

CHOUINARD REVISITED

By Peter Clothier

Peter Clothier is an art writer and critic. He was Dean of Otis Art Institute from 1976 to 1979.

It's a good time to celebrate Chouinard, while its influence is still vibrant in our collective life as an art community in Southern California.

This exhibition honors the singular vision and dedication of the determined woman whose name the art school bore. Nelbert Chouinard started out with nothing but her love for young artists and their creative spirit, and her generous need to offer them encouragement and training. Her gift reverberates not only through the impressive fifty-year roster of her students, but through those whom they, in turn, have taught or influenced. I'd venture to say there's barely an artist working in Southern California today who has not been touched in some way by the vision of this richly achieving woman.

The exhibition also celebrates the diversity of Mrs. Chouinard's faculty and students. It celebrates the famous and the not-so-famous, the avant-garde along with the mainstream, the traditionalists along with the groundbreaking – inviting us to consider how speedily the passage of time turns one into the other. The multiplicity of vision of these artists testifies to the unpredictability of cultural preference, as well as to the eventual pointlessness of assessing the value of an art work or an artist on the scale of current taste.

That said, the number and diversity of “well-known” artists who passed through Chouinard remains astounding, crossing at least three generations: first, the late Millard Sheets, Mike Kanemitsu, Lorser Feitelson, the ever-ebullient Emerson Woelffer, the impeccable Frederick Hammersley; the generation who first came to attention in the late fifties and early sixties – John Altoon, Robert Irwin, Connor Everts, Joe Goode, Ed Ruscha, Llyn Foulkes, Richards Rubin, John Mason; and the succeeding wave who came along in the later sixties and the early seventies – Guy and Laddie John Dill, Chuck Arnoldi, Mary Corse, Terry Allen, Larry Bell, Allen Ruppersberg, Tom Wudl, and Elsa Rady, to mention just a few. They embody our history from plein air impressionism to post-surrealism, from Abstract Expressionism to “Light and Space,” from Pop and Minimalism to the Conceptualism of the early seventies.



Last night at Chouinard, 1972

It may, indeed, have been not merely the financial crunch but also the advent of Conceptualism that super-annuated Chouinard, since it challenged everything the school stood for since its inception: the traditional skills of drawing, painting, and sculpting, a reverence for the art object as a discreet and privileged entity, the value of slowly acquired mastery. As Dean of Otis Art Institute, shortly after Chouinard's painful transformation to CalArts, I watched a faculty and student body at war with itself over just these issues. Confusing and distressing as this turmoil was, I view it now as a necessary transition, at a moment when one approach to art had exhausted itself and needed the infusion of new thought and vision.

Our institutions are, like everything else, impermanent. For all the lasting aesthetic satisfactions of its artworks, this exhibition offers an important lesson in the impermanence of such things as art-world recognition, reputation, and reward. It's important not only for the names that are familiar, but for the ones that are less familiar, or not at all; for it is those who survive as artists, without critical or commercial approbation, who mostly clearly exemplify what it means to be an artist - to give one's life to a creative urge that brings no tangible reward, but is rather something we are simply given to do. It is, despite all discouragement from a world in which “success” is often measured by outward manifestations, what we have to do with our lives.

It's a good time, then, to celebrate the spirit that made Chouinard possible – the spirit that pervades this exhibition and inspired the vision of its founder. Art is not, eventually, about fame and fortune, or critical approval. It's about the stuff we have inside us, and our effort to dig it out and take a look at it. It's about the tough, day-to-day work of finding out who we are in relation to the world, of persisting on the difficult path between desire and resistance, aspiration and failure. It's about learning, slowly, sometimes painfully, to see.

This is the great achievement of Chouinard, where the artist-faculty prepared the way for creative minds to discover their own path for themselves, and offered the example of tough-minded dedication that would keep them on track regardless of external standards. It is this vast and largely unseen army of working artists, far more than the constricted scene of hype and commerce, that constitutes the real “art world.” We owe a debt of thanks, then, to Nelbert Chouinard and her art school for helping them along the way.