows of the transatlantic slave trade. Time is spatial in Gray's work—it's not linear, but radial. The histories of his ancestors and the migrants that inhabit Los Angeles mix with space imagery, plant life, and cultural references, overlapping to build a new and stronger mosaic of culture and connection.







Words by Todd Gray

I did a series of work about 20 years ago called *California Mission*. It was about the Jesuits who created the California Missions, which were cathedrals and farms spaced out a day's [horseback] ride from Mexico. They actually compelled the Indigenous to work on these and converted and brutalized them. That made me aware...of my ancestry, which is being snatched from Africa to come here as free labor. It makes me more aware of this land that I'm on, [which] is stolen.

It made me see that uncontested power and might is historical; it's one of the failings of humanity. It gave me a macro view of power, as opposed to the very specific view of power that's affecting me through the Atlantic crossing and the building of America.

When I was in Rome, you're walking around and seeing buildings from millennia ago or remains of antiquities, and I'm reminded of how brief we are here. Then when I get back to L.A., time disappears and everything is immediate.

There were so many international students during my time at Cal Arts, and a lot of 'em did not go back home. They stayed. Because L.A.'s got something. It's got an openness. I really do think it has something to do with the Gold Rush-slash-Hollywood. Dreamers chasing the pot of gold.





I first got my electric bike in 2017 [and started riding it to the studio]. On a bicycle, you see details, whereas you don't see those details in a car. I do believe, wholly, that the gathering of information on the unconscious [level] eventually will play itself out on the conscious level.

Bike riding breaks down class barriers [because] there's a certain class associated with the vehicle that you drive, [or an] amount of economic privilege that's associated with it.

When you're in a car you're always in a capsule—which means you can easily get lost in your thoughts 'cause you're in your own little cocoon moving through the city.

Earlier in my career, this very wealthy collector sent their driver and car to pick me up to meet them at their collection. It was a chauffeur-driven Bentley.

I recall being in the car at a stop sign and a younger person staring at me with death eyes. Because [I was being] associated with the elite.... It gave me a reality check to [ask] why I'm in the game. What's valuable in the game of life and in the game of art? It makes me double down because I want to leave a clear record of how I saw society was operating.



It's always a pleasure to come to [the studio]—a place that you have freedom in. But also, there's a tension as you're leaving this residential area [by my home] and coming into an urban environment that has tension, [and] it follows me into the studio. I think it's the grain of sand in the oyster that helps create the pearl. That tension makes me conscious of what's going on...it makes me sensitive.

I believe that architectural space really contributes to mental space.





When you see decay, you're not seeing the possibility.... I see possibilities that are there. Dominant culture or media will have you look at something and say, there's only one way to read this, because we work in binaries. Fortunately, as an artist, I'm able to open up and see there are multiple possibilities that I'm looking at.... What is coming at me is what I'm projecting.

I am an artist because I want to exercise my voice, and by exercising my voice I can challenge and speak to power.

I really gravitate to what I don't understand. I embrace what I don't understand. The view of life that's left behind by those in power is called "history," and it's skewed.

The view of life by artists is more realistic because it's the people's point of view.





Top: Rokhsana Pirouzmand, *Land* (installation view) (2026). Ceramic, steel, contact mic, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and OXY ARTS. Photo: Gina Clyne.

Bottom: Rokhsana Pirouzmand, *everything was once something else (the land was the sea, the sea was the land)* (installation view) (2026). JOAN, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the artist and JOAN. Photo: Evan Walsh.

Roksana Pirouzmand at OXY ARTS and JOAN

February 12–April 11, 2026
and February 21–May 2, 2026

Roksana Pirouzmand's solo show *everything was once something else*, recently on view at OXY ARTS, invited visitors to step onto a thin metal platform that held a trio of ceramic sculptural installations of figures or body parts, each mounted on tall stilts of thick, flexible wire. A sign near the platform cautioned that the floor was intentionally uneven, and sure enough, it buckled and snapped under me as I moved slowly across it. The shock waves of my steps translated into movement in the sculptures, a direct cause-and-effect that felt simultaneously horrifying and empowering. *Wave* (2026), comprising two clusters of wire topped with hands, resembled cattails bent towards one another by the wind; as I walked, the hands bobbed endlessly and smacked into each other with a clang. Heads crashed in *Land* (2026), transforming what may have looked like a tender nuzzle in moments of stasis into a violent grinding. Not long into the run of the show, these repeated corrosive touches had taken their toll, visible in amputated fingers, ceramic dust, and worn-down noses. These were sculptures meant to bend and break, and to implicate viewers in their demise.

The show at OXY, which also included several smaller

sculptures and wall-mounted clay reliefs, constituted one half of a two-venue exhibition that continued at JOAN, marking Pirouzmand's most ambitious presentation to date. Across both spaces, the artist commits to clay, casting aside any hint of preciousness and instead iterating, experimenting, and testing its limits as a material. In both form and content, Pirouzmand's work invokes the experience of exile—one the artist, who relocated to Los Angeles from Iran just over a decade ago, knows firsthand. Exile wears away sense memories—the smells, textures, tastes, and sounds archived in the body over years of living in a place one calls home—that give way incrementally as the body acquires the grammar of another country and a foreign culture. "Home" persists as a diminishing trace; what accrues is a specific grief, an alienation not only from somewhere you can no longer reach, but from the self that belonged there.

Diasporic experiences are almost always underscored by longing, but to be a part of the Iranian diaspora today is to have the dull heartache of distance compounded by a sense of helplessness in the face of devastating American military action. Pirouzmand's 2022 series *I was praying at home while you were dying on the streets*—ceramic wall works featuring drawn figures praying and meditating, tethered to one another and the earth by their hair—thematized these issues in response to her experience witnessing the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests from

afar. In a short video produced for Frieze the following year, the artist's exasperation is evident as she laments being "exposed to all this trauma" while unable to do much about it.¹ Her latest work builds on the frustration of being a digital bystander—a condition many of us, exiled or not, can relate to—while also asking us, in ways subtle and profound, to bear witness to our own complicity in violence and its terrible wake.

I didn't fully realize it at the time, but the rumblings generated by the sculptures on the heaving platform at OXY were linked, in real time, to works on view at JOAN. There, stacks of disembodied hands and floating bodies echoing forms at OXY were pushed to even greater visceral intensity, surreality, and poetic resonance. Near the entrance at JOAN was a figure on the floor with no head or torso, aptly titled *kneeling, sinking* (2025). Cut off at the hip, the sculpture's bowels—or perhaps its womb—had been replaced by a plate of steel inset into the pelvis and etched with a haunting drawing: a child lying on the back of an adult who appears to be sinking downward, one leg already subsumed. The steel plate was slicked with a pool of water rippling from energy transmitted by a "sound exciter," a tiny transducer that converts audio signal—in this case the crackling metallic sounds of the platform at OXY—into vibration. The effects of my steps, and those of every other visitor, traveled much farther than I had known, entangling each of us in slow damage staged miles away.

Sonic vibrations recorded at OXY, ranging from gentle to

aggressive, caused artworks at JOAN to react and shape-shift. Slabs of ceramic set on steel shelves shook vigorously, eventually cracking into pieces that resembled drought-stricken desert landscapes. Three pairs of chairs invited visitors to sit and feel the pulses that were agitating clay and water on the seats opposite. The visitor-driven movement that had set clay in motion at OXY was here transformed into an alchemical kineticism, allowing the viewer to watch and sense rather than participate. That distancing from action and responsibility—into a mode of subtle but palpable voyeurism—became more acute during the second half of the show’s run at JOAN, when the show at OXY had closed and no further vibration was transmitted to the exciters. Visitors then arrived to a kind of aftermath, with dismembered fingers and a fine dusting of clay on the floor. The only work still in motion was *spring* (2025–2026), a cracked, hollow human body made of clay, lying on a steel box with water burbling through the figure’s palms and face, like an embalming without end.

The subtitle of the JOAN presentation—*the land was the sea, the sea was the land*—also invokes the destabilization of displacement and the feeling of psychic drift familiar to many who live in diaspora. The exhibition’s own structure performs this drift: Divided across two venues, connected only—and just temporarily—by transmitted vibration, it offers no vantage point from which the whole can be seen at once. Like photos sent over spotty Wi-Fi, offering

evidence of horror or reassuring signs of survival, the view comes in fragments: an image here, a sensation there, the real and the surreal blurring together in physical space and in the space of dreams and nightmares. Bits of violence assimilate into minds and bodies, threatening to break open vessels always already riven in two.

1. “Roksana Pirouzmand: ‘I was praying at home while you were dying on the streets,’” *frieze*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.frieze.com/video/roksana-pirouzmand-i-was-praying-home-while-you-were-dying-streets>.

Nancy Holt at MAK Center for Art and Architecture

February 25–
May 24, 2026

I drove across the country last summer, from Los Angeles to St. Louis in the sweltering heat. I stopped in Phoenix and Albuquerque. I walked along the Arkansas River in Tulsa. I watched in silence as fireworks exploded in the distance on the Fourth of July, bursts of colorful light illuminating the vast farmlands on either side of the interstate. These poetic interventions become a way of keeping time on a long journey—together they form an assemblage of coincidences and encounters that mirror the prolonged pauses and sudden crescendos of a life well-lived. This kinship between physical expanses and emotional landscapes was at the heart of the latest Nancy Holt exhibition at the MAK Center for Art and

Architecture. Spanning photography, photo-drawings, video, and sound, *Nancy Holt: Light and Shadow Poetics* laid bare the durational quality of the artist’s practice. The exhibition paid homage to the open-ended processes, meandering paths, and unexpected detours that led to and resulted from Holt’s monumental works in public space.

Holt (1938–2014) was known for taking long drives across the American West, sometimes with her husband and collaborator Robert Smithson or fellow land artist Michael Heizer and other times on her own. The audio work *U.S. 80 SOLO* (1976–79) documents Holt’s 1976 road trip from Salt Lake City to New York after completing her landmark sculpture *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76). The four-part sound piece was played in its entirety at a listening session hosted by the MAK Center in April, while an excerpt from the artist’s passage through Nebraska played on a loop at the entrance to the exhibition. In a series of voice recordings, Holt reads aloud the names of several towns she passes—Avoca, Walnut, Atlantic—holding certain syllables as if singing a song. She reviews the motels where she stays, the cheap wine and clams she tried at a roadside restaurant. This narrative ritual set the tone for Holt’s exhibition. With each click of the recording device—on and off and on again—Holt’s audio work is as much about absence as it is about presence, about the waxing and waning of geographic landscapes and psychic states over time.

Comprising 22 black-and-white prints, Holt’s *Light and*



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Top: Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels* (1978).
16mm film, color, sound, 26 minutes.
Image courtesy of the artist and
MAK Center for Art and Architecture.
Photo: Joshua Schaedel.

Bottom: Nancy Holt, *Light and Shadow
Photo-Drawings* (1978). Inkjet prints on archival
rag paper made from 35mm transparencies,
each 19.5 x 30 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and MAK Center for Art and Architecture.
Photo: Joshua Schaedel.

Shadow Photo-Drawings (1978) lined the walls of the Clyde Chace Studio at the Schindler House. Transparent arcs and slivers of light intersect, eclipse, and cast shadows upon one another in these prints, bringing to mind the phases of the moon. Made by shining a light through various cutouts and capturing the resulting forms on 35mm film, Holt's photo-drawings were a perfect counterpart to the surrounding architecture. Just as Holt's oeuvre refers to the passage of time, so too do the spaces of the Schindler House transform throughout the day. Designed by Austrian-American architect R.M. Schindler, the modernist structure is in constant dialogue with the natural environment, the diffused light of a foggy Los Angeles morning generating an entirely different viewing experience than the warm hues of a late afternoon sun. This exhibition venue complemented the durational quality of Holt's work, inviting the audience to return again and again.

These cycles and recurrences were echoed across *Light and Shadow Poetics*. In *California Sun Signs* (1972), a series of photographs depicting signage for restaurants, liquor stores, schools, and motels, the word 'sun' appears in each establishment's name, from "White Sun Guest Ranch" and "Sun Gold Date Shop" to "Sunshine Pre-School" and "Sun-Ray Lodge." Through this meditation on the word sun—and all the memories, interpretations, and sensations it evokes—Holt constructs a visual poem for the viewer, revealing a playful dynamic between language and

landscape. As with *U.S. 80 SOLO*, it is only by traversing large swaths of space and time that such patterns and repetitions begin to emerge. In a sense, Holt used her long journeys to open the doors of perception, welcoming the moments when boredom begins to teeter on the edge of delirium and ordinary sights start to deviate into the otherworldly.

Perhaps most emblematic of Holt's spatio-temporal musings is *Sun Tunnels*. The earthwork consists of four large concrete cylinders arranged in an X-formation in Utah's Great Basin Desert. The MAK Center exhibition included video and photo documentation of the work. Shot from the same perspective—looking straight through one of the cylinders—30 images record the gradual changes in light and shadow that transform the interior of each tunnel over time. Like an industrial sundial, Holt's tunnels are activated by their surroundings, in continuous conversation with the sun, the sky, and the desert landscape. They serve as both containers and portals, alluding to an infinite beyond without ever showing us the full picture.

"The sky is pure blue," says Holt in *U.S. 80 SOLO*, her voice sounding increasingly fatigued as she makes her way through Iowa, Illinois, and Ohio. I could feel that restlessness in my body on my own cross-country drive, hours spent looking through the same window at what Holt calls the "asphalt ribbon" ahead. Until, slowly but surely, a sense of calm crept in. As Holt reaches New Jersey, the place where she grew up,

the worn out tone of her previous recordings gives way to a renewed burst of energy. I felt it too as I got closer to Missouri last summer—the relief and familiarity of the home stretch. The air began to hold more moisture; the environment grew more lush and green. Holt's power is in her ability to capture these subtle shifts. The artist constructs a frame or commits to a format—be it a concrete cylinder, a curved cutout, or a repeated word—and allows time, space, light, and sound to fill the voids.

Presented in conversation with the introspective and communal spaces of the Schindler House, *Light and Shadow Poetics* made a strong case for this collaboration between artist and environment. The exhibition situated Holt's long drives and diaristic entries as far more than studies for her monumental earthworks. They are all part of the same brilliant constellation, living sculptures of the quiet expansions and contractions of time.

***Marooning Bodies* at Feminist Center for Creative Work**

February 9–April 18, 2026

The smell of incense consumed me as I entered Feminist Center for Creative Work (FCCW). In the gallery space, a large, patchwork coat hung from the ceiling, and a wooden table was piled with books and loose papers. On the back wall, Spanish moss hovered over a white altar where winding branches sat, stretching upward. To my right, notes and drawings were tacked against



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Mims and Mười, *Marooning Bodies: Prototype as Prophecy* (installation views) (2026).
 Images courtesy of the artists and Feminist
 Center for Creative Work (FCCW).
 Photo: Evelyn Hang Yin.

a maroon-painted wall. This color represents maroon communities, independent societies formed by enslaved Africans who were able to escape colonial settlements across the transatlantic slave trade.¹ The FCCW exhibition, *Marooning Bodies: Prototype as Prophecy*, presented by artists Mims and Mùrì, pulled from these rich histories to imagine possible futures.

A marooning body is about leaning into incompleteness to find power. Philosopher Dr. Bayo Akomolafe describes it as questioning “how brokenness can redeem us from the incarceration of wholeness.” After their self-liberation from captivity, maroon communities turned to remote landscapes—from the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and Virginia to the jungles of the Guianas—for temporary or permanent freedom. Since maroon communities were formed by people from various parts of Africa, there was no previously shared culture to tether to in these new civilizations. As a result, they had to adapt to the environment but also to various languages, governing styles, and social values. Through cultural exchange, the communities unified with agreed-upon leadership styles. For example, a common trend in maroon communities was the Kuutu, a routine meeting where leaders and community members debated issues, both big and small. Maroon communities were built through a unified understanding that adaptation was a shared effort.² As the FCCW’s artist-in-residence for last spring, Mims’ exhibition (presented with collaborator Mùrì) challenged us to

imagine similar worlds that might operate outside of oppressive systems. At the core of the presentation was an immersive Marooning Bodies game, designed by Mims to build a fictional community by collectively imagining a future centered on equitable governance, healing, and creation. Packed into a cylindrical wooden container that Mims describes as a “time capsule for the future,”³ the game includes a guidebook, a small bottle filled with a scent to inspire the group’s speculative environment, and card decks that describe the community practices of animals for inspiration. Throughout the run of the show, the artists hosted two free 3-hour game sessions where groups of up to six people delved into the process of building a shared community, using the guidebook to prompt discussions around creating communal systems and a reflection on the socio-political issues participants are facing today. Players were asked to reflect on personal memories—like how they learned from mistakes as a child—before digging into larger questions, like the type of biome they’d like to inhabit or the way they’ll resolve issues within their community. For Mims, *Marooning Bodies* extended her practice of creating interactive pieces that are embodied by viewers, often while taking part in conversations around oppressive systems like the prison industrial complex. “How do we extricate ourselves from any systems that are oppressing us, and how do we do so with our whole bodies?” Mims said during our conversation over the phone. Based in L.A., Mims and Mùrì first

collaborated while attending the University of Southern California. *#jailbeddrop* was the artists’ first collaboration, an immersive performance that prompted community discussions and interaction. When Mims began developing the *Marooning Bodies* game in 2020, she felt compelled to return to and explore *#jailbeddrop*’s blend of performance, installation, and community facilitation.⁴

The exhibition was split into three sections: an archive of the game’s development (where gameplay tools like dice and stopwatches were displayed alongside the artist’s research) led into a section of written notes gathered from previous game sessions. Composed on loose slips of paper, the handwritten notes shared past participants’ approaches to conflict resolution within their imagined communities and revealed ideas shared by participants who have played the game in Ghana, Senegal, Morocco, as well as USC, CSU East Bay, Women and Dance Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, and Norco Prison. Third, a collection of what Mims refers to as “Future Relics”—works of art inspired by the futures imagined by groups who have played the game—hung from the ceiling and rested atop pedestals throughout the gallery.

Chain Gang in Blue: The Bower Dress (2026), for instance, was a dress designed by Phlemuns, a Black-owned fashion label based in L.A., made of uniforms from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Denim and lace ribbons flow from the body of the dress—rather than disposing of the

past, this dress imagines it as an opportunity for creation and beauty. Against an opposite wall, a model for a Collective Prayer Stool (to be completed by artist Kia McCormick and used in a performance by Mims after the exhibition's conclusion) offered a structure that might encourage the types of conversation that the game fosters—a space where people might pray and dream together.

"I look at these art objects as tools for rehearsal," Mims told me. "How do we rehearse some of the future histories that we're dreaming up, the future communities and the future systems we want to have?" *Marooning Bodies* isn't a final product. It is an evolving open studio that lives on beyond the exhibition's closing. Like the game, the work isn't meant to be witnessed and forgotten—it is meant to be rehearsed. A marooning body may be emergent, but by finding empathy to grow alongside other people's fragments, together creating a whole, the body becomes part of a community—the puzzle is complete.

An earlier version of this article misrepresented the artists' roles in the Marooning Bodies project. Mims was the FCCW artist-in-residence and is the sole creator of Marooning Bodies. They brought Muriel in as a collaborator for the *Prototype as Prophecy* installation at FCCW.

1. Ayana Young, "Dr. Bayo Akomolafe on Slowing Down in Urgent Times [Encore]," *for the wild*, June 2020, podcast, mp3, 87:24, <https://forthewild.world/listen/dr-bayo-akomolafe-on-slowing-down-in-urgent-times-encore-285>.

2. Kenneth Bilby and Diana Baird N'Diaye, "Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Culture in the Americas," in *1992 Festival of American Folklife* (Washington, DC: Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 54–61, <https://folklife-media.si.edu/docs/festival/program-books/FESTBK1992.pdf>.

3. Marooning Bodies, "About the Game," <https://www.marooningbodies.com/play>.

4. Sophie Bress, "Marooning Bodies," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2025, <https://brooklynrail.org/2025/10/dance/marooning-bodies/>.

Celeste Dupuy-Spencer at Jeffrey Deitch April 18–June 6, 2026

When Celeste Dupuy-Spencer was a child, she aspired to study archaeology, not art. The appeal of the discipline did not stem from Dupuy-Spencer's desire to uncover dusty relics, but to excavate the human need to belong. "You see the paintings in Pompeii and you think you had an idea of how the people lived but then you see a piece of graffiti or the dog frozen in time, and you go, 'oh God I feel I know how it feels like. I feel like I'm standing there before Vesuvius exploded,'" she explained in an interview. For her, the profession was akin to "being a time explorer and a magician."¹

Dupuy-Spencer, who died in April at the age of 46,² went on to become a painter with a visual oeuvre that's archaeological in scope; her paintings are acts of divination that preserve the minutiae of living as recorded history. Yet it's hardly coincidental that Dupuy-Spencer name-checked Pompeii to explain her longstanding fascination with archaeology. In a recent posthumous exhibition at Jeffrey Deitch, *Burning in the Eyes of the Maker*, the late artist painted propulsively in the Expressionist tradition, with a color palette of rotting hues, like a pile of rancid fruit. Paralleling the ash and pumice

that famously entombed the ancient Southern Italian city, this substantial collection of 36 paintings considered how fire acts as both cleansing agent and catalyst for destruction. At our tense inflection point in human history, Dupuy-Spencer collapsed together threads of myth, history, and fantasy to gesture toward layered questions of human belonging, desire, and harm. Her works make viewers sit with these discomfiting images of chaos rather than looking away.

Dupuy-Spencer once spoke of trying to capture "what it feels like to be living in what really is the fall of human civilization" in her work, which she acknowledged felt somewhat "impossible."³ But sometimes the vantage point from inside the storm is, if not the clearest view, certainly the most honest. Some of the show's most outstanding pieces contextualize the rote militarization of everyday life in America, particularly *Bones* (2022), in which Dupuy-Spencer used a brushy style that imbues choppy emotions into the scene. In it, a young man is being sent off to fight in a civilian militia by his proud parents, presumably the descendants of the Confederate skeleton lying supine on their porch. The elderly couple packs their son's vest with extra gun clips, while shoving last night's leftovers into his hand, right before he enters the line of fire alongside others donning familiar red hats. (In the past, Dupuy-Spencer depicted the January 6, 2021 siege on the Capitol, and the encroachment of religious fundamentalism into U.S. politics.⁴) In *Back to Where the Start Ended*





Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *The Shape of the Rock That's Hurling Towards the Sea* (2022). Oil on linen, framed, 95 x 210 x 3.5 inches. Image courtesy of the Estate of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer and Jeffrey Deitch, New York and Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White / JW Pictures.

(“A Greeting to You from the Mud”) (2024), Dupuy-Spencer painted a brutal scene of Israeli soldiers marching through Gaza, looking “frazzled and lost” while confronting a larger soldier wielding a flamethrower (which Dupuy-Spencer described as “the giant golem of their past”).⁵ Dupuy-Spencer, who was Jewish, often spoke out against the state of Israel and advocated for Palestinian rights throughout her lifetime. On Instagram she described the work as an attempt to “envision history as not as a straight line” but rather “a hall of mirrors.” Throughout the exhibition, and particularly in paintings such as this one, Dupuy-Spencer critiques the political machinations that have led to a devastating war, and our world teetering on the edge.

The largest painting in the show, the sprawling *The Shape of the Rock That’s Hurling Towards the Sea* (2022), situated mythology alongside present-day catastrophes fueled by fire. Across four huge linen panels, Dupuy-Spencer painted kinetic scenes that warp into one another across the canvas. These images subvert the wondrous myth of evolution, devolving instead into a darker and more honest vision that depicts humanity’s propensity for destruction. In the first panel, ancient animals like saber tooth tigers and dodos, many of them long extinct due in part to the destructiveness of humanity, amble through treacherous landscapes. Medusa, cursed against her will to bear a head of snakes, is seen in the largest second panel with half of

her face engulfed by flames—a moment of transformation and, thus, renewal, despite her terrified facial expression. A third panel sees various ships at war amidst choppy seas, a fire sealing at least one’s fate and another’s triumph. Close by, smudged brushstrokes show an armed border patrol agent and a row of people, sitting on the ground by the officer’s car, directly before him as he aims to fire. These juxtapositions allow viewers to confront and draw meaning from the works on their own terms, rather than having Dupuy-Spencer ascribe literal interpretations. Still, an apocalyptic air pervades the scenes she portrays, forcing the viewer to confront various ills and evils while attempting to connect the dots.

Much like the archaeologists that fascinated her as a child, Dupuy-Spencer’s paintings both excavate—questioning what conditions led to our current polycrisis—and document for future generations that may dig through the past. With time, they might be able to determine, definitively, if this moment in America, as immortalized by Dupuy-Spencer, was merely a trial by fire, or fated to smolder until only the ashes remained.

1. “Celeste Dupuy-Spencer on her powerful new Artspace edition,” Phaidon (blog), <https://www.phaidon.com/en-us/blogs/stories/celeste-dupuy-spencer-on-her-new-artspace-edition>.

2. Alex Williams, “Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Painter of Hotly Topical Images, Dies at 46,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/17/arts/design/celeste-dupuy-spencer-dead.html>.

3. “Celeste Dupuy-Spencer on her powerful new Artspace edition,” Phaidon.

4. Alex Williams, “Celeste Dupuy-Spencer.”

5. @_celesters_, “Back to Where the Start Ended (“A Greeting to You from the Mud”), 2024, Oil on canvas, 60 × 75 inches...This painting is trying to envision history as not a straight line but as more of a lasagna...” Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/C4KsiOUr7AD/?img_index=1.

(L.A. in N.Y.) Manuel Neri and Ruby Neri at Salon 94

March 5–April 11, 2026

I met Manuel Neri near the end of his life at his studio/home in the Bay Area. I was visiting with his daughter Ruby, and her family, the artist Torbjörn Vejvi and daughter Sigrid, who were visiting up from L.A. at the time. Manuel’s place, a stately Congregationalist Church embedded in a garden, was partly converted to exhibit his work: abstracted female forms made of plaster, stone, or metal, framed by individual walls. Never having encountered his art before, I was surprised to see how it resonated with Ruby’s art, with its bright colors and sculpted figures.

Before I knew Ruby, I was familiar with Reminisce, the graffiti name she used when spray painting horses in San Francisco in the ’90s. After a friend pointed it out on a Muni kiosk, I’d see them all around, often painted near other murals done by Ruby’s friends. Her graffiti style stood out because it didn’t include the elaborately-painted letters or drips, sad sacks, hoboos, or drunks of the other members of her DIY crew. Just proud, directly illustrative, occasionally nostalgic horses.

Robby Herbst



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Top: Ruby Neri, *Ghosts* (2025).
Glazed ceramic, 33.5 × 20 × 20 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.
Photo: Pierce Sapper.

Bottom: Manuel Neri, *Mujer Pegada*
Series No. 7 (1985/2005). Bronze, oil-based
pigments, 79 × 54.5 × 12.25 inches; edition of 4.
Image courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.
Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Today, both Neri are known for their depictions of women in sculpture. Last spring, art viewers had the opportunity to see simultaneous side-by-side exhibitions of the father and daughter's work in New York City. Salon 94 hosted *It's What's in The Ether*, featuring new ceramic pieces by Ruby. In two adjacent galleries they also hosted *Manuel Neri: Selected Works by Ruby Neri*. A second location downtown at Andrew Kreps Gallery continued Manuel's show. The opportunity to look between the exhibitions of father and daughter in such close proximity provided the chance to reflect on artistic inheritance as well as the culture's shifting understanding of how the female figure might communicate in art.

Manuel Neri, who passed away in 2021 at the age of 91, is considered a significant American sculptor. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Bay Area Treasure Award from SFMOMA. Despite these accolades, though, he's widely encountered through a footnote: He was a co-organizer of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* reading at Six Gallery in 1955, a poetry event understood as an opening salute of America's counterculture.¹ Yet when discussing her father and his artwork at a walk-through of Salon 94 this spring, Ruby described him as "conservative." And while Manuel may be associated with Beat culture, abstract expressionism, California funk, and the Bay Area figuration movement, his bohemian attitudes regarding labor and lifestyle don't

necessarily correlate with contemporary representations of gender.

His sculptural female nudes were sites for his operations with a chisel or bright flashes of color. They are compelling artworks but his figures lack a distinct "identity" or correlated "voice." At Salon 94, *Mujer Pegada Series No. 7* (1985, cast 2005), made of bronze and pigment, stood in relief against a wall, about six and a half feet tall. While the figure's legs were visible, her shoulders and much of her arms were submerged into the wall, her facial features hinted at, but not present, incapable of expression. Across her body's surface, Manuel developed a thrilling language of contrasting textures and colors; the figure is mostly ochre, though a bold-blue almost-rectangle frames her midsection. Her upper chest down to her legs carry yellow puffs of pigment. The figure, based on his longtime model Mary Julia, becomes a trace for Manuel's mark-making rather than a translation of the figure's individuality or life experiences.

In a 1998 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Manuel mentioned that he had received critical letters from the Guerrilla Girls for the way he was "attacking the female form" in his art. The interviewer, Cathy Curtis, also made note of Manuel's "virile swagger" and the fact that he had been married four times. Manuel often defended his use of female bodies as subject matter for his work, stating that they represent a universal humanism.² Manuel's works push together the bold formalism of abstract expressionism

(shape, texture, mark, color) with the classicism of figurative sculpture. Manuel said he used women's bodies as a "vehicle to carry my ideas."³ In this sense, these nudes of Manuel's can be considered "conservative," as they were vessels for his artistic ambitions and perhaps sublimations of more abstracted impulses.

Ruby, on the other hand, talks directly *through* her nudes. She told me she identifies with Joan Brown, an occasional model and former wife of Manuel's, and her approach to the figure, in which formal techniques are used as a tool in art's ultimate communicative and expressive agenda, rather than its end.⁴ In the gallery walkthrough at Salon 94, Ruby said the "ether" in her show's title refers to "spirit." This notion of spirit is represented throughout the show in such motifs as smoke, vapors, deities, animals, and ghosts. They lend her figures their essential life force.

Ghosts (2025), for instance, is about three feet tall and decorated with colorfully cartoonish repeating motifs and shapes. Two bulbous yellow and orange flowers sit at its top, and below them are a ring of yellow-eyed ghostlike figures. The ghost's black drawn-on lips smile behind and above a ring of women, all in brightly colored skirts, topless, their booted feet pointing outwards spunkily. Like all of Ruby's current work the piece embraces a bawdy, spirited fullness. Its playful spray-paint-like glaze and circle of women tell a story of interconnected generations growing, dying, living.

In January of 2025, along with many other artists

in L.A., Ruby lost her home to the Eaton Canyon fire. In the Salon 94 exhibit, in another three-foot-tall ceramic sculpture, a figure lounges nude with a matchstick in her lips. From her mouth, she blows billows of colorful smoke. A group of smaller women stand below her, enduring the weight of the reclining smoking figure, who appears to be a deity. The work, *Let The Unknown Pass Over* (2026), alludes to the grit and soul demanded to survive life's chaos and perhaps the community that supports us when we do. While Manuel Neri's "virile swagger" may rightly strike some as out of step with our time, as his sculptures contain an element of gendered displacement, Ruby has inherited her father's figurative tradition. But crucially, she translates a different narrative energy into her objects, imbuing them with her own vital life force, portraying a fuller version of the female experience.

1. In a 2008 interview, Manuel stated that he and Peter Forakis invited Allen Ginsberg to read at the Six Gallery after hearing him previously at a poetry reading held at a Berkeley moving company. This remembrance seems at odds with the narrative surrounding Neri's involvement with the evening. In general, he's credited with being one of the organizers of the famous Six Gallery reading. Wally Hendricks is generally credited for the invitation. Manuel Neri, "Oral History Interview with Manuel Neri," by Robert Matteson, *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, May 6, 2008, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-manuel-neri-13699>.

2. Manuel Neri, "Oral History Interview with Manuel Neri," by Robert Matteson.

3. Ibid.

4. Joan Brown, "Oral History Interview with Joan Brown," by Paul J. Kalstrom, *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, July 1–September 9, 1975, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-joan-brown-13063>.

Photo Essay Contributor and Featured Subject

With a background in micro-mobility transit design and a long history in the cycling industry, Zachary Lucas takes photos to make sense of the spaces we share and the intricate systems at play in different environments. His work approaches the urban center as a diverse ecosystem and celebrates the miraculous moments in the mundane processes of daily life.

Todd Gray (b. 1954, Los Angeles, CA, lives and works in Los Angeles, CA and Akwidaa, Ghana) is a photo-based artist whose work aims to destabilize assumptions about the veracity of photography and provoke reconsiderations of long-accepted norms and beliefs surrounding the medium, including the role of the viewer in constructing meaning. His lush photo assemblages are composed of images ranging from imperial European gardens, West African landscapes, and architecture, to rock icons and portraits of the artist himself, all carefully arranged to create critical juxtapositions that examine ideas of African diaspora, colonialism, societal power structures, and dominant cultural beliefs. With an eye informed by his four decades as a professional music photographer as well as his B.F.A. and M.F.A. from California Institute of the Arts, Gray's photo sculptures are infused with a certain subversive beauty, reflecting his strong sense of visual aesthetics.

Review Contributors

Andrea Gyorody is a curator, art historian, and critic. Recent projects include solo exhibitions of Jeni Spota C., Karl Haendel, Cameron Harvey, Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson, and Isabel Yellin. She is co-curator of *Joseph Beuys: In Defense of Nature* (The Broad, 2024–25); *Forms Larger and Bolder: Eva Hesse Drawings* (2019–22); and award-winning *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic* (Allen Memorial Art Museum, 2019–20).

Nora Kovacs is a Hungarian-American arts professional based in Los Angeles. Her writing has been published by *Art in America*, *AQNB*, *Berlin Art Link*, *Burnaway*, *the Julia Stoschek Foundation*, *Pelican Bomb*, *Public Parking*, and *This Is Tomorrow*. Nora holds a BA in global liberal studies from New York University and an MA in curating contemporary art from Royal College of Art.

Steven Vargas is a multimedia journalist, dancer and actor based in Los Angeles whose work focuses on the intersections of media, social justice, and performance. He's a former arts reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and has also written for publications like *Alta Journal*, *E! News*, *USA Today*, *TheWrap*, *Dance Magazine*, and *ARTnews*.

Paula Mejía is a writer and editor living in Los Angeles.

Robby Herbst is an interdisciplinary artist/writer recently transplanted from Los Angeles to New York. He investigates avant-garde paradigms to expand cultural imaginations. He's a recipient of a Warhol Arts Writers Grant and grants from the Mike Kelley Foundation, The Graue Foundation, The Danish Arts Foundation, and The Rema Hort Mann Foundation.

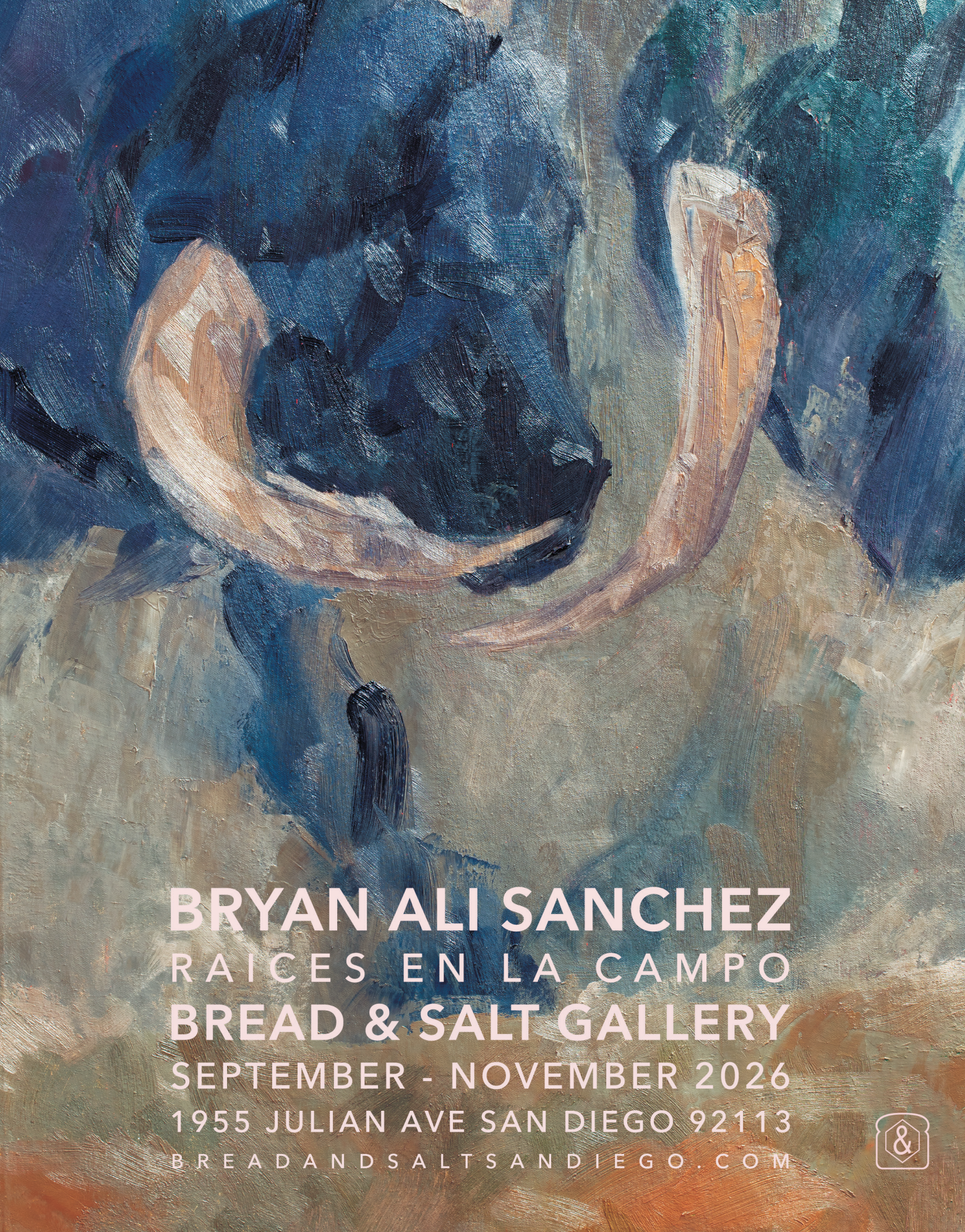
Charles Dickson:

Select Works, 1966 - 2026

September 19 - October 31, 2026

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Curatorial walkthrough 5 pm

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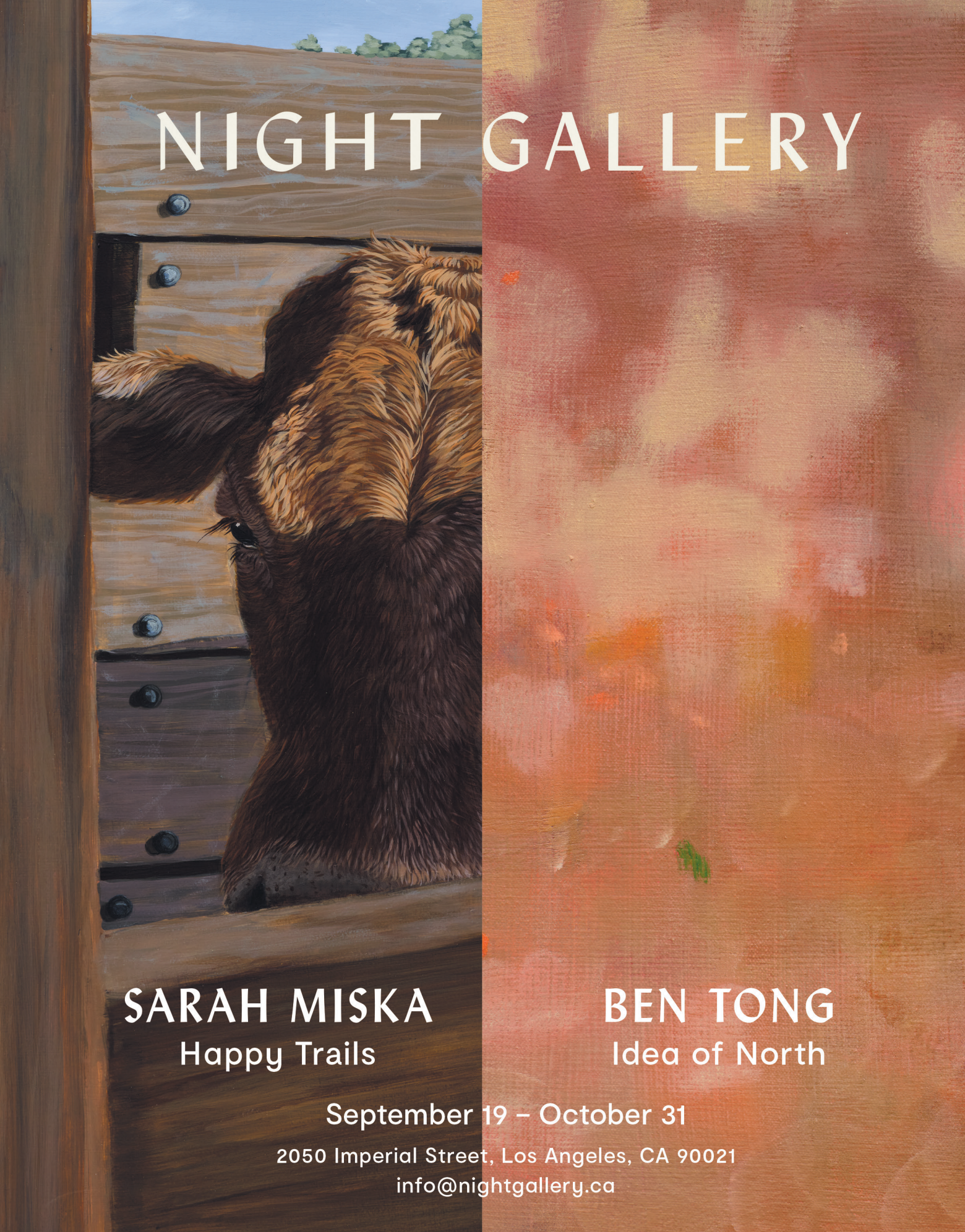


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Los Angeles, CA 90019
davidkordanskycastle.com

Tala Madani

September 18–October 24, 2026

Keith Sonnier

September 18–October 24, 2026

Abraham Lincoln Walker

November 13–December 19, 2026

Chris Martin

November 13–December 19, 2026

Ivan Morley

November 13–December 19, 2026

François Ghebaly

2245 E. Washington Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90021
ghebaly.com

Patrick Jackson

All Signs Fail
July 18–August 15, 2026

Alexis Smith

Rapido
July 18–August 15, 2026

Xie Lei

September 2026

Ann Leda Shapiro

September 2026

Farah Al Qasimi

October 2026

La Loma

6516 N. Figueroa St., Unit A
Los Angeles, CA 90042
lalomaprojects.com

Skylar Hughes

Lost Mind in the Tall Grass
September 12–October 17, 2026

Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

1110 Mateo St.
Los Angeles, CA 90021
luisdejesus.com

Evita Tezeno

Coming Home: A Gathering of Voices
On view through August 15, 2026

Body Memory

On view through August 15, 2026

Phung Huynh

Bite the Hand that Feeds You
September 12–October 24, 2026

June Edmonds

Inheritance
September 12–October 24, 2026

Sherin Guirguis

Into the Lake of Fire
September 12–October 24, 2026

Kim Garcia

November 7–December 20, 2026

Danica Phelps

November 7–December 20, 2026

Mimi Smith

November 7–December 20, 2026

Nazarian / Curcio

616 N. La Brea Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90036
nazariancurcio.com

The Other Side, curated by Annie Lapin

July 25–August 29, 2026

Bridget Mullen

September 12–October 24, 2026

Daniel Gibson

September 12–October 24, 2026

Hammer Museum

10899 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90024
hammer.ucla.edu

Huguette Caland

A Life in a Few Lines
September 27, 2026–February 28, 2027

Mavis Pusey

Mobile Images
October 11, 2026–February 28, 2027

Felipe Baeza

Anima
November 21, 2026–April 4, 2027

OCHI

605 N. Western Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90004
ochigallery.com

The Best Machines are Made of Sunshine

July 11–August 22, 2026

Lenworth “Joonburg” McIntosh

September 12–October 10, 2026

Avery Wheless

October 17–November 14, 2026

Matthew F. Fisher

Opening November 21, 2026

Official Welcome

672 S. La Fayette Park Pl., #46
Los Angeles, CA 90057
officialwelcome.art

Ann Thornycroft

September 5–October 17, 2026

Sarah Ippolito

September 5–October 17, 2026

iris yirei hu

October 24–December 19, 2026

Henrik Munk Sorensen

October 24–December 19, 2026

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

1700 S. Santa Fe Ave., #351
Los Angeles, CA 90021
patriciasweetowgallery.com

***Liberté Éclairant le Monde:
Liberty Enlightening the World***

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Stories Within

September 12–October 17, 2026

Armando Cortez

November 7–December 19, 2026

Pilar Agüero Esparza

November 7–December 19, 2026

Regen Projects

6750 Santa Monica Boulevard,
Los Angeles, CA 90038
regenprojects.com

Alex Hubbard

Abstract or Regular?
July 11–August 15, 2026

Elliott Hundley

Book of Sand
September 16–October 24, 2026

Skirball Cultural Center

2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90049
skirball.org

Judy Baca

The 1960s—A Generation on Fire: Judy Baca's Great Wall of Los Angeles
October 22, 2026–February 28, 2027

Jenny Yurshansky

What We Carry
October 22, 2026–February 28, 2027

Inventing America: The Comic Book Revolution

On view through February 28, 2027

Sprüth Magers

5900 Wilshire Blvd,
Los Angeles, CA, 90036
spruethmagers.com

John Baldessari

Sculptures
September 11–October 24, 2026

George Condo

November–December 2026

Vielmetter Los Angeles

1700 S. Santa Fe Ave.,
Los Angeles, CA 90021
www.vielmetter.com

Patrick Wilson

September 5–October 17, 2026

Shanna Waddell

September 19–October 31, 2026

April Bey

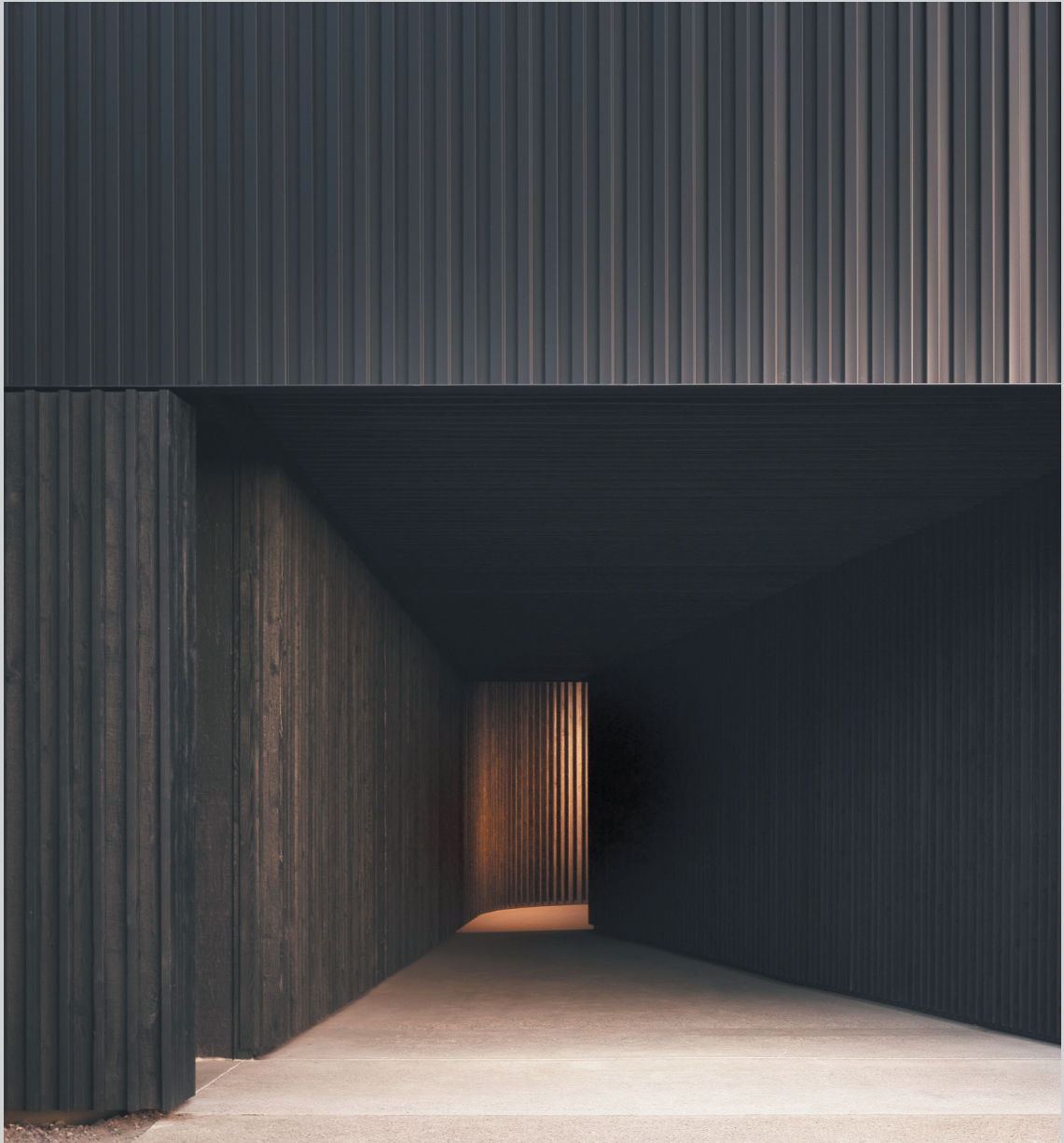
October 31–December 19, 2026

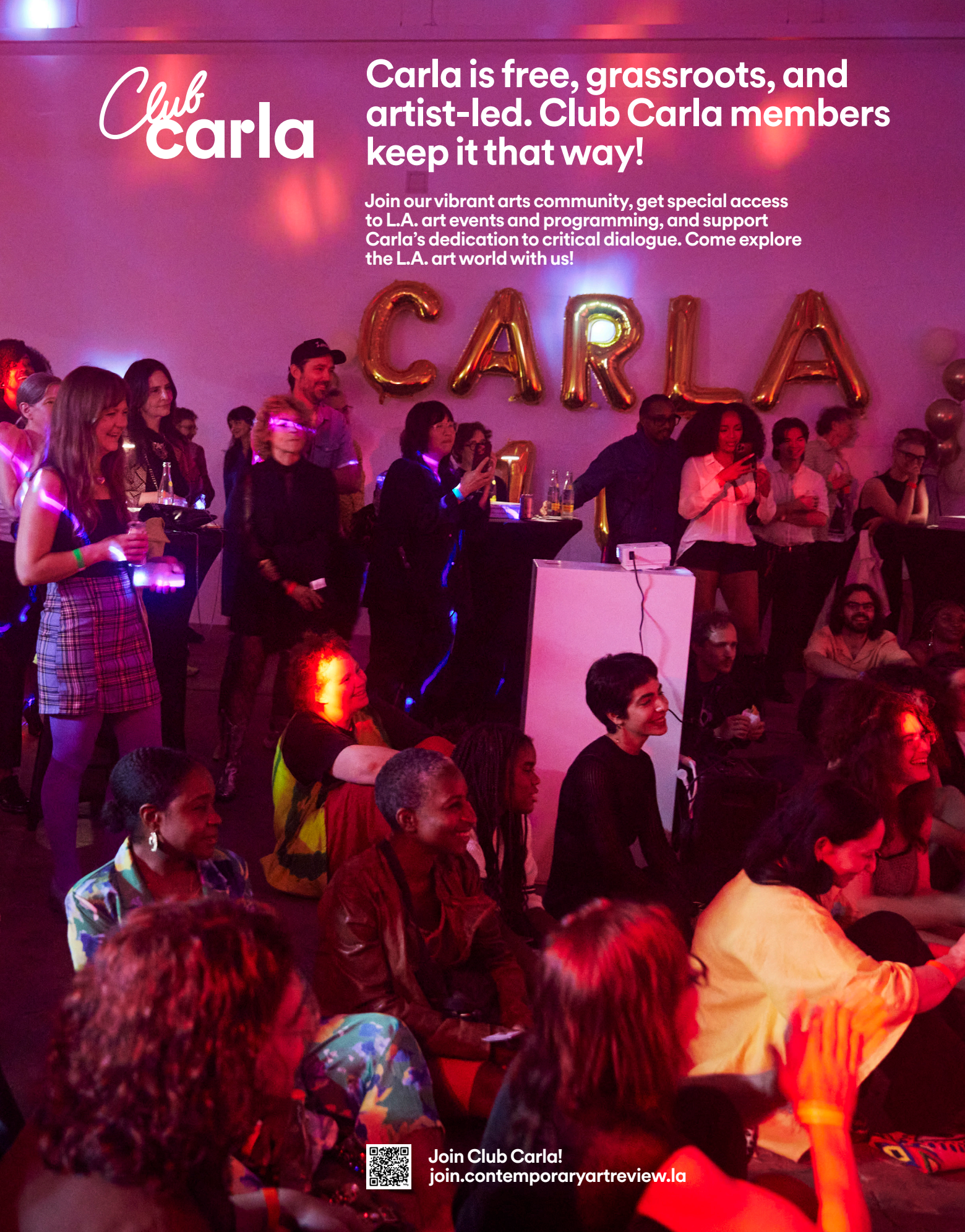
Mario Joyce

November 21–January 9, 2027

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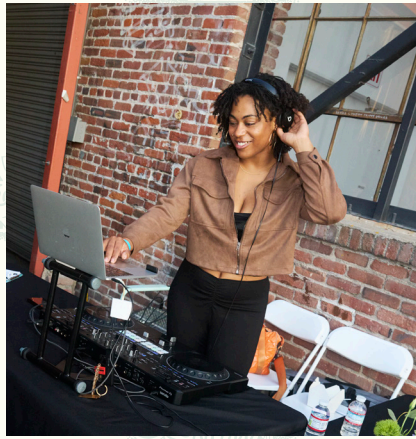


May 9, 2026 | Night Gallery

Thank you so much for attending and supporting our Carla Soirée & Art Auction earlier this summer, our second annual fundraising event! The event, held at Night Gallery, was a vibrant, unforgettable celebration—from cocktails during golden hour in the gallery's beautiful courtyard, to artist Michelle Blade's exhibition walkthrough and the delicious Pine & Crane dishes, to Sharon Chohi Kim's special performance and the art bids coming in throughout the night, our community showed up full of passion, connection, and love for L.A.'s art scene. Huge thanks to all of the participating artists, hosts, sponsors, and event attendees! We can't wait for next year!

Thanks to your support, this year's fundraising event grossed over \$59,000. This event is not only an opportunity to celebrate with our community, but the funds raised also provide crucial support to our organization across the year, helping us to sustain our key program: producing a free quarterly art publication that engages the community and builds platforms and entry points for artists and writers across L.A. It's not too late to support Carla at join.contemporaryartreview.la; plus, you can join Club Carla to attend member-only events throughout the year. Let's explore the art world together!





Photos: Leah Rom | Logo: Ben Sanders

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