

ART

MOCA mix provides a boost for LA artists

Even as the Museum of Contemporary Art has responded to aesthetic developments throughout the nation and the world, it has always acknowledged its special responsibility to the art of Los Angeles and Southern California.

From its very inception, MOCA has sought advice from local artists on its plans and programs, and has regularly exhibited their work.

A case in point is the exhibition "Striking Distance," a survey of the work of eight Los Angeles-area artists that runs through June 19.

Though one feels the lack of a cohesive idea or curatorial construct, "Striking Distance" is admirable as MOCA's demonstration of support for young artists (all those included are under 40) and new art (the oldest piece in the show is dated 1982). The museum has also purchased at least one work by each exhibitor, with funds provided by the El Paso Natural Gas Co. Fund for California Art.

The most spectacular piece in the show is Long Beach artist Bill Viola's 1983 video/sound installation, "Room for St. John of the Cross." At the center of a large, darkened gallery is a tiny cell — St. John's cramped and bare 16th-century prison room, from which we hear his whispered dreams of "love, ecstasy, passage through the dark night, and flying over city walls and mountains."

Outside the stuccoed box, filling the gallery with the roaring sound of wind, a huge video projection presents aerial mountain views: an image too grand and powerful to be contained by mere prison walls.

Alexis Smith's always-hilarious collages are represented here by her "Jane Series" (1985), which pays tribute to the disenfranchised Janes of history: Tarzan's Jane, Dick's Jane, Howard Hughes' Jane Russell, everybody's Jayne Mansfield.

Mixing found phrases from the novels of Kerouac, Raymond Chandler and other quintessential American writers with detritus from this country's most hedonistically, consumptive eras (the 1950s and '60s), Smith creates ingenious and deeply engrossing images.

An attempt to revitalize found imagery, an approach current in art everywhere these days, engages not only Smith but Stephen Prina, who constructs highly intellectualized diagrams of Western philosophy; Mitchell Syrop, with his visual/verbal clichés; and Mike Kelley, whose cartoonlike paintings deal with human bodily functions and the line between nature as it really is and our conception of it.

Jill Giegerich, Lari Pittman and Peter Shelton all work in an apparently abstract arena, yet with forms strongly reminiscent of familiar natural and organic shapes.

"Striking Distance" is at MOCA's Temporary Contemporary facility, 152 N. Central Ave., through June 19. It will then begin a yearlong tour of the state.

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Seen at the Venice Art Walk last Sunday:

● Drummer/comedian Robin Ryan out on the boardwalk, pounding and kicking plastic water bottles to create an energy and excitement rarely experienced at high-priced rock shows.

● Susan Hauptman's pencil and charcoal drawings — surreal,

On Art



Charles Desmarais

super-real self-portraits of a solid androgyne — in a bare studio furnished only with some tables, an easel and a full-length mirror. The artist herself, recently relocated from the Bay area, quietly standing in a corner.

● Robbie Conal's new poster, plastered all over town, of a suited skeleton against a camouflage background. The text, in block letters above and below the image: "CONTRA/COCAINE." The new poster is the first color work disseminated by the guerrilla artist. You may have seen his Oliver North portrait, "SPEAK," or his famous "MEN WITH NO LIPS" in the street-corner galleries Conal makes of blank walls and fences throughout Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C.

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Art-world talk these days is of real estate.

That startling new structure going up near the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is the museum's next addition: a pavilion for Japanese art.

Designed by the late Bruce Goff, a renegade disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright famous for his unconventional buildings (like a house with an AstroTurf roof), the new LACMA wing is sure to be this year's most controversial work of architecture. The opening is planned for September.

Another museum building rapidly nearing completion is the newly founded Santa Monica Art Museum, due to open in December. The museum will occupy a small (8,000-plus square feet) space in a Main Street commercial complex designed by Frank Gehry.

Major architects have also been named for two additional museum projects in Southern California:

Post-modern theorist Robert Venturi and the firm of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown unveiled a plan in May for renovation and expansion of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. The \$11 million project is scheduled for completion in 1992, to coincide with the museum's 50th anniversary.

Also projected for 1992 is a \$50 million building being designed by Renzo Piano, the architect of the Center Pompidou in Paris and the much-acclaimed Menil Collection building, which opened in Houston last year. It will house the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach.

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Sandra Rowe, one of Riverside's most promising artistic talents and a witty, ingenious visual storyteller, will be featured in a major exhibition at the California Afro-American Museum from Friday until Sept. 11. Rowe will speak about her work at a free opening reception June 12 from 2 to 4 p.m. The museum is at 600 State Drive, Los Angeles, in Exposition Park.