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September 13, 2009

THE NEW SEASON | ART

Open the Storeroom: Let's Put on a Show

By JORI FINKEL

LOS ANGELES

WHEN the financial crisis at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) here made headlines last year, many in the art world questioned why the museum was spending so much on temporary exhibitions while the bulk of its impressive collection languished in storage. It's not just a budget issue but also one of museum identity: if a museum is known for organizing big but short-lived surveys and staging shows on loan from New York, is it giving visitors enough to feel proprietary excitement about and inspire them to keep coming back?

So there was clearly a silver lining when the museum announced this year that to save money it would cancel several exhibitions and for the first time devote both its buildings — some 50,000 square feet — to its permanent collection. This installation will run from Nov. 15 through May 2010, when some galleries will make room for an [Arshile Gorky](#) show. Until then, expect to see about 500 works handpicked by the chief curator, Paul Schimmel, which is less than 10 percent of the museum's overall holdings but promises to speak volumes about the history of contemporary art.

Last month Mr. Schimmel showed me models in progress of the installation, for which he has largely taken a chronological approach, mixing California artists with New Yorkers and Europeans who worked at the same time. Early on, the New Yorkers clearly overpower their West Coast counterparts.

The show begins with a gallery featuring eight of the museum's 11 paintings by [Mark Rothko](#), acquired mainly from the collection of Count Giuseppe Panza. Another early gallery has 8 of the museum's 11 combines by [Robert Rauschenberg](#), also from Panza.

But as you enter the 1960s, you see the Los Angeles art scene take root, and you discover one of the reasons it remains so vital today: Many of its most inventive pioneers are still alive and active. Robert Irwin (now in San Diego), John Baldessari (still in Santa Monica) and [Ed Ruscha](#) (long in Venice Beach), for example, are well represented in the show, each appearing at multiple junctions.

"I think you will see as the exhibition progresses the growing impact of L.A. artists internationally," Mr. Schimmel said. "What begins as a sprinkling becomes by the end a dominant force."

The chronological approach also makes for some startling juxtapositions, like a wall where three pieces — a biomorphic Ken Price sculpture from 1962; a sketchy, flesh-toned oil by Cy Twombly from 1961 (one of a few works borrowed from [Eli Broad](#) to round out the offerings); and a bloody-looking valentine of an abstraction on paper from 1960-63 by Hannah Wilke — all vibrate with a sexual intensity that Mr. Schimmel described as a "kind of encoded expressionism." (The installation is hardly balanced in terms of

gender, but it would probably survive a male-versus-female counting game better than most, thanks not just to the occasional Wilke but to large bodies of photographs by Helen Levitt, [Diane Arbus](#) and Nan Goldin.)

Then comes the generation of Los Angeles artists that Mr. Schimmel helped put on the map with his 1992 exhibition “Helter Skelter,” including the shock artists Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Chris Burden. Most of their work appears in the warehouse-style Geffen building, along with a newer crop of Los Angeles art stars, from Laura Owens to Mark Grotjahn to Liz Craft.

Throughout, the exhibition has historically important examples of installation art, starting with sculptures from the Store, a mock-retail environment Claes Oldenburg created in Lower Manhattan in 1961, and a mouth-watering re-creation of Mr. Ruscha’s 1970 chocolate room. Also look for a lesser known 1969 neon installation by Doug Wheeler that has only been shown five times in the past 25 years.

As Mr. Schimmel pointed out, “People think of installation art as a new thing.” But they are wrong. This show, as strong on origin stories as the museum’s acclaimed surveys of performance art and conceptual art, should dramatically improve our collective memory.

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LOS ANGELES

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Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Vaga, New York

Two works to be featured in the Museum of Contemporary Art's show drawn from its collection are Robert Rauschenberg's 1955 "Interview," above and an untitled 2000 painting by Laura Owens, below.

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Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

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