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ART & ARCHITECTURE / YEAR IN REVIEW

A Wealth of Shows and Fund-Raising

Art: Buying artworks wasn't the only acquiring institutions did over the last 12 months.

December 27, 1998 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | Christopher Knight is The Times' art critic

Los Angeles' 10 most notable art exhibitions and events, in no particular order, for 1998:

1. Laura Owens (ACME Gallery): This has been a very good year for painting (Karen Carson at Rosamund Felsen, Maxwell Hendler and Scott Grieger at Patricia Faure, Roy Dowell at LACMA West, Chris Finley at ACME, Lari Pittman at Regen Projects, Kevin Appel at Angles, David Hockney at L.A. Louver, Carol Kaufman and Penelope Krebs at Kiyo Higashi, Edward Ruscha at Gagosian and quite a few more.) Laura Owens, a young artist who has made curiously compelling if not fully resolved work in recent years, took a huge step forward in her second solo show with a playful group of paintings that incorporate the gallery context into their subject matter. Recalling strategies employed by artists as different as Gerhard Richter and Uta Barth--yet distinctly her own--Owens marshaled fragmentary images, oblique suggestiveness and techniques of visual reflection and mimicry to create deceptively simple paintings of unusual depth and delight.
2. "An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine" (LACMA): In painting, the modern association we make between thick, colorful, vigorous brushwork and highly personal, emotional expressiveness is by now pretty standard. This riveting exhibition showed that Soutine (1894-1943), an artist who has languished on the margins for nearly half a century, was a primary source of that connection--especially in the devastating portraits, still-lives and landscapes from the early 1920s.
3. "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" (MOCA): A big, sprawling, undeniably flawed attempt to chart the convoluted, international postwar relationships between artists' performance activities and the art objects that arose from them as a kind of residue, this ambitious, globally minded effort at understanding recent art history is the kind of show that's hardly ever seen in American museums these days. Except, that is, at MOCA, where it's been a distinctive, periodic, always exciting staple.
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6. "Sunrise" (1873), Claude Monet (Getty Museum): This remarkably immaculate painting, which shows a silhouetted sailboat crossing a gray industrial harbor amid the first orange rays of morning light, is a modest little canvas that dates to the moment French Impressionism was crystallizing in the popular consciousness. Aside from its art historical virtues, its acquisition by the Getty--the museum's first major purchase in more than a year--raised hopes that building its good but erratic collection will assume highest priority in the ongoing reorganization of the Getty Trust's far-flung programs.
7. "The Progress of Life," Mural Restoration (City of Hope): A long-forgotten mural in a former library in Duarte's City of Hope National Medical Center was carefully restored and returned to public view. To the surprise of scholars and art lovers, the 1935-36 allegory of youthful hope and the resignations of old age turned out to be a very early painting by the team of Reuben Kadish, who is little-known today, and Philip Guston, who went on to be a major artist of the New York School. Guston's stunning conversion in the 1970s from abstract to figurative painting was a harbinger of things to come in the 1980s, and the City of Hope mural--painted when Guston was just 23--now stands as an important early signpost in his distinguished career.
8. Annals of fund-raising, Part 1: For an undisclosed sum, LACMA rented from New York's Museum of Modern Art three dozen paintings and more than 70 prints, drawings and books by Picasso--the perennial box-office champ of museum shows--and pretended the haphazard array was a major artistic event. The blunt marketing goal: Inflate the museum's membership rolls by charging a ticket premium that would make buying a LACMA membership a bargain. A sure sign of the show's artistic insignificance: MOMA is willing to pocket the big rental fee, but unwilling to host the "show" in its own august galleries.
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Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: Chaim Soutine's emotional expressive- ness and strong brushwork are reflected in "The Bride," a portrait in the LACMA exhibition.; PHOTOGRAPHER: The Whitehead Collection

Credit: Christopher Knight is The Times' art critic

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