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**W**on't they ever get it about L.A.? The city's arrival in the 1980s as an artistic powerhouse has generated lots of heat but not much light. Every few months, media cannons get reloaded with hard facts and cold figures—numbers of artists and galleries, square-footage of museum buildings, dollars'-worth of sales and collectors' bank accounts—as indices of clout.

Each new round of media surveillance ends up proposing one of two familiar scenarios. If the story is "West Coast-friendly," it asserts that Los Angeles, crown jewel of the diadem called the Pacific Rim, wavers on the brink of becoming the new imperial palace of international culture. If it's "East Coast-friendly," it firmly demurs—yes, but—yes, the cultural life of the city has undergone phenomenal transformation since the late-1970s, but its impressiveness lags way behind New York's.

If you find accounting to be an endlessly fascinating topic, you'll be mad about these new volleys in the old war between the coasts. You'll also be misled. Neither scenario suggests what actually happened in the 1980s. A milestone certainly was passed, but the city and its still-expanding institutional infrastructure aren't even close to usurping any other established capital as King o' the Mountain. What's more, the considerable significance of L.A.'s arrival as a cultural power precludes that very possibility.

To understand why, you first have to understand that, in the decade now ending, this quintessentially American city finally became cosmopolitan. Tally sheets won't show you that. Culture will. In a provincial milieu, bad art sanctifies local creed, while good art is forced to ignore it—usually by taking refuge in claims

of rugged individualism, then promptly looking to the nearest artistic center for incentive. A subtle but distinct shift in this modus operandi heralds the arrival of a sophisticated cosmopolitanism. In short, enough good art needs to accumulate over time to establish a singular history; next, a new generation needs to regard that history in a critical way. The current, widespread mindfulness of a raft of previously unexamined conventions, which forms a tradition

**Adrian Saxe's ceramics use a splendidly vulgar concatenation of 18th-century vocabulary.**

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particular to Los Angeles, is something new.

The 1970s art of light and space—dematerialized perceptual environments by Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman, and James Turrell, which are regularly extolled as L.A.'s first wholly original contribution to modern art—gets wittily effaced in Michael Gonzalez's radiant constructions of translucent erasers and in Sarah Seager's shrouded light-box, which glows beneath a scrim-cum-bridal veil. Liz Larner's demonic *Corner Basher*—a whirling iron ball and chain on a motorized stanchion, which does with fearsome force just what its title says—is in a part a feminist riff on sculptor Chris Burden's pugnacious 1970s performances and macho-machinery. Among other things, Tim Ebner's metal-flake and resin paintings perform a shotgun wedding between John McLaughlin's Zen-inspired geometry of the 1950s and John McCracken's 1960s lacquered planks (call Ebner's work "McPaintings").

You can even follow an artistic trajectory through several generations. Take Adrian Saxe, the most significant midcareer American artist working with clay. At 45, he's heir to the mantle worn first by Peter Voulkos, then by Ken Price. Voulkos's radical ceramics of the 1950s tore apart the segments of a pot—lid, body, handles, foot, surface—to make each fight against the others for attention. Parts didn't peacefully coalesce in the insistently harmonious manner of conventional pottery. This disruption of the holistic nature myths tied to arts and crafts doctrine was the spur for Price. His pots set established cultural hierarchies of high art and low against each other—say, Russian constructivist form sporting Tijuana color on a teacup of vaguely Italian futurist origin.

Saxe, whose technical mastery is astounding, ups the ante once more in his splendidly vulgar concatenations of ceramic vocabulary. His principal source has been 18th-century Sèvres porcelain, as much for the social role it played in modern history as for its exquisite formal embellishments. The aristocratic addiction to this rococo porcelain contributed to the bankruptcy of the government of France, thus lighting the fuse of insurrection. As today's art market spirals into the stratosphere, Saxe's is a powerful aesthetic of excess in which every overfed element is privileged.

It isn't that Saxe, or any of these younger artists, is trying to avow some regionally defined aesthetic with his work. To the contrary. When Stephen Prina sends his canvases to an auto-body shop to be painted monochrome green, the Kar Kulture fetishism of sixties art in L.A. is simply being looked on as part of this century's bigger compost heap, which includes the varied monochrome paintings of Moscow's Kazimir Malevich, New York's Ad Reinhardt, and Cologne's Gerhard Richter. Time has passed,

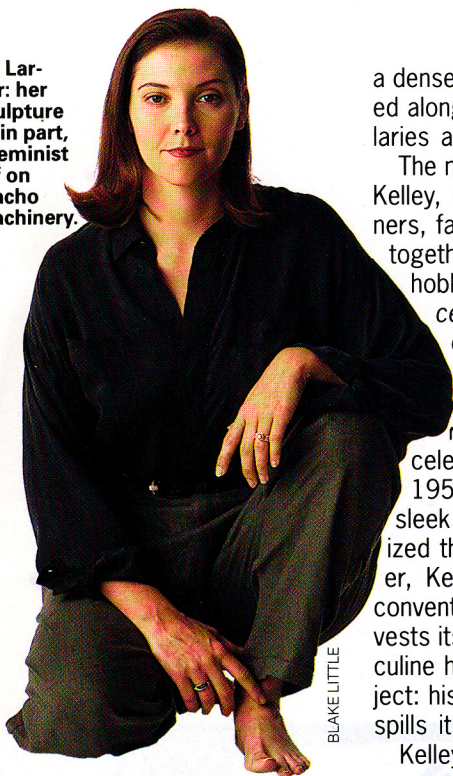
**CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**

The cosmopolitan sophistication of recent art made in Los Angeles

## L.A., LATELY



Liz Larner: her sculpture is, in part, a feminist riff on macho machinery.



BLAKE LITTLE

## NOT IN NEW YORK

L.A. art is now part of this century's aesthetic compost heap

a dense vocabulary of "L.A. art" has precipitated alongside the others, and all those vocabularies are now available for critical use.

The most eloquently loquacious user is Mike Kelley, who lately has been making felt banners, fabric wall hangings, and sculptures put together from stuffed animals and toys. The hobbyist material of a work such as *Eviscerated Corpse*—an outlandish, lifesize doll assembled from scavenged plush toys—drolly recalls the tradition of hand-crafted art in Los Angeles, which reaches from Voulkos, Price, and the celebrated "Otis clay" revolution in the 1950s to the technical obsession with sleek and polished surfaces that characterized the vaunted 1960s "L.A. Look." However, Kelley's scuzzy rag doll deftly guts the conventional credo of craft-as-art, which invests its optimistic faith in the earthy and masculine honesty of the artfully hand-wrought object: his mordant *Eviscerated Corpse* wickedly spills its dolly viscera across the floor.

Kelley's case also signals something unprecedented. In New York and Europe as well as in L.A. his work has been recognized as among the most significant American art of the present generation. Acknowledgment of the arrival of a major artist central to a cultural moment would, under any circumstance, provide ample reason for pause and reflection. With Kelley, who is 35, a fateful variation gets added to the tale. Born and raised in Detroit, and schooled at the California Institute of the Arts, he resisted common wisdom after graduation ("Go East, young man!") and decided to stay in Los Angeles. For the past decade, Kelley has lived and worked in a small apartment on an ordinary street in a working-class neighborhood of Hollywood.

Here's the anomalous part of the story: not since New York City became the preeminent artistic capital of the Western world, some four decades ago, has an American artist who chose not to live and work there come to be regarded as among the small handful of artists decisive to the moment. I'm not just talking about very good artists in a host of places, metropolitan or rural, who become successful. I'm talking about that invariably small number whose work changes everything. Several score of widely recognized artists of the postwar era have indeed chosen to do their work in far-flung locales. Without exception, they've been artists who a) were tagged as regional variants on truly consequential movements identified as having originated in New York; b) first established themselves while working in a recognized cultural capital (in Europe, if not Manhattan), then called the moving van; c) have only lately been awarded full retroactive acclaim, despite having had substantial art-cult followings for 15 or 20 years;

or d) remain undervalued even as we speak.

Without exception, that is, until Kelley. His career was indeed born aloft on the updraft of L.A.'s soaring institutional infrastructure. Yet his art and its reception signal weightier changes in American cultural life.

We have critic Robert Hughes to thank for this head-spinning "factoid": "Every five years, the art schools of America alone produce as many graduates as there were people in Florence in the last quarter of the 15th century." The art school glut, well underway by the 1970s, has altered American cultural life at least as much as the G.I. Bill of the 1940s did. Where once academic draftsmanship was art's lingua franca, today the classroom reproduction—seen in slides, books, catalogs, and magazines—has become the common language spoken by artists from coast to coast. Kelley's fetishistic toys brilliantly locate a worldly equivalent; like reproductions, dolls are surrogates or substitutes for absent realities. A work such as *Eviscerated Corpse* is polymorphously perverse, its touching testimonials calling up European surrealist arcana (e.g. Hans Bellmer's bizarre 1935 sex-toy, *The Doll*), as easily as discarded suburban tokens of love stockpiled in San Fernando Valley thrift shops (e.g., home-crafted dolls made from pot holders by avid readers of *Family Circle*). Kelley is hardly the first, or only, artist to recognize and make use of mass culture; CalArts tutelage is steeped in the byzantine ramifications of a world swimming in reproductions. But that's very much the point. Collective ritual, not the zip code where the artist gets his mail, is the issue. Particularized experience of contemporary life is what's specific to Kelley's repulsively endearing art, and it's an inquiry felt and understood in Manhattan and Cologne as much as in Hollywood or Detroit.

**S**peaking of Cologne, it's no accident that L.A.'s newfound cosmopolitanism and recent arrival as a cultural power coincide seamlessly with the return of European art to international prominence. Any empire can have only one Imperial City, and for the long-running American Empire, that singular metropolis was New York. Now that the United States is firmly settled in as, arguably, the biggest debtor nation in global history, and New York has been usurped by Tokyo as banker to the world, Western culture at large has been busily sprouting myriad artistic capitals. As one decade concludes and another looms, let me tell you something critical about Los Angeles: finally, it's one of them.

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Christopher Knight is the art critic for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* and is the author of *Art of the Sixties and Seventies: The Panza Collection* (Rizzoli).