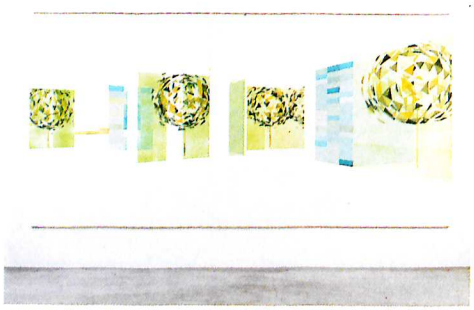
YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD
OF THEM,
BUT THESE YOUNG L.A. ARTISTS
ARE WHIPPING UP
THE LOCAL ART SCENE.
BUY NOW,
ASK LATER

young art

By George Melrod

PORTRAITS BY PATRIK ANDERSSON



WHATEVER ART LOOKS LIKE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, IT'S A GOOD guess that L.A. will have something to do with it. From the pre-pop days of the Ferus Gallery to the grandiose Getty of today, the city has long played a vital role in shaping America's cultural landscape. And in the past decade, Southern California has become a breeding ground for artists. Nurtured by an exceptional teaching community encompassing many of the region's most prominent names, not to mention a gallery system eagerly seeking new ones, the artistic ecosystem is teeming. At the forefront of this push are the Art Center College of Design, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Claremont College, Otis College of Art and Design and, especially, UCLA, whose all-star grad school has become so trendy one half expects to find Britney Spears there conducting seminars on video art. The increased relevance

KEVIN APPEL IN FRONT OF HIS *House: Exterior View, South West*, A WORK IN PROGRESS
ABOVE: APPEL'S *House: South View from Court*, 1999

and visibility of local museums doesn't hurt, either. Many critics, curators and artists still consider MOCA's 1992 "Helter Skelter" show to be a watershed in defining the sometimes transgressive dynamic of the L.A. art scene. And that image has had a ripple effect, attracting students from around the country eager to plug into that zeitgeist.

There are those who believe, however, that in the rush to discover new talent, some artists are thrust into the spotlight too soon and turned into commodities before they've mastered their craft. And while anecdotes of dealers tripping over each other at art shows to sign up the Next Hot Artist are exaggerated, they're not entirely untrue.

In such a hothouse atmosphere, critics might be dubious about feeding into the hype. But there are artists in L.A. who are legitimately making waves and who, in part because of the inbred posture of the art world, are not nearly as well known to the public as they should be.

None of the artists under discussion here represent any distinct schools or movements; as Paul Schimmel, chief curator at MOCA, observes, "This era is the era of individual accomplishment rather than collective movements." Although shared themes are clearly evident in their work—particularly the dialogue between abstraction and pictorial narrative, and discovering oddness in the familiar (and vice versa)—each draws from a diverse, idiosyncratic spectrum of sources and experience from the vast postmodern smorgasbord that is late-20th-century culture.

Here, then, are five young artists who are lending shape to that funky, sprawling entity known as the L.A. art scene.

KEVIN APPEL

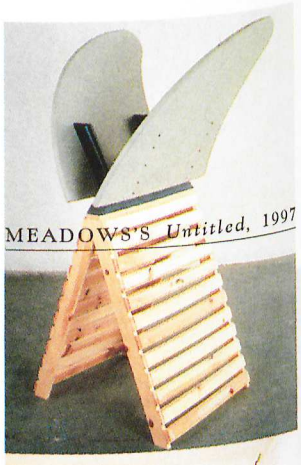
SOME PAINTERS LOOK TO THE PAST FOR INSPIRATION, others look ahead. Kevin Appel does both. His starkly handsome, rigorously designed canvases point in both directions, applying a futuristic computer-era gloss to the ideals and forms of midcentury modernism. For his June show "House" at Angles Gallery in Santa Monica, Appel conceived his own house via computer imaging, then created vast, angular compositions based on views of the virtual spaces. With its sharp yet flowing geometries and impersonal architectural logic, Appel's work seems to draw at once from Piet Mondrian, Richard Neutra and Buckminster Fuller while sustaining an ethereal quality that echoes the "Light and Space" studies of James Turrell. Merging nature and artifice through an eerie green kaleidoscope, his critiques of utopia are as smoothly chilly as a cut-glass bowl of lime sorbet.

But if his paintings are cool to a fault, Appel himself is suddenly hot: The Angles show sold out, with many works going to top collectors. That same month, he won the third annual Citibank Emerging Artist Award, which includes a fall show and catalog at MOCA (the exhibit runs through January 2). MOCA's Schimmel, who selected Appel from a list of finalists, describes his paintings as "complicated, commanding and quietly unrelenting. What I find interesting about his looking back is that it has none of the warmth, humanity or romanticism usually associated with nostalgia. His nostalgia is devoid of human reference. It looks inviting, but there's no way to get into it."

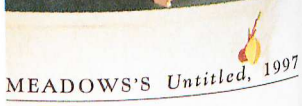
The 31-year-old UCLA graduate concedes the teeth behind his unsentimental vision. "The idealism is stripped away a bit. I think we're a little bit more savvy now; we're not necessarily thinking modernism is going to redeem culture."

Appel's attraction to indigenous L.A. modernism is innate. The son of an architect father and an interior designer mother, he grew up in a glass house on the Westside, and his father Richard would take him on drives around the city, pointing out distinctive modernist structures. In contrast, Appel's studio is vintage Raymond Chandler, tucked into an office building in the heart of Hollywood.

UCLA'S ALL-STAR GRAD SCHOOL HAS BECOME SO TRENDY ONE EXPECTS TO FIND BRITNEY SPEARS THERE CONDUCTING SEMINARS ON VIDEO ART.



MEADOWS'S *Untitled*, 1997



MEADOWS'S *Untitled*, 1997

MEADOWS'S *Terra-forma*, 1999

When discussing his ideas and inspirations, Appel wistfully recalls his childhood. "My parents' house is submerged in a canyon, so there's green all around it," he says. "At certain times of day, when the lights are dancing off the foliage, everything's got a green cast."

That same dance of nature and artifice is crucial to the dynamism of his works. For all their digital diligence, it is in their shifting interplay of interior and exterior, of surface, texture and color, that they truly come alive. To

build these contrasts, Appel often uses knives, squeegees and other tools—some of his own invention—in a physical, hands-on process that requires him to support his canvases with wood beams. "Moving the paint around is a constant point of fascination for me," he says. "As clean as they look, there's a lot of battle. You get to the *painting*—that's where the pleasure comes in. That's why you're doing it."

JASON MEADOWS

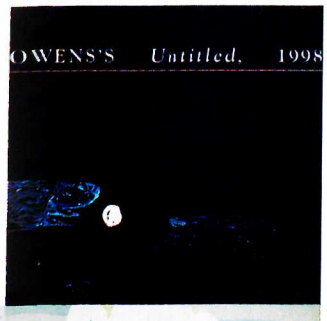
LEANING OVER A WORKTABLE STREWN WITH SNAPSHOTS of his recent sculptures and computer renderings of works as-yet uncreated, Jason Meadows contemplates his oeuvre. One piece resembles a disjointed picket fence; another looks like a cross between a seating unit and a tacky chandelier. A third suggests an aluminum ladder on peyote.

JASON MEADOWS IN HIS HIGHLAND PARK STUDIO

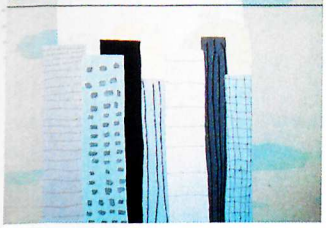
In fact, one can discover familiar objects in almost all of Meadows's pleasingly rough-hewn works—it's just that they've usually been twisted inside out or upside down. "It's a do-it-yourself kind of thing," explains the tall, thoughtful, shaggy-haired artist amid the casual clutter of sculptural scraps in his storefront studio in Highland Park. "There's always something people can relate to; you can still sort of recognize the sum of its parts. It's about something losing its function." He turns to the deconstructed ladder. "It's about losing and gaining its essence of ladder, its *ladderness*."

Raised in the Midwest (one of his earliest childhood memories is clambering over a Robert Indiana *LOVE* sculpture), Meadows moved to L.A. from Chicago and enrolled in UCLA's vaunted sculpture department, where he studied under such notorious "Helter Skelter" veterans as Charles Ray and Paul McCarthy. At 27, he's now—along with Evan Holloway and Liz Craft—one of that department's most visible young graduates. His

LAURA OWENS IN FRONT OF HER *Untitled (Bee#2)*, 1998



OWENS'S *Untitled,* 1998



OWENS'S *Untitled,* 1999

work draws from a range of 20th-century sources, including constructivism, pop art and, especially, minimalism. But while they may be spare, Meadows's pieces are mischievous rather than bombastic. One striking example, done in collaboration with L.A. sculptor Jorge Pardo, is an homage to Constantin Brancusi's famous *Endless Column*, made from plywood struts and yellow wooden disks held in place with latex tubing. Like many of Meadows's works, the piece makes a virtue out of repetition, transforming raw materials into elegant motifs. "I prefer not to be literal about things. I figure the best thing that I do is look at the way someone takes a musical idea and try to make an analogue, with cadence, rhythm, patterns, setting one rhythm against another—like a deejay."

It's apt that Meadows should describe his sculpture in terms of music: Next to art, it's his passion. When not using music as an analogue to design his art, he uses his computer to assemble "sound" collages. But he's also big on what he calls "active listening" (to hard-core rock, electronic music and hip-hop—his current favorite is Kool Keith), studying how the music is constructed.

Among Meadows's admirers is Dean Valentine, president and CEO of the UPN Network. One of L.A.'s foremost contemporary art collectors, Valentine purchased the sculptor's 1997 installation at the now-defunct L.A. gallery Room 702 (the highlight being a picnic table flipped upside down at an awkward angle atop a custom display mount, like an exotic beetle plucked from a backyard). Valentine regards Meadows's work as "very lovely, very playful and very, very intelligent. He has a great sense of humor and storytelling, along with this impeccable formal control."

So far, Meadows has been seen mainly in snatches. This spring, he has two solo shows—one at Marc Foxx in L.A. and another in Milan. If his previous work is any indication, one should expect his new pieces to be rugged, rhythmic and drolly subversive. "I'm interested in things not being so fixed," Meadows says, spinning the thought into another musical metaphor. "It's like punk rock: urgent but not overproduced."

LAURA OWENS

TOO MUCH ATTENTION ISN'T THE SORT OF PROBLEM most artists have to deal with. But buzz in the art world can be a burden *and* a blessing. Just ask Laura Owens. Only five years out of school, this 28-year-old painter has already spent most of her career trying to outrun the hype—and barbs—flung in her path. The consensus is that she's succeeded admirably.

With her quirky compositions and doodly subject matter, Owens is a painter's painter who, in forging her own eclectic style, has earned the respect of curators and critics. Among her fans is David Reed, her teacher at CalArts and recently the subject of his own retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, who praises her "great courage and wit."

The works themselves teeter between imagery and abstraction. Many feature elements of nature, such as flowers, trees and grass (her new works echo Chinese landscapes). Owens, who teaches at Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, believes in studying from life, often taking her students to the Huntington and Descanso gardens. "There's something virtuous and wholesome about our humble little human attempts to reference the awe and beauty we see around us," she says.

But her palette is amusingly retro, highlighting the pseudonatural colors seen in 1970s dishware: avocado, coffee, peach, honeydew. Sometimes her paintings use patterns inspired by textiles. Frequently, they are characterized by large, flat expanses punctuated by small, dense globs of paint squeezed directly from the tube: outbursts of sensuality erupting through a seemingly bland facade.

It takes some footwork to orient yourself to an Owens composition: You have to back away to take in the whole thing, then scan the surface to soak up the details. Even in the art world, these aren't easy works. But along with fellow CalArts graduates Monique Prieto and Ingrid Calame, Owens is considered one of the most promising new painters of the '90s. Last fall, she scored an urban trifecta of sorts, landing solo shows at ACME in L.A., Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York and Loyola University Chicago. At the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland last June, she won a special award, the Baloise Art Prize, for a single 10-by-10-foot painting installed in an otherwise empty booth. (Owens is not afraid to work large: Her painting at Loyola spanned a daunting 40 feet.)

In her Eagle Rock studio, an old brick storefront that she shares with her mutt Lucy, Owens exudes a studious sincerity that masks a disarming sense of humor. She remains bemused about the art-world hoopla surrounding her work. " 'This painting's a prizewinner,' " she mimics. "What does that mean?" She is likewise resistant to being tagged a "female" or an "L.A." artist. "Place—that's such a limiting idea," says Owens, who was raised in a small town in

ONLY FIVE YEARS OUT OF SCHOOL, LAURA OWENS HAS ALREADY SPENT MOST OF HER CAREER TRYING TO OUTRUN THE HYPE—AND BARBS—FLUNG IN HER PATH. THE CONSENSUS IS THAT SHE'S SUCCEEDED ADMIRABLY.

SALOMON HUERTA NEXT TO HIS *Untitled,* 1999

Ohio. "Why not hair color? 'You're a brown-haired artist. Why do you use those colors?' 'You're a Virgo. What's up with that?' "

As testament to her discomfort with labels, her paintings are untitled. And for all their playful ambiguity, they remain self-aware. Staking out a balance between the familiar and the abstract, Owens examines not just the outside world, but the pleasures and limitations of the act of painting and the way that a painting informs its space. "I guess the referents I use are nature, the space within a room and the space within a painting," she says, studying the small, unfinished works around her. "I'm really interested in painting not being passive—that it comes out at you."

SALOMON HUERTA

YOU EXPECT FIGURATIVE WORKS TO REVEAL THINGS ABOUT THEIR SUBJECTS, not obscure them. Which is why Salomón Huerta's paintings are so startling. Huerta paints people from behind, forcing the viewer to actively engage in a search for their identity. In his first major solo show, at Bergamot Station's Patricia Faure Gallery last November, Huerta exhibited 13 paintings: eight shaved heads and five nearly life-size figures, all shown from behind and presented against pastel-colored backgrounds. Some gallery-goers found the images menacing or decided they were gang members in a lineup. A few thought they were all men (they were not) and even questioned their sexual orientation. (Huerta's models are strangers he finds on the street, some of them foreigners.)

This is the sort of dialogue the artist actively seeks. By raising issues of race and gender from a coolly neutral stance, he lets viewers project their own preconceptions onto the works. "I wanted to find a way to make them nonconfrontational—to tone everything down, so it was like a mirror to the viewer. I took the palette out of pop culture," he explains, speaking in his tiny studio north of downtown, laying out clips from fashion magazines of slinky models posed against teal blue backdrops. "The colors are institutional colors, but I sweeten them, make them candy-coated. In jails, they use pink to calm down violent inmates."

Born in Tijuana, Mexico, Huerta, 34, grew up in the projects in L.A.'s Boyle Heights. He later attended Art Center, where at one point he was so poor he was living on rice and beans. His first works were of gang members. After two solo shows at L.A.'s Rico Gallery, he got his master's at UCLA, where he was a *true* minority: a figurative painter. (His favorite artists are Velázquez, Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon.)

"There were some teachers who would see the work and just walk out," he recalls. "But overall, they were very supportive."

John Miller, an abstract painter who was a visiting artist at UCLA when he encountered Huerta, was among those impressed. "When viewing his work, what you're dealing with is your own experience," he observes. "You find yourself looking at yourself looking. And I think that's an aspect of *abstract* painting."

One of Huerta's greatest supporters is his older sister Catalina, with whom he lives in Van Nuys. Not only did she help put him through UCLA, she also acted as his surrogate in the art world for several years, mixing at parties, dealing with his business affairs, even hosting elaborate dinners for collectors. Another big fan is his mother, who is excited that her son has a show this fall in her native country, at the Mexico City Museum. "Where I was raised in Boyle Heights, no one expected you to amount to anything," Huerta states simply.

Lately, Huerta's subject matter has been suburban homes, neatly centered and stripped of detail. These, too, he considers a basis for examining class and cultural status in a starkly neutral way. "No one wants to be preached at," he says, the aforementioned model snapshots spread before him like a ragtag catalog of strangers. "And I don't want to cry 'Victim.' I want to make work that makes the viewer question his own identity. That, in itself, is political."

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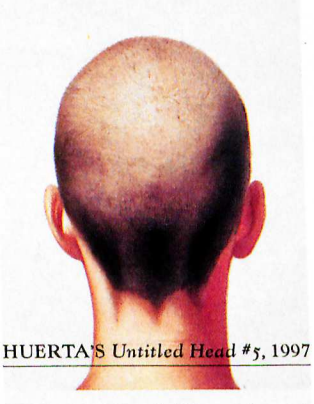

HUERTA'S *Untitled Head #5*, 1997

HUERTA'S *Untitled Figure #1*, 1997

young at art

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SHARON LOCKHART

SHARON LOCKHART IS A BIG DEAL IN EUROPE. Which isn't to say she isn't one here: Since 1994, she's had her photographs purchased by nearly a dozen museums, including MOCA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and the Whitney in New York, where she showed in the 1997 Biennial. But it's Europe that keeps calling. In August, Lockhart took off for a nine-month residency in Berlin, and in November she opens her first museum show, at Rotterdam's Boijmans Museum.

It's no surprise that Lockhart, 35, is receiving such accolades abroad: Her sleekly anthropological films and photos reflect a continual exploration of "otherness," with the interaction of foreign cultures and our urge to project our own associations onto them in search of common ground. Lockhart's images—marked by a cool, detached style—have elicited comparisons to those of German photographer Thomas Ruff and Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, though her subject matter makes her seem more like a contemporary stepdaughter of anthropologist Margaret Mead.

The process of Lockhart's work suggests a distinctly Hollywood approach; she directs her photo shoots, working with a hired cameraman. "L.A. has really shaped the way I work," says the Art Center graduate. "It's like producing a film: scouting a location, running auditions, renting equipment." For her 1994 photo series *Auditions*, Lockhart cast several L.A. preteens to enact a first kiss, then documented their awkward initiation. The 1997 *Goshogaoka*, shot in Japan, featured six 10-minute films of a Japanese girls' basketball team running practice drills: Part real and part choreographed, the oddly sensual exhibit hovers between the banal and the surreal. "There's stuff where I really direct it, and there's stuff where I just let it happen," she says of her method. "Process has always been a big part of my work. Things happen, and those things make it whole somehow."


SHARON LOCKHART IN HER STUDIO


LOCKHART'S *On Kawara: Whole and Parts, 1964–95, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, January 24–April 5, 1998*, 1998

> THE PROCESS of Lockhart's work suggests a distinctly Hollywood approach—she directs her photo shoots working with a hired cameraman.

Lockhart, who grew up in Maine and Massachusetts, came to L.A. in 1991 and retains a touch of New England reserve. Though gracious, she exudes the sort of composed efficiency one might expect from a smartly empathetic doctor. Indeed, when she was in school, Lockhart wrote her thesis on medical photography, and she brings a scalpel-edged acuity to her own investigations of personal and cultural alienation.

Recently, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego purchased a 1999 photo triptych, spanning 18 inches, of a repairman working alone at night amid archaeology displays at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. As captured by Lockhart's lens, the man himself becomes part of the exhibit, set off by a barrier of glass. Notes Elizabeth Armstrong, senior curator at MCA: "Lockhart seems so deeply connected to her subjects—I would say her work is soulful. I think her portraits transcend issues of identity and go right to the essence."

For her newest body of work, Lockhart spent three months in the Amazon. The project includes a 29-minute film of a Brazilian audience, seated in an opera house, watching an American orchestral performance. "It's set up like an experiment, a happening," the artist explains. "It's about one culture, one audience, looking at another." A series of photographic images, to be shown at Santa Monica's Blum & Poe Gallery this spring, depicts families from the region. For each shot, she let her subjects pick their location, then showed them Polaroids, allowing them to adjust their pose. "There's a certain relationship between the subject and the camera that doesn't exist anymore," says Lockhart. "I'm not trying to be an anthropologist, you know? It's more of an exchange." **LA**

ALL ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE FOLLOWING: APPEL: ANGLES GALLERY, SANTA MONICA; MEADOWS: MARC FOXX, L.A., AND 303 GALLERY, NYC; OWENS: THE ARTIST AND ACME GALLERY, L.A.; HUERTA: PATRICIA FAURE GALLERY, SANTA MONICA; LOCKHART: BLUM & POE GALLERY, SANTA MONICA

paradise lust

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when the millionaire Max Fleishmann wanted a place to moor his yacht, he took out his checkbook and practically paid for the construction of Santa Barbara's harbor. The entirety of the area, in fact, is based on the banana republic model, with a host of wealthy bwanas creating jobs for the natives. "It's always been said there are two populations here," says Parent. "The rich and the people who feed off the rich."

So the surest path to acceptance is, of course, to give baksheesh. "It's the stamp of approval," says one local. Jeff Bridges received the stamp of approval, partially funding a transition house for homeless youth. Michael Douglas was approved, writing a $600,000 check to help purchase the bluffs overlooking Arroyo Burro Beach, saving them from development. Kenny Loggins was approved, writing the Montecito Union School song. Brad Pitt was approved, paying $5,000 to become a "garden benefactor" at Lotusland. Dennis Franz, new to Montecito but beginning to show up with his wife at black ties, is pending approval.

Buried beneath this mountain of check writing, of course, is the hot anxiety of identity itself: When will my status change from parasite to host? In Montecito today, the hottest political issues focus on keeping other people out—issues like the debate over opening another Lotusland-like public garden, named Val Verde (bad: too much traffic), or widening the 101 Freeway, which magically converts to the rush-hour 405 every weekend (ditto: even worse). De facto local government is in the form of the Montecito Association, a homeowners group whose mandate and influence on county government has been growth control. (Montecito was instrumental in enacting the first county zoning ordinance in California in 1929.) And it has been successful—in a town comprising roughly 4,000 lots, no more than 19 new houses a year can be approved.

The problem today is there just aren't that many lots left to build on. Ortega Ridge on the enclave's eastern border still had buildable lots five years ago; today it's a colony of mini estates piled atop each other. Sheffield Drive, considered the borderline between Montecito and the smaller beach communities to the south, is filling up in the same manner. Thus, the overriding desire in Montecito is to get in, get through the line, get the stamp of approval, and then start complaining about outsiders. "It's funny," says a local foundation president, "but the use of our motels, restaurants and gas stations by tourists—this is not seen anymore as their proper function by the new people who live here. When these issues come up, the most radical of activists—they're fundamentalists, really—complain that we already suffer too much traffic."

But woe to the outsider who jumps the line and, without approval, proclaims himself a local. (Outsiders are actually easily spotted by their mailing habits. New Hollywood people will write "Montecito" as the return address on their mail, says local writer Ann Louise Bardach, who reported the flap surrounding Joel Schumacher's barn in *The New Yorker*, while old-timers put "Santa Barbara" on their letters.) There is much disdain at Lotusland for the so-called "local" homeowner who spearheaded a political appeal concerning the garden's attendance numbers, and who happened to be keeping a home address in Santa Monica at the time. And as for the "grassroots" cry against adding a lane to the 101, Tina Herold says: "I was at the house party of a married couple, a Hollywood producer and director new to Montecito. And they were loudly complaining about the 101 being widened, about outsiders ruining Montecito and turning it into Los Angeles. And these people were brand-new to the neighborhood."

Everyone wants to get into Montecito these days—tourists, producers, actors, IPO kings. The rush fuels the desires of arriving hotel operators like Schrager as much as it stokes the fears of local government and residents bent on keeping interlopers and development out. "Believe me," says one longtime resident, "you try to build a fence here these days and they're all over you." Santa Barbara seems to enjoy toying cruelly with unsuspecting outsiders, like mice set down in a Byzantine paper maze. "Local government here," says a hotel executive, "is like Jessica Lange playing Death in *All That Jazz*—they seduce you and seduce you and seduce you, and then they've got you." To Schrager's credit, he has run a very smooth campaign, enlisting local architects, holding meetings with Montecito homeowners, spending a reported $1 million just to assure his development application's acceptance. All of which has led to a certain optimism in Philip Dailey's presentations to visitors. "If everything goes well and our application is accepted," he will say, "I can see us breaking ground early next year, finishing in about 14 months."

But Hollywood and new development still make Old Montecito uneasy to its defensive soul. When Ivan Reitman purchased the old Armour garden estate with plans to build a new home, not many people took notice. Yet when the construction of his Robert Stern–designed mansion began dragging on for years with the attendant rumbling of heavy equipment, some in the community began to get suspicious. And when a local newspaper ran an article claiming 50 telephone lines were being routed into Reitman's property, some neighbors fretted that a film company had moved into their midst, an enterprise that might generate more traffic than the torpedoed Val Verde public garden ever would have.

Reitman calmly takes any discomfort his presence gives off in stride. "I know my neighbors," says the director. "I get along with my neighbors. I think any bad feelings in the neighborhood have to do with a single person who wanted to buy some property I wasn't interested in selling. As for the 50 phone lines, that's just a rumor that has something to do with the local phone company installing a trunk line in the area."

Stories that surround Hollywood and its denizens are inevitably more vivid than reality. And so, on a recent afternoon inside the tony University Club, bastion of the Old Montecito elite, news that guest speaker Reitman was canceling 30 minutes before the day's scheduled luncheon was greeted with considerable grumbling. It didn't matter whether or not the director had a good reason—Reitman had stood up the gentry today, had gone too far. As the plates were deposited in place around the tables, and napkins laid out in laps, one diner was heard to remark to his neighbor, "Ivan Reitman will never see a building permit in this town again." **LA**