

Recelebration P.1

Recelebration is a group exhibition of recent acquisitions from the Luckman Permanent Collection. It honors the legacy that passes from one guardian to another each time a work of art changes ownership. Once this happens, the attitude, ethics, and material of an artist's efforts are in the hands of its new custodian, and, along with the artwork's provenance, the artist's text and personal mythology are also transferred. But there might be more to the path of an artwork than a single story of conveyance can tell. Sometimes, an exhibition provides a sketch for a point in time shared by those who seem to be poles apart.

Five years before the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at Cal State LA received its first gift of contemporary art from the Eileen and Peter Norton Collection, I was going through Eileen and Peter's Brentwood home with three members of the United States Secret Service who, among other tasks, had been called in to remove 'inappropriate artwork' from the premises prior to Hilary Rodham Clinton's visit. Clinton was scheduled to spend a few days at the private guesthouse that stood near the driveway entrance of the Norton's family mansion while her husband, Bill, politicked around Los Angeles. It was my job to reveal the whereabouts of each piece since some of the work didn't look like art.

Preceding the Secret Service's arrival, a team of art technicians had spent two weeks setting up 100 artworks throughout the estate. Just as we had done in advance of special events during the year, art was installed in the living room, dining room, library, bedrooms, guestrooms, kitchen, upstairs and downstairs hallways, basement, housekeeper's quarters, and transitional spaces. The Secret Service agents were determined to do a full sweep. They asked that an artwork by Rachel Lachowicz resembling a platter of Molotov cocktails be removed as well as another by David Hammons which combined symbols from the American flag with those of the Pan-African flag. We came to a Fred Tomaselli panel in which marijuana leaves were hard-set into a support field of clear epoxy resin, and another Tomaselli work in which psychotropic drugs were embedded in the same way. The agents insisted that it all be taken out.

We removed the art that had been identified as unsuitable for Hilary's visit, returned it to the art-storage warehouse, then patched and painted damaged walls. On the third day of eliminating art, Peter Norton learned what was going on at the mansion, and while the last ill-fated artworks were being deinstalled and packed, he contacted the head Secret Service agent and, according to the message relayed to me from the Norton office, voiced his reaction: "You know, if these artworks pose a national security risk, we'll gladly remove them from our home. But if they do not...and this is simply a case of censorship, then we'd like to keep the art where it is." After a period of deliberation, the Secret Service agents withdrew their demands, and the art was returned and reinstalled. One day later, after everything was back in place, Hilary

arrived and had her photo taken with Eileen Norton in front of the Tomaselli marijuana-leaf panel.

In the summer of 1995, Kim Dingle pulled up to the Norton warehouse in a 1963 MG Midget, ready another day of selecting artwork for her upcoming exhibition, "A Glimpse of the Norton Collection as Revealed by Kim Dingle" to be held at the end of the year at the Santa Monica Museum. For three months she stood on the hard concrete floor picking out work, and her feet were dog-tired. She gratefully accepted when I offered to roll her from station to station on a four-way furniture dolly, which enabled her to have easy access to artwork. The art collection required organizational and retrieval systems that made sense: bins on shelves for small objects; containers for larger three-dimensional work stacked on low-slung risers with island names such as Aruba, Sicily, Hawaii, Sumatra, and Cuba; tall custom-made painting racks for oversized two-dimensional work and large photographs. Each object was labeled with its proper caption information and imaged with a Polaroid photograph for speedy identification. With this data, Kim was able to point to the works she wanted to display in the museum on shelves, which on islands, and which in racks. She further determined that some of the art would be exhibited wrapped in its protective polyethylene or Dartek sheeting, some would be shown in their sealed storage bins, and others would be displayed unwrapped, out in the open, installed. Kim settled on the selections that she felt elucidated specific methods of storage organization and manners of preservation. I applied a Post-it note to each of her candidates and compiled an alphanumeric list which was then entered into a database.

Recelebration P. 2

The artwork was prepared for shipping then sent to the museum. Dingle's intention of mining the art collection was clearly expressed throughout the exhibition. On the night of the opening, some artists with work in the collection were surprised and amused by her choices, but others, upon seeing their artworks boxed and wrapped, snapped at Kim, declaring that the show misrepresented their purposes and further objecting because the exhibition concept was exploitive. Even though the Nortons were troubled by the artists who walked out in anger, it was Kim who undertook the difficult task of absorbing the disgruntled artists' hostility. But she remained calm throughout the opening, still offering her support while struggling to overcome the artists' outrage. Despite the fact that she wanted to cleanse herself of the whole unfortunate affair, she, nonetheless, bounced back by silently asking: How much effort should we put into protecting art? What art does a culture think it should save? And furthermore, who believes in a funding system that enables manufacture to continue?

The following year, Kim's show traveled to Site Santa Fe while the Eileen and Peter Norton Collection continued to grow. The Nortons had a generous lending program in lieu of establishing their own museum to showcase art, and every day museums around the world called for artwork. Early on in the years Eileen and Peter Norton were together as a couple,

money was tight; their date nights often played out in art galleries where they enjoyed free access to fine art. Over time they learned which artworks they liked and which they didn't. Then in 1990, everything changed when Peter sold his PC software business to Symantec Corporation for an estimated 350 million dollars. From that point on, the Nortons had enough purchasing power to buy the art they loved—the art they had appreciated in tougher times. After a period of casual buying, they began to narrow their focus to work by local artists, artists of color, artists in the queer community, concept-driven art, and high-end works by well-known international artists.

Time after time, artists have related to their practices as political acts—viewpoints that draw attention to specific injustices. Ana Mendieta, Nancy Spero, Judy Chicago, Guerrilla Girls, and Carrie Mae Weems have all taken political stances with their art. During the 1990s, some artists felt that it was not only conceivable to inform parochial beliefs but also to transform the social imbalances borne of insular thinking. In Millie Wilson's work, obscure histories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are updated by queer sexuality, race, and class proposed within the context of an art exhibition. She applies surrealist-minimalist narratives and wit to reorder outmoded ideas that point to stereotypes of difference. Less about Malvina Reynolds singing "We Don't Need the Men," or artist-markswoman Valerie Solanas screaming out her S.C.U.M. Manifesto, Wilson's work from the 1990s helped to form the new biological imperatives needed for survival just as the hallucinatory effects of Maya Deren's avant-garde films were being forgotten.

30 years after *Artforum* moved from San Francisco to the office above Ferus Gallery and nicknamed the gallery and its artists the "Cool School," SPIN magazine published Dennis Cooper's article, "Too Cool for School," (July 1997, p. 86-94) which drew attention to the work of young UCLA art-school students. At one time, an artist completed several years of studio work before being seriously considered by a gallery or museum curator; then, they hopped on the career treadmill trying to rescue themselves from the fear and dread that had long-permeated the post-Duchampian art world. However, fortunes changed for some when SPIN became the savior of the fledgling artist. While artists of all ages deserved a nod, career flights sped up for many students who hadn't been producing art for any quantifiable period of time. The immediate sense of entitlement magnified prejudices that were already familiar, but now, dividing lines not only grew wider between photographers and painters, between one way of thinking and another, they also widened between generations of artists. Soon, Los Angeles curators, gallerists, and collectors validated an artist's credibility, not by the sophistication of their practice, but by the hypothesis embedded in their youth. Collectors began to acquire art right out of campus studios at bargain prices, cutting out the middlemen—using the artists as pawns. Patterned on models of sexism and racism, the new ageism seemed to be less about an artist's work than it was about the speculator's potential financial gain. Thankfully, artists' production was also expedited by other private, institutional, and interpersonal trade.

Recelebration P. 3

Los Angeles today has become the site for mixed-use, build-to-curb, high rise architecture where property values are determined for speculators by tribes of nomadic artists and settlement is denied. When he founded Pacific Electric Railway in 1901, old-world art collector Henry E. Huntington (1850-1927) probably didn't anticipate that an incalculable number of displaced citizens would wind up in L.A.'s inner-city sprawl. While transit-oriented developments continued to evolve from Huntington's plan, artists steadily became more isolated. As their interests in creating art for art's sake began to diminish, they became less present in their work, and art began to match the desolation and dehumanization of the industrialized world.

With the artist's consent, I invited an L.A. art dealer to accompany me on a trip to Chris Finley's studio. Chris had been making objects that contained hidden compartments for smaller items, often realized in clusters. Entombed within each form, these internal spaces were veiled by the primary structure in that viewers had no visual access to them unless a flap, a curtain, or lid was lifted, and the artist's partitioning system was revealed. Finley called these cryptic areas *negative spaces* but his term did not hold the same meaning as art-class concepts of negative space which describe the zones around and between the solid regions of a symbol, figure, or image. After we left Finley's studio, the art dealer complained, "I don't get it, you can't see some of the stuff!" I suggested that, sometimes, the things we can't see are the most important. People rely on gods they've never met, believing in ecstasies both unseen and imaginary.

Every other year, works from the Norton Collection travelled to Semantec Corporation in Silicon Valley, the exact spot where, two decades earlier, fruit orchards and farmland had aerated Santa Clara Valley's immense land mass. Now, Semantec, Apple, Google, EBay, Netflix, and scores of other Internet-related technology companies thrived there. Any time we hung artwork, a staff illustrator was sure to say with confidence that his art was better than the work we had transported from L.A. It wasn't unusual to hear this from other creative groups who blurted out age-of-endless-reproduction disorders as conceptual metaphors for one circle of artists being dumb shits and another being smart. Also, on any given day, 100 Norton works of art likewise lined the walls at RAND's headquarters in Santa Monica. Each time an installation was finished, RAND's in-house psychologist would corner me to air his opinion that certain artworks were "too dark" or "too silly" for the employees and should be removed. Protests against art never seemed to end as each censor assessed value in prejudicial ways through the logics of authorization.

A decade earlier, ideas about intellectual capacity had already changed. Consider the findings of intelligence scholar Howard Gardner in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (published by Basic Books, 1983). Through his research we discover that

brainpower doesn't have to be a case of "he's smart" or "she's dumb," but that intellect and aptitude are specific to each person. It's not a matter of how smart we are, but of how we are smart. An artist, Gardner suggests, has superior spatial intelligence while often exhibiting weaker mathematic or linguistic intelligences which push them to the base of the educational system's standardized bell curve. Gardner's research flattened the playing field, advising that we pay homage to the remarkable qualities and diversities of the individual. But artists, like most people, are trapped by social biases wherein judgments are shaped by measures of race, religious belief, and job status set forth by popular myth. Plus, American society habitually sanctions or sacks a person's merit based on their appearance or manner of speaking, not by the content of their conversation.

Sometimes, if you don't know the story behind a picture, object, or other work of art, it falls flat. But Jessica Bronson's videos function to the contrary in the way they engage a viewer with repetitious, modulating covers of covers that spin off into absurd Lewis Carroll-like distractions and uncertainty. The perception of time and space and the physical experience of it requires no script for spectator access. Instead, the witness is transported out of bodily space through what Carlos Castaneda in his character don Juan referred to as *energetic fact* or *seeing*: the act of perceiving energy directly as it flows into the universe. The power of visual effects to transform and the immateriality of film feed the idea that something might happen, even if a story is unknown and the objects and events as they are perceived are only understood in the human consciousness.

Recelebration P. 4

We want to believe that the value of art is not only determined in art-fair business transactions nor in the sums stated by Christie's New York, Bonhams London, or Sotheby's Beijing; that's not what makes art great. Great art should make us pause and take notice of ourselves and the human condition. The sense of memory, the sense of celebration that points to our shared humanity, the longing we feel whenever a work of art somehow makes us realize that someone or something is gone forever, or that our minds have grown blank and nothing needs to be retrieved—that's what we see and learn and remember by heart.

It seems absurd to worry if someone is going to thump Kim Dingle on the head at an art opening, or if a thief is going to steal a detachable dildo from Paul McCarthy's *Tomato Head* installation, or if U.S. Customs will crack open an important traveling sculpture looking for drugs, but that's what collection custodians do—they worry. They worry, they appease people, they meet deadlines, then they worry some more. When Peter Norton purchased Clyde Beswick's entire art collection for \$1.5 million while Clyde was locked up for pilfering money from the direct mail company he co-owned, the artworks arrived at the Norton art storage facility with their containers ripped open and "Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department" parceling tape sloppily circumscribing each piece. In the course of integrating and

documenting the newly-delivered works, it was determined that many were edition duplicates of art the Nortons already owned, which prompted the need for a responsible deaccessioning plan. Ultimately, 29 arts institutions in the United States and abroad received a total of 1,000 gifts of contemporary art from Eileen and Peter Norton.

In 1999, the Luckman Gallery at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at Cal State LA was named as one of the Norton's beneficiaries (80% of the work in *Recelebration* was gifted to the Luckman by the Nortons in a second-round donation). Today, the Luckman Permanent Collection, after receiving additional gifts, is meeting three of the conditions that define a museum—to educate, to exhibit, and to collect. This new position comes with undeniable challenges. While most people's eyeballs roll back into their heads at the mention of archiving minutiae, preservation of the Luckman's art collection persists, and safeguarding the accuracy of its historical record depends on the current custodian's level of dedication and the steadfastness of those who will follow one year, five years, or fifty years from now.

For decades, the timbre of contemporary art in Los Angeles was defined by strange utterances about the west. Newcomers use to say, "Everything west of the Rocky Mountains is plastic," meaning that everything here was affected and phony. The 1992 exhibition "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s" curated by Paul Schimmel, was credited with depositing the edginess of social commentary into Los Angeles area art. If you had grown up in California, you would know that "social commentary" or "edginess" was nothing new to Los Angeles in the 1990s.

In 1966, when I stood in front of Ed Kienholz's "Back Seat Dodge '38" at one of LACMA's exhibitions, the County Board of Supervisors had just threatened to close down the show because the installation was pornographic. But they soon realized that objects can't be pornographic; only some employment of those objects by the mind can refer to pornography. Of course, Kienholz's sculpture later became part of LACMA's permanent collection. In those days, my art-school roommates and I appreciated the exhibitions at LACMA, and we also looked forward to the ones at the Pasadena Art Museum where we had the opportunity to see a range of work by artists who employed a variety of disciplines in their approaches to various questions, issues, or theories. After it closed in the 1970s, the Pasadena Art Museum was absorbed by the Norton Simon Museum and its collection was rarely seen. With a bit of luck, such alienation of affection won't occur with the Luckman's permanent collection, and the project will be shepherded in the right direction so future exhibitions like *Recelebration*, which exposes subjects of the 1990s to a new audience, will provide their own sketch for a turning point in time.

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