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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute chronicled in new documentary film

By Mike Boehm

Watch film:

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/126462248>



A new documentary film is the latest chapter in an ongoing effort to keep alive the memory of the defunct Chouinard Art Institute as a foundation slab in L.A.'s rise to art world prominence.

"*Curly*," produced and directed by Gianina Ferreyra, addresses the influential school's history from 1921 to 1972, when it was subsumed into the newly established California Institute of the Arts, and the 21st century effort to rekindle awareness of Chouinard.

The 51-minute film's first showing is 6:30 p.m. Thursday in the community room of the South Pasadena Public Library, accompanied by a panel discussion involving a number of L.A. art luminaries connected to Chouinard, including Larry Bell, Chaz Bojorquez, Llyn Foulkes and John Van Hamersveld. Art curator Michelle Deziel is the moderator, and admission is free.

The film focuses on the progress of a Los Angeles youngster, Gustavo "Curly" Fernandez, during his enrollment in art classes provided by the Chouinard

Foundation, the organization that has tried to keep the school alive, in fact or in spirit. It branches out with interviews and archival material to tell the story of how Nelbert Murphy Chouinard (pronounced shen-ard) launched the independent art school that fostered the talents of Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha and costume designer Edith Head, among others.

Walt Disney sent his animators there to hone their chops, starting in 1929. Disney would later save the school from bankruptcy in the late 1950s; after his death in 1966 and Nelbert Chouinard's in 1969, the school came under the control of the Disney-founded CalArts and was dissolved.

The Chouinard revival was spearheaded in the 2000s by Dave Tourjé, who became fascinated by the saga after buying and restoring Nelbert Chouinard's 1907 home in South Pasadena. He helped to establish the Chouinard Foundation, which produced a 2001 retrospective exhibition and gave art classes, first in its own building and then under contract with L.A.'s Department of Recreation and Parks. Since 2009, when funding for the art classes ran out, Tourjé has focused on keeping the Chouinard name alive, including a Chouinard Foundation website stocked with archival material.

Two of Chouinard's independent college-level art education peers in the Los Angeles area are still going: Otis College of Art and Design, founded in 1918, and Art Center College of Design, launched in 1930.

Besides promoting "*Curly*," Tourjé said, the Chouinard Foundation is trying to develop "a large, Chouinard-based masterworks show" that ideally could be shown at a major L.A. museum and subsequently go on tour. It also wants to develop a coffee-table book that would "revolve around Chouinard's influence in the L.A. art world, but also explore connections to the other schools such as Otis and CalArts."

More a dream than a plan, at this point, would be acquiring the former Chouinard Art Institute building at 743 Grand View St. in Los Angeles, now a child-care center, and uncovering and refurbishing "Street



Chouinard Art Institute alumni John Van Hamersveld, left, and Larry Bell, Venice, Ca. Photo: Dave Tourjé

Meeting," a mural that David Alfaro Siqueiros created in the building's courtyard in 1932, while teaching at the school. It showed a labor organizer addressing a multiracial crowd of workers, making it a politicized companion to the now-recovered "America Tropical," which Siqueiros painted in downtown L.A. the same year as a protest of American economic imperialism in Latin America.

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