

Los Angeles Times

ART REVIEW

Coastal confluence; Geography links the art in 'Baja to Vancouver,' but it's the social landscape that resonates

February 1, 2004

By Christopher Knight

In his famous poster for the classic 1966 surfing documentary "The Endless Summer," graphic artist John Van Hamersveld posed his faceless tribe of free-spirited beach bums in an otherworldly terrain, engorged with pure psychedelic beauty. Above a vast crimson beach beneath a bright magenta sky, an enormous lemon-yellow sun sat bolted to the horizon.

The image was the stuff of epic literature, high or low. Three men carrying long boards -- silhouetted in the vivid landscape, courtesy of the blackness of a high-contrast photograph -- stood facing into the distance, prepared to enact a utopian quest for the perfect wave. The sun, poised between perpetual rising and continuous setting, forged an eternal radiance.

The endless summer of the 1960s did come to an end, of course, shrouded in a body bag sent home from Vietnam, shredded in the crimes of Watergate and subdued by the malaise that Jimmy Carter correctly diagnosed but could not remedy. A fierce rightward stagger -- the cruel flight into reactionary nostalgia that so often camouflages fear -- sealed its fate for American society. After the endless summer came the melancholy of autumn and the bitterness of winter.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, just up the road from the renowned surfing beach immortalized in 1968 by Tom Wolfe in "The Pump House Gang," a video projection records the bleak season of a seemingly endless winter. Canadian artists Shannon Oksanen and Scott Livingstone shot "Vanishing Point" (2001) on 8-mm film and transferred it to video, which emphasizes a homemade feel. Named for a 1971 B-movie -- a classic of drive-in existentialism -- the four-minute loop shows a red surfboard tossed on the gray waves of an empty beach. Its rhythms are set to the glum soundtrack of a lone electric guitar and a single snare. The camera searches a severe coastline, empty of human habitation.

The long board flips over and washes up on shore. Surf's down, the forlorn video suggests, alluding to more than the local weather report.

"Vanishing Point" is something of an emblem for the sprawling group exhibition in which it's found. No one will mistake the surfing video's cool colors and pine-forest cliffs for the sunny Southland. The film was shot at Long Beach, Vancouver, not Long Beach, Calif. Once, the term "West Coast" concentrated the mind on a relatively limited strip of real estate, much the way "East Coast" doesn't conjure up Georgia or the Carolinas. This show astutely recognizes that, in a globalizing world, regional identity changes. It codifies the shift.

"Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art" stretches that mental geography just beyond the artifice of national borders, south to the edge of Mexico and north to the lip of Canada. Along a 2,000-mile trans-national corridor, it identifies the lively artistic activity that has come to characterize all the coast's urban centers: Tijuana, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver.

A few of the show's 34 artists, such as Stan Douglas and Larry Sultan, have widely established reputations. Many have lately been drawing considerable notice -- including L.A.'s Delia Brown, Brian Calvin, Sam

Durant, Thomas Eggerer, Evan Holloway and Catherine Sullivan; Tijuana's Marcos Ramirez; San Francisco's Chris Johanson; and Vancouver's Steven Shearer. And a few more -- like Oksanen and Livingstone, or the San Francisco animator Kota Ezawa -- will emerge as discoveries for viewers outside the artists' immediate working environs.

The shifting epicenter

Artists have always worked in these locales, of course, with varying degrees of skill and critical or commercial success. For more than a generation, the large-scale production of serious and influential art in North America has not been centralized in New York, as used to be the case. (Notably, all but six of the show's artists are under 45.) The exhibition catalog declares that a reimagined West Coast arguably represents North America's most vital art-making region.

Admittedly, that region is pretty big. But so is "the South" or "the Midwest" or "the Sunbelt," where no comparable phenomenon has been witnessed.

The old artistic idea of regionalism is wisely tossed aside by B2V -- the nickname used to brand "Baja to Vancouver." It doesn't claim there's a local style or visual aesthetic, presumed to be common across cities, states and national borders. Instead, the show chooses to focus on representational artworks -- specifically, those that engage with the region's social landscape.

Douglas' "Every Building on 100 West Hastings," for example, is a panoramic photograph of a decaying urban street in Vancouver. Shot at night, it upends the witty, sun-bleached glamour of its obvious precedent, Ed Ruscha's legendary 1966 photo book, "Every Building on the Sunset Strip." West Hastings is derelict and forbidding, a once-prosperous strip now dimmed after many lifetimes. Near the photograph's center, a window sign advertises "Artist's Studio for Rent." The margin to which our society relegates its artists is sharply identified, along with ongoing social histories of potential gentrification.

Ezawa's social landscape is conveyed through mass media. In a mesmerizing three-minute video, he animated the famous televised moment in 1995 when the O.J. Simpson verdict was read in court -- and, simultaneously, broadcast in the court of public opinion. His animation's flat colors, simple forms and jerky motions are vaguely reminiscent of "South Park," but the effect is unique and striking. A deeply familiar experience is rendered strange.

Courtroom jurisprudence, carefully costumed and scripted, is the product of Enlightenment ideals traced to the 18th century -- an age of live theater. The abrupt intrusion of modern camera technology, which replaced the period convention of the courtroom sketch artist, has created the monstrous hybrid of television-theater. Ezawa's brilliant, stately cartoon pictures the toxic madness produced by such formal dissonance.

Eggerer, in seemingly unfinished paintings of ferryboat passengers and sports fans in the bleachers, records the paradoxical psychic isolation felt within modern crowds. Calvin's paintings -- the only ones I know that build on David Hockney's Edenic L.A. paintings of the 1960s and 1970s -- suggest subtle trouble in paradise: a bather grimly shrouded in the act of removing a sweatshirt, an androgynous guitarist adrift in a style-conscious domestic interior.

Shearer's huge composite poster -- made up of thousands of vernacular snapshots showing teenage boys and adult men posing with guitars -- reveals a rock 'n' roll symbol of male rebellion to be thoroughly domesticated and conventionalized. With surprising poignancy, the fascinating composite reinvents the famous observation by art critic Harold Rosenberg about mass culture, home to "the herd of independent minds."

A considerable number of the show's selections are themselves conventional -- several even dull. (The art is also packed in a crowded installation.) But as is often the case with surveys, B2V is as revealing for what has been omitted as for what has been included.

The curatorial decision to focus on representational art that engages with the social landscape means that abstract painting -- a profoundly intriguing direction in recent art -- is not encountered here. Why is that omission a critical flaw? Because "representational art that engages with the social landscape" is a product of the struggle against the museum status of abstract painting -- a struggle that began more than 30 years ago and that has long since been won.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, abstract painting had been thoroughly institutionalized -- the rowdy avant-garde transformed into the polite (and policed) art of the establishment. Its spirited resurgence today suggests the degree to which the rebellious art that once challenged abstract painting has itself been thoroughly institutionalized. Now it is the art of the museums.

Durant's savvy photograph "Return" articulates the enervating but inescapable situation. Four attractive, stylish young men and women sit on the floor in an all-white space holding hand-lettered, protest-style signs aloft. The signs shout "call/response," "echo/ reflection," "chorus/chaos" and "revolt/return." The white space of the modern fashion advertisement blends seamlessly into the white wall of the gallery, on which Durant's photograph hangs.

Indeed, it's noteworthy that this work is a photograph. More than half the show's artists work mainly with photographs, film and video. Camerawork is today's institutional norm for art practice.

Durant's art understands something that B2V misses: Despite the common wisdom, "the art world" is not distinct from "the real world." The art museum has long since become an integral feature of the social landscape. So abstract painting is as socially engaged as representational art is.

West Coast art might once have advanced a regionalist belief in the possibility of a local style. Today, as globalization prompts a reimagined West Coast, that idea has shifted. Globalism is characterized by a corporate, institutional ethos -- which B2V radiates from behind its snappy logo.

L.A. takes a pass

A team of five curators working at museums and art schools in Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco and San Diego -- the institutional venues where the show will travel -- organized "Baja to Vancouver." (The San Diego MCA is the show's second stop.) L.A., where abstract painting has lately flourished, is notable by its absence from the list.

Apparently, no L.A. institution wanted to board B2V's curatorial bus. L.A., first among equals in any West Coast cultural topography, can afford to be indifferent to its aspiring siblings. But that's not to say it isn't stupid for being so.

Why? Because B2V is focused squarely on the efflorescence of West Coast art production, while art's consumption remains centralized in Manhattan. (There's no mystery as to why. Manhattan is the global economic capital.) The show's institutional consortium draws the fragile outlines of an independent network that, with some effort, could operate with considerable freedom from the limited mandate represented in New York.

Two big impediments to the essential task of writing the histories of West Coast art now block the region's art museums. One is social. The average career-minded curator wants to curry favor at court, which means bowing deferentially to the east. That alone may explain the absence of an L.A. team member from B2V, which operates on a north-south axis.

The other hurdle is economic. Mounting shows is expensive. Partners are needed -- museum partners elsewhere willing to say, "I'll take your show, if you'll take mine."

That's how retrospectives and surveys of important artists and movements get done. For L.A. and its phenomenal, largely unwritten art history, B2V represents a missed opportunity in forging those relationships.

*

'Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art'