

## Created in California:

### Summer Art Fare Includes a Variety of Work Made in the Golden State

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Rex Brandt, *Surfriders* (1959)

California art can be many things to many people. Aficionados often discuss its captivation with color and light, tendency for innovation, as well as inclusion of different styles and influences. Three art exhibitions in The OC this summer explore these varied perspectives, while also looking at a bit of the history and the wide range of art made in California.

**In Laguna Beach, where the Art Museum is cooled by ocean breezes** and colorful flowers grace nearby Heisler Park, “Rex Brandt: In Praise of Sunshine” features scenic/modernist landscapes. Here, 50 twentieth century paintings by Brandt bridge landscape with abstract styles, while bringing to light this icon of American Scene Painting. The title of this show is taken from the artist’s words: “Whether we are conscious of it or not, everything in the perceived world is in motion. Sunshine is the mediator, a pervasive quality in which things are lost and found, emerge and recede.”

Rexford Elson Brandt was born in San Diego in 1914 and grew up in Riverside, California, at a time when impressionism proliferated in this area. While influenced by this style, his education at UC Berkeley, including German expressionist style studio work, inspired him to incorporate expressionism and abstraction into his art. After studying at Stanford and the University of Redlands, he moved back to Southern California and joined the California Water Color Society. Brandt worked alongside Phil Dike, Emil Kosa Jr., Barse Miller and Millard Sheets; artists creating a distinctly American artistic style, depicting this country's landscapes and urbanscapes. Over the years, Brandt won numerous awards for his finely rendered watercolors.

Janet Blake, curator of historical art at Laguna Art Museum and of this exhibition, describes Brandt's blend of abstraction and realism, and his ability to express ideas through the fluid watercolor medium. The artist's watercolors in this show include *San Francisco Pattern*, 1960, *Strong Light*, 1968, *Balboa Ferry Sunday*, 1972, and *July Morning, Dory Fleet*, 1982, works depicting various scenes that also manifest their colorful titles. Blake adds that these landscapes and harbor scenes are also influenced by Chinese landscape painting. His oil painting *Surfriders* blends "the mythic sunlight and leisure of the Golden State with close-up views of the reality of contemporary life on the California coast," explains Susan Anderson, an Orange County curator and art historian. She adds that this painting from the 1950s foretells of the sun, surf and youthful high spirits attitude that California art and culture would take in the 1960s.

**At the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana**, "The Lure of Chinatown: Painting California's Chinese Communities" features 40 vibrant oils and watercolors depicting San Francisco and Los Angeles Chinatowns, 1885 to 2007. Julie Lee, the Bowers' vice president of collections and co-curator of this show, says: "The paintings really get your imagination going while bringing a bit of history alive. After all who wouldn't have fun dodging firecrackers and a vivacious dancing dragon on New Year's Day, or attending a stage production where the audience (gauged by their talkativeness) seems to be enjoying themselves more than the performers. How about the chance to rub elbows with politicians and film actors at Tang's restaurant or, gain an exclusive back stage view at the notorious *Forbidden City Nightclub, San Francisco, 1938*?" While the Bowers is known for its exhibitions of shows from foreign lands, it is refreshing to see this show of exotic "homegrown" art, even as it features paintings of a glorified perception of Chinese life.

Co-curator Susan Anderson explains that artists gathered at San Francisco's Chinatown, the first large U.S. settlement of Chinese, to portray the inhabitants, tight alleyways, Chinese theaters, and places of worship called joss houses. She says, "Later, Depression era artists, some of them Chinese-American, created positive, stylized images of the quarter." Many works of Los Angeles and San Francisco Chinatowns reflect the artistic styles of the times, including impressionism and American Scene painting, resulting in a visually striking and relevant display.

Among the earliest paintings is the undated *San Francisco Chinese Maiden*, depicting a little girl in colorful Chinese attire holding a chrysanthemum, a symbol of nobility and

elegance, while standing in front of a shop selling herbs and vegetables. Other works of Chinese ceremonial life include *Chinese Theatre, Chinatown San Francisco*, 1925, a portrayal of elaborately dressed Chinese actors on stage, causally observed by modern attired Chinese. Several paintings, while artfully rendered, evoke memorabilia in Chinese tourist shops. Here is *Chinatown, San Francisco*, 1950, an overview of a brightly decorated community, combining techniques of Chinese and American landscape painting. *Pagoda Old Chinatown, Los Angeles*, 1949, is a watercolor inspired by Chinese landscape painting; as a romanticized version of a Chinese scene, it dovetails with the elegance of this show.

**Videos await the viewer at the Orange County Museum of Art** in Newport Beach, where Peter Sarkisian's *Extruded Video Engine*, 2007, is an integrated video sculptural work with numerous colorful fanciful gears—the gears are in fact creative interpretations of machine parts from the industrial to the digital revolutions. As these gears rotate and turn together like a choreographed dance, their “music” is delightful, robotic gear-like sounds (similar to the robot voices in “Star Wars”). There is also a tromp l’oeil aspect to this and the artist’s other works; as they “fool the eye” with their tricks of perspective and space, ultimately creating enhanced three-dimension features.

Also in this “Sarkisian & Sarkisian” show is *Videomorphic Figure: Robot 5, version 2*, 2013, a stand-up robot, onto which bright primary colored video is projected; the result is a combination child’s toy and a mad scientist’s invention. In this piece, as with the artist’s other works, it is difficult at first to discern if the colors and 3-D dimensions are part of the initial structure, part of the video, or both.

The artist’s 21 additional video sculptural pieces run the gamut from amusing to sublime. These include: *Gathering*, 1996, two martini glasses, each with a small gathering of people within; *Sleep Defined*, 1997, a projection of a pillow adjusting itself as if it is being slept on; and *Hover*, 1999, a large cube in a darkened room with video projections of a mother and child, trapped within the cube, on all four sides. The actions of the pair accelerate rapidly until they disappear, with only a blank cube remaining.

This exhibition also includes an extensive selection of two-dimensional collages, monotypes and paintings by Sarkisian’s father, Paul. This first showing of many of Paul’s works resurrects this important 1950s and 1960s Los Angeles artist. And the tromp l’oeil, “fool the eye,” aspect of several of Paul’s paintings provides a bridge between his work and of that of son, Peter, explains Curator Dan Cameron, also OCMA Interim Director. He adds that the elder Sarkisian's work connects abstract expressionism with pop art, photo-realism, abstract illusionism, pattern & decoration, and even post-minimalism.

A monumental example of Paul’s tromp l’oeil style is *Untitled (El Paso)*, 1972-74, a life size, black and white realistic painting of an old, Western style storefront. It is one of five similar architectural facade paintings, three of them permanently installed in Europe.

*Liz Goldner*