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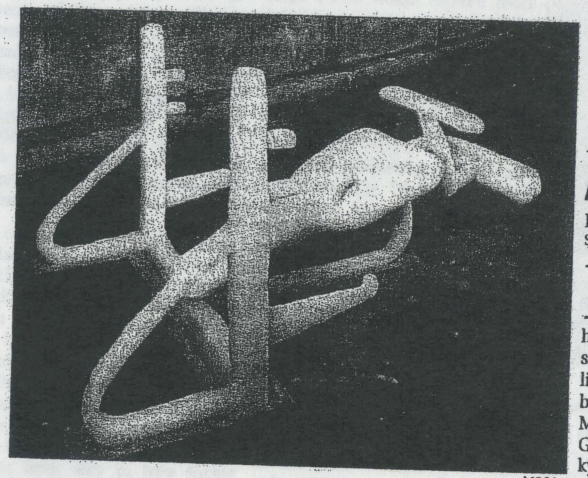
Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Associated Press

NBC's "Today" show will pay tribute Thursday to its own **Katie Couric** in recognition of her 10-year anniversary as a permanent anchor of the 7 a.m. program. Recall whom she replaced? Deborah Norville.



MOCA

A weightlifting bench made of petroleum jelly was part of an installation in Matthew Barney's first solo show in 1991 in West Hollywood.

Before Their Art Was Famous

A show in Little Tokyo offers time-capsule views of artists who grew to prominence.

Art Review

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

If you've ever rented a video of "Thelma & Louise" just to see what Brad Pitt was like before he became a star, you'll understand the reasoning behind "Public Offerings," a hit-and-miss exhibition that opened Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo.

Organized by chief curator Paul Schimmel, this surprisingly endearing show features the early works of 25 artists who emerged in the 1990s, catapulting from the anonymity of graduate school to the spotlight of the international exhibition circuit.

Its biggest pleasures are retrospective: time-capsule views back to moments when the buzz surrounding a young artist's work was just beginning to build, and the air bristled with a sense of possibility so electrifying it made viewers who were savvy enough to be in the right place at the right time giddy with excitement.

Although these fleeting and seemingly magical moments have passed, the exhibition strives to recreate them as faithfully as possible, displaying the so-called breakthrough works in separate galleries or spaces—as they would have been seen in the original solo shows. In nearly every case, Schimmel has done an admirable job reassembling the diverse installations, sculptures, films, paintings, photographs and drawings on which the artists' still-fledgling reputations have been built, some on shaky foundations and others on solid ground.

Strange as it may sound, some of the best works now look corny—not quite quaint, but a lot more charming than mind-blowing. For example, when Matthew Barney had his first solo show in 1991 in West Hollywood (at what was then Stuart Regen Gallery and is now Regen Projects), it seemed as if he had transformed the white-walled space into a Space Age gym for the Marquis de Sade's futuristic offspring.

Combining a bright yellow wrestling mat, a surgical retractor, a clay pigeon, a saltwater pearl, a walk-in cooler, a speculum, a vial of steroids and a weightlifting

Please see Geffen, F8

Geffen: Show Presents Early Work of Prominent Artists

Continued from F1

bench made of petroleum jelly, among other objects, the New York artist's glistening props provided an antiseptic setting for his queasy videos, which showed a body-builder dressed as Oakland Raider Jim Otto, along with the artist impersonating Harry Houdini, a female supermodel and a nude mountain climber. The installation embodied the absurdity of modern life.

Reunited today, the main elements of Barney's scintillating debut no longer look as if they're ahead of their time. Rather than indicating his work's short shelf life, however, this change marks its influence, measuring how dramatically Barney has altered the look of contemporary art and, more important, the way we look at the world.

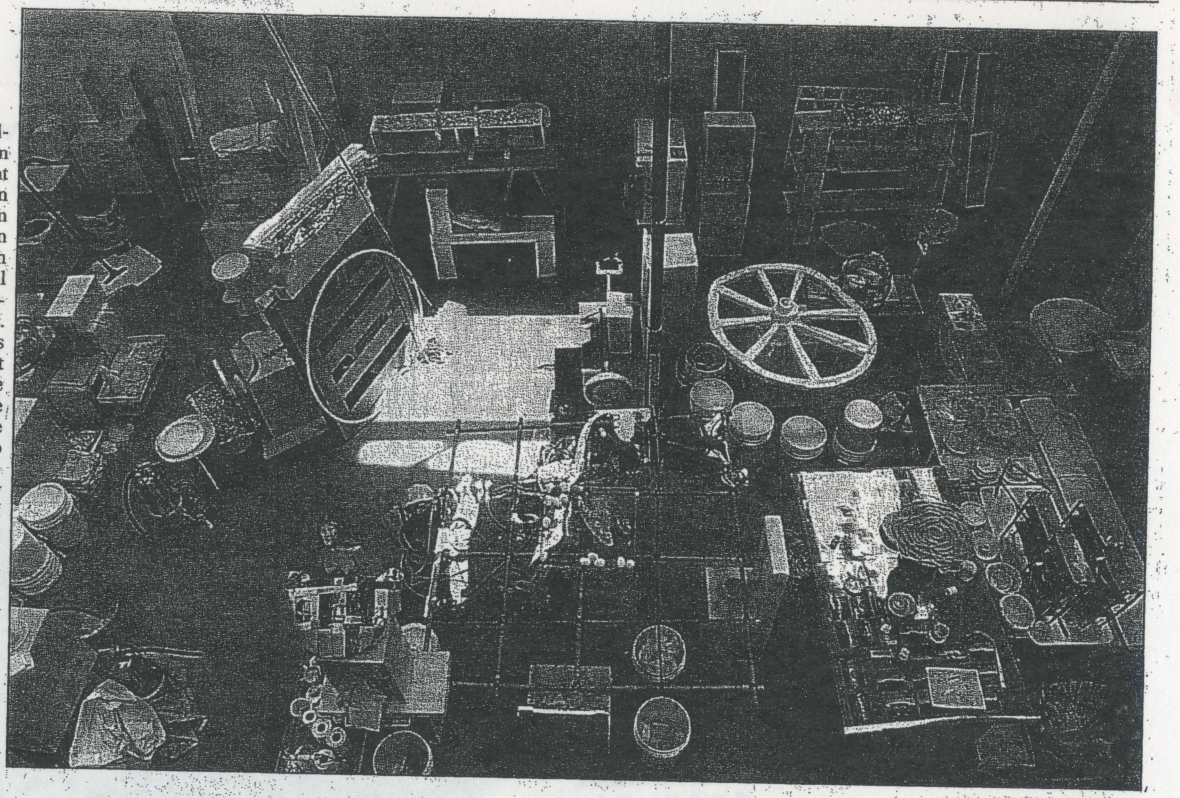
In contrast, Damien Hirst's plexiglass-encased paintings, to which dead butterflies have been stuck, are as callow today as they were 10 years ago. The best that can be said about the inordinate attention that has been lavished on the British artist's subsequent works is that it has not ruined a once-compelling vision. Hirst's recent works are distinguished from earlier ones only in how slickly they have dressed up the same tired ideas about meaninglessness.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are Jorge Pardo's humbly optimistic sculptures. Masquerading as sports equipment and workshop tools, these sturdily built and handsomely finished woodworks may not look like much on their own. Until you learn what followed hot on their heels.

Upon completing his hand-crafted/mass-produced hybrids in 1989 and 1990, the L.A. artist went on to design and build a pier in Kassel, Germany, a house in Mount Washington, an office in Philadelphia and an exhibition space in New York, functional sculptures that force one to wonder where art ends and life begins. Knowing this, you begin to see his early works differently: as modest prototypes that contain the core ideas Pardo would explore more fully in subsequent works. Like acorns that have the potential to grow into mighty oaks, his unpretentious early sculptures shy away from the fanfare and theatrics that accompany bombastic adjectives like "breakthrough."

It's also refreshing to see Jason Rhoades' 1994 "Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts," a low-budget, color-coordinated installation that's held together by carefully pasted pages torn from hundreds of yellow legal pads. The same is true of Steve McQueen's black-and-white silent film "Bear" (1993), in which a confrontation between two nude black men begins tensely and ends tenderly. Both works give form to a tentativeness and earnestness that are all the more heartening for their vulnerability.

Other artists are more guarded. Apparently more concerned to put on a splashy show than to invest their efforts in such easily overlooked objects as paintings and sculptures, many focus on the social activities that swirl around art. Rikrit Tiravanija makes a joke of generosity. He enlisted a kitchen-full of volunteers to cook and serve pad Thai at the opening reception for "Public Offerings," leaving the mess that was left over to be contemplated by viewers who visit during regular hours.



AL SEIB / Los Angeles Times

Jason Rhoades' 1994 "Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts," a low-budget, color-coordinated installation, is part of show at Geffen Contemporary.

Renée Green has created an installation out of texts, catalogs and commentaries—the information ordinarily found on wall labels. For his part, Takashi Murakami has placed klieg lights in a gallery whose walls have been brightly painted. Visible through the museum's front windows, his piece from 1992 is a window display that advertises excitement. It fails to deliver the thrills of his work in more permanent materials.

Three artists who act as if art still has the power to make its own context (and doesn't need to be dressed up with entertaining gimmicks) fare very well. Toba Khedoori's gigantic works on paper, Yoshitomo Nara's dreamily surreal sculptures of life-size kids in larger-than-life-size coffee cups, and Laura Owens' mural-scale paintings use size to get your attention. They sustain it by getting more and more interesting the longer you look at them.

A common criticism of ambitious young artists is that they are more interested in making a career than in making work. Although the days of hiding in a garret to protect one's integrity from the corruption of the marketplace are long gone, the alternative is not to become a glib entertainer. The most engaging (and mature) works in "Public Offerings" demonstrate that plenty of young artists know the difference between hype and the long haul, and that the best way to make a career is to make objects that viewers will want to keep looking at, long after the buzz has quieted.

● *"Public Offerings," Museum of Contemporary Art at the Geffen Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., downtown. (213) 621-2766, through July 29. Closed Mondays. Admission is $6.*