When Art Happened to L.A.

For contemporary art in the 1950s and ’60s, there was New York and that was it. So the old story goes. But it’s wrong. If there’s one thing that recent globally minded art history has taught us, it’s that after World War II, new art, and lots of it, was turning up in cities everywhere. Los Angeles was one, and in the late ’50s, almost to its own surprise, it had a big art moment. That moment, which lasted about a decade, is the subject of “Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s,” by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp. The book has much to recommend it: it’s fast-paced, well researched, accessibly anecdotal. But as an account of a still under-studied episode in American postwar culture, it’s oddly lopsided. It corrects one imbalance — the “only in New York” idea — but ignores others.

The story starts in 1955, when Los Angeles was a boomtown thanks to movies and the aerospace industry, but a cultural backwater. There were plenty of homegrown artists, but few galleries and no modern art museum. Into this bare terrain came a couple of driven personalities. One of them, Walter Hopps, preppy
and bespectacled, was a college dropout and art addict. The other, Edward Kienholz, was a bearish farm boy-artist with a peppery temperament. On the surface, their alliance was an unlikely one — Mr. Peepers meets Bigfoot — but it worked.

Both wanted to get some art action going in the city, and in 1957 they pooled their meager resources to open the Ferus Gallery. Initially conceived as a showcase for local talent, Ferus expanded its scope after an early shift in personnel. Kienholz bailed; he really didn’t want to run a business. Hopps, a person of pathologically impractical habits, didn’t know how to. So when an amiable former actor and New York transplant named Irving Blum turned up and bought out Kienholz’s share, he became the gallery’s functional director and made its range of artists bicoastal.

These three men are recurrent figures in Drohojowska-Philp’s narrative, which pans back and forth in time. Around them, or around Ferus, circulated a constellation of figures who would become the city’s first glamorous art stars, among them John Altoon, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, Ken Price and a young Oklahoman, Ed Ruscha. The Ferus scene, as described in the book, started out fairly relaxed and mildly countercultural. Even its hardest-working members put in serious surfing time. After all, why worry about shows and sales if there was no market? In line with this laid-back affect, everyone made a big thing of not caring about what was going on with art in Manhattan, though in fact, many Los Angeles artists in the ’50s were fixated on Abstract Expressionism. Some of the Ferus artists were too, but what distinguished them was that they managed to work that style out of their systems and come up with something new.

Painters like Bengston, and sculptors like Bell and Kauffman, stayed with abstraction but eliminated gesture and psychological drama. Instead, they developed a kind of surfboard look: plain geometric forms, with immaculately smooth surfaces that took on an interior glow, particularly in sculptures made from glass, or from plastic, which, after years of restricted military use, had become available on the popular market.

The sculpture — which came to be called Light and Space art or, disparagingly, Finish Fetish — had similarities to the minimalism of Donald Judd and others on the East Coast. One difference was plastic, which minimalism abjured. Another was attitude. Judd loaded his stripped-down aesthetic with a materialist rhetoric; the West Coast artists gave theirs a spiritual overlay. And there was Pop, which appeared simultaneously but differently in Los Angeles and New York. In 1962, Hopps, by then a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon), organized the first-ever group show of Pop work in the United States. That same year, Ferus gave Andy Warhol his first commercial gallery show, made up of Campbell’s soup can paintings. And Los Angeles was already on a Pop track of its own, with Ruscha’s paintings of commercial pack-aging and signage.

By the mid-1960s, art in Los Angeles was big time. More galleries had sprung up; a collecting base had coalesced. The Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art and had been transformed into two institutions, one of them an art-only museum. In Pasadena, Hopps was cooking up more curatorial coups, must-see events: Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Cornell surveys, and Marcel Duchamp’s first retrospective. Traffic back and forth between East Coast and West Coast, and Europe, grew heavy. Drohojowska-Philp, an art critic based in Los Angeles and a biographer of Georgia O’Keeffe, handles an increasingly crowded and complicated story deftly in a series of short chapters that center on specific players: individual artists, new dealers like Virginia Dwan and propulsive personalities like the -actor-collector-painter Dennis Hopper. Her prose style is efficient, but nothing more: her descriptions rarely go
beyond clichés (the artist DeWain Valentine was “built like a wrestler, with wavy blond hair, blue eyes and a turned-up nose”). But she’s good at shorthand scene-setting, with period references and bits of gossip. We get, for example, references to Frederick’s of Hollywood, Barney’s Beanery, “77 Sunset Strip,” the Byrds, the Smothers Brothers, “Beach Blanket Bingo,” Hugh Hefner, Rudi Gernreich, the John Birch Society and Johnny Rivers at the Whisky a Go Go, along with reports of the breakups of several marriages. And because she’s talked to a lot of the main figures from that time, she sounds as if she were writing from inside.

Once Los Angeles art moves away from the relative isolation of the ’50s, that -story becomes more and more ordinary: a familiar tale about career stakes raised ever higher, about competition, failure and resentment — art-world business as usual — magnified by alcohol, drugs and testosterone, and set against the larger insanities of a cultural era. Drohojowska–Philp calls ’60s Los Angeles “the epicenter of cool,” but in the portrait she draws it feels increasingly twitchy and overheated.

Her final chapter, “The End of the Innocence,” is set in 1969, after Ferus had closed. Its founders would soon scatter. Hopps (who died in 2005) went to Washington and became director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Kienholz (who died in 1994) moved to Germany in the early ’70s. By then, innocence, if that ever existed, was long gone. -Drohojowska–Philp, echoing Joan Didion and countless other commentators, points to the Manson murders as the event that ended the ’60s high, though a case could be made — I would make it — that a significant disillusioning blow had been delivered four years earlier by the so-called Watts riots of 1965.

Drohojowska–Philp passes over that event — which resulted in more than 30 deaths, nearly 4,000 arrests and some $40 million in property damage — in a few paragraphs, as if it were distant news from some other place. More important, in a book about “the Los Angeles scene,” she gives scant attention to cultural ferment in the Watts neighborhood, which, during the period she’s covering, was home to a lively group of young artists — including David Hammons, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, John Outterbridge and Melvin Edwards — all affiliated in some way with the national Black Arts Movement, and most of whom were working primarily in the medium of assemblage.

Although they were unrepresented in the city’s major museums and galleries, these artists were fully aware of what was happening there. Several of them were strongly influenced by Hopps’s exhibition of Schwitters’s collage work; they knew Kienholz’s sculpture made from thrift shop junk. But they were infusing assemblage with a different content, and directing it to a different audience. Over time, the reputation and influence of at least one of these artists, Hammons, who arrived in Los Angeles from the Midwest in 1963, have come to outstrip those of most members of the Ferus group. Yet he gets only a passing mention in Drohojowska–Philp’s account. While we’re on the subject of imbalance, nor does the book give more than glancing acknowledgment to the existence of the Chicano Art Movement, which was active in and around the city from the mid-’60s onward.

Until 30 years ago, it was routine practice to keep contemporary art and “ethnic” art in separate categories, thereby leaving non–mainstream artists out of standard histories. Those days are over, or should be, but they linger on in this book, which ignores entire cultures while meticulously cataloging the marital mishaps and bad-boy pranks of a few Establishment “rebels.”

A revisionist history is already in formation. “L.A. Object and David Hammons Body Prints,” which will be published next month, documents the work of black artists in Watts from the mid-1960s to the mid-
1970s. And a multi-institution art survey called “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980,” spread over some 60 Southern California museums, will open in October and present the panoptic picture of a time and a place that Drohojowska-Philp’s account forgoes. In her introduction, she calls her book “a love letter to Los Angeles,” and with its easy tone and attention to detail, it can be valued as such. That love, though, is way too selectively bestowed.

_Holland Cotter, an art critic for The Times, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2009._

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