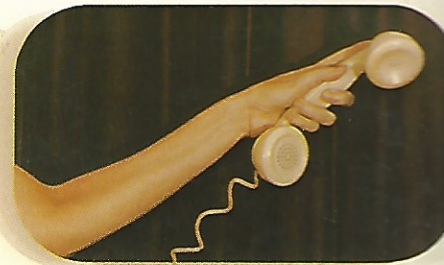
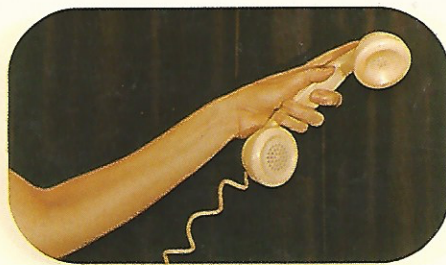
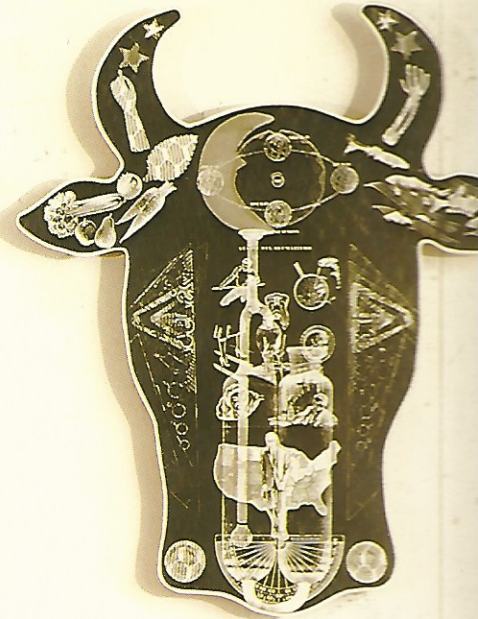
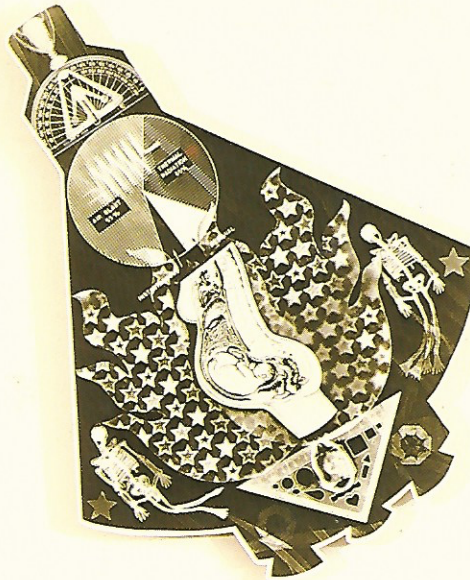
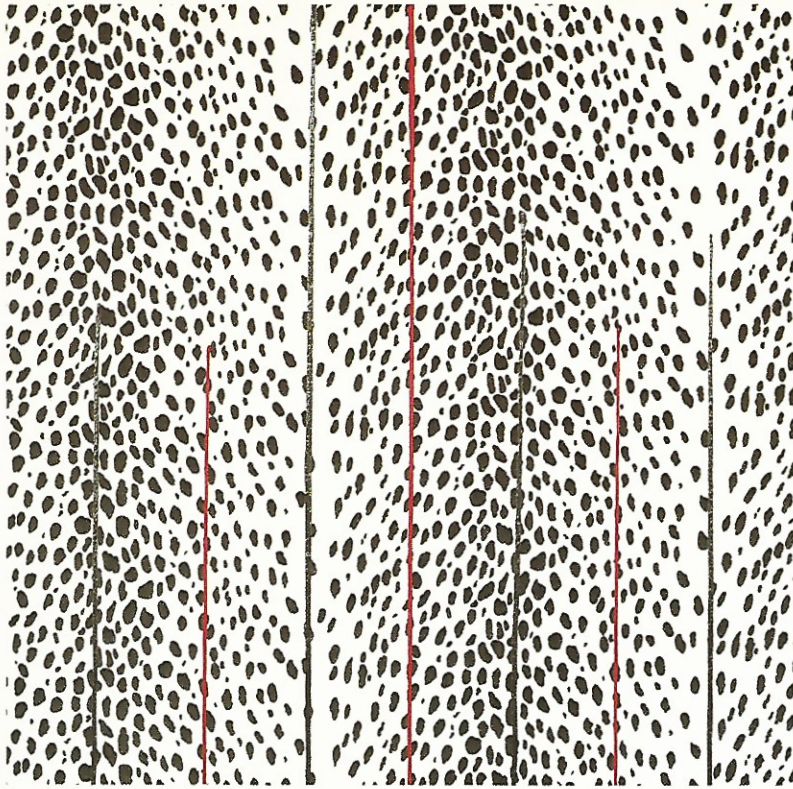


VISIONS

ART QUARTERLY SUMMER 1989 \$ 4.50

California:
Land of Opportunity





Tom Henry III, *Fair Warning*, 1989. Acrylic on fake animal fur, 30" x 30"
Photo credit: James Franklin



Thaddeus Strode, *Brain Spooning Law*, 1988
Oil, acrylic, paper on wood, 20" x 16"
Courtesy of DAG. Photo credit: James Franklin



Canon Hudson, *Untitled*, 1988. Velvet, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24"
Courtesy of DAG. Photo credit: James Franklin

OUR GANG

by Bonnie Clearwater

When Dennis Anderson invited some of his former classmates from the California Institute of the Arts to show their work at his eight-month old gallery, he created an event that marked a turning point in the Los Angeles art world. Just five years ago, young artists who resisted moving to New York felt they were forfeiting the opportunity to become part of the mainstream. But based on the decision by so many recent graduates from one of the most internationally prominent schools of art to



Richard Lee, *Twenty-Dollar Painting*, 1988
Oil on canvas, 28" x 17"
Private collection, Los Angeles
Photo credit: James Franklin

remain in Los Angeles, it seems that the much anticipated emergence of the city as a viable art center has become a reality.

Anderson's guerrilla gallery with its graffiti-covered exterior and rec-room interior created a relaxed environment in keeping with the informality of this event. Although the exhibition's participants were drawn from a larger pool of artists, most of whom graduated from CalArts after 1983, this was not a curated show, nor was there an attempt to make a statement about the type of work these artists are producing. The surprising result of this assembly was the diversity of works shown, particularly since recent exhibitions of CalArts graduates, such as *Skeptical Belief(s)* organized last year by the Renaissance Society in Chicago in cooperation with the Newport Harbor Art Museum, seemed unusually cohesive for group shows. Refer to someone as a CalArts artist and people in the art world probably would know what was meant by the description.

The Dennis Anderson Gallery (DAG), however, challenged the general perception of CalArts as a monolithic academy that produces a particular type of artist.

The majority of artists whose works were on display grew up in the Midwest or California. Most of them considered applying to CalArts after reading articles on the school that stressed the freedom students had there and the way students and faculty interacted. The enormous attention and success achieved by CalArts graduates David Salle and Eric Fischl did not go unnoticed by these artists either, when deciding to apply to the school.

Their teachers at CalArts, John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, among others, taught them to question and analyze their work in a manner that benefitted their later experimentation and growth. Nevertheless, the theoretical and conceptual curriculum the school promotes also presented some of these artists with a cause for rebellion. Despite the fact that the best-known earlier graduates from CalArts are painters—Salle, Fischl, Ross Bleckner, Matt Mulligan, Lari Pittman—these younger artists felt pressured by the faculty and their peers not to engage in this activity, as it was considered a futile gesture. In defiance, several of the artists in the exhibition deliberately have chosen the retro act of painting on canvas. Indeed, the use of photography and text which dominated much of the work of earlier graduates now seems on the wane. The same appears true for the use of appropriated images. However, film and cinematic effects, as well as television, continue to be an influence. Still, these artists admit to feeling like hybrids—they enjoy manipulating paint and materials, but their conceptual training has instilled in them an urge to infuse subject matter into the objects they

create, and to explore the questions raised by working in their chosen medium.

Mass media art, particularly as exemplified by *Mad Magazine*, rock record covers, advertisements and television, as opposed to exposure to "high culture," inspired many of the participants in this exhibition to become artists. Although now savvy about the international art scene through access to art magazines, exhibitions, the Los Angeles art fair, the visiting artists series at CalArts, trips to New York, etc., their experience is limited to random encounters rather than to any systematic or comprehensive study of art history. For the most part, these artists are not daunted if they repeat the achievements of other artists or if there is nothing especially novel about the way they approach their work. If they are producing historically redundant work, it's because they see themselves as assimilating theoretical positions on contemporary art that they still regard as relevant.

The artists included in the DAG exhibition fall into two categories. The first is a close-knit group of self-



Chris Wilder, *UFO Sighting*, 1988
Chroma-key blue, fluorescent paint on canvas with wooden stool, 72" x 72"
Courtesy Judy and Stuart Spence, South Pasadena, CA
Photo credit: James Franklin

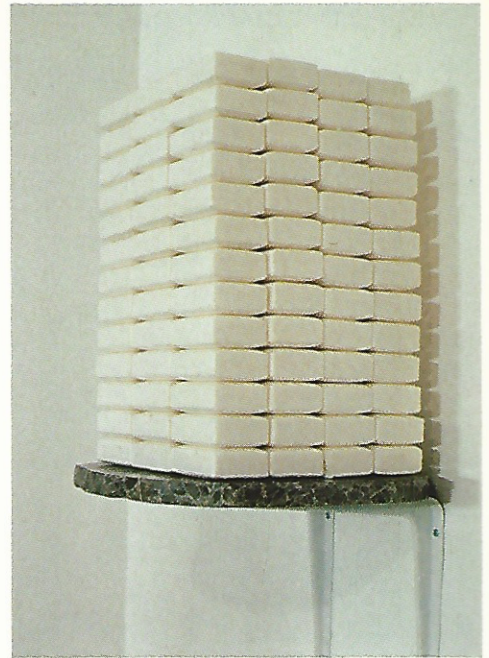
styled rebels that includes Tom Henry III, Chris Wilder, Cannon Hudson, Thaddeus Strode, Richard Lee and Carl Bronson. The balance of artists in the show—Gary Bachman and John Franklin (the only represented artists who have moved to New York), Jamey Bair, Judie Bamber, Jeff Beall, Cindy Bernard, Paul Boettcher, Luciano da Napoli, Darcy Huebler, Liz Larner, Eric Magnuson, T. Pendlebury, Jim Shaw, Laura Stein and Carrie Ungerman (who is presently completing her final year at CalArts)—work more autonomously. Of this group, only Bernard, Larner, Bamber and Shaw (who graduated in 1978) had received any substantial exposure prior to the exhibition. In fact, Bernard and Larner are participants in this year's *Biennial* exhibi-

tion at the Whitney Museum of American Art. For most of the other artists, this was their first opportunity to show their work in public.

By staying in Los Angeles, it is probable these artists' careers will develop at a slower rate than if they moved to New York. Yet this is precisely why a number of them have decided to remain. They feel they need time to experiment away from the spotlight and to allow their work to grow without being molded and packaged by the New York art world. They point to John Baldessari and Edward Ruscha as two examples of important internationally recognized artists who also made the decision to stay in Los Angeles, and they note, too, the attention such earlier alumni as Tim Ebner, Lari Pittman and Mike Kelley are achieving without leaving town.

The support system that CalArts generates among its students has made these artists feel that it is possible to live and work in Los Angeles. Their studios and homes are clustered in a few of the low-rent districts of the city, such as Silver Lake, downtown or Pico Boulevard, where Wilder, Hudson and Lee share studios and living quarters just down the block from Liz Larner. These artists meet socially, engage in discussions on art and, now, exhibit together. As some of them begin to be singled out for attention, the others are likely to benefit as well. But the competitive spirit of CalArts has driven some of its recent graduates to engage in a form of one-upmanship. The danger in this attitude for a group of artists that has remained somewhat hermetic since school is that its members will measure themselves only against the best artists in their class rather than see how they relate to artists outside their immediate circle.

The "rebel" group composed of Henry, Wilder, Hudson, Strode, Lee and Bronson has taken a deliberate stance against what they regard as the anti-object bias of CalArts. They discovered they could not repress the urge to create works that appeal to the senses, nor resist the temptation to do something considered "wrong" or "bad." At the same time, they realized they had to come to terms with what it means to produce art in a capitalist society. Their romantic notion of the struggling artist is tem-



Carrie Ungerman, *Untitled*, 1988
152 bars of Ivory Soap, granite and metal
14" x 10" x 8" (approx.)

pered by their cynicism toward consumerism. When even conceptual art and installation art can be turned into commodities, they reason, why not reconsider the potential of the aesthetic object? At least they have control over whether such objects enter the market.

Their cynicism has prompted them to downgrade the consideration of their works as precious objects. Unappealing flashy fluorescent paints are used by Henry in his stripe paintings, as well as by Wilder to create his trademark circles and dots. Lee's tightly executed paintings of ornaments and costume jewelry are simultaneously seductive and repulsive, as are the horrific subjects of Strode's collages. Drips, accidental marks, haphazard compositions and found objects have a particular appeal for these artists. Admittedly their approach is largely influenced by Dada and Surrealism. Wilder quotes directly from Duchamp when he incorporates wooden stools into his works, while the mechanical forms, style changes and spatial depth that characterize the paintings of Francis Picabia have had an effect on Hudson. For his paintings on thick blocks of wood, Bronson exploits chance and the Surrealist automatist technique. After meticulously layering different colors of paint on these blocks, Bronson rubs the surface with sandpaper, revealing the colors



Liz Larner, *Steel, Rubber, Plaster*, 1988, 54" x 10"
Courtesy Wendy and Robert Brandow
Photo credit: James Franklin

underneath.

Television has had a significant impact on this group of artists, who not only grew up with the medium, but belong to a generation that has had access to remote control. Zapping through the channels creates juxtapositions of unrelated images reminiscent of the Surrealists. Rather than link separate images, as in Baldessari's photographic ensembles, Strode and Henry overlap forms, simulating the effect of accumulated afterimages that appear on a television screen after rapid channel-changing.

Wilder, Strode, Lee and Hudson all draw on science fiction for subject matter. The appeal of science fiction goes hand-in-hand with these artists' disillusionment with physical science's ability to explain the unknown and reflects a widespread anti-positivist view of the time. Science fiction establishes a new mythology and belief system that these artists consider relevant to contemporary art. In *UFO Sighting*, Wilder equates the belief in UFOs with the spirituality that such artists as Yves Klein professed existed in monochromatic painting. In the center of a large square canvas painted chroma-key blue is a tiny fluorescent dot, presumably the UFO. The space created by this blue field becomes deep and expansive in relation to the speck in the center, and a wooden stool placed directly in front of the canvas invites the viewer to sit and contemplate this vista. Wilder also uses this stool to blow the whistle on a hoax. The top of the stool, painted the same fluorescent orange as the speck, could easily have served as the model for the UFO if viewed from several miles above. Like the investigators who routinely expose photographs of UFO sightings as frauds by revealing the fabricated circumstances of these documents, Wilder challenges both the validity of his own painting and many of the claims about the spiritual in art made by twentieth-century abstract painters.

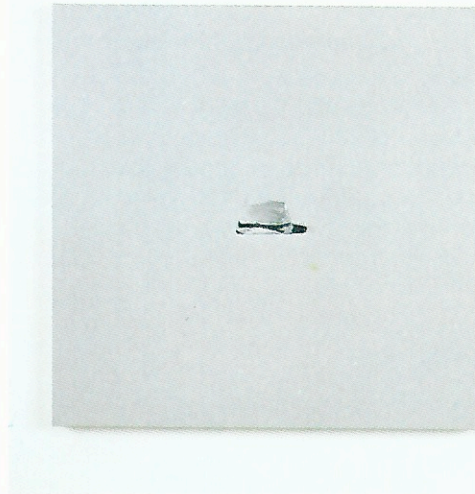
Ideas and information circulate freely among the artists included in this exhibition, so it's not surprising to find similarity in their approaches to subject matter. Larner, who graduated a few years before the artists already mentioned, has also been addressing issues related to science fiction, alchemy and science. For one

series of work, Larner collected specimens of microscopic particles from the breath of various individuals in petri-dishes filled with agar-cultures. These works are continually in progress as bacteria grows and metamorphoses. The grotesque transformations of these specimens force the viewer to confront decay, disease and mortality. In the DAG exhibition, Larner showed a mysterious sensual object made of heavy-duty rubber hanging in pleats from the wall and molding itself snugly around its bulging contents. There is a sense of danger about this work. One begins to fear that if the rubber were stretched to the limit, its contents would burst through, tumbling chaotically onto the floor.

Like Larner, Huebler, Ungerman, Franklin, Boettcher and da Napoli are attracted to non-traditional

stapled to wooden frames.

Working more traditionally with oil paints, Judie Bamber indulges in the manipulation of the medium on canvas. While still at CalArts, Bamber was inspired to investigate representational painting as a result of her interest in "New Image Painting" and the work of Vija Celmins. Her approach to painting, however, is conceptually based as she explores the relationship of the medium to the subject. By choosing to paint figuratively, Bamber addresses the historical role of the figure in representational painting as well as the idea that the viewer can have an emotionally moving experience when beholding such works. Her paintings are small and depict isolated objects such as canned cherries, marbles and rings, centered in a monochromatic field. Working in



Judie Bamber, *Do You Have Something In Your Eye Or Are You Just Glad To See Me?* (Ice cube, whole and melting), 1980
Oil on Canvas. Diptych, each panel 23-3/4" x 23-3/4"

Courtesy Mark and Susan Harris. Photo credit: James Franklin

substances. In the tradition of Jackson Pollock, Huebler pours an organic mixture of tar and beeswax onto wooden panels, manipulating the flow and creating overlapping layers. In the same vein, Ungerman's sculptures employ cakes of opaque Ivory soap or stacks of sandalwood-scented amber bars of glycerin in scaled-down minimalist arrangements. Italian-born da Napoli joins Henry, Wilder, Strode, *et al* in disparaging the preciousness of art by using lowly materials such as plastic garbage bags that have been indiscriminately punctured and crudely

this scale pulls the viewer right into the painting. But no sooner do these works grab your attention than your interest is mocked with a clichéd statement affixed to the wall next to the painting. The grand themes historically associated with painting are replaced in Bamber's work by melodramas played out in diptychs and triptychs. Each panel in the sequence serves as a frame of a film. An off-scene action, generally violent in nature, is implied by the transformation of the object from panel to panel. A shiny marble in one panel appears smashed in the second, and

in *Do You Have Something In Your Eye Or Are You Just Glad To See Me?*, a solid ice cube in the first canvas is half melted in the next. In *Someone Is Going To Get Hurt Here And It's Not Going To Be Me*, Bamber reduces heroic subject matter to fluff with her painting of a lone coy marshmallow. These melodramas are like the routine mishaps and misfortunes that one usually ignores in life or responds to with humor and sarcasm.



Jeff Beall, *Untitled*, 1989
Laminated plywood, photograph and pigmented micro-crystalline paraffin wax, 8-3/8" x 13" x 2"
Courtesy Peter and Eileen Norton, Santa Monica, CA. Photo credit: James Franklin

Though the sting these works inflict reveals how such minor annoyances can unmask deeper woes.

There is a desire among many of these artists in the DAG show to make the viewer slow down and look. The more one looks the more one may glean from these works. Give just a glance at Laura Stein's paintings, for instance, and you would miss their point. Viewed face-on, the all white surface of these minimal structures continues the plane of the wall. Not until you move to the side of these thick panels and discover the lavishly decorated edges do they completely reveal themselves. This decadent flourish is in sharp contrast to the austere frontal plane. Liberated from their functions as frames, these borders with their arabesques of foliage populated by perverse little creatures become the focus of the viewer's attention.

Jeff Beall also rewards his audience for close attention to his seductive works by leading them through a labyrinth of ambiguity. In one piece Beall arranges three blocks of wood in a row, each representing a different medium: the sculptural first block is left natural with its grain untreated; the second supports an atmospheric black-and-white photograph of sea and sky; the third is glazed with layers of pale blue paraffin through which the wood grain is

still visible. The three blocks are unified by the continuity of pattern in the wood and the ripple of waves in the ocean, as well as by the horizon in the photograph, which aligns with the center of the panels. The work flows from the real object extracted from nature, to the photographic representation of nature, to monochromatic abstraction. This progression in turn triggers the viewer's reflection on the pragmatic presentation of

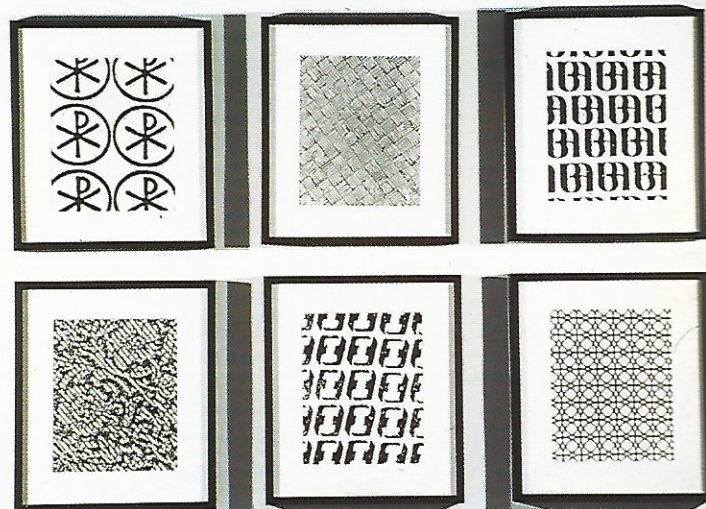
nature, the sublime in nature, and the sublime as represented in luminous abstract paintings.

The ambiguity of Beall's work underscores the basic difference between the attitude expressed by some of the artists in the DAG show and that of the more purely conceptual methodology of artists such as Cindy Bernard—who photographs details of repetitious mechanically produced patterns and enlarges them into abstract images—as well as Eric Magnuson, who analyzes the effectiveness of corporate logos in his recent series of paintings. Although these CalArts graduates have been exposed to many of the same theories and philosophies, the work of Bernard and Magnuson appeals to the intellect, whereas Beall seeks a more intuitive response.

At the time of this exhibition, the Dennis Anderson Gallery was an obscure space off the beaten track.

Even so, the event sent a quiver through the Los Angeles art community as it signaled the determination of these young artists to remain in Los Angeles, and their rebellious attitude toward the art associated with their alma mater. Already Anderson has widened the scope of his gallery to encompass graduates from other schools, notably, from the University of California at Los Angeles, and has been an active catalyst, bringing together artists who previously had little contact with each other. The effects of the exhibition have continued to accumulate for the participating artists. Several of the established galleries in the city have paid close attention to their activities and have included some of them in exhibitions. Their work is being pursued and acquired by collectors and they are receiving reviews and mention in the press. This attention is both exciting and worrisome for the artists as they strive to maintain control over their fate within the complex system of the art world. ■

Bonnie Clearwater is an art historian and curator living in Los Angeles. She is author of *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper* (Hudson Hills Press) and is presently preparing a catalogue raisonné of Edward Ruscha.



Cindy Bernard, *S.E. : Grid #5*, 1988
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, plexiglass, each 14" x 12"