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COVER STORY

Ascent of the Early Risers

A MOCA exhibition tries to capture the moment when new art and young artists made their mark on the real world.

April 01, 2001 | SUZANNE MUCHNIC | Suzanne Muchnic is The Times' art writer

In 1990, Jorge Pardo, a 26-year-old, UCLA-trained sculptor, introduced himself to the art world at Thomas Solomon's Garage, a makeshift gallery in a West Hollywood alley. In an astonishing blend of old-fashioned craftsmanship and up-to-the-minute ideas, Pardo created painstaking likenesses of domestic tools and other ordinary, manufactured objects—a ladder, a router, a set of wrenches, even a handmade sheet of plywood. Reviewing the show for The Times, critic Christopher Knight deemed it "among the more impressive debuts of recent memory."

The following year, Matthew Barney, a 24-year-old, Yale-educated artist who supported himself by modeling for fashion ads, created an extraordinary buzz at Stuart Regen Projects in West Hollywood. His ambitious installation, "Transexualis (Decline)," consisted of a walk-in cooler containing a weightlifter's decline bench made of petroleum jelly, assorted exercise equipment and a video of the nude artist engaged in a feat of physical endurance and metaphorical innuendo. When the exhibition subsequently appeared on the East Coast, the New York Times hailed it as "an extraordinary first show."

In 1994, it was Jason Rhoades' turn to flaunt his youthful ambition and ingenuity. In his installation "Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts" the 28-year-old graduate of Pasadena's Art Center College of Design turned Rosamund Felsen's West Hollywood gallery into "a domesticated landfill," as former Times reviewer Susan Kandel put it. Having filled the space chockablock with crude copies of Ikea furniture, plastic trash bins and assorted consumer detritus, then parked a yellow Pontiac Fiero outside the gallery, Rhoades was on his way to art stardom.

Meanwhile, in London, Rachel Whiteread, a graduate of Slade College of Fine Art, was making big plaster casts of spaces around domestic fixtures and furnishings. Chris Ofili, educated at the Royal College of Art, was selling clumps of elephant dung on a crummy street in the East End and applying the stuff to his luminous, dot-covered paintings.

Hottest of all was Damien Hirst, who was making ecosystems that incorporated life cycles of insects. In 1991, fresh out of Goldsmiths College, he took over an empty shop to install "In and Out of Love," a two-part reflection on life and death. In one room, butterflies hatched from cocoons attached to paintings, flew around a humid room and feasted on sugar water. After the butterflies died, Hirst attached them to paintings, displayed in another room with a table holding ashtrays crammed with cigarette butts.

These breakthrough projects—and many more—by artists who blasted out of art schools in the 1990s are the subject of "Public Offerings," opening today at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo. The exhibition, organized by MOCA's chief curator, Paul Schimmel, presents early work—including performance-based installations, conceptual sculpture, paintings, photographs and films—by 25 artists who studied at major art schools in Los Angeles, New York, London, Tokyo and Berlin.

"It's a historical exhibition about the making of the artist in the '90s," Schimmel says. The show marks a period when an unusual number of young artists burst upon the scene with remarkably ambitious, labor-intensive work that quickly won them recognition, launched them on the circuit of national museum shows and into the fast lane of the international contemporary art scene, and yielded financial rewards as well.

"What differentiates these artists so dramatically from preceding generations is that they gained recognition so early," he says. "The Abstract Expressionists were well into their 40s when they became well-known; the Pop artists were in their 30s, and that was considered very young at the time. These artists were in their early 20s. They went into a kind of public arena that artists at that age had never experienced so uniformly, across the whole generation."

The exhibition catches them at a moment when their work was still fresh and pure, and when they were compelled to spend an extraordinary amount of effort on it, Schimmel says. "When they started these pieces, they didn't know who they were yet, as artists. There is that sense of discovery within the works themselves.

"Whatever you can say in retrospect about these artists in terms of how strategic they were or how clever they were about marketing and the commercial implications, what they were doing was insane," he says. "They were doing it because they knew nothing else, and they were working day jobs to do it. They had to do it."

The title, "Public Offerings," plays with the notion of IPOs, the initial public offerings of stock made when private companies go public. But the term mainly characterizes the moment when the artists "took something that was a very private experience and put it into a very public arena," Schimmel says. "Every time an artist puts anything out, it's a public offering, but there is only one initial public offering. If you are an artist, you can never go back to the one time when the art world discovered who you are."

Schimmel has long been fascinated by moments of transition in modern and contemporary art. He is probably best known as curator of MOCA's landmark exhibitions "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s" (1992) and "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979" (1998). But he also loves delving into art's historical cracks, as in "Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62," a 1993 show organized with Donna De Salvo, and "The Interpretive Link: Abstract Surrealism Into Abstract Expressionism," which he organized in 1987 for the Newport Harbor Art Museum when he was curator there.

"Public Offerings" is not part of a series, but when a friend pointed out that it fits a pattern of addressing art in transition, Schimmel had to agree. "I have an ongoing interest in the kind of simplicity and clarity of those first, breakthrough works," he says. "Whether it's a Pollock or a Rothko, or a Damien Hirst or a Matthew Barney, those really early pieces reveal a lot about the artist without reflecting the popular culture, the media, or even the work's critical or commercial value."

"Public Offerings" evolved from his observation of dramatic changes in Los Angeles' art scene in the early '90s. Dozens of galleries that had popped up in the mid-'80s boom disappeared a few years later, after the art market hit bottom. "Just at the moment when it was all going great guns, it evaporated. What was fascinating was that it was amazingly liberating for the artists," he says.

"It was a bit like a forest fire, when the old growth gets burned down, but the new growth can come up. Out of this scorched earth of the art world, new art came out of the art schools and immediately found a place in small alternatives to the gallery structure—apartments, garages, project spaces, setups that were sort of one-offs. It was a very informal structure that developed from the bottom up. Seeing that here in Los Angeles made me feel a great sense of pride, but the same thing was happening internationally."

Los Angeles and London are the pillars of the show, he says. Along with Pardo and Rhoades, filmmaker and photographer Sharon Lockhart, painters Laura Owens and Toba Khedoori, and video-installation artist Diana Thater are on the L.A. roster. London's lineup features performance artists Jane and Louise Wilson (twin sisters), painter and sculptor Sarah Lucas, filmmaker Steve McQueen, and painter Gary Hume, as well as Hirst, Whiteread and Ofili. Five other artists in the show studied in New York or New England, four come from Japan and two from Germany.

At first, Schimmel planned a show that would track the '90s phenomenon in terms of art schools. He was aware of Southern California's long tradition of influential art schools, and he considered CalArts, which opened in Valencia in 1971, "the mother of all new art schools." Run by artists instead of administrators, it played a seminal role in the widespread art-school evolution away from relatively academic curricula toward more open-ended approaches, which spawned the artists in "Public Offerings."

As the idea took shape, however, Schimmel began to realize that he was not only interested in the impact of schools and their surrounding communities, but also in the artists' personal development. He decided to shift to the crucial, formative work made while they were still "in the orbit of the art school," he says.

Schimmel didn't lose interest in the art-school angle, but educational and social issues became grist for commissioned essays in the catalog instead of the visible theme of the exhibition. The publication was edited by Howard Singerman, author of the book "Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University." Catalog essays were written by Yilmaz Dziewior, Midori Matsui, Lane Relyea, Katy Siegel, Jon Thompson and Singerman.

"We have left the critical, theoretical underpinnings of the exhibition to the theoreticians," Schimmel says. As curator, he concentrated on winnowing a list of about 100 artists to 25 and to selecting appropriate pieces. Still, he "learned a thing or two" about art schools, he says. "My hopes for grand generalizations were not to be borne out, in that you cannot finally compare Tokyo and Berlin to London and Los Angeles." He also found that Germany was not producing hot young artists at the same rate as London and Los Angeles in the early '90s, as he had thought.

All that is in the background, however. What visitors will see at the Geffen Contemporary is art, not an exposition of a social phenomenon. "I honestly believe when people walk in, they are going to see a show filled with the generosity that young artists have when they first put something out there," Schimmel says. Art historians must look at the social environment in which works of art are made, but the works in "Public Offerings" don't deal didactically with social changes, he says. "It's not about that; it's the other way around. Artists don't make theory. They don't make social experiments."

They do react to social conditions, however. In "Normapaths," a takeoff on '60s television, Jane and Louise Wilson filmed themselves as cat-suited avengers, bouncing on a trampoline while destroying a kitchen. Los Angeles artist Sharon Lockhart's film and photographs come from a world of cinema, screen tests and auditions in which kids grow up too quickly.

German artist Thomas Demand's photographic tableaux look prosaic but actually re-create newspaper pictures of loaded subjects, including the hallway leading to serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment and the archive of Nazi propaganda filmmaker Leni Reifenstahl. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's giant kinetic sculpture, "Sea Breeze," is an over-the-top-spectacle of Klieg lights in a shuttered trailer that's intended to seduce and repel viewers with an artwork that emits way too much heat and light for comfort. Another Japanese artist, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, requires viewers to climb a mountain of futons to see a series of photographs. Begun in 1989, "Twilight Jizoing" placed him at the forefront of Tokyo's adventurous young artists.

Schimmel expected "Public Offerings" to present "an evolution from object-oriented sculptures to installation-oriented art to fabricated photography to a kind of fictionalized filmmaking," he says. It didn't work out that way. "All of that is in the mix, but it happened at the same time. The nexus of the show is 1990 to 1993; that's when most of the pieces were made."

Another possible approach was to group the works by school, city or media. Instead, Schimmel presented the art in 24 concurrent solo shows, featuring 23 individuals and the Wilson sisters. "I've tried to spread it out so that nothing is being compared and to respect the coherence of those original installations," he says. "What is different is that they are all bumping up against each other at the same time, in the same place."

Schimmel made the final cut of artists by choosing works that fit his parameters. He wanted pieces made while the artists were still in school or relatively soon afterward, and works that had "some real impact when they were first shown," he says. "It's not like everything had to have been on the cover of Artforum, but it had to have made a big difference in who the artists are. I was looking for a kind of completeness that could stand up to scrutiny 10 years later. This is the first shot at creating a historical exhibition for something that has just passed.

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"Public Offerings," Museum of Contemporary Art at the Geffen Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., L.A. Through July 29. Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thursdays, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Prices: Adults, \$6; students and seniors, \$4; children younger than 12, free. (213) 626-6222.

