

# REGEN PROJECTS

Saltz, Jerry, "L.A. Rising," *Art & Auction Magazine*, April 1994, p.88-91, 122

In the wake of the quake,  
and despite a host of other  
troubles, a new generation  
of artists is turning up  
the heat in Los Angeles

by Jerry Saltz

## L.A. Rising



**O**n Monday, January 17, at 4:31 a.m., the "Northridge Earthquake" changed the beginning of this article on new L.A. artists. I was going to begin by saying L.A. had changed, that with all its terrible, weird problems—the riots, the drought, the floods, the fires—L.A. had *grown a soul*. I was going to write about how people in L.A.—at least people in the art world—look tired (the way we do in New York), how they act like things matter more. I was going to explain that L.A. isn't empty or fluffy or lite anymore, how it feels more "real." But the earthquake changed all that. To say these things now would be patronizing or snooty. So what changed?

The earthquake changed everything, the earthquake changed nothing. From coast to coast the American art world had already been roughed up by the recession, loss of interest and disillusionment. But the L.A. scene, a fragile system perpetually poised on the edge of "starting over," was especially damaged. In the last two years or so, much of the top layer of the city's galleries was peeled away (unlike New York, which saw its lower-middle hurt). Richard Kuhlenschmidt, Roy Boyd, BlumHelman and Michael Kohn closed; so did Fred Hoffman, though he has since reopened. Daniel Weinberg, after 12 years in L.A., moved his gallery back to San Francisco (where he started in 1973); Linda Cathcart, who represents such prominent L.A. artists as Jim Shaw and Joan Mahony, decided to go private; Luhring Augustine Hetzler (a hybrid N.Y.C.-Cologne venture) closed up shop; and Stuart Regen Gallery changed its name to Regen Projects and went semi-nomadic, staging exhibitions in various locations. The earthquake was, as Regen puts it, "a temporary nail in L.A.'s coffin."

L.A. might be about money, but what it really runs on is faith. What else would explain how a new generation of interesting artists is emerging without a lot of financial support from indigenous collectors? L.A. galleries are big, beautiful and almost always empty, and Weinberg is not the only dealer to complain that "75 percent of my sales were to collectors not in L.A." Still, as the complaints continue, so do the shows—and more



*Women dressing "butch": Catherine Opie's Mike and Sky (left). Top, Jason Rhoades's More Moor Morals and Morass.*

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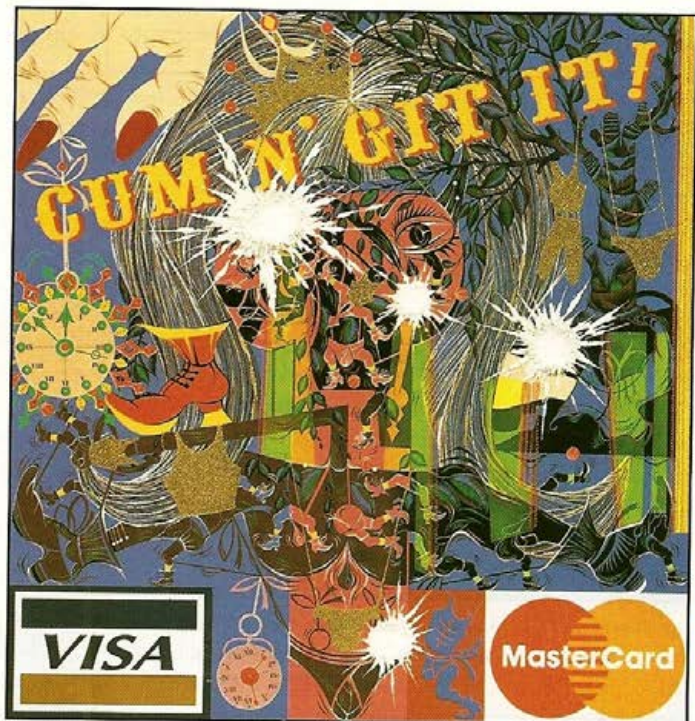
and more of them are good. More interesting still: the new crop of often experimental galleries that is also emerging. With the top layer torn away, the lower levels have prospered, having more effect and greater visibility. In fact, the scene today is pretty much equal to the one of five years ago, if not in terms of money and glamour, then in terms of the number and the quality of its artists.

Some of these young galleries are run in traditional ways, while a few add novel twists. Thomas Solomon is probably the prototype: a quietly intense 34-year-old, he opened his gallery in a rickety garage off an alley in West Hollywood in 1988. Three years ago he moved into his present, much more permanent quarters on Fairfax. Solomon, who says L.A. is made up of "opposites that work and balance each other," has staged exhibitions in swimming pools and basements, galleries and museums, and he has always supported emerging local artists. Among the more notable of the newest tier of galleries—joining L.A.'s well-known mainstays—are Regen Projects, which gave Matthew Barney his first one-person show in 1991; Kim Light, exhibiting work that tends toward the quirky or irreverent; Sue Spaid, who runs her storefront gallery on a shoestring and a prayer; Richard Telles Fine Art and A/B Gallery, both of which look to be putting together good stables of area artists; TRI, based in the Fairfax apartment of artist Rory Divine; 1301, a rigorous gallery run by the intelligent and laconic Brian Butler out of his Santa Monica apartment; and Food House, set up by three artists in a small storage-like space located in a parking lot off a main street in Santa Monica. Is any of this new? The energy is, though the ideas are not, because in a sense L.A. has always been about foundationless shacks out of which fortunes are made.

When you combine all these elements with an excellent indigenous art press (the only one in the country outside New York) and four local art schools pumping artists into the system, it makes for a lot of internal pressure: good writers develop, new dealers are born, artists shake the system. And out of this complex miasmatic soup a new art scene has begun to emerge. Things are stop-and-go, and there aren't going to be any "movements," but it's beginning to ripen.

**I**s L.A. art different from other art? Yes and no. L.A. is different from other cities, so maybe its art is, too. After all, why have the artists who live and work there chosen L.A. over other places? Yes, it's cheaper than New York and it's got all that sunshine, but there's more to it than that.

First and foremost, L.A. is about *every day*. Right now it's warm and sunny in L.A., the same way it was yesterday, the same way it will be tomorrow. That every-dayness is the thing that lifts L.A. and L.A. art out of the cyclical and into the *endless* or the *always*. It means that place comes into play, that in a very broad sense, things are shared. Second, L.A. is about containable natural hazard. Its setting may help to explain this: its mountains are real but they're not the Rockies, its desert dry but not barren. Yes, it's risky to live in L.A., but the risk is calculated, an accommodation to chance governed by money. The third thing about L.A. is that top and bottom tend to merge there, so that popular culture and high culture are almost



*Lari Pittman makes wildly claustrophobic paintings with elegant-to-gaudy surfaces.*

the same, a kind of High Vernacular. L.A. art—I'm thinking especially of Charles Ray, Robert Irwin, Chris Burden—is like the movies in one important respect: the best of it can be judged by layman and professional alike. Finally, and contrary to popular opinion, L.A. is a very intimate city—not disconnected. If I want to see someone I know in New York, all I have to do is walk around SoHo. I don't have to tell them how much I wanted to see them. I can just act like it's a lucky coincidence. Not so in L.A. If I want to see you there I have to call you and make a date, and we both have to drive 30 minutes to get there. This



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intimacy may account for the weird warmth and self-deprecating humor in much L.A. art.

All this is important because in the end the work is culled not from a mindscape, but from the landscape.

It might be useful to divide L.A. art into four nonbinding, admittedly subjective (and from an outsider, no less) Ur-categories that repeat and echo from one generation of artists to the next. The first can go by several names: the Doors of Perception, Lateral Movement—also known as Scanning—or on a more physical level Traveling Across. Think of distance and space and horizon. Think of the visionary purity of Robert Irwin, or early Ed Ruscha, when he made those banal yet mystical landscapes with gas stations or a museum on fire: things your eyes would simply

ing Across category is the rarest in L.A. art, the fact that there is even one artist in it is fascinating.

More than a few L.A. artists fall into the category known as The Jerry-Built or The Fragmentary—its nickname is Shack (or Ramshackle). It's how John Baldessari pieces images together, the way Bruce Nauman, who is one of the best living artists anywhere, arrives at his ingenious solutions.

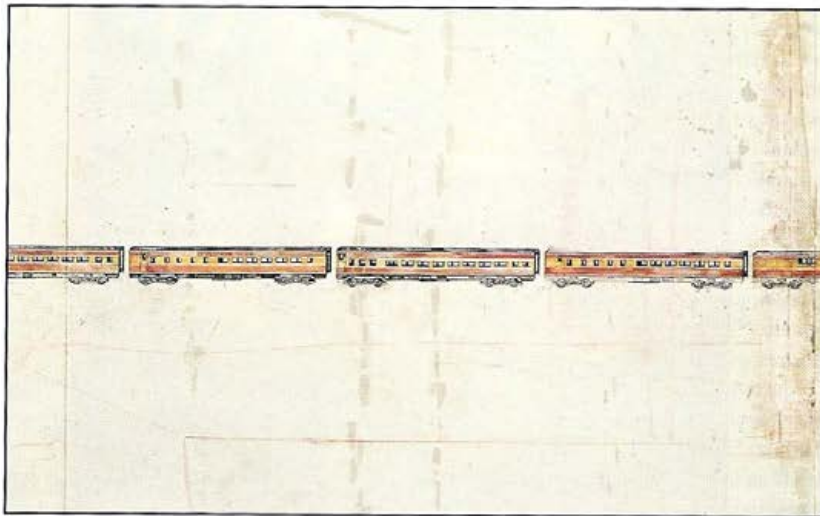
These days nobody pieces things together like Nancy Rubins, 42, who makes amazingly physical sculptures out of old airplane parts, mattresses, trailers or hot-water heaters. Her drawings—graphite-covered sheets of paper that she sometimes drapes over the sculptures or covers whole walls with—look like rhinoceros skin. Rubins really gets scale. She piles her raw materials together, making mounds, moun-

tains, twisting serpent shapes in space or spills that overwhelm you with their massive yet acutely arranged "there-ness." There's a unique rowdiness to her work, a savage earthiness about the way she puts things together. It has a combustible beauty. If she keeps pushing, Rubins may turn out to be the female Richard Serra, and she's definitely an influence on other artists.

Jennifer Pastor, 27, is a former student of Rubins at U.C.L.A. (a school recently enjoying a reputation as an incubator of new talent) who also piles things up, only she deploys her materials with a sly humor and a hint of narrative. In one work, Pastor made a 152-inch column of gooey-looking

plastic that resembles a fossilized wedding cake (the title of the piece is *Bridal Cave*). She also maintains a collection of pubic hair she finds in public restrooms. Like Rubins, Pastor has a great sense of the ludicrous, though Rubins has a firmer grip on the preposterous.

Chris Finley is only 22 years old, but he has already developed an interesting approach to sculptural problems. Made out of such diverse materials as Tupperware, pencils, bottle caps, cassette tapes, dog figurines, plastic plants and contact paper, his works are obsessively organized analogs for thought. There are endless little compartments filled with tiny handmade objects that the viewer opens, in turn revealing more compartments filled with tinier objects. His is a wheel-within-a-wheel aesthetic of parts. It's interactive sculpture that is as much like using the "windows" function on a computer as it is like playing with toys. There's nothing that distinguishes one work from the next, and it is a little too precious,



*Traveling Across: a close-up detail of Toba Khedoori's painting on paper of a seemingly endless train.*

"travel across," like a car gliding down a highway.

Toba Khedoori, 30, makes huge, 10-by-20-foot paintings on paper. She depicts disembodied sinking ships, exploding shells or a model train standing jewellike in space. Her grounds, covered in beautifully translucent layers of wax, are empty yet flecked with odd marks and sundry dirt. Her work produces the same dreamy awareness of space and details (that second-before-an-accident acute consciousness), the same appreciation of openness that Ruscha's does. Khedoori's subjects are specific, yet they lack meaning; they turn you around the way Gerhard Richter does. Her touch is an intriguing chameleon combination of calibrated thought and hazy bliss. You "travel across" her work as it simultaneously takes you in and removes itself from thought. Since right now this Travel-

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which is a problem, but Finley's on to something good.

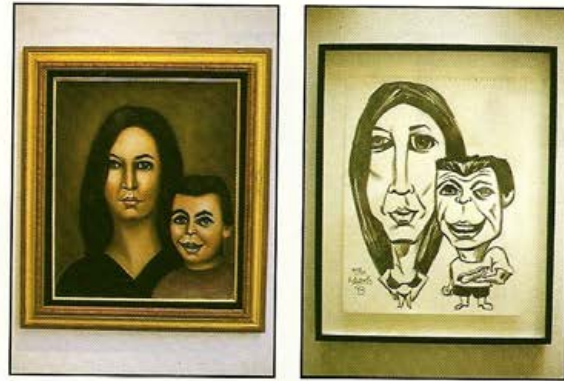
Like Rubins, Jason Rhoades takes over space. His sculptures are wild excesses—layered narratives—made from junk, car engines, found objects, aluminum foil and foam core. There is a driven relentlessness to them, something fragile and exact but undeniable. Like Finley's, Rhoades's work is an analog for thought; but unlike Finley—whose work feels automated and tame by comparison—Rhoades, who is 29, deals in biography and big vernacular narratives of everyday life. His sculptures—the physical equivalent of James Joyce's stream of consciousness—look like junk run amok and feel literary, like the core of something deeply personal and compelling.

Physical fragmentation can also be seen in the work of Rachel Khedoori (Toba's twin sister), who makes disjointed, enigmatic installations. Using such materials as bricks, chocolate, folding tables, video monitors and plants, Khedoori makes difficult-to-follow yet symmetrical narratives, physical distillations of temperament.

Not all artists in this category are sculptors. Lari Pittman makes wildly claustrophobic paintings combining myriad parts and elegant-to-gaudy surfaces. Pittman, 42,



*"Raucous, twisted, grotesque": Paul McCarthy's Spaghetti Man.*



*Two of the pictures commissioned by Cameron Jamie for his series "Portrait with Bart Simpson."*

has gone his own way, developing a personal style that is part cartoon, part politics, part design and part bleeding heart. His compositions—which can sometimes be a little formulaic—are sinuous, dovetailed and undulating, his colors blunt yet bland. Pittman is a dark horse who is emerging as one of the better painters around.

Other artists to be considered here are Thaddeus Strode, Keith Mayerson, Francis Stark, Greg Colson, Martin Kersels, Millie Wilson, Laura Stein, Meg Cranston, Rachel Lachowicz, Sarah Seager, Monica Majoli and Chris Wilder.

Some of L.A.'s best-known artists fit in under the third heading: The Apocalyptic, The Utopian or The Visionary. These are artists who raise the commonplace to mythic proportions or bring down the important to the pedestrian. Often they have a messianic or possessed edge, something slightly mad, yet weirdly comic. Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw (Raymond Pettibon fits in here, too) are like folk artists this way. Shaw is a cipher who makes encyclopedic art based on the eccentric life of a fictional boy named Billy who, like Shaw, was born "circa 1952"; Kelley's work with rag dolls, old blankets and the detritus of everyday life has made him probably the single most influential artist in America today.

Paul McCarthy is something of a local hero. He has taught at U.C.L.A. for 10 years and has done sculpture and performance art since the early 1970s. He was one of Jason Rhoades's teachers, and it shows. More and more young artists are looking to McCarthy's raucous, twisted, grotesque work for clues. Though he's 49 years old, it's only in the last two years that he has moved from "cult artist" to wider recognition.

Catherine Opie, 32, makes beautiful color photographs that are neither overtly apocalyptic nor visionary. She deals with the fragmentation of society and how a number of people—mainly women and dykes (the intentionally provocative term many of her subjects prefer)—view and live within that society. To call Opie a documentary photographer or a political artist is to sell her short. If she's as talented as I think she is, she's closer to Cindy

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Sherman. Opie is not an ironic artist. In some of her photographs, these women—who usually look you right in the eye, unashamed—dress butch or sport the fake beards and mustaches she has asked them to “play with.” Instead of dressing up, the artist is asking others to do so. Opie’s work would be only sensational if it relied exclusively on its subject, but her technique is silky and professional, her format historical and dignified. She’s a subversive artist, but she’s more than that too. She’s one of the better young American photographers working today.

Ralph Rugoff introduced me to the work of Cameron Jamie. Rugoff is a well-known L.A. critic who has a sharp eye for newer artists (he was one of the first to write about Opie’s work). Jamie, unknown outside L.A. and underknown there, makes paintings and sculptures—or rather he has them made for him by artisans, illustrators and tattoo artists. In one work he had someone draw his hand in a “Señor Wences” pose, then had another artist paint this hand’s portrait, then from this image another artist painted a picture, which ended up looking like a cross between James Cagney and the Elephant Man. Now Jamie is having sculptures made of these “people” and a family portrait painted. He’s playing visual post office by way of aesthetic gene-splicing. His work is naturally quixotic. If Jamie can harness this energy, he may be the heir apparent to such obsessive artists as Shaw and Pettibon.

Finally in this category is Bob Flanagan. Flanagan is to the art world what Ricky Jay is to the world of magic—a

once-in-a-lifetime apparition. Flanagan, who at 42 is said to be one of the oldest living people with cystic fibrosis (he was once, reportedly, a poster boy for the disease), describes himself as a “Super-masochist”—a kind of superhero. The pleasure he seems to take in pain transcends him and becomes art. He’s done the kinds of things to his genitals that you might associate with the hardest of hardcore pornography, involving pins, nails, wooden boards, etc. With Flanagan we’ve ventured so far from “normal” art world activities that we can lose sight of the art world altogether (which is refreshing)—or at least we can see it a lot better.

Finally, what used to be the big California category is today occupied by only a handful of artists: The Hip Decorative, otherwise known as The Finish Sublime. Here we find the world of hedonistic visual pleasure, beautiful, highly worked surfaces that catch the sunshine. Remember Billy Al Bengston? John McCracken? Peter Alexander? DeWain Valentine? And (probably the best of them) Larry Bell? Today younger artists bring to this category an ironic self-consciousness or a controlled conceptualism that had been sparse.

Diana Thater, 31, makes hypnotic videotapes that she projects in space so the viewer feels as if he or she were walking through a gorgeous landscape painting or a photograph by Jack Pierson. Thater is trying to integrate video into an area heretofore occupied by painting and sculpture. Larry Johnson’s work is complicated, banal-looking and smart—but most of all (although people are usually scared to say

this about art) it’s beautiful to look at. Johnson, 35, makes photographic text pieces that are part Disney fairy tale, part theory and part technicolor dream. Finally, Jim Isermann, 38, makes geometric paintings, shag rugs, stained-glass windows and quilts. He has an innate love of craft and the decorative that ties him to older L.A. artists like Bengston and Alexander as well as to someone like Vija Celmins. Other artists to consider in this category are Richie Lee and Jennifer Steinkamp. These days, though, artists mostly react *against* this category. It may be a generation or so until it comes back in force.

I haven’t discussed Chris Burden or Charles Ray simply because, while most of the artists I’ve mentioned slip back and forth between categories, these two—like Ruscha—transcend categorization. Burden and Ray are the closest the art world has come to the movies. They are among the very few American artists whose work breaks through the “art wall” and can be accepted—or rejected—by anyone who sees it. And both have made some of the best public sculpture by an American in more than 10 years. Burden’s *Medusa’s Head*, 1989–92, was a five-ton ball suspended from the ceiling and covered in a seething maze of dilapidated miniature train tracks. This is the kind of sculpture that turns 10-years-olds who see it into artists (although they might not know it at the time). And the life-size red fire engine—based on a toy—that Ray parked in front of last year’s Whitney Biennial was one of that show’s high points. Ray seemed to suggest that here was the fire truck, at last, to put out the fire Ruscha had depicted all those years before—except that this fire engine (true to California form) wasn’t functional, only a wonderful facade. Both Burden and Ray are in a mature phase of their work, and both are getting better. And both, in very different ways but like so many of the artists discussed here, embody the endless physical horizon of Los Angeles and the classic American journey west. **Jerry Saltz is a New York-based art critic and lecturer.**

### Where to See Them

In Los Angeles, Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman and Jason Rhoades are represented by Rosamund Felsen Gallery; Toba Khedoori and Catherine Opie by Regen Projects; Jim Isermann and Jennifer Pastor by Richard Telles Fine Art; Chris Finley by Food House; Cameron Jamie by Robert Berman Gallery; Larry Johnson by Margo Leavin Gallery; Nancy Rubins by Burnett Miller Gallery; and

Diana Thater by 1301. (Bob Flanagan has no gallery representation.) Several of these artists show in New York, including Rhoades and Thater at David Zwirner (the Khedoori sisters are having an exhibition there this month); Isermann and Pastor at Feature; McCarthy at Luhring Augustine; Pittman at Jay Gorney Modern Art; and Rubins at Paul Kasmin.