

## Chouinard/Cal Arts

By Dave Tourjé



The Chouinard Art Institute closed its doors near downtown L.A. in 1972 under what many considered to be controversial circumstances. Walt Disney's promise to keep the school alive morphed into the awkward realities of closure and transition, removal of long-term teachers, and to some, the neglect of a 50-year body of work unparalleled in art history. An article in the L.A. Times at the time articulated it as a debacle; others considered it evolutionary and necessary. Most likely it was a combination of both.

Though too complex to explore here, the basics of the Chouinard/Cal Arts transition in '72 have earlier roots. Walt Disney and Nelbert Chouinard had a long-term collaborative relationship since the 1920's when she offered Disney, who was low on cash as he funded his growing enterprise, free scholarships in order to train his first animators - now known as the 9 Old Men among others. Their teacher was a former USC engineering student named Donald Graham who would become the longest-running teacher at Chouinard (1929 - 1972). An excellent draughtsman, his advanced abilities in figure drawing technique and teaching lent themselves well to Walt Disney's advanced ideas concerning the future of animation. This union produced the radical advancement visible in the early, simplistic Mickey Mouse cartoon's transition into full-blown animated productions such as Snow White. Disney's collaboration with Chouinard would continue until his death in 1966, and reached a most critical point in 1955 when he salvaged the school from certain closure.

Through years of administrative problems including embezzlement, the Chouinard Art Institute was several weeks away from closing its doors in 1955 when Disney stepped in. Nelbert Chouinard signed the school over to him, he endowed the new non-profit with ten million dollars, and thus the California Institute of the Arts was born. He promised a hands-off approach which he honored, and which in fact was the primary reason for Chouinard's massive productivity in the Postmodern movements of West Coast Pop, Light and Space and Conceptualism which would flourish during its last run through the '60s. Disney had envisioned a new, multi-disciplined school which would be a fertile, creative environment, cross-pollinating a wide range of disciplines from music to dance to art which in fact, began in the early 60s at Chouinard.

What was likely not planned for was his passing in 1966, which led to the usual confusions of transition which Chouinard awkwardly found itself in. Nelbert Chouinard died in 1969, and the school made its way several more years until 1972. This was also a time of great change in the arts. The evolutionary/revolutionary spirit of the 60s was very much alive and change was inevitable one way or another, smoothly or awkwardly.

In the end, the new school known as Cal Arts would find its place on Disney land in Valencia and become a world force in art, music and performance - a testament to the enormous creative vision and will of Walt Disney as well as Nelbert Chouinard and Lula Von Hagen, the founder of the L.A. Conservatory of Music which was also part of the new evolution.