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Pacific Standard Time: Young artists talk about the sweeping exhibit

Many are impressed with its scope, but others think it may be trying to do too much or even misrepresent the L.A. art movement.

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We've heard a great deal in recent months from members of the Pacific Standard Time generation: artists whose work between 1945 and 1980 heralded "the birth of the Los Angeles art scene," in the words of the Getty's PR campaign. Less visible have been the heirs to all this innovation — the artists who've swelled the ranks in the last two decades, standing on the shoulders of PST's giants to capture the attention of curators everywhere.

Which gets one to wondering: What have they seen? What are their responses? What does the post-PST generation make of the ubiquitous PST enterprise, now at its approximate midpoint?

The lines, of course, are far from distinct. The L.A. art scene, whether pre- or postnatal, is a multigenerational social ecosystem, in which 1980 is an arbitrary boundary. The history that PST has crafted is one that's continually bumping against the now. "It feels very present because a lot of those people are still around and still teaching," says Mara de Luca, 38, a painter who graduated from Cal Arts in 2004. "A lot of the people in the Redcat show [The Experimental Impulse] were my teachers. It felt odd to see the whole institution historicized in this way. It's like if you take your childhood and make a museum show out of it or something."

Alison O'Daniel, 32, came here in 2007 after stints in Austin, Texas, London and Mexico City to get her MFA at UC Irvine. Like many recent grads, she says, she has the interesting perspective of watching the faculty she's studied with reviving old projects for PST. "Many of us came to these programs to work with these artists, so it's really exciting to see the trajectory of their practices in the PST shows," she says.

Soliciting opinions about PST is something like querying the proverbial blind men on the subject of the elephant: No two people have seen the same PST. "It's a giant," says Shana Lutker, 33, a sculptor. "You can't possibly traverse the whole series of exhibitions. Yet it's really understated! It's sprawling, overwhelming, kind of understated, easy to miss if you're not looking for it, but once you find it and take time to appreciate it, you'll be pleasantly surprised. It's just like L.A."

The majority of young artists interviewed spoke of PST with qualified enthusiasm. Many were dismissive of the manner in which it's been packaged for the public and suspicious of the tendency toward nostalgic sentimentalism. Many were simply overwhelmed. But nearly all were exhilarated by one thing or another and commended the efforts of individual exhibitions to bring under-recognized artists to light.

The strongest criticism — by far — concerned the marketing. "It is only men, and it is only superstars promoting other superstars," says Alexandra Grant, 38, a text-based artist who works in painting and sculpture. "There is a sense of insecurity. 'People won't understand if we use a less-well-known person' — well, that's actually part of the problem. PST is about people other than the people who are already well known."

Several questioned the ideological implications of the historicizing impulse. "Sometimes PST seems a bit like navel-gazing," O'Daniel says. Noting, as many did, that few of the shows are slated to travel, she wonders if it isn't "a bit like a self-congratulatory high-five in a vacuum. In talking to my friends elsewhere, it feels like it's being recognized as an important, massively scaled and organized bunch of intertwining exhibitions that no one else is going to see!"

"My reservation about PST," says Thai-born sculptor Nuttaphol Ma, 40, who earned his MFA from Claremont Graduate University in 2009, "is that it takes the huge undertaking in one blast. Boom! Done! I wish that PST stretched over three to five years or longer and engaged in alternative ways of presenting the work to reach the public in a smart way."

"There is a weird, obligatory nostalgia part," says Deborah Aschheim, 47, whose work explores issues of memory. "Like these were the days of the giants, everyone was so young and good-looking and groundbreaking. That feeling of 'Oh, you got here after the party.' I am always suspicious of that kind of gloss on the past."

The one near-universal point of agreement was excitement for the abundance of the artwork itself — particularly the abundance of the unknown or unfamiliar. "It's not the same experience as reading about a Warhol in an art history book and going to the MoMA to see that exact Warhol," says Anna Sew Hoy, 35, a sculptor. "With PST, it's so much about seeing this stuff for the first time and not having read about or studied it in school first. The sense of discovery makes it feel very alive."

She was particularly excited by the Asco retrospective at LACMA and "Speaking in Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken" at the Armory Center for the Arts, which she saw feeding directly into her work with Two Serious Ladies, a collective she formed with artist Eve Fowler that explores, among other things, the relationship between photography and sculpture.

Many expressed fatigue with the greatest hits contained in the larger exhibitions — "the famous, mostly white male figures from that period," in the words of multimedia artist Hillary Mushkin, 42 — and hailed the smaller, more focused shows, particularly those featuring subjects outside the mainstream. The favorites so far, by a notable margin: "Asco: Elite of the Obscure" at LACMA; "Now Dig This" at the Hammer Museum that profiles the work of African American artists; and "Mex/LA: Mexican Modernism(s) in Los Angeles" at the Museum of Latin American Art.

"Coming from the kind of double minority position, not only being in L.A. but being an under-recognized artist in L.A.," says Edgar Arceneaux, 39, a conceptual artist and founding director of the nonprofit Watts House Project, "'Now Dig This' showed that these artists were making work of significance that was under appreciated and that there's a real shame to that."

If the implicit purpose of PST is to challenge the dominant New York narrative of American art history by illuminating the strength and diversity of what transpired in L.A., it seems to have had the further effect, at least among artists, to have shifted the center of L.A. art history as well, away from the

predominance of the Ferus school, Light and Space, Baldessari and Ruscha.

"Because I came to L.A. from the East Coast and through Cal Arts," says de Luca, "I feel like I was given a very specific history of L.A. work, which had mainly to do with feminism and conceptualism. It's exciting for me to see all these other histories and to be exposed to them as an adult, not as a student." A painter who revels in lush atmospherics and sensual color, de Luca recounts being particularly energized by the pop-inflected abstractions of painter Joe Goode. "It gives me the freedom to choose another history. The authority figure on the shoulder has definitely been slightly toppled."

Grant sees the revision occurring on two levels: in the reconsideration of individual artists who've been under-recognized and in the reconsideration of the question of why some artists figure into art history and others don't. "It's an ongoing discussion," she says, "why certain people are privileged over other people. As artists, we need to make sure that we pay attention, that we see things like the PST experiment as a dialogue and that we don't let ourselves or other people be written out."

What L.A. will make of its newfound status — whether or how long it will manage to hold on to the pioneer spirit that fostered so much innovation — remains to be seen. The trade-off for recognition, as several critics have noted, is institutionalization.

"I have been wondering what it means to re-brand 'experimentation' under the Getty/Medici label," says Fran Siegel, 51, who came west in 2002 after 15 years in New York. "How has the context shifted for what might be considered radical or alternative now? And how does the act of representing L.A.'s alternative history in a mainstream way alter its new interpretation?"

Perhaps, as the geographically unwieldy nature of Pacific Standard Time would suggest, the story will prove in the end too difficult to encapsulate. "PST definitely energized the scene here this fall," says Aschheim, "but I also am even more aware than usual how hard it is to look at L.A. in a coherent, unified way. I want to see everything before it goes away, but I am also looking forward to the chaotic diversity of the present tense returning."

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