

ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

Southern California Artists
at the Natural History Museum
of Los Angeles County

1945 – 1963

If you wanted to see art in Los Angeles before the mid-1960s, the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art — now NHM — would have been the only major art museum in town. In addition to its collections of natural and cultural history, its galleries displayed art from around the world, and hosted major traveling exhibitions of work by da Vinci, Van Gogh, and Renoir. It was also the most important venue for Los Angeles-based artists to exhibit their work, making it the cradle of a nascent avant-garde art community.

This important, though somewhat forgotten, artistic legacy is chronicled in a temporary exhibition, *Artistic Evolution: Southern California Artists at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1945–1963*, on display in the Museum's historic 1913 rotunda from October 2, 2011 to January 15, 2012. Guest-curated by independent art historian Dr. Charlotte Eyerman, the exhibition is part of *Pacific Standard Time*, an unprecedented collaboration, initiated by the Getty, that brings together more than 60 cultural institutions from across Southern California for six months beginning October 2011 to tell the story of the birth of the L.A. art scene.

Inspired by the *Annual Exhibition, Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity*, which took place at the Museum from 1940–1961, and related contemporary art exhibitions, *Artistic Evolution* presents “the history of an embryonic moment for the L.A. art scene when this Museum was the only game in town, before the art department moved to mid-Wilshire in 1963, and opened as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1965,” says Eyerman. “It was a time of tremendous change in the art world — locally, nationally, and internationally — and there was a productive tension at the Museum about the nature of cutting-edge art, and the type of art the Museum



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should be showing. The show's title refers to both the evolving modes of art making, and the evolution of this Museum and Los Angeles as an art capital.”

Featuring 27 paintings, drawings, and prints by 22 artists, which were either exhibited at the Museum, or are comparable to those works that were on display, *Artistic Evolution* highlights the Museum's role as a standard-bearer for contemporary art in Southern California in the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s. Though some of the artists in the exhibition were local favorites who are not widely known today outside of Los Angeles, such as Ynez Johnston and Howard Warshaw, both of whom were awarded purchase prizes in 1949, others, such as John Baldessari, Robert Irwin, and Ed Ruscha, were young artists in the early stages of what would evolve into influential international careers.

Between these two generations was the highly regarded group of “Hard-edge” abstractionists, which included Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, Karl Benjamin, and John McLaughlin, all of whom were included in the Museum's seminal 1959 exhibition, *Four Abstract Classicists*. All are represented in this exhibition, as is artist Helen Lundeberg, Feitelson's wife, who is represented by an oil painting, which won the Annual's 1950 purchase prize. Artists John Alton, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston,

Tony Berlant, Hans Burkhardt, Craig Kauffman, Rico Lebrun, Ed Moses, Lee Mullican, Mel Ramos, Betye Saar, and June Wayne are also featured in the exhibition.

“The revelation in working on this show,” says Eyerman, “was the range of work and artists that were presented in the Museum's Annual Exhibitions. There was an intermingling of generations, and the emergence of young artists who went on to become titans of the L.A. art world.”

Given the small, noncommercial nature of the L.A. art scene at the time, most artists supported themselves by teaching, and the show includes several sets of teachers and students. Burkhardt and Lebrun, who led a budding community of modernists, were important teachers for a younger generation of artists. A direct link to New York's abstract expressionists, Burkhardt was one of L.A.'s premier artists, and is represented by a painting shown in the 1954 Annual Exhibition.

Lebrun, who also exhibited widely, is represented by a small gouache, “Study for a Soldier,” which won the Museum's purchase prize in 1949. Baldessari, a student of Lebrun's, credits his teacher with encouraging him to become an artist. Baldessari is represented by a small abstract painting, which is comparable to works he showed at the Museum in 1960, and is a rare surviving work from this

period. In 1970, the artist burned his early work before embarking on the more conceptually focused painting that would become his signature.

Bell, now known for his diaphanous, geometric sculptures, was a 19-year-old student when he first exhibited a watercolor in the 1959 Annual. The work was created in a class taught by Robert Irwin at Chouinard. “It was my first show, and the recognition of being included meant a lot to me and to my parents who had paid for art school.” From 1950 to 1960, Irwin exhibited at the Museum seven times, and is represented in the exhibition by three paintings.

By this time, the famed Ferus Gallery, which opened in 1957, and other contemporary art spaces were operating in the city. Still, the Annual was “the only real show of repute,” recalls Ferus artist Billy Al Bengston, who was in the 1959 and 1960 Annuals. “Everybody entered, and you hoped you could see who was doing what around town. In many ways, it was a springboard for my career.”

Artistic Evolution closes in 1963, the year the Museum featured six California Pop Art painters, including Bengston, Ramos, and Ruscha, arguably the brightest star of his generation. By this time, Los Angeles was coalescing into a distinctive art center, and LACMA opened two years later to lead it into maturity. ■