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The Ghost in the Pacific Time Machine: Chouinard Art Institute and the History of Art in Los Angeles

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With a veritable archipelago of exhibitions, well over 60-strong, strung throughout the Southland, the Getty-driven Pacific Standard Time initiative seems to document the postwar Los Angeles art scene with remarkable thoroughness. The extent of the documentation, and the initiative itself, are indeed unprecedented; but in fact, the vastness of the project only serves to highlight its gaps. The Getty itself does not pretend to have organized an exhaustive history of southern California art 1945-1980, but only to have set the compilation of that history in motion (or at least to have kicked it into third gear). With any luck, Pacific Standard Time's organizers aver, the project itself, scheduled to run through next April, is just the beginning of an ongoing reclamation of southern California's recent art history.

Perhaps Pacific Standard Time shouldn't whimper out in 2012, but become some sort of annual (okay, bi-annual) event, during which month or two several institutions, large or small, public or commercial, mount exhibitions devoted specifically to southern California (okay, anywhere California) art before 1980 (indeed, well before 1980 – like 1930, or 1880). Each time around a different focus can be posited: one year can stress, say, women artists; another, oh, abstract painting; still another, how about patrons of the modern.

But if any through-theme demands closer inspection – especially for getting so little this time around – it is the role of art education in the emergence of the southern California art scene. One could argue that our art world is as large and dynamic – and, as we're learning, durable and already somewhat venerable – as it is because so many artists emerge here and choose to remain. And one can argue further that this plethora of artistic talent has been created not principally by the lure Los Angeles and environs exercise on immigrant artists, but by the region's ability to create artists – that is, to educate them and initiate them, ultimately, into an overarching community. Counting dedicated art schools and university and college art departments, there are more places to receive an education in visual art, fine and applied, in southern California than in any other comparable region in America.

This, some insist, is a mixed blessing at best. But, then, any similar social condition – the relatively small (if growing) commerce in art, or the influence of Hollywood, or the flexible but rapidly changing real estate available to artists, or the climate – is a mixed blessing. And as far as the pre-1980 L.A. art scene goes, it's a fact, a done deal, history. Whether driven by local industries' need for designers, local schools' need for GI-bill students (after both World Wars), or local boosters' need for some culture to crow about, southern California schools have been cranking out artists at a steady pace for a good century, at least. And, it would seem, this critical mass has led to a distinctive and dynamic discourse.

The offerings of Pacific Standard Time make this little apparent. The only investigation of a school's impact undertaken by an institution is "Best Kept Secret," the Laguna Art Museum's look at the early years of the University of California Irvine art department. (Full disclosure: I wrote the show's catalogue essay and consulted a bit on its curation.) More surprisingly, no institution of higher learning has chosen to examine its own art history, at least with anything more than a glancing nod to faculty and alumni. Nearly all such institutions in these parts can lay claim to some significant figure and/or event and/or pedagogic innovation; none, however, has chosen to do so. That would make for a good PST theme…

When that theme happens, in particular, I hope someone mounts an exhibition looking at the Chouinard Art Institute, a great school that can no longer present its own history. Of the several local art schools to have flourished and then disappeared, Chouinard is certainly the most heralded and most fondly remembered – and the most important. Its name keeps coming up as the place that issued degrees, undergraduate and graduate, to some of PST's "biggest" names – and, not incidentally, that employed many other of those well-known figures. An exhibition surveying the school's half-century existence was mounted a decade ago – in three institutions in northern San Diego, at a goodly remove from Chouinard's home base near downtown LA. It is high time for another, (literally) closer look.

That exhibit, "Chouinard: A Living Legacy," was organized and sponsored by the Chouinard Foundation, then (as now) dedicated to the preservation of the school's legacy. And it is a more distinctive legacy than most of us realize. We know Chouinard as the art school that became the California Institute for the Arts. That process of "becoming" was not a simple metamorphosis from easel-oriented caterpillar to multi-media butterfly. Economics and politics came to bear, much as they did when, say, the Newport Harbor Art Museum sought to absorb the Laguna Art Museum and become the Orange County Museum of Art (which kinda happened and kinda didn't), or Norton Simon bought the Pasadena Art Museum and hid it under his own collection (from whence it has been slowly and steadily emerging). Like the Pasadena Museum, Chouinard bowed out with great dignity, a bit less grace, and not at all quietly. And old-timers remember the school as fondly as they do the museum (both of which vanished in the early 1970s).

Chouinard grew out of its principal rival, the Otis Art Institute, but was nearly as old. Founded as World War I wound down, Otis could not grow its physical plant quickly enough to keep up with its burgeoning enrollment. A student revolt prompted Otis' first teacher of art history, Nelbert Chouinard, to found an additional school literally around the corner – with the blessing of Otis' own founding administration. The school opened its doors in 1921.

Ms. Chouinard's directorial approach was somewhat less top-down than was Otis'; while intimately involved in the running of the school's physical and financial matters – and famously present on campus as a kind of "watchful eye" – she trusted more or less entirely in her teachers to determine their own pedagogies. From the start, artists of different stylistic and ideological persuasions as well as mediumistic skills comprised the faculty, providing students broad exposure to the scope of artistic discourse and allowing each to gravitate to an appropriate mentor. By all accounts, there was a consensus that all instruction was based in drawing, especially but not exclusively drawing from observation.

But every instructor interpreted this fundament differently, adapting it to his or her own pedagogical style. This pertained no less to design, illustration, and other applied-arts curricula than it did to the fine arts, resulting in a strong crossover pattern. The list of teachers associated with Chouinard is matched only by the roster of its students – many of whom returned to teach. Early on the school became the redoubt for the southern California "watercolor school," boasting the likes of Millard Sheets, Rex Brandt, Phil Dike, Phil Paradise, and Emil Kosa. But the local avant garde also thrived at the school, as the recorded presence of Stanton MacDonald-Wright, Lorser Feitelson, Fred Hammersley, William Brice, and Rico Lebrun attests. Visiting scholars, including international figures such as Alexander Archipenko and Hans Hofmann, further enlivened Chouinard's first decades, and after World War II the school became a veritable crossroads for the national as well as local art scene, hosting increasingly adventurous lectures and events right up to its closing in 1972.

The postwar years were in fact Chouinard's glory days, when the school was a hotbed of abstract expressionist practice with Hans Burkhardt, Emerson Woelffer, John Altoon, Richards[STET.] Ruben, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Ynez Johnston, Connor Everts and Robert Irwin on hand. Both student and teacher at Chouinard, Irwin became the go-to guy in the late 1950s for a group of disaffected advertising design majors who switched over to fine art – a group including Ron Miyashiro, Joe Goode, and Larry Bell and Ed Ruscha. For his infamous "War Babies" show at the pioneering Huysmans Gallery, Henry Hopkins put Bell, Goode, and Miyashiro together with fellow Chouinard grad Ed Bereal; Ruscha's career also launched right out of school, at the nearby Ferus Gallery. Yet other artists associated with Chouinard in its final years include – hold on to your hat – Terry Allen, Chuck Arnoldi, Ralph Bacerra, Mary Corse, both Guy and Laddie John Dill, Sam Erenberg, Llyn Foulkes, Raul Guerrero, Gary Lang, Margaret Neilsen, Elsa Rady, Allen Ruppersberg, Peter Shire, Elena Siff, Matthew Thomas, Doug Wheeler, and Tom Wudl.

This list, of course, only scratches the surface of Chouinard. The "Living Legacy" show brought together dozens of artists, some notable enough for their reputations, but more notable for their achievement, an achievement perhaps overshadowed by their classmates and colleagues but testifying to the organizing principle of Pacific Standard Time, that Los Angeles was a cauldron of artistic accomplishment and experiment long before it was recognized as such. Indeed, the Chouinard legacy demonstrates that that cauldron began brewing well before even PST's chronological reach. Nelbert Chouinard was an enlightened and dedicated administrator, and had a hands-on involvement with her school for most of its existence. She was less gifted with money, more generous and trusting than judicious (allowing, for instance, accountants to embezzle the school's funds at least twice), and the school spent much of its existence in financial peril. During the Depression and War years in particular, when Chouinard had to compete with Otis and its newer neighbor Art Center College for a shrunken enrollment, it teetered on the edge of collapse.

Walt Disney, who sent many of his animators to Chouinard for training and re-training, was an early and frequent angel; but after his death in 1966 (and Chouinard's own three years later), his Imagineers re-imagined the school into something else. As the list of artists above indicates, theschool was no stranger to "post-studio" art, and had begun as early as 1960 to expand its conception of artistic practice under the guidance of art-school professionals Mitch Wilder and Gerald Nordland. But the absorption of Chouinard into a pan-artistic Institute of the Arts hadn't been in the cards until the Disney people decided to play their hand.

With its emphasis on drawing and intensive studio practice, Chouinard was a hotbed of stylistic revolution and academic improvisation, yet not of practical innovation the way Cal Arts was, and remains. One might deduce that, as its rival art schools themselves evolved, Chouinard lost its edge in

the competition to be edgy; but accounts indicate that it was a lively, even unpredictable place to study and to teach right up to its final commencement forty years ago. It might also be determined that only in the wake of Chouinard's demise did Otis and Art Center (not to mention the neo-traditional Laguna College of Art and Design) undergo their own radical transformations.

In this respect, especially, the Chouinard Art Institute is the spectre that haunts the Los Angeles art world. It is a friendly ghost, but a restless one, and, as the PST exhibitions evince, it gets around.