

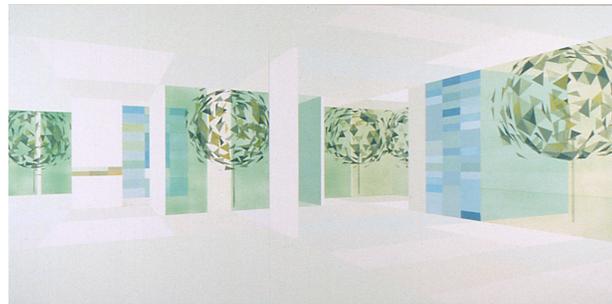
A R T
S P E C I A L

YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD
OF THEM,
BUT THESE YOUNG L.A. ARTISTS
ARE WHIPPING UP
THE LOCAL ART SCENE.
BUY NOW,
ASK LATER

y o u n g a r t

By George Melrod
PORTRAITS BY PATRIK ANDERSSON

WHATEVER ART LOOKS LIKE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, IT'S A GOOD guess that L.A. will have something to do with it. From the pre-pop days of the Ferus Gallery to the grandiose Getty of today, the city has long played a vital role in shaping America's cultural landscape. And in the past decade, Southern California has become a breeding ground for artists. Nurtured by an exceptional teaching community encompassing many of the region's most prominent names, not to mention a gallery system eagerly seeking new ones, the artistic ecosystem is teeming. At the forefront of this push are the Art Center College of Design, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Claremont College, Otis College of Art and Design and, especially, UCLA, whose all-star grad school has become so trendy one half expects to find Britney Spears there conducting



APPEL'S House: South View from Court, 1999

seminars on video art. The increased relevance and visibility of local museums doesn't hurt, either. Many critics, curators and artists still consider MOCA's 1992 "Helter Skelter" show to be a watershed in defining the sometimes transgressive dynamic of the L.A. art scene. And that image has had a ripple effect, attracting students from around the country eager to plug into that zeitgeist.

There are those who believe, however, that in the rush to discover new talent, some artists are thrust into the spotlight too soon and turned into commodities before they've mastered their craft. And while anecdotes of dealers tripping over each other at art shows to sign up the Next Hot Artist are exaggerated, they're not entirely untrue.

In such a hothouse atmosphere, critics might be dubious about feeding into the hype. But there are artists in L.A. who are legitimately making waves and who, in part because of the inbred posture of the art world, are not nearly as well known to the public as they should be.

None of the artists under discussion here represent any distinct schools or movements; as Paul Schimmel, chief curator at MOCA, observes, "This era is the era of individual accomplishment rather than collective movements." Although shared themes are clearly evident in their work--particularly the dialogue between abstraction and pictorial narrative, and discovering oddness in the familiar (and vice versa)--each draws from a diverse, idiosyncratic spectrum of sources and experience from the vast postmodern smorgasbord that is late-20th-century culture.

Here, then, are five young artists who are lending shape to that funky, sprawling entity known as the L.A. art scene.

KEVIN APPEL

SOME PAINTERS LOOK TO THE PAST FOR INSPIRATION, others look ahead. Kevin Appel does both. His starkly handsome, rigorously designed canvases point in both directions, applying a futuristic computer-era gloss to the ideals and forms of mid-century modernism. For his June show "House" at Angles Gallery in Santa Monica, Appel conceived his own house via computer imaging, then created vast, angular compositions based on views of the virtual spaces. With its sharp yet flowing geometries and impersonal architectural logic, Appel's work seems to draw at once from Piet Mondrian, Richard Neutra and Buckminster Fuller while sustaining an ethereal quality that echoes the "Light and Space" studies of James Turrell. Merging nature and artifice through an eerie green kaleidoscope, his critiques of utopia are as smoothly chilly as a cut-glass bowl of lime sorbet.

But if his paintings are cool to a fault, Appel himself is suddenly hot: The Angles show sold out, with many works going to top collectors. That same month, he won the third annual Citibank Emerging Artist Award, which includes a fall show and catalog at MOCA (the exhibit runs through January 2). MOCA's Schimmel, who selected Appel from a list of finalists, describes his paintings as "complicated, commanding and quietly unrelenting. What I find interesting about his looking back is that it has none of the warmth, humanity or romanticism usually associated with nostalgia. His nostalgia is devoid of human reference. It looks inviting, but there's no way to get into it."

The 31-year-old UCLA graduate concedes the teeth behind his unsentimental vision. "The idealism is stripped away a bit. I think we're a little bit more savvy now; we're not necessarily thinking modernism is going to redeem culture."

Appel's attraction to indigenous L.A. modernism is innate. The son of an architect father and an interior designer mother, he grew up in a glass house on the Westside, and his father Richard would take him on drives around the city, pointing out distinctive modernist structures. In contrast, Appel's studio is vintage Raymond Chandler, tucked into an office building in the heart of Hollywood.

When discussing his ideas and inspirations, Appel wistfully recalls his childhood. "My parents' house is submerged in a canyon, so there's green all around it," he says. "At certain times of day, when the lights are dancing off the foliage, everything's got a green cast."

That same dance of nature and artifice is crucial to the dynamism of his works. For all their digital diligence, it is in their shifting interplay of interior and exterior, surface, texture and color, that they truly come alive. To build these contrasts, Appel often uses knives, squeegees and other tools--some of his own invention--in a physical, hands-on process that requires him to support his canvases with wood beams. "Moving the paint around is a constant point of fascination for me," he says. "As clean as they look, there's a lot of battle. You get to the painting--that's where the pleasure comes in. That's why you're doing it."