

Spotlight Orange County

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“The Avant-Garde Collection” opening

Beyond its popular façade as a place defined by suburban tract housing and Disneyland, Orange County and its surroundings are home to a burgeoning and vital art community

Orange County’s contemporary arts legacy begins in the 1960s when the University of California at Irvine’s art department attracted rebellious artists who taught there, staff who ran the place, and eager students who created wildly conceptual pieces. Around the same time, 13 visionary women opened the Balboa Pavilion Gallery in Newport Beach, exhibiting work by area pioneering artists. This venue soon became the Newport Harbor Art Museum, today the Orange County Museum of Art. The ongoing successes of UCI’s art department and OCMA have undoubtedly influenced the evolution of many other art venues in this region.

OCMA has morphed over the years from its modest roots into a major museum, exhibiting giants of the local, national and international art worlds. The museum’s *pièce de résistance* is its 3,000-plus-artwork collection, which includes works by many prominent SoCal artists. Its current exhibition, “The Avant-Garde Collection,” culled from this treasure trove, features dozens of SoCal artists, including John Baldessari, Larry Bell, Chris Burden, Lynn Foulkes, George Herms, Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz and Ed Ruscha. Chief Curator Dan Cameron says, “It’s really just the tip of the iceberg. There are quite a few more artists who could have been included. But I think it tells a good story about how risk-taking we are, and have always been.”

The Laguna Art Museum, eight miles down Pacific Coast Highway, was founded in 1918 as the Laguna Beach Art Association. While LAM is proud of its early 20th-century California Impressionism, its emphasis today is on modern and contemporary art from the Golden State. Works exhibited include Abstract Expressionism, surf-culture installations, and paintings and sculpture from the 1960's Light and Space movement. The museum's "Art & Nature" series, now on view, addresses art/science connections with an emphasis on environmental issues. This series' exhibitions include Elizabeth Turk's delicate marble sculptures and *X-Ray Mandala* prints; and Lita Albuquerque's *Pigment Figure No. 1*, a blue-pigmented plaster human figure.

OC's newest major art venue is the three-year-old Palm Court Arts Complex, within Irvine's Orange County Great Park, site of the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro. The Park's 4,000-square-foot gallery mounts three shows a year, several related to air travel, the history of the base and Orange County. The gallery's "The Living Room" installation is a gathering place that host dialogues with local artists and arts leaders, including, this fall, gallerist Suzanne Walsh and Laguna Art Museum curator Grace Kook-Anderson. The larger gallery space, featuring local to international artists, is exhibiting, through January, the abstract paintings of OC-based artist Mark Leysen, whose current works are influenced by western US geographical regions.

Santa Ana, 10 miles to the north, is justifiably proud of its Artists Village, created in the mid-1990s from a decaying urban neighborhood. At its popular monthly artwalk, where artists and art lovers mingle with the area's largely Latino population, two venues stand out. Grand Central Art Center, a partnership between California State University Fullerton and the City, is comprised of live/studio spaces for graduate students and artists-in-residence, Grand Central Theater and a main gallery space. As the hub of the "Village" revival, exhibitions include lowbrow, primitive, abstract, allegorical and figurative works, and recently, with John Spiak as director and chief curator, multi-media shows. "LOUD silence," on view through December 6, with prints, drawings, sculptures, videos, audio and film, explores our understanding of sound and voice.

At the nearby Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, executive director Stephen Anderson explains, "I look at OCCCA as a giant sandbox, inspiring artists to experiment and take risks with their art. It also allows many other opportunities, from curating a show on a hot-topic theme, to creating a music event, to collaborating with other institutions." Founded by five members in 1980, OCCCA moved to its current location in 1996, where it has since exhibited over 800 guest artists and held numerous solo, group and juried shows, showcasing more than 6,000 participants. The director and members receive no salaries.

Just beyond Orange County in the port town of San Pedro, Angels Gate Cultural Center grew out of a decommissioned WWII Army base to emerge with exhibition spaces and artists studios, offering art education, cultural events and gallery shows. Work shown within this charmingly ramshackle campus is by mid-career and younger artists, and spans all media. Recent exhibitions explore stories within the community. The current "Gettin' Off the Ground: Contemporary Stories from an American Community" is inviting dialogue about the community, its culture and the people who live there.

Three museums in Long Beach illustrate the history and diversity of this city, bordering Orange County. The University Art Museum at California State University Long Beach, accredited three times by the American Alliance of Museums, is in an urban campus with a 2,000-student School of Art, and exhibition galleries that often meld visual arts with design, technology, music and contemporary culture. Registrar/curator Maria J. Coltharp describes their permanent collection as “one that traces in its narrative the interests and waves of our region’s Zeitgeist.” She adds, “There is historic significance to our archive, including interviews with seminal artists as Roy Lichtenstein, George Segal, Susan Rothenberg, Eric Fischl and Dennis Hopper.” These and other works of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and photography will be housed in the UAM’s new 3,000-square-foot collection galleries, opening February 2015. Kristina Newhouse, who received her MFA in ceramics here in 1996, has been chief curator since 2011.

With its magnificent vistas facing Long Beach Harbor and historic stone buildings, one might overlook the Long Beach Museum of Art’s vision, among them shows that relate personal stories about the artists, while displaying their work. Its recent “The Paternal Suit: Heirlooms from the F. Scott Hess Family Foundation,” includes historical paintings, prints, photos and objects. These pieces, while alluding to the Hess family’s legacy, do so with artistic license, as most of the so-called “historical” pieces are actually creations of the artist. The current “Masterworks: Defining A New Narrative,” curated by Nathan Spoor and Jeff McMillan, features paintings by 14 artists. With each large-scale painting representing a pivotal moment in the artist’s career, the show aims to stimulate narratives about the nature of contemporary painting.

From its humble origins in a refurbished rolling skating rink in 1996, The Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) has expanded notably, amassing a collection by artists Cruz-Diez, Los Carpinteros, Matta, Tamayo, Tunga and others. As the only museum in the US exhibiting modern and contemporary Latin American art exclusively, its artworks span from Surrealism, Social Realism, abstraction, and Conceptualism to performance art. Opening November 22, “Esterio Segura” will present works in a variety of media addressing commercialization, migration, censorship and cultural isolation in Cuba. Look for changes at MOLAA. As Stuart Ashman, museum president/CEO states, “Our recent board resolution clarified the definition of Latin American art to include Chicano art or art created by people of Latin American descent who have lived exclusively in the United States.”

The nine-year-old Torrance Art Museum is a cultural outpost in the South Bay area, a short driving distance from Orange County. Director/curator Max Presneill describes the venue as “an artist-centric Kunsthalle type institution,” adding that it promotes “partnerships and exchanges, as well as artist-led projects and emerging art.” The recent “Another Thing Coming” is an intrepid exhibition featuring 14 LA-based sculptors, working with a variety of materials, creating conceptual pieces that evoke feelings from surprise to sorrow. “South Bay Focus 2014: Contemporary and Traditional Art Juried Exhibition,” running November 8 through December 6, features painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, video and photography. With work by South Bay area artists, “Focus” exemplifies TAM’s community-oriented roots, complementing the more groundbreaking “Thing” exhibition.

The nearby Palos Verdes Art Center is another community-oriented art gallery. On view through November 16 is “SWEATERMAN: AKA Mark Newport” and “Acquired Objects: Textiles, Tools & Notions from The Judith Solomon Collection.” “Sweaterman” includes eight hand-knit suits, made of cheap acrylic yarn in bright colors depicting Batman, Captain America and superheroes imagined by the artist. The more prosaic “Judith Solomon Collection” includes crochet, intricate lace, Celtic knot tasseled, cross-stitched and embroidered items, acquired from several countries and continents.

Among many college and university galleries in the OC, five are worth special mention. Cal State Fullerton’s Begovich Gallery presents contemporary exhibitions focusing on Southern California artists, with occasional national and international work. Gallery director Mike McGee explains that the venue is a training facility, providing students with hands-on experience to prepare them to work in the field. Dozens of former students are working at art institutions all over the world. The gallery produces four to six publications a year; some award winning.

The Guggenheim Gallery at Chapman University in Orange collaborates with other area institutions. Past shows include “Confronting Nature: Silenced Voices” with Cal State Fullerton, and “Art and Architecture” with 10 SoCal museums and galleries. Exhibitions include work by California artists such as Manuel Ocampo and Tim Hawkinson, while group shows address issues as death and dying, sex and humor, the Vietnam War, public art and religion.

Soka University’s 8,000-square-foot Aliso Viejo gallery features contemporary artwork, much of it from Southern California; a committee of staff and faculty (not all art professionals) select the exhibitions. Archibald E. Asawa, VP for finance and administration, explains that the gallery dovetails with the college’s mission, “to develop global citizens committed to living a contributive life as well as support our university principles, which include the fostering of leaders of culture in the community.”

Coastline Community College’s Newport Beach campus includes a 2,400-square-foot gallery. While the venue displays artists from across the globe, its special draw is work by significant, contemporary OC artists including Tony DeLap, Tom Dowling and John Eden. The recent “Selections from the Festival of Arts Permanent Collection,” featuring works by artists from the past, including Edgar Payne and Paul Outerbridge, was a departure for the gallery.

At the University Art Galleries at UCI, directors Juli Carson and Robert Plogman explain that the gallery’s mission “is to keep an eye on our modernist past while promoting the most innovative aesthetic and political debates of our post-modern present.” The exhibition, “Ed Moses: Cross-Section,” through December 13, features five decades of this artist’s work, examining his various styles, rather than presenting a chronological account. As UCI’s gallery directors add, the venue exemplifies this area’s 50-plus year commitment to “provoking intelligent debate on the subject of art in its most expansive poetic definition.” This is a bold statement, and one that applies to museums and galleries throughout the Orange County region.