

# EasyReaderNews

Added on March 16, 2017

California Locos , Manhattan Beach Art Center

Bondo Wyszpolski

## California Locos in Manhattan Beach

Text Size | Print This Page | Send by Email

Like 159

Tweet



California Locos: John Van Hamersveld, Norton Wisdom, Dave Tourjé, Chaz Bojórquez, and Gary Wong. Photo by Adam Cude

### LET'S GET A LITTLE CRAZY, SHALL WE?

A California Locos experience at the Manhattan Beach Art Center

*by Bondo Wyszpolski*

In a few minutes, an L.A.-based art collective will set up camp, drop “an art intelligence bomb,” the likes of which we haven’t seen here in the South Bay, and then they’ll scatter, to regroup elsewhere. Such is California Locos, whose “Somos Locos” pop-up show is only on view from today (Thursday) through Sunday at the Manhattan Beach Art Center.



“We’re gonna be gone the next day,” says Dave Tourjé. “That’s part of what I like about what we do. We don’t sit around and wait; we don’t educate people; we don’t have symposiums about this stuff.”

Tourjé, who could stand in for Ron Perlman if Guillermo del Toro films another “Hellboy,” is the spokesman/ringleader of California Locos, which also includes Chaz Bojórquez, John Van Hamersveld, Norton Wisdom, and Gary Wong. These are established artists, each with a unique L.A. aesthetic or sensibility, who bring their individual art endeavors to the table. Not unlike a gritty rock ‘n’ roll band, but with paint and brushes, colors and forms, instead of guitars and drums—although music plays or has played a large part in each of their lives.

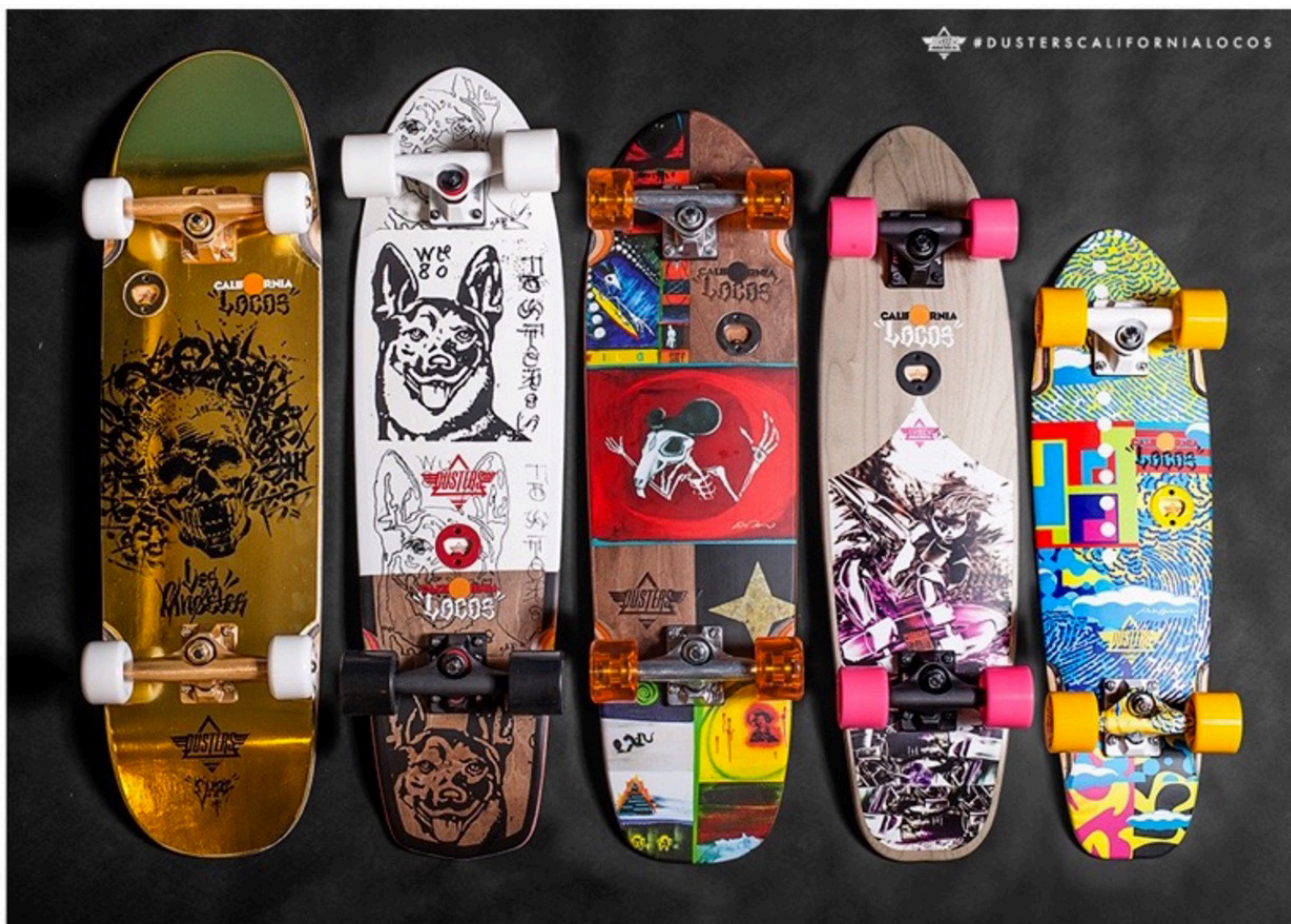
“Somos Locos” tells us that they are crazy-passionate about their work. That’s the integral connection they share, even as their backgrounds are as varied and divergent as the sprawling metropolis from which they’ve emerged.

#### ONE FROM HERE, ONE FROM THERE

Dave Tourjé grew up in the Highland Park-Eagle Rock-Mount Washington area. “That’s also where Chaz is from,” he says. “So we’re the northeast L.A. side of town, which is more of the cholo-skate-punk rock kind of edge, you could say.” Gary Wong, he continues, “grew up in South Central L.A. as a Chinese-American, growing up in the blues scene of Central Avenue.” Norton Wisdom has roots in Venice and Santa Monica: “I met Norton briefly in the early ‘80s in the punk rock scene in Hollywood, like the Cathay de Grande. We used to both perform there.”



Dave Tourjé. Photo by Adam Cude





The pop-up show in Manhattan Beach not only highlights artwork in the “usual” sense, but really kicks off on Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m. with the Marine Avenue Skate Park dedication. In the gallery, several skateboards are on display. Last year, Nano Nobrega, owner and chief designer of California Dusters, created a series of skateboards, one for each of the Locos (and they truly are works of art on wheels), with a new one that celebrates all of them to be unveiled at the opening.

But of the five compadres, the best known would be John Van Hamersveld, whose creative output dates back half a century to his iconic posters, his album cover designs, his corporate logos, and on up through his recent pop art murals and installations. Last August his work was shown at the Manhattan Beach Art Center and his outdoor Frieze remains in place, encircling the round gallery.



John Van Hamersveld. Photo by Adam Cude

Van Hamersveld’s formative years were spent in Palos Verdes Estates, and his early interest in art went hand-in-hand with his love of surfing (which led to his design of “The Endless Summer” movie poster), whereas Tourjé was way across town doing some serious skateboarding and Bojórquez (“the godfather of cholo writing”) was leaving his graffiti lettering on the sides of fences and walls. Tourje: “The Señor Suerte tag, on the column at the split between the 5 and the 110, at the end of the tunnel, was sort of a ‘Welcome to Highland Park’ sign.”

So how does all this add up, and how could it possibly bring these guys together?

“The common thing that we all did was move from subcultural immersion into art school, to try to find our way,” Tourjé says. “That was our commitment individually. That doesn’t mean we all got degrees, it just meant we had enough interest in that to leave the skateboarding behind as a singular pursuit, or the punk rock or the graffiti or whatever, and try to figure it out through art education.”

Did all of them attend the same art school?

“Well, that’s interesting,” Tourjé replies, “because everybody except me went to the Chouinard Art Institute, which was the famous hub-hotbed of pretty much all West Coast art movements, and many renowned people were taught there. Ironically, I bought the home of Nelbert Chouinard, without knowing who she was. [Note: She founded the art school in 1921.] I started renovating it, and once I found out who she was I started the Chouinard Foundation, because of all these weird connections.”

Which is what led him to become Chouinard’s unofficial historian.

Tourjé is still there, in the South Pasadena house he purchased in 1998, and where he incorporated the Chouinard Foundation in April of the following year. The home was where all those earlier hit-and-miss encounters with the other Locos artists finally coalesced: “It all came together because I knew of these guys and I wanted their input, and I wanted them as part of the advisory board.”



## FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT

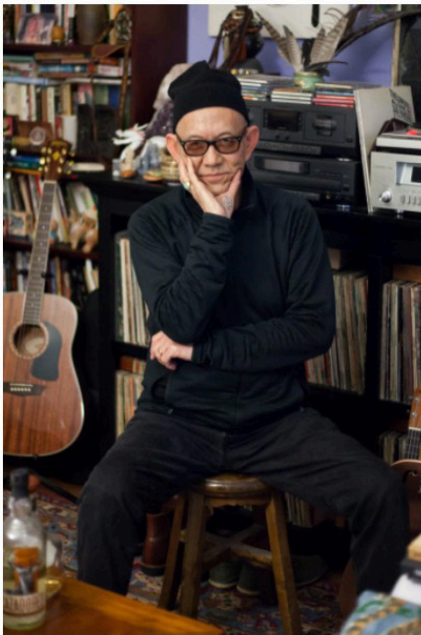
As mentioned, his cohorts attended Chouinard, but Tourjé went to UC Santa Barbara to study fine art. What he seems to have encountered were instructors touting the achievements (hence superiority) of New York or East Coast artists. “Growing up in L.A.,” Tourjé says, “you were kind of ingrained in the idea that there’s no history here: It’s just a feeble, plastic, stuccoed-over shell of culture. You get Disneyland, and you get Hollywood. That’s all you get. It’s kind of embarrassing to be a fine artist from here at that time because that’s all you’ve ever heard.”



Chaz Bojórquez. Photo by Adam Cude

Tourjé quit art school and landed a job moving furniture in downtown L.A. And then, in large part because of his studies and artistic bent, he became an art handler and installer for Security Pacific Bank’s art collection, which included work by such local artists as Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Mary Corse, and Emerson Woelffer. If he hadn’t realized it before he certainly realized it now: Los Angeles also had its own share of profound, innovative artists.

In 2002, Tourjé had a show at the Riverside Art Museum, at which time he began to formulate many of his current ideas about the L.A. art scene, how it’s evolved, and how it moves on regardless of what we say or think. But let’s take another jump, to 2011, when Tourjé happened to be given a slot at the Gregory Way Gallery in Beverly Hills after one of the scheduled artists dropped out.



Gary Wong. Photo by Adam Cude

“This was during Pacific Standard Time,” he says, referring to the citywide initiative propelled by the Getty that focused on Los Angeles art from 1945 to 1980. “But as an L.A. native, I took note of the fact that all of these L.A. artists weren’t born in L.A. You could say there’s somewhat of a romanticized view when you come from Texas or Kansas. It’s like you’re looking at Oz, and you’re coming to L.A. with this idea. Whereas, when you’re born in L.A., raised in L.A., you’re choking on the smog as a kid. The smog was a metaphor. Anybody who knows L.A., the romance kind of ends when you think about the smog.” He laughs. “What I say is it was an inside-out view versus an outside-in.”

Tourjé does have a point (I lived through the inland smog years myself), although such words may have the ring of “only locals can surf here.” But to continue...

An old-time costume designer for the movies named Theadora Van Runkle praised Tourjé’s work and called him an urban aboriginal. “I like that, Theadora; that’s pretty cool,” he replied, and when he repeated this to his friend, the artist Brad Howe, who’d gotten him into the gallery in the first place, Howe then said, You’re an L.A. Aboriginal, which became the name of the show. A fitting title, in fact, “because I was trying to make a bit of a statement about Pacific Standard Time, a bit of a rebellion against this notion of L.A. art made by people who weren’t from L.A.”



## THE BIRTH OF CALIFORNIA LOCOS

After the show had been up for a while, the gallerist thought about extending it, and in order to alert people to this fact he suggested that Tourjé give a talk about his work.

“And I said, Why don’t I do something like bring my friends in that are associated with that idea, and we’ll do a panel discussion?” The man agreed. “So I picked up the phone and called John, Gary, Norton, Chaz, and in this case Brad also. They all said, Yeah, let’s do it.”

Mary Anna Pomonis served as the moderator, and there’s even a pretty good short film about Tourjé and the show that also bears the “L.A. Aboriginal” moniker.

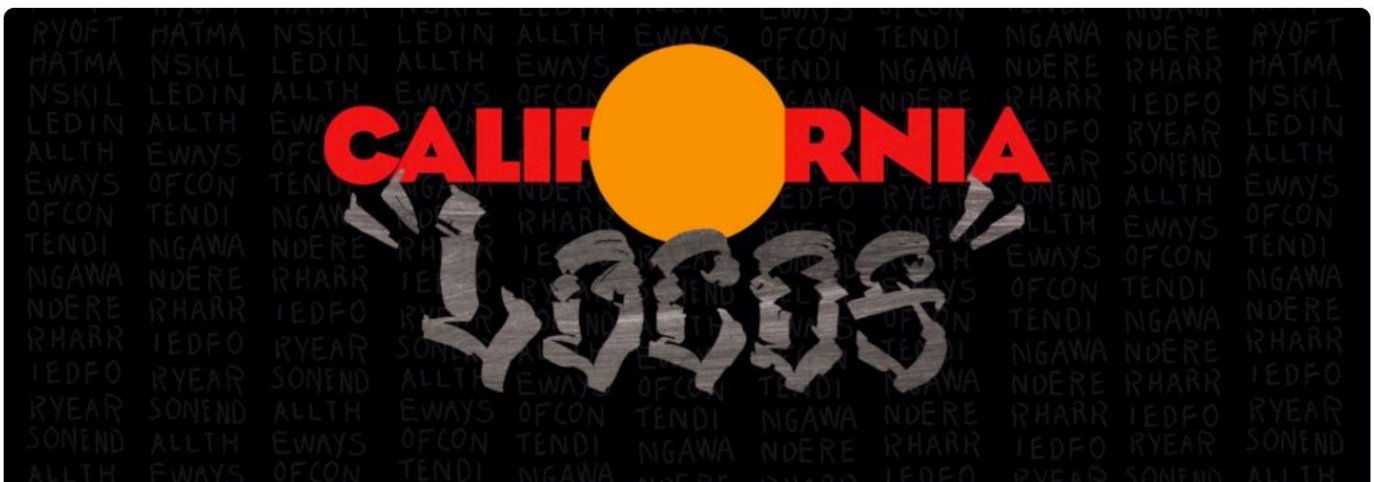
“I’ve always had this interest in trying to thread my background, which is subculture, kind of counterculture, with high art,” Tourjé says. Big Daddy Roth lurks in the background, as does his impressions of Mexican art which he beheld firsthand as a youngster (his mother was born in Mexico City).

The panel discussion, and the resonance of the ideas that were expressed that day, seems to have been a key element, maybe the key element, that brought the five artists together as a collective (perhaps Brad Howe is something of a sixth Beatle?). In short order, they found themselves referred to as California Locos, which “had a good feel, it had an organic, unforced reality. There’s also the notion of Los Angeles as a multicultural fabric that I felt was contemporary to talk about, rather than just surf and skate.”

Now, if you’ve got a brand, as such, you need a logo, right?



Norton Wisdom. Photo by Adam Cude



And this is the result...

Separately, Tourjé approached Van Hamersveld and Bojórquez. “I said, John, I want you to design the word ‘California’ as the last time it ever gets designed, like ‘The Endless Summer.’ And I told Chaz, I want you to write ‘Locos,’ that is legible to anybody, but still retains your concept of what a locos is in locos. Then I put [the results] together to create the dichotomy of this multicultural fabric.”

The two word-designs clash and yet are visually right on the money.



“You could say there’s all these multicultural eclecticisms happening, right? That’s the thing about us, we’re distinctly Los Angeles in nature.”

#### LASSIE EATS HER YOUNG

One can debate whether, individually or otherwise, the artists who comprise California Locos are in the vanguard, on the sidelines, or merely a footnote in the making. Will the Pacific Standard Time events of, let’s say, 2050, even take notice of them? How can we have 2020 hindsight when it’s still just 2017? But, as Tourjé says:

“Art history constantly moves, whether you like it or not. It’s going to move somewhere. It also gets held in suspension by economics and commercial interest. Abstract Expressionism in New York was held in place by the Clem Greenberg school of thought, and it lasted for a long time—until it got blown apart by Hard-edge painting. Art went from unplanned existentialism strokes to totally planned, with Pop Art, and then Hard-edge came in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s.”

Young Turks push aside their elders, even their own peers; they rebel and make their own rules. To quote de Kooning, who objected to Greenberg whom he thought wanted to narrow the abstract into a program, with its set of rules: “Every year you have to knock out your opponent. That’s what painting is.”

“Now it’s Postmodernism,” Tourjé continues. “It’s not Modernism anymore. But here’s the thing: That notion of what art became with the Ferus Gallery and [Ed] Ruscha and Billy Al Bengston and Finish Fetish, and all these things that emerged from Chouinard, they got held in place also by commerce. What is California art? Really, what’s behind it is in some ways art sales, and being legible to the people with money.”

The work and the ideas and the overall aesthetic of the California Locos, and others of like mind, Tourjé says, is like a turn of the dial. “If you look at its origins it was kind of a rebellion to PST, a direct rebellion. But it also starts to talk about the subcultures that are so much a part of Los Angeles. It starts to rip the ideology away from what has been cemented in as California art. That’s my concept of it. It starts to embrace these things that were considered irreverent or unintellectual. In terms of high art, it forcibly merges them.

“So, my point is, I consider this to be a part of L.A. art history, being in the fine art history sense.”

That said, everything that emerges has a predecessor or two, and for example one could bring up the Chicano art collective ASCO (Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez) and some of their Dada-like escapades, but with a sociopolitical thrust. They were to some extent the California Locos of the last artistic generation.

Music? That’s part of the package, too. Wong’s band, Charlie Chan and the S.O.B.s, along with Steve Alba’s PowerFlex 5, play in the art center parking lot from 3 to 5 p.m. Tourjé’s band Los Savages won’t be playing, unfortunately, because half the lineup is touring elsewhere, but he may well sit in with Wong’s group for a song or two (in a former life Tourjé was a member of the Dissidents).



“D for Dolphy,” by Dave Tourjé

From 5 to 6 p.m. there's a book signing (yes, the show has a catalogue, prefaced by art critic Shana Nys Dambrot, who'll be introducing the exhibition, by the way, and thoughtful, informative essays by Charlotte Eyerman and Jim Daichendt).

At 6 p.m., come in and enjoy the art!

"Our shows, our philosophy, our everything," Tourjé concludes, "is about pushing the artwork, as fine artwork, as philosophical material, you could say. That's really what we're after. So, when we do these shows, it's imperative that each person pushes himself in the studio. It's not about leveraging something from the past that was popular, it's about torquing everything forward and making really great art. That's what we try to do."

*The SOMOS LOCOS pop-up show, featuring the work of California Locos artists CHAZ BOJÓRQUEZ, DAVE TOURJÉ, JOHN VAN HAMERSVELD, NORTON WISDOM, and GARY WONG, goes on view today, Thursday, and runs through Sunday at the Manhattan Beach Art Center, 1560 Manhattan Beach Blvd., Manhattan Beach. Opening reception on Saturday from 6 to 9 p.m. Call (310) 802-5440 or go to [citymb.info](http://citymb.info). ER*