



page 17

1 A Strange and Wonderful Poetry

by Lita Barrie
Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries at LACMA

3 Arttalk

by Greg Schneider
A conversation with Tom Lawson

14 Time After Time

by Bruce Nixon
Robert Wilson's Vision at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

16 Mopping Up

by Tony Reveaux
Carolee Schneemann at SFAI

16 Max Gimblett

by Mary Hull Webster
At Haines Gallery

17 The Style of the Story

by Phillip Bergen
Eileen Cowin at Roy Boyd Gallery

17 On a Solitary Road

by R.J. Merrill
Nine Perspectives in New Italian Art at Otis/Parsons

18 The Perils of Politics

by James Scarborough
A Commentary

19 The Old Man and the Tree

by David Stairs
Leroy Setziol at the University of Oregon

20 Artweek Focus

A Look at the New Art History

An introduction
by Lance Carlson 20

A conversation with Abigail Solomon-Godeau
by Michelle Plochere 20

A conversation with Whitney Chadwick
by Mark Van Proyen 21

Book Review
by Barrett Watten
Painting as Model by Yve-Alain Bois 23

26 The Last Days of Pre-modernism

by Collette Chatopadhyay
Dream and Perspective at the Laguna Art Museum

27 Kahlo/Trotsky: Photographs by Debra Bloomfield

by Joan Murray
At the University Art Museum

27 Book Review

by John Ryskamp
Memoirs of a Dada Drummer
by Richard Huelsenbeck

28 Artlaw

by Peter H. Karlen
A Guide to Creative Co-ownership

DEPARTMENTS

2 News

4 Calendar

4 Exhibitions

10 Photography

11 Performances

11 Events

29 Competitions

30 Classifieds

Arttalk

A conversation with Tom Lawson

BY GREG SCHNEIDER

Tom Lawson became dean of fine arts at the California Institute of the Arts last January, after several years as a visiting professor there. He also is an artist and art critic who has written for *Artforum* and is editor of *Real Life* magazine.

Artweek CalArts has a reputation as a Marxist stronghold which makes use of a contextual body of knowledge that largely ignores issues of connoisseurship in favor of a sociological model for art. How does theory find its way into the art-making process at CalArts, and in the way that you teach art at CalArts? Is this sociological model a fair criterion of judgment for what comes out of the school?

Tom Lawson First, I would dispute that CalArts is Marxist. That's too simple. There is a tendency, quite frankly, among the faculty to give a lot of weight to the theoretical implications in the making of art and in thinking about its placement in society. I don't know if it's necessarily Marxist—that's too one-dimensional a label—things are much more complex than that. But it is true that we tend to think that art-making is a fairly complex procedure that requires a lot of thought beforehand. The way that we teach is to present students with a variety of models. I think that maybe we have one strict Marxist on the faculty, but there are also feminists, post-structuralists, different kinds of theoretical positions. The one thing that we all tend to agree on is that art as an exercise in self-expression is inadequate. We teach students that to do that is really to betray the whole point of art education. The emphasis is on thinking about the meaning and placement of art in society and then working from there.

AW That is a very conceptual approach to art making.
TL That's the school's tradition. CalArts is only twenty-one

years old, and it was started in the heyday of conceptual art, the buzzword of that period was post-studio art. The thought of hanging around in the studio with a bunch of other art students splashing paint around was no longer the way to go.

AW Is it safe to say that the art-making process at CalArts is more cerebral than retinal?

TL No. The end products are still primarily visual artworks.



Tom Lawson
(Photo: Steven A. Gunther.)

Maybe they are less physical. The art is not necessarily created through muscle spasms—with wrists or by swinging their arms. It is about actually getting people to be more sensitive about using their brains, but there's absolutely no way that that means it's less visual.

AW That also seems to be the approach you take in your own art making.

TL Yes, I tend to be more project-driven. A lot of research goes on before I put pen to paper or brush to canvas.

AW You have also been called a 'conceptualist art critic.' One of your most important essays, I think, is 'Last Exit: Painting,' which was

written ten years ago. Do some of the statements you made in that piece still hold up today? In particular, does painting, modernist painting, have any relevance for art today?

TL I think that the situation we're in today, and this stands as a model for the art-making process at CalArts, is that giving weight to any medium is an idea whose time has passed. One of the benefits of thinking through a project before beginning it is that you're not tied to the notion of 'this is what I want to say and now I've got to make paintings out of it,' because ultimately it might work better on videotape or some other medium. Of course, there are still situations in which, given that sort of planning, painting is what you want to do.

AW Even if what you want to do is abstract painting?

TL Even abstract painting. I tend to think that you need to make the work that best suits your original purpose.

AW But can abstract painting ever be socially relevant in today's world?

TL To be socially relevant, art needs in some way to speak to contemporary culture. But it doesn't need to stand there wagging its finger at you, telling you how to behave. Art needs to have some sense of being attached to the world around it, but that attachment can be quite abstract or poetic. I don't like art that just stands there telling you off, but I don't like art that is too self-involved, either, art in which the artist has abandoned all responsibility and joined a commune of one.

AW You seem to be taking a strong postmodernist stance, which infers a Baribian notion of 'the death of the artist,' at least as an originator of unique meaning. Are artists today more or less simply compliers of processors or organizers of information?

TL What I think we've come to

continued on page 24

A conversation with Tom Lawson

continued from page 3

understand in the last ten or fifteen years is that the whole notion of originality in art is a little difficult and needs to be examined further. We have been situated at the end of a cycle—the end of modern art—and that situation is just now beginning to change. That's why we question the idea of originality, because we are at the end of a cycle that promoted originality as the ultimate value. Now, with the collapse of the Cold War, with Europe breaking back down into different political and ethnic groups, there is a whole new refiguring of culture. There are less distinct but still evident things going on in this country, especially around the theories of multiculturalism, and out of those clashes and battles there will be a new paradigm of thinking about art-making. It's not clear yet, but we're in a pretty interesting time—it's all up for grabs.

AW So there is something to look forward to beyond postmodernism.
TL Yes. We're in the first simple stage of postmodernism, which has been defined by the kind of appropriationist work I was involved in, which was a fairly extreme and reductive statement to make a point. Now the argument has to get to a different point.

AW So much postmodernist art simply battles against the precedence of modernist art. There must be something that doesn't have to be defined by what came before it.
TL That's part of the larger discussion about the end of modernism in 'Last Exit.' We'd been down this road with exit signs saying 'end of painting,' and people saying either it's truly the end or it's not. The work of the late seventies and early eighties was about trying to make some kind of decision about that—is painting completely over with, or something worth maintaining? For me, minus all the baggage—the mystique about painting—if you could get rid of that, then there is no problem with painting as a skill and as a method of creating images.

AW But can you ever paint without that baggage? There's so much of it.
TL As long as you don't put all your hopes and aspirations into it—as long as you're open to doing other things. Earlier this year, I made a sculpture, which was quite astonishing for me. I never thought I could think three-dimensionally, and had no desire to, and I was working on this pro-

ject which I assumed at the outset would be a painting project, but as I worked through the images, it became clear that that would not be the solution. It would have been a failed project if I painted it.

AW In 'Last Exit,' you state, 'it all boils down to a question of faith,' and that 'modernism has been totally co-opted by its original antagonist, the bourgeoisie.' Is there any way for an artist today not to be co-opted by the bourgeoisie?
TL In isolation, that sounds like the rhetoric of a younger person. I now think that to continue to be an artist, you have to be associated with some kind of identifiable culture. It doesn't have to be the bourgeoisie, but you need to feel you are a part of something, a class, a race, a nation—that's the only way that their various judgments resonate—in a group.

AW How does that feed into the art market? You have also written that 'as too many conceptual artists discovered, art made on the peripheries of the market remains marginal.'
TL The market is a separate entity that some artists work toward and others don't, and even some that don't work toward it find themselves in the market.

AW How important is the art market in the teaching process?
TL We discuss it, because it's very much a part of the life of an artist, and it is one of the structures that gives meaning.

AW How important is the art market in the teaching process?
TL We discuss it, because it's very much a part of the life of an artist, and it is one of the structures that gives meaning.

AW Throughout the 1980s, there was a steady stream of wildly successful people—in terms of the art market—that came out of CalArts.
TL You don't necessarily do what your teachers tell you to do. But there is no doubt they were taught well. They understood the mechanisms of perception better than those graduating from other schools.

AW Coming from New York, do you feel at all professionally isolated on the West Coast? The perception in New York is largely that while a lot of good art is coming out of California, there isn't much support for the art, especially in terms of the academic institutions.
TL That is part of the whole stereotype of LA as a cultural desert. But in an odd way, there is more intellectual discussion about art here currently. We've got a lot of heavyweights, people like T.J. Clark and Serge Guilbaut. There is a lot of academic thought here. One of the disappointments about New York is that the art schools are not centers of great intellectual debate and that most New York conversations are about money and real estate.

AW Coming from New York, do you feel at all professionally isolated on the West Coast? The perception in New York is largely that while a lot of good art is coming out of California, there isn't much support for the art, especially in terms of the academic institutions.
TL That is part of the whole stereotype of LA as a cultural desert. But in an odd way, there is more intellectual discussion about art here currently. We've got a lot of heavyweights, people like T.J. Clark and Serge Guilbaut. There is a lot of academic thought here. One of the disappointments about New York is that the art schools are not centers of great intellectual debate and that most New York conversations are about money and real estate.

TL That is part of the whole stereotype of LA as a cultural desert. But in an odd way, there is more intellectual discussion about art here currently. We've got a lot of heavyweights, people like T.J. Clark and Serge Guilbaut. There is a lot of academic thought here. One of the disappointments about New York is that the art schools are not centers of great intellectual debate and that most New York conversations are about money and real estate.

A Strange and Wonderful Poetry

continued from page 1

with the counsel of Paz and architect Pedro Ramirez Vazquez. After its yearlong run in New York, where it became the nucleus for a plethora of exhibitions by contemporary Mexican artists, it has arrived in Los Angeles, where its historical significance to the Latino origins of the city make it the most important exhibition of the season—and a potent catalyst in the city's search for a non-Euro-

centric identity.

In any case, *Mexico* is a resounding reminder that art is not an isolated occurrence which can be separated from the culture in which it evolves. The emphasis upon transformation through sacrifice—so prevalent in Mexican cosmology—lies beneath the violent emotions that are so characteristic of Mexican art. According to the Mexican myth of creation, the universe was formed after two gods threw themselves into flames to become the sun and moon. But the universe is defined by constant movement, since, every day, the

sun must vanquish the night a gain its nourishment from the blood of the stars. Human being must also make a gift of blood: their place in the universe, and the cosmic drama shapes a part of the Mexican soul and finds its most potent expression in art. In both ancient Mayan carving of a bloodletting ceremony and Frida Kahlo's portrait of herself as an arrow-pierced deer, there is evidence of cultural sensibility that regards sacrifice as necessary and noble. When this is combined with an extraordinary history in which two civilizations—Indian and Spanish—fought to reconcile their oppositions and to forge a cultural identity out of their duality, then it is no accident that Mexican art expresses the battle for survival—the will to life, in effect—so powerfully. This basic human drive speaks across cultural differences, and into the very core of our humanity: that, finally, is what makes this exhibition such a tour de force.

Beginning from the pre-Columbian section (which constitutes a third of the exhibition), one passes through dark rooms filled with sacred objects carved and sculpted in gold, jade, obsidian, stone, shell and wood, along with ceramic urns and fresco paintings from eight different archeological sites, each of which represents the height of a unique civilization—La Venta, Izapa, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, Palenque (or Maya), El Tajin, Chichen Itza and Tenochtitlan (or Aztec). Each site is characterized by quite distinct artistic achievements, but shares the same calendar of solar cycles and an emphasis upon a deep reverence for their gods, expressed through ritual and ceremony. Although most of this work was made for the adornment of public architecture and communal spaces, it often reveals a markedly individualistic interpretation of religious subject matter.

After the conquest of the twenty-five-hundred-year-old Mesoamerican civilization by the Spanish conquistadors (led by Hernán Cortés) in 1521, Mexico was ruled by viceroys who transformed Mexico into New Spain. The imposition of Christianity and colonial art forms gradually evolved into a unique fusion of cultures—exemplified by the Virgin Guadalupe, who symbolically mediates the ancient goddesses and the Virgin Mary. The Colonial section traces a progression from the imported styles of ecclesiastical painting and sculpture to the beginnings



Left: Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)*, 1943, oil on canvas, 29-7/8" x 24"; and below: Artist unknown, *Flanged Cylinder (Temple of the Foliated Cross, Palenque)*, ca. 690, ceramic, 28" high, both at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.



Miguel Covarrubias, *The Bone (Rural Schoolteacher)*, 1937, oil on canvas, 29-5/8" x 23-1/2", at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.