



Laguna Art Museum

At left, George Blakely's "A Cubic Foot of Photographs." Above, Robert Heinecken's "Costume for Feb. '68."

Here's 'Proof'

Laguna Beach Photo Show Looks at Rule Breakers of the '60s, '70s

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LAGUNA BEACH—Maybe it's just as well that Charles Desmarais didn't move to Southern California until 1981. Had he grown up here, he might not have been so struck by an odd Los Angeles phenomenon of the '60s and '70s, at the intersection of photography, art, cultural upheaval and experimental impulses.

Desmarais, boyish-looking at 43, grew up back East indoctrinated in the standard view of art photography as an elegant composition and a "window on the world." After earning a master of fine arts degree in photography from the State University of New York, he directed the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography and edited the photography journals *Afterimage* and *Exposure*.

In the course of his work, he kept

stumbling across photographs made in Los Angeles that just didn't follow the rules.

"These images dealt very specifically with the idea of what photography might mean or how it might work in the culture," he says. "They didn't look like photographs in the sense of snapshots."

So what were they?

Well, in the '60s these images included:

- Ed Ruscha's deliberately unartistic, amateurish-looking photographs of utterly banal subjects, such as gas stations and small fires, which he assembled into books.

- Robert Heinecken's film transparencies of department store newspaper ads, slightly rearranged to make social and political commentaries.

- Llyn Foulkes' mixed-media works in which the faces—and sometimes the bodies—of men in anonymous photo-portraits are turned into anonymous blobs with applications of paint.

- John Baldessari's "An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer of a Series of Facts, Which in This Case the Camera Has Had to Accept and Mechanically Record," a nondescript photograph of a San Diego street, printed on canvas, with the title phrase hand-lettered below it.

- Wallace Berman's untitled photocopied collage of a grid of photographs of a hand holding a transistor radio, with a different image appearing in each radio.

Desmarais' fascination with what he calls the "photographic weirdness" produced in Los Angeles led him to organize "Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960-1980," an exhibition opening Saturday at the Laguna Art Museum.

Other photo shows have dealt with the innovative aspects of L.A. photography. But Desmarais points out that the "aesthetic and social conservatism" of the photog-

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raphy world too often emphasizes technical innovations in the work at the expense of meaning.

"People have spent so much time doing exhibitions [with titles] like 'Spectrum: New Uses of the Photograph,'" he says, which "concentrate entirely on the fact that the photographic image is on a different support than paper, or that it's a blueprint instead of a silver print—which in the end is not really relevant unless these pictures mean something."

Desmarais ultimately concluded, as he writes in his catalogue essay, that the L.A. work was "an expression of profound doubt . . . an art born of the unreliability of modern social and political structures, anchored in the liberating revelation that there is no such thing as proof—that we can communicate nothing but interpretation."

One work that reflects this idea is Terry Allen's 1973 piece "Memory House," based on a pre-existing photograph of what appears to be a murder scene, with attached slips of paper on which Allen wrote various times of day. One of the times is circled.

"OK, it's a murder scene, a picture of a murder that somebody did," Desmarais says. "But then, any of these times could be the correct time. [Allen] just made up something. As he points out himself, if you really examine the photograph, the room looks a little too topsy-turvy. Maybe this is a film still from a movie. We'll never know."

Desmarais says he also intends the exhibition to be a reminder that "Hey, there was this other world"—before the ubiquitous postmodern photography-based work of such New York artists as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger. "For 20 years, it was happening in the hotbed of Southern California. Maybe it wasn't quite the same thing. It oftentimes isn't quite as cynical or ironic. But that's where you start to see this consciousness."

So what was it about Southern California that nurtured this radical perspective?

Was it the lack of an art guru—a critic or curator—with the clout of a John Szarkowski? (The former photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was a powerful tastemaker whose 1978 exhibition "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960" split contemporary photographers into romantic types pursuing personal meanings and realists exploring the outside world.) Was it the absence of a tradition of home-grown street photography? Or was it simply the cultural void?

Desmarais says he mailed questionnaires to the 45 artists in the exhibition that posed such queries as "What about Los Angeles was key in your experience?" Many responses invoked the nearly nonexistent art scene of the era, when the Pasadena Art Museum was the one museum showing adventurous contemporary art.

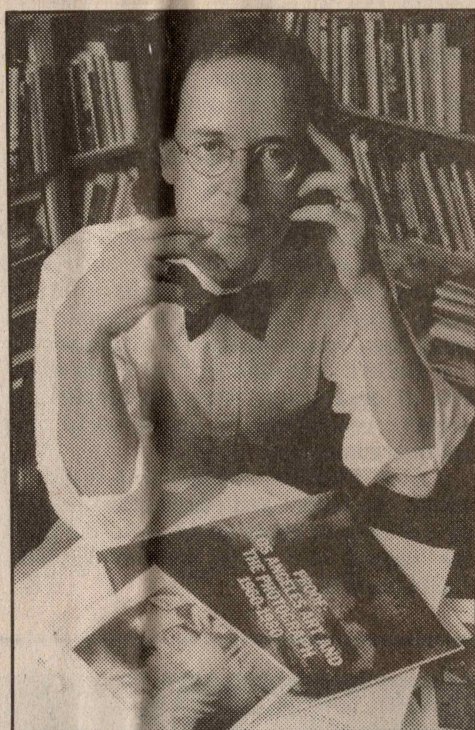
"If you were a painter, you had a hard enough time finding a place to show," Desmarais says. "If you were doing these funny photographs, you had very little chance of getting the work out. There was no commanding curatorial figure or critical figure who forced everyone down the same avenue."

"So you went off in your direction and you talked to each other about it. The idea of the photographic community was very much alive in the '60s and '70s. It was based around Robert Heinecken, around Robert Fichter, Jerry McMillan was friends with Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode. All these people went back and forth between media. There wasn't an insistence that you stay in your box because the stakes weren't all that high."

Many connections were forged between students and their teachers, particularly Heinecken—who began teaching pioneering UCLA courses in photography in 1962 and who was an early member of the nationwide Society for Photographic Education—and McMillan, who has taught photography at Cal State Northridge since 1970. But a student's work didn't necessarily look much like a



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LACY ATKINS / Los Angeles Times

mentor's.

For example, Darryl Curran—a colleague and student of Heinecken whose photographic work incorporates elements of printmaking and sculpture—has taught at Cal State Fullerton for 25 years. One of his graduate students was Suda House, whose "Stay Free Series" (photograph images printed on sanitary napkins) is included in the show. House also studied with Eileen Cowin (who began staging the dramatic made-for-photography tableaux for which she is best known after moving to Los Angeles in 1975) and was a fellow student of George Blakely, whose work is also in the show.

Other connections were a product of friendships and social events. "You have somebody like Fichter, who came here from Florida and Rochester, N.Y., to teach temporarily at UCLA for two years," Desmarais says. "Partly because he'd been a curator at George Eastman House [the noted photography museum in Rochester] and partly because he's a neat guy whom

Above, John Baldessari's "An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer . . ." (1968). "The idea of the photographic community was very much alive in the '60s and '70s," curator Charles Desmarais, left, says.

everyone likes, he knew lots of people in different social groups in Southern California. He brought them together simply by giving a lot of parties at his house."

Another frequent response to the questionnaire was to invoke the proximity of Hollywood and, as Desmarais says, "the whole idea of Southern California being a made-up place. It's not just Hollywood. It's billboards, Disneyland, the tourist industry, the whole idea of the snapshot. Blakely, who worked at Disneyland in high school and college, says it was heavily influential on his work. He'd find these photographs—Polaroids people dropped, or the negatives from Polaroids—and he'd use those."

In a similar vein, Baldessari said in a telephone interview with Desmarais that the only reason he used film stills in his work is that "they were so cheap—you found them all around."

But although the exhibition is "centered on an attitude toward the photograph" among Southern California artists, Desmarais cautions that it is not intended to be a photography show per se. As director of the Laguna Art Museum for the past four years, after a seven-year tenure heading the California Museum of Photography at UC Riverside, he says he has profited from leaving the photography world for the broader perspective of contemporary art.

"So we have an Eleanor Antin, a John Baldessari—he'll never admit that he's pretty much a photographer—a Terry Allen, an Alexis Smith, a George Herms," Desmarais says. "These are people who aggressively used photography in their work and yet you never think of them as photographers."

In Desmarais' view, the artists using photographs who tended to avoid the inbred world of American photography in favor of exhibiting as artists in art venues

(whether in the United States or Europe) were not necessarily more inventive or more theoretically minded. He sees the distinction as primarily social: "As Baldessari said: 'You are known by the company you keep.'"

Desmarais offers Heinecken as an example. In the early '60s he already was devising ways of turning photographic images into objects. And yet, Desmarais contends, Heinecken's identification as a member of the photographic community has prevented him from being viewed as a conceptual artist, in the same way as a Baldessari or a Ruscha.

"Ruscha said: 'Unfortunately, there wasn't a Jackson Pollock of the camera, and that's why photography never really made the same impact painting did,'" Desmarais adds. "Maybe Ruscha is, if not the Pollock, the Jasper Johns."

Desmarais jokes that the period covered by the exhibition was determined in part by the "nice round numbers" of the decades. In fact, he sees the early '60s as the seminal period of "Wallace Berman, Lynn Foulkes, George Herms—a range of artists who had a strong interest in mass media images and were trying to extract the essence of these pictures."

Berman was "a proto-postmodernist," Desmarais says, whose work is "a knowing critique of the modernist ideal of originality as well as an examination of photography's cultural triumph as a kind of substitute reality." His untitled image of the grid of hands and radios, he says, conveys "a single-minded message: Pictures are signs. They are not stories. [The piece] is like a flashing neon sign sending out a bunch of images saying: 'This is our culture.'"

Desmarais points out that the early works in the show are "nearly contemporaneous with Andy Warhol's repetitive presentation of commonplace images." The artist's paintings were shown at Peris Gallery in 1962 and 1966, and the Pasadena Art Museum gave him his first one-man museum show in 1970.

But Desmarais has no particular theory to expound about a possible relationship between Warhol and L.A. artists. He suggests only that their experimental attitude might have made them "responsive to Warhol's ideas—his use of images out of mass media and pop culture, or his new applications of photographic techniques [such as] photo silk screens."

"The thing I've avoided saying—because I think that it's unprovable—is that it all springs from Los Angeles," Desmarais says. "But I don't think that's the same as the point of the show: That there was an important interaction and conflagration that started in Los Angeles, which was largely independent—though not entirely—of what was happening artistically in the rest of country and the world."

By the late '70s, he says, the L.A. photo-based work "became a little more self-conscious, a little more ironic. When you get to the point of Blakely's 'A Cubic Foot of Photographs' [made in 1978], it's just, 'What does this prove?' There might be 3,000 photographs stacked in this pile, photographs from processing places—duplicates and failures. These are people's dreams, and all of that can be reduced to a pile of paper. It's such an interesting struggle between meaning and meaninglessness."

"By the end of this period—and that's why the exhibition ends in 1980—there is the publication in October [magazine] from 1978 to 1981 of essays by Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens that caused the popularization of [post-structuralist] theories in France. They were recognizing something that was beginning to happen in New York. But by that time, the distinction [between California and New York artists] starts to fall apart."

■ "Proof: Photography in Los Angeles Art, 1960-1980" opens Saturday and will continue through Jan. 17 at the Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach. Gallery hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays (till 8 p.m. Fridays). Admission: \$1.50 to \$3, children under 12 free. (714) 494-6531.