

## Arts Publications

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# Place matters: Los Angeles sculpture today: recent years have produced a burgeoning sculpture scene in Los Angeles, where abundant studio space, high-profile art schools and do-it-yourself confidence provide a uniquely congenial mix. Here two Paris-based sculptors interview 19 of their Southern California counterparts

Art in America , Nov, 2006 by Anne Rochette, Wade Saunders

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Art-world tides answer to elusive gravities and are hard to anticipate. Last fall, we were reminded of this on seeing a group show of good work by younger sculptors in a Paris gallery. Four of them came from Los Angeles, two from London and none from New York. The geographic distribution seemed inverted--New York has ruled over contemporary art since the '40s, while L.A. has often been marginal. In the months afterwards, we kept coming across articles, catalogues and books documenting recent three-dimensional work from L.A.

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As working sculptors, we wondered what circumstances had helped transform L.A. into a sculptors' town. There, younger sculptors make sculpture, while peers in New York and Europe often treat sculpture-making as part of a broader practice, which can involve photography, video, film and performance. While it's significant that L.A. offers warmer winters, more available space, lower rents and easier access to materials and fabrication than New York does, what other factors are at

play?

Speaking with L.A. sculptors was the obvious way to get answers, and we asked artists, critics and curators for names. (1) Our list soon had more sculptors than we could meet during our planned visit, so we shortened it by excluding many (but not all) artists who have previously figured in these pages. We further limited our field by focusing on currently visible artists between the ages of 30 and 60; ultimately, we had to make subjective choices. (2)

We interviewed 25 sculptors in L.A. in February 2006. With every artist, we started by asking a series of questions, which often included: When and why had they come to L.A.? Where had they studied? Why had they stayed in L.A.? How had their career started? Does the city affect their work? What were the economics of making art in L.A.? Would they talk to us about recent work? Each conversation followed its own course. Their optimism was so catching that we wondered whether our children would miss us if we prolonged our stay indefinitely. (3)

We told the artists that, to avoid repetition, we would take out our part of the conversations when transcribing the interviews, and that their texts would be cut in length and edited for readability and narrative flow. We emphasized that our larger subject was how Los Angeles had come to be so hospitable to sculptors, and said that we weren't focusing on individual studio practices. We promised all the artists the chance to check a final copy of their interview and warned many that they might not appear in the article. In the end, six were left out for reasons of space.

The artists were generally gracious and professional about checking their texts, and this article is better and more accurate for their care. Almost all understood the constraints and complexities inherent in our reproducing but one side of a conversation, accepted our somewhat sociological bent and respected the looming deadline.

Humor, wild energies and disrespect for esthetic codes run through much of the best L.A. art. Artists there have had few historical and critical superegos to answer to. A number of art critics write from Southern California, but a succession of art magazines based in L.A. have decamped or folded. Local artists often have had the freedom of developing outside the East Coast's ken.

Five of the most influential American artists born after 1940 and involved with sculpture came of artistic age in greater L.A., and four are still based there. Bruce Nauman lived in Pasadena from 1969 to 1979; Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Charles Ray and Mike Kelley were all working, exhibiting and teaching in L.A. by the mid-'80s. They helped art in Los Angeles develop as it did, opening territories, giving permission and influencing younger artists in ways few New York sculptors their age have done. Ray and Burden, in particular, have shown sculpture to be both a necessary and sufficient medium.

A resounding difference between East and West Coast artists appears in their attitudes toward teaching. Few well-known New York artists, past or present, have held full-time faculty positions for long periods. Painters and sculptors from the Yale University School of Art helped shape late '60s and early '70s New York art. But no other American graduate art program outside of Southern California has been steadily noteworthy, in part because none has kept an exceptional faculty for a sustained period.

In L.A., almost all the important artists under 70 years old have taught regularly, both for the income and to be part of a community. California Institute of the Arts in Valencia was the seminal '70s American school, though it fell on pedagogical hard times in the mid-'80s. Beginning in the late '80s, Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and the University of California, Los Angeles,

developed strong programs. In the '90s, UCLA counted the best-known group of artists teaching in an American university. (Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy and Nancy Rubins lately have left, and Charles Ray now teaches half time.)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5