class reunion

DAVID A GREENE

Sam Durant, **Dave Muller** and **Laura Owens**, three early-90s graduates of LA's California Institute of the Arts, now share the distinction of museum shows in their adopted hometown.

IN THE SPRING OF 1992, THE LOS ANGELES MUSEUM OF Contemporary Art (MoCA) hosted a ground-breaking group show. 'Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s' was dark, brash, and ambitious. Not only did it lay claim to a decade barely two years old, it promised a forward-looking (if dystopic) vision, unlike the staid retrospective it was modelled after: the Whitney Biennial. The Whitney was, and still is, the US art world's most important trade fair, an eagerly anticipated glimpse of all that is hot and happening – at least as deemed by its taste-making curators, and as seen in a rear-view mirror.

'Helter Skelter' kneecapped the Whitney with a pre-emptive strike: rather than wait for New York to discover Los Angeles, LA went ahead and discovered itself. Held in MoCA's cavernous, Frank Gehry-designed Temporary Contemporary exhibition space, it gathered all the cool, brooding artists in town who hadn't been getting enough press (Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy), who didn't fit into the New York art world's tidy boxes (hot-rod comix-god Robert Williams, scary beach-bum Llyn Foulkes), or whose *oeuvres* were just achieving critical mass (sculptor Charlie Ray, painter Lari Pittman).

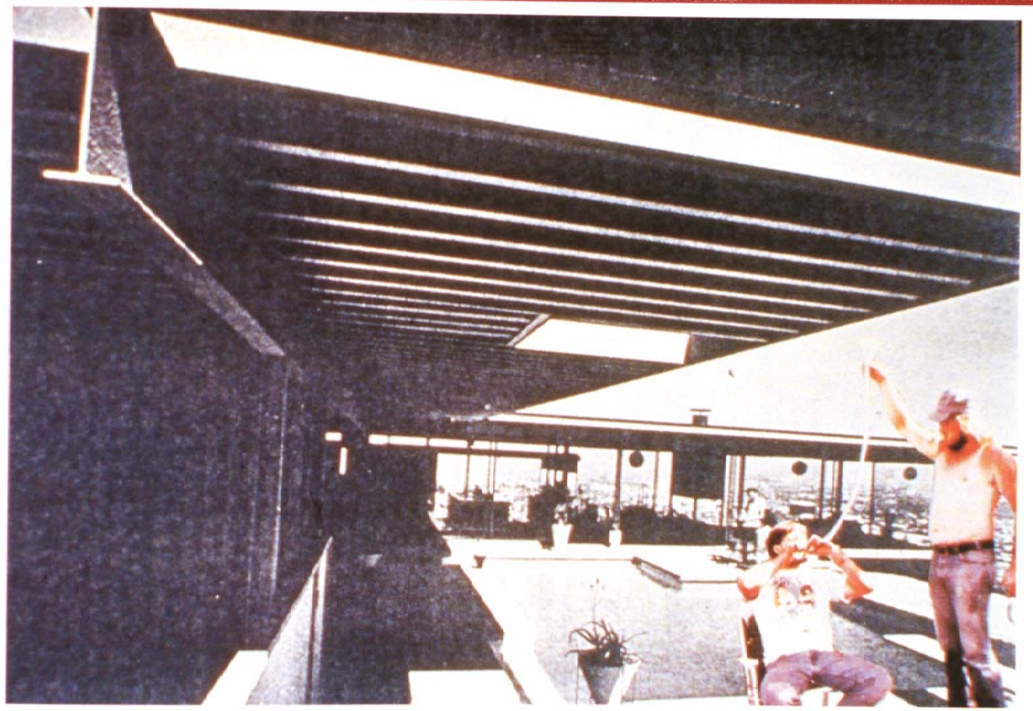
Sam Durant, *Reflected Upside Down and Backwards*, 1999, wood, acrylic, asphalt, and CD players, 66 x 213.4 x 127 cm. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Santa Monica. Photo: Joshua White

If you were here at the time, the Los Angeles art scene felt like a small town, and New York seemed far, far away. (Outside of LA, some still considered Kelley a creepy weirdo, and Gehry a kooky left-coast postmodernist.) So while 'Helter Skelter' was unmistakably an institutional product – and thus worthy of suspicion, if not contempt – it did have a certain... something. A bit of sweaty, gothic funk, and just enough jangling noise to make young art students pay attention, its big-time setting giving them a whiff of legitimacy's perfume. It smacked, for a brief second, of rock'n'roll.

Rock'n'roll, of course, has nothing to do with music: nurtured in a Petri dish of low expectations, it arises, always, from the state of having nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Note that this is different from having nothing left to lose (though the latter is a fertile medium for good art, and interesting crime). Which is why true rock'n'roll is almost always made by kids. It's an optimistic thing.

And the growth medium was perfect in LA: the US was in a deep, jobless recession, recovering from a cynical war in the Middle East. The art world was in the doldrums; but doldrums, when the sun is shining, are no different than any other hazy summer's day in lacadaisical LA. News travels slowly here, so artists kept making art, and kids kept coming to art school. Many of them stayed; there were plenty of cheap corners of town where they might rent a loft and make art, or rent a storefront and show it.

So, more than a decade on, has the promise of 'Helter Skelter' – and its acolytes – panned out? Did those young garage-rockers grow up to be arena-filling superstars? Well, yes and no. It's complicated. Consider three young artists who were at LA's California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) when 'Helter Skelter' was on view, and now are having their first museum shows.



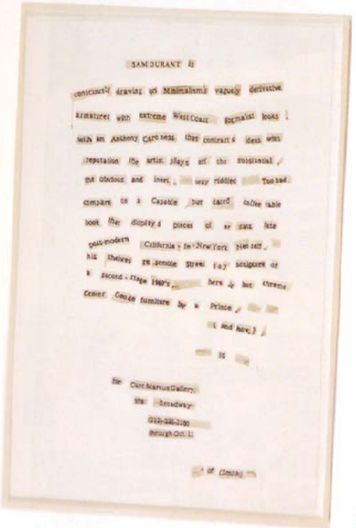
Sam Durant, *Beer Bong*, 1995, collage on photocopy, 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy MOCA, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest

YOUNG ARTISTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CAREER-CONSCIOUS, BUT after 'Helter Skelter', there was a palpable sense that they could, you know, get famous. One sure way, it seemed, was to make art specifically to be shown in museums: to create a product never meant to function in the outside world, but to feed the voracious hordes of curators, university historians, and administrative hangers-on whose jobs depended on 'museum-quality' art with thesis-worthy rhetorical chops. Art that refers to books begets books that refer to art – the perfect symbiotic relationship. Some young artists followed this formula slavishly, but even those who rejected it found that to ensure a viable career, they had to let it infect their work in some form, whether they acknowledged it or not.

In the main MoCA building, less than a mile away from the Temporary Contemporary (since re-named the David Geffen Contemporary), is an eight-year survey of the work of Sam Durant, a forty-one-year-old who had just graduated from CalArts when 'Helter Skelter' was on view. Though he had been showing locally for years after school – and had been toiling as a carpenter to make ends meet – Durant's first real break-out artworks were a series of waist-high sculptures from 1995, made of those architecture-student staples, foam-core and cardboard. His 'Abandoned Houses' were seriously fucked-up models of Case Study Houses, the modernist showplaces designed by the likes of Pierre Koenig and Richard Neutra in the 1940s–60s as examples of pragmatic (if upscale) homesteading. Durant's versions – trashed, graffiti-ed, and burnt – appeared on the cusp of a national design obsession with all things modern. While savvy furniture-dealers were snapping up Eames chairs, Durant was already subverting their clean lines and utopian ideals.

Seeing these things in a white-walled museum, now, is like a blast of refreshing jet exhaust. Now that 'mid-century modern' is the twenty-first-century equivalent of 'Where's the beef?', Durant's little crackerboxes aren't just funny, they're hilarious. And, coupled with his contemporaneous photocopy collages of the interiors of similar modern houses, with glued-on magazine photos of beer-bong-swilling jackasses and buxom biker chicks violating the pristine settings, they are angry and raunchy and brilliant all at the same time. (More so, way more so, than Richard Prince's 1980s biker-babe cutouts ever were.) *This* is rock'n'roll.

That is, until you read Durant's current explanation of them in the MoCA catalogue. (Durant now refers to his unsavoury houseguests as 'the return of the repressed'.) Round the corner in the gallery more reality sets in: rooms full of scatter-ish installations, complete with store-bought sound-systems and expensive, outsourced fabrication. Rather than *being* rock'n'roll, Durant's newest work is about rock'n'roll: Curt Cobain shows up, as do Neil Young and the Stones at Altamont, all tied to Robert Smithson, Isamu Noguchi and, unbelievably (and unironically), the Black Panthers. Durant's intricate – but not too intricate – webs of association, all dryly plotted on accompanying drawings, provide useful roadmaps for museum curators eager to write footnote-studded essays (and are saleable souvenirs for budget-conscious collectors). But emotionally,



they're as dead as Cobain's mouldering corpse. Art *about* rock'n'roll is about as thrilling as rock'n'roll about art. In trying to amp up the seriousness of his 'mature' work, Durant just makes simple art complicated. But like I said – rock is a kids' game.

THE FEAR OF HAVING NOTHING TO MAKE art about strikes all artists who aren't irreparably emotionally damaged or certifiably insane. To sustain a career, one must either be an extremely interesting person, or hit upon a formal style that people can't get enough of – to become a brand name. This is why catering to academics is so alluring: they're a guaranteed constituency, ignorant of fashion and immune to charm.

But some, more introspective artists cannot abide selling out. To combat the emptiness within – or at least the fear of it – some give up entirely; others retreat into their studios, never to emerge. The shrewdest find creative ways to give up without *really* giving in. One of the best is Dave Muller: At CalArts, Muller was paralysed, but he didn't wallow in his bad fortune to be in art school with nothing to make art about. Instead, he opened up his studio to his peers, and let them show their own art in it. An empty studio, come faculty-review time, was a venal sin; but when it came time for Muller to be judged, he had the fullest studio around. Brilliant.

By becoming a 'cultural producer' – in the Hollywood sense, not the industrial – Muller became a new kind of art-world animal. (The term was coined by one of Muller's teachers at CalArts, conceptualist Michael Asher.) Muller's later work consisted of larger versions of his art-school shows, a shoe-string budget series held at venues all over the world under the moniker 'Three Day Weekend'. He also made genuine, saleable art, by painting dainty, sometimes bitingly witty watercolours of announcements for other artist's shows – some of them faithful reproductions, others with his own editorial additions (and still others, outright fabrications).

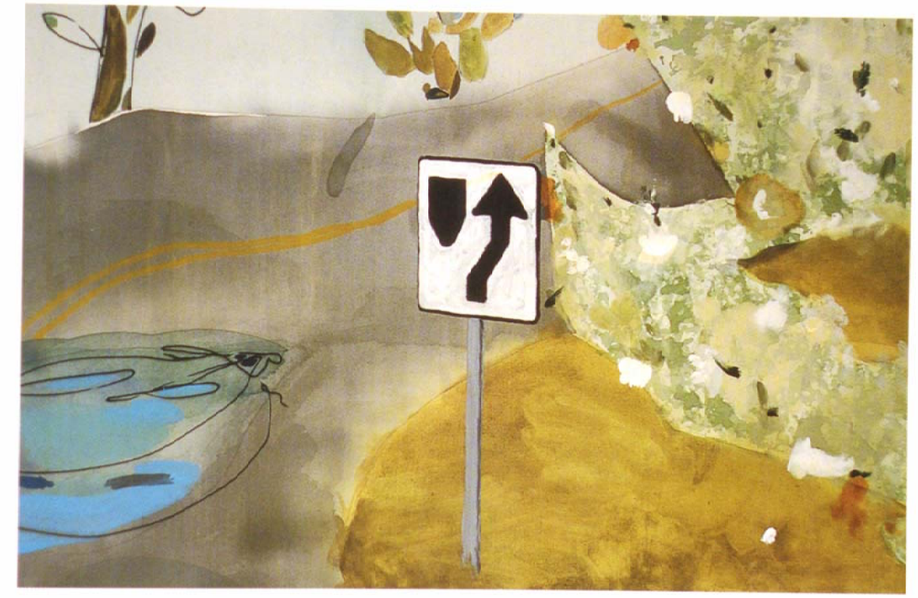
At the UCLA Hammer Museum is a huge, yet airy-feeling retrospective of the thirty-eight-year-old Muller's work since 1994. Hung salon-style – or, more accurately, teenager-bedroom-style – Muller's posters and cards paint an exuberant, intimate portrait of a particular slice of LA art history, and of Muller's own travels (as well as his manic fascinaton with George Nelson 'bubble' lamps). Like Sunday-newspaper comic strips, there can be no 'best' with Muller's works, just personal faves; mine include a reconstructed review of Sam Durant's art by the *New York Times*'s answer to Cruella DeVil, Roberta Smith (*ReSmith*, 1998). In his version, Muller takes a cranky pan and turns it into a disjointed, nutso screed – or is it a love letter? Another classic is a series reproducing a MoMA announcement-card for a Jackson Pollock show (*Pollock Sketchbook [Icy Landscape, small]*, 1999), utilising a classic Peanuts cartoon showing Charlie Brown (bald and round-headed, like a juvenile Jackson) grumbling about the bankruptcy of common snowmen, then rolling his own icy, abstract fantasia.

Riffing on others' work is a time-honoured tradition in the American arts: some call it 'jazz'. Muller claims Romanian carpetbagger André Cadere as a muse, and follows in the footsteps of domestic art-world jokesters/naïfs like Jeffrey Vallance – and any number of local graffiti-taggers – in his shyly egotistic, piggyback authorship. But always in Muller's work, pride is tempered by gentleness: a side effect of this retrospective is, for those in the know, a sense of nostalgia and loss. Many of Muller's classmates at CalArts, who were the stars of those early Three Day Weekend shows, have dropped off the art-world radar: Andrea Bowers, Dave Hughes, Jory Felice and Anne Collier are a few of the good, interesting artists who have not achieved the success that gives a career momentum. But like an actor thrust into celebrity due to the luck of the draw – a little movie that struck a chord, an endearingly floppy hairstyle – Muller is loyal to his friends and comrades, feeling lucky and slightly ashamed of his success, and giving credit where credit is due.

IF MULLER FOUND A WAY TO MAKE ART BY RENTING HIS STUDIO out, Laura Owens has found a morally defensible way to remain in the studio. When her huge, spare paintings began making the rounds of galleries in New York and LA, no one knew quite what to make of them; local (male) critics lumped her in with fellow CalArts abstract painters Ingrid Calame and Monique Prieto, in a retro-modernist 'Charlie's Angels' triumvirate. But Owens's paintings never really jibed with the carefully plotted, biomorphic colour-fields of the other two. Hers were somehow less calculating – or maybe so smart and calculated that they just seemed agenda-free.

As CalArts dean Thomas Lawson (once a painter himself) makes clear in a catalogue essay for Owens's upcoming retrospective at MoCA, her art takes hesitant, half-steps into the dark and musty parlours of visual perception and painterly technique, with their well-trodden floors and dangerous moulds growing in corners. The thirty-two-year-old Owens wants to make paintings, but doesn't especially want to *be* a painter – that's so nineteenth-century. Then again, better to be stuck in the 1800s than the 1980s – the last time painting was commercially popular in the US.

Though Owens's paintings are heroically sized, they embody what was missing in bombastic 1980s canvases: an acknowledgement of the viewer. Her work invites us to step inside, via classical perspective and Sylvia Mangold-ish floor planks, or the moist airiness of ancient Chinese landscapes. Owens's paintings recognise that people – that is, people who don't own them – will be looking at them, and not just in a glossy art magazine or auction-house catalogue. In fact, the paintings look far worse in reproduction than they do in real life – just like people. And, just like people, each has a personality, because (if you believe Owens) they arise from small epiphanies: a 'what if...?' or a 'how come...?' moment. Yet they take a hell of a lot of time, and dedication, to complete. This sticktoitiveness is the hardest part of being a painter in our Photoshop world: coming up with what seems like a good idea, then spending weeks or months to find that it leads, sometimes, absolutely nowhere.



Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2002–3, acrylic and oil on linen, 213.4 x 203.2 cm. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles

It's a refreshing waste of time to describe Owens's paintings in anything but schematic terms – there is no overarching theme, no formal through-line other than their large size and depth of field. Their casual use of a formal vocabulary is drawn from a seemingly bottomless well of decorative flourishes, smudges, smears, lines, bits and pieces culled from the history of art and painting itself: Japanese shoji screens and Agnes Martin stripe-paintings, Jim Dine's heroic gateways and Florine Stettheimer's coy tea-parties, maybe even discarded background-art from a 'South Park' cartoon.

Owens scats a familiar tune, but her lilt and timbre make it something entirely new. Maybe it's because, unlike other art-school painters, she was given room to grow: contrary to popular myth, painting was not discouraged at CalArts (it was the spring from which David Salle sprang, after all), but the faculty was, as a whole, uneducated on the subject. For a young, already technically-accomplished painter like Owens, this was, in fact, a gift; for when she sought out opinions on her work, they were not tainted by expert jargon or classical prejudices. Her art was discussed as art, nothing more or less.

FOR ALL ITS ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT BLUSTER, 'HELTER SKELTER' marked the maturation of the Los Angeles art scene, and its coming-out party. In the intervening years, some of the big names in the show became huge, while others faded into the smoggy horizon. Art magazines have all run special LA issues, declaring it the hot new art spot over and over again (though in typical Byzantine art-world fashion, some got the telegram later than others). Little galleries run on a shoestring by ambitious youngsters have coalesced into a few bigger ones run by adults. New York corporate-art showrooms have set up shop in the tonier parts of town, while the celebrity-laden opening-night parties of new small galleries, run by savvy rich kids with backers and PR flacks, make the society pages.

Yet today's times feel eerily similar to a decade or so ago. War in the Persian Gulf is again on the horizon, and the country is in an economic crisis that may prove larger and louder than the last. MoCA is reportedly on the brink of financial disaster, the result of rapid growth – and grand plans – fuelled by private donations that have come to a shuddering halt, due to a dramatic drop in the stock market. Elsewhere in town, a state and local budget crisis has obliterated the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's plans for replacing their campus with a cloth-roofed confection by Rem Koolhaas, the hottest architect of 1997. The apex has been reached, and the downward slide begins – how deep the gorge goes, nobody knows. Will our unsettling era influence another generation of local kids to seek their own way in a changed LA artscape? Maybe. Ask me again in a decade. MP

THE FEAR OF HAVING NOTHING TO MAKE ART ABOUT STRIKES ALL ARTISTS WHO AREN'T IRREPARABLY EMOTIONALLY DAMAGED OR CERTIFIABLY INSANE.

(Above)
Dave Muller, *ReSmith*, 1998, acrylic on paper, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Santa Monica, CA. Photo: Joshua White

(Below)
Dave Muller, *Pollock Sketchbook (Icy Landscape, small)*, 1999, acrylic on paper. Four parts, 10.2 x 15.2 cm each. Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

'Dave Muller: Connections', 6 October 2002 – 5 January, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. **'Sam Durant'**, 13 October 2002 – 9 February, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. **'Laura Owens'**, 16 March – 22 June, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.