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Lance Richbourg's "Portrait of James and John" has touch of a Western.

TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT L.A.'S 'RAGGED EDGE' ARTISTS

By WILLIAM WILSON

Artists tend to believe, or at least fervently and silently hope, that they are making history. The aspiration is probably an act of necessary and sometimes conscious self-delusion. Something must be done to keep on working in the face of public indifference. Entertainers have to make it in their lifetimes, or know failure. Artists can always console themselves with the hope of posterity's redemption.

The rather uncomfortable truth is that in the myopic scan of a brief human strut, it is impossible to say with certainty what will prevail. History, it seems, is something that happens after we exit the stage.

Kienholz to Robert Irwin and Billy Al Bengston and was co-founded by the brilliant curator Walter Hopps.

The Ceeje was a couple of blocks north of the center of activity, near Santa Monica Boulevard. Its founders were Cecil Hedrick, a quiet, rather puckish ceramic sculptor, and Jerry Jerome, a gangly former UCLA theater arts major with an agreeably flamboyant persona. The name of the place was compounded from their first initials. Most gallery artists were associated with UCLA's department, where they formed a slightly scruffy minority within the academic subculture.

The Ceeje's ambiance was assertively

those who were not, the show offers a revelatory peek at artists who intentionally ran the wrong way (presumably in the hope of lapping the competition and coming out ahead).

What is most likely to strike the first-time viewer of the Ceeje group is a strong generic resemblance between its style and recent Neo-Expressionism. Former Ceeje artist Charles Garabedian has, in fact, come to be regarded as a Neo-Ex precursor with his awkward symbolic figurative work. Garabedian taught at UCLA at the time and, older and more mature, acted as guru to artists, many of whom were still graduate students. He set the Ceeje tone with work that seemed to attack every cosmetic blandishment associated with art. Neither elegance, beauty, refinement nor chic have place here. In self-portraits, he replaced the notion of the artistic genius with that of a slightly comical craftsman whose only hope of success is earthy candor, pathetic bravado and dogged labor.

If the resemblance to Neo-Expressionism helps call attention to Ceeje survivors, so much the better. But it is coincidental, fails to take the whole stable into account and is not, in my view, the most interesting aspect of the group.

For one thing, the gallery harbored a couple of artists of marked elegance. Photographer Edmund Teske was represented with his nicotine-colored prints that blend French-Symbolist decadence with a love of vintage Hollywood. Marvin Harden emerged from among his peers as a refined visual poet of delicate touch and haunting insight.

The fact that such artists could coexist suggests that the place was guided by unself-conscious intellectual liberality. The whole thing seemed to be glued with that kind of artistic closeness fostered by the scary period when school begins to blend with the demands of the Big Bad World.

No question that the Ceeje look was dominated by a kind of "kitchen sink" populism combined with a "these are the corny little fantasies I have while I paint in the bedroom in our dingbat apartment in Mar Vista while my long-suffering spouse tries to take care of the bambino on my teaching-assistant's salary."

For Lance Richbourg, the fantasies were of B-movie Westerns painted in the accents of Thomas Hart Benton and liable to include a gallery buddy or two in the cast. (He even made a surprisingly good color videotape of a shoot-out, although marred by a corny ending where he is a young daddy dreaming in the kids' playground. The group's earnest sincerity was a virtue that sometimes

tripped them up.)

Ray Brown actually painted domestic scenes from ordinary blue-collar lives that take on hallucinatory intensity filtered through the artistic imagination. Les Biller was an Expressionist enthralled with the Orient and James Urstrom's rather stiff Italo-Flemish primitive style occasionally longed for the lyric sexuality of "The Great Love Affair."

A core commitment to a particular aesthetic "look" did not prevent the

Ceeje from taking on artists of differing stylistic persuasion. At the time, Aron Goldberg just wanted to paint traditional studio still lifes of fish heads, bones and whatnot with as much of the intensity of Rembrandt or Soutine as he could muster. The work still looks good. Maxwell Hendler painted in a manner that today seems to anticipate Photorealism. Actually, it was closer to what used to be called Magic Realism. Small compositions like his 1965 "Brick" represent his best period.

It's nice to remember that long before subcultural issues insinuated their way into art-world consciousness, the Ceeje showed all manner of so-called "minority" artists without giving it a second thought.

Harden is black. Ben Sakoguchi is Japanese-American. The gallery had three Mexican-American artists, such a high proportion that they might lay authentic claim to being precursors of the later L.A. Latino art movement. Of the trio—Louis Lunetta, Roberto Chavez and Ed Carrillo—the latter two show marked affinities with folk and mythic aspects of their ancestral culture. Interestingly, Lunetta was attracted to Ghana and the art of Asia.

Women artists appeared at Ceeje without anyone, we may be certain, sitting in the back room plotting quotas. There is a still life by Anita Delano, Arleen Goldberg's haunted scene of Venice titled "Val's From Mildred St." and, of particular interest, a group of paintings by Joan Maffei. Her still lifes and emblematic



Ed Carrillo's "Self Portrait," photographed at an oblique angle, is fashioned in oil, tin, carved wood.

The Ceeje show at the Municipal Art Gallery offers a revelatory peek at artists who intentionally ran the wrong way (presumably in the hope of lapping the competition and coming out ahead).

Currently, the Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park hosts an exhibition titled "Ceeje Revisited." Organized by artist Faith Flan, it remains on view to May 13 and concerns itself with an interesting art gallery that held forth at 968 N. La Cienega Blvd. from 1961 to 1970, the heyday of Gallery Row.

The leading showplace, from the point of view of innovative home-grown art that went on to become canonized with international renown, was the Ferus Gallery. It featured every comer from Ed

grass-rootsy and much of the prevailing humor centered around its chosen posture as the home of "The Rear Guard," or, as somebody put it, the "Ragged Edge," as opposed to the Ferus' "Cutting Edge."

The Ceeje is certainly the right place to choose to stake out the extreme parameters of the L.A. scene in those days. The exhibition may be historically corrective; it may just be nostalgia. For those of us who were around, it is a chance to compare memory with evidence. For

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figural compositions are partly as fresh and naive as work of the Dounier Rousseau, partly as haunted as Richard Lindner's kinky art. Most striking is a stylized, centrally-composed still life that may have anticipated similar work by Judy Chicago and is certainly an early manifestation of what came to be called feminist imagery.

Maffei encapsulates several manifestations of the term *primitive* as it touches almost every artist in the exhibition, but the real polarities are staked out by Marcell Cavalla, an authentic folk artist, and Ed Newell. Newell's psychotic-style images like "Goddess" and "Cats" are

absolutely riveting. You get the feeling that every artist in the place was trying to uncover something that basic in his own work.

So how did they do? Well, according to the fickle and always provisional judgment of that dread chimera, Contemporary Art History, their funky group spirit fared better than individual careers. Only Garabedian and Harden can claim larger reputation. Most of the rest have vanished from public view, either sunk in cozy tenured academic obscurity or, as far as we know, just plain quit.

There are, however, other considerations, and given the almost perverse

integrity of the artists, the most important question may be: "Did they get better?"

Ceeje artists were always compelling, but they remained in memory as rarely making art as well as it could have been. The retrospective confirms the impression. They had a tendency to skew imagery all over the canvas so that the work seemed pointless. Carrillo's fantasy landscapes were particularly meandering but he got better, just as he promised in an untitled work with a carved wood head.

In the beginning, it was silly to call Sakoguchi a virtuoso. He was just com-

plicated, cramming his anti-war satires with squadrons of fighter planes and battalions of semi-feral kids. Eventually, he grew into his reputation.

The exhibition is an excellent reminder of the real variety of Gallery Row and how it was at the Ceeje, but it whets the appetite to know what became of all the artists. We know Richbourg had a slump and then took to painting wonderful baseball scenes.

What about the rest?

Let it be. It is undoubtedly better for us not to know which of them await the sound of history opening a door that they can no longer hear. □

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