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PST, A to Z: ‘Artistic Evolution,’ ‘The Experimental Impulse’

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Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.

 Most Pacific Standard Time exhibitions offer a mix of artworks and documentation — such is the nature of a project with such a historical mission. But this approach sometimes makes the art look like a mere illustration of the history. It’s difficult to strike the proper balance between art that appeals to us on aesthetic terms, and history that seeks to tell stories or provide a broader context. Two PST shows, “Artistic Evolution: Southern California Artists at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles” and “The Experimental Impulse” at REDCAT don’t even try. The former is an exhibition of art; the latter features only documentation. As it turns out, both approaches work rather well, although they do require a bit of prior knowledge to fully appreciate the results.

“Artistic Evolution” is a small show in the rotunda of the Natural History Museum, which before 1965 was the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art. As Christopher Knight discussed in his [review](#), it’s smartly and economically curated with succinct, informative wall texts and some early gems by artists who later went on to prominence. Despite the show’s historical focus, it puts the art first, a move that feels surprisingly appropriate amid halls of prehistoric skeletons.

A few highlights: painter Helen Lundeberg, known for elegant

abstractions, started out as a muralist working for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. Her painting featured at NHM is a misty, somewhat forlorn woody landscape inhabited by a lone wisp of a woman. Delicate and detailed, it presages the flat, blue-toned palette she favored in later work.

Robert Irwin and John Baldessari started out as Abstract Expressionists (It seems that's what all the kids were doing in those days.) Irwin's work was bold and tactile and full of tension; Baldessari, who destroyed most of his pre-1970s work, well, not so much. He's quoted in a wall text saying, "It's a little embarrassing, but every artist has a history."

The show does presume some knowledge of L.A. art history — Irwin's thickly painted, expressive canvases are more interesting for being so different from the sleek, floating orbs of his later work. And an early free-form watercolor by Larry Bell seems 180 degrees from the stark geometries of his mirrored glass boxes.

Familiarity with art history is also useful in "The Experimental Impulse," which is the result of seminars at CalArts, and is organized by School of Art dean Thomas Lawson, his students and REDCAT curator Aram Moshayedi. They decided early on that they didn't want to display any artworks at all, and structured the exhibition as a kind of expanded reading room whose contents reflect their research into the Los Angeles art world of the 1970s.

With design help from artist Martin Kersels, the selected items are arrayed on a series of concentric, semi-circular tables topped with cardboard. There are no vitrines or white gloves; all of the magazine articles, documents, photographs and notes are reproductions, glued or tacked directly to the tabletops. There's a selection of audio interviews (available for intimate listening sessions on old-fashioned phones), projected videos and computer terminals where visitors can access articles from CalArts' online publication East of Borneo, which serves as the exhibition's catalog. On the walls, there are also quotes from prominent figures of the period, large banners bearing uncaptioned black and white photos, and three earnest but over-designed murals: cockeyed mash-ups of the names, quotes and portraits of influential writers and theorists: Freud, Gandhi, Marx, etc.

All of this is presented without much preamble or framing — there’s really nothing for it but to dive right in and start reading. Aside from some very spare captions (created on a typewriter no less) viewers are pretty much left to their own devices; there are no texts that summarize the material or provide guidance. Trends, movements and issues come together slowly, providing a piecemeal impression of the era instead of a cohesive historical narrative.

No doubt, some viewers will find this experience frustrating or mystifying, but it’s wholly in keeping with the turbulent, experimental spirit of the times. There’s material on Norton Simon’s controversial takeover of the Pasadena Art Museum, the rise of experimental music and cowpunk, the emergence of portable video technology, and the various programs and alternative institutions that supported local artists. You can learn about the anarchist leanings of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, the public art interventions of Foundation for Art Resources, the early days of artist-run Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, and of course, CalArts, which nurtured the Feminist Art Program and the life-as-art teachings of Baldessari and Allan Kaprow. There’s also some fascinating documentation of Close Radio, a weekly arts program on KPFK coordinated by John Duncan, Paul McCarthy and Linda Burnham that was shut down when Chris Burden spent an hour asking listeners to “conceptualize sending him money.”

The exhibition’s contents are admittedly subjective — students were encouraged to pursue whatever aspects of the period they found interesting — and there are some omissions, most notably evidence of the African American art scene in South Central L.A. (It is however, well documented in [“Now Dig This!”](#) and [“Places of Validation.”](#)) There are a couple of great articles on Watts and Senga Nengudi on East of Borneo, but no substantial representation in the exhibition.

Still, in the context of PST, “The Experimental Impulse” is a refreshing alternative to shows that struggle with conflicting obligations to both art and history. By simply selecting and presenting historical documentation, it jettisons the curatorial presumption that such artifacts require extensive interpretation. This is asking a lot of the viewer, and the show functions more like a self-

guided crash course than an exhibition. However, in wending your way through the maze of documents, you are allowed to make your own discoveries, becoming something of a researcher yourself.

-- Sharon Mizota

Natural History Museum, 900 Exposition Blvd., (213) 763-3466, through Jan. 15. www.nhm.org

REDCAT, 631 W. 2nd St., (213) 237-2800, through Jan. 15. www.redcat.org

Photos, from top: Robert Irwin, "Lucky U," 1960, oil on canvas. Collection Joni and Monte Gordon, Los Angeles. © 2011 Robert Irwin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

John Baldessari, "Micropainting," 1960, oil on canvas. Private collection, from Marian Goodman Gallery. © John Baldessari.

"The Experimental Impulse," installation view at REDCAT, Los Angeles. Photo by Scott Groller.

Rena Small, "Screen Dinner," performance for Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" class at CalArts, 1974. From the artist.

