

CALIFORNIA BIENNIAL'S NEW ENERGY

The Orange County Museum of Art is 'looking back to look forward' as it revives its longtime salute to works in the spirit of the Golden State

BY DEBORAH VANKIN



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"PACIFIC Gold" by
Narsiso Martinez.

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INCE TAKING THE HELM of the Orange County Museum of Art a year and a half ago, director Heidi Zuckerman has repeatedly said that her vision for the museum is "looking back to look forward." ¶ That vision will become a tangible reality on Oct. 8 when the museum debuts its long-in-the-works new building at Costa Mesa's Segerstrom Center for the Arts. As part of its inaugural suite of exhibitions, OCMA is resurrecting its long-running California Biennial, which dates back to 1984. ¶ "The biennial is in the DNA of OCMA," Zuckerman says. "And we have to open with that acknowledgment of our past but also our commitment to the present and the future. The best exhibitions do that. They let you know where you are right now — as a person, as a creator, as an interpreter, as a responder, as a human."

The biennial — originally called the Newport Biennial back when the institution was the Newport Harbor Art Museum — was conceived by then-curator of exhibitions Paul Schimmel as a way to shine a light on new work by artists encapsulating the spirit of California. Early versions had a thematic or geographic focus. The inaugural exhibition in '84 spotlighted the Los Angeles arts scene; the second, in '86, elevated Bay Area artists. The third, called "Mapping Histories," opened in '91 focusing on intergenerational conversations between artists. The fourth went broader, opening in '93 and showcasing artists from around Southern California.

After a short-lived and ill-fated merger with the Laguna Art Museum in '96, the museum changed its name to the Orange County Museum of Art and the '97 biennial was renamed simply "the Biennial." In 2002 it took on its current moniker, coinciding with a broadening of vision geographically and artistically — that year's biennial showcased artists from all over the Golden State.

In 2013 and 2017 the biennial was again reinvented, under then-chief curator Dan Cameron, as the California-Pacific Triennial, focusing on connections between California and the Pacific Rim region. It hasn't run since, largely because the museum

relocated in 2018 to a temporary space, OCMA Expand, while its \$93-million new building was being conceived and built.

"California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold" will feature painting, drawing, sculpture, large-scale installation, textiles and ceramics, as well as digital and multimedia work, by 20 emerging, midcareer and under-recognized artists from around the state. Going broad was key — participants range in age from 32 to 84. And the three exhibition curators are of different generations, informing the exhibition with a cross-section of points of view.

Biennial co-curator Elizabeth Armstrong, who served as OCMA's deputy director and chief curator from 2000 to 2008 and most recently steered the Palm Springs Art Museum from 2014 to 2018, is the resident baby boomer, bringing institutional knowledge of the long-running exhibition. Gilbert Vicario, now curator of modern and contemporary art at the Phoenix Art Museum and with over 20 years of museum curatorial experience elsewhere, fills the Gen X spot. Essence Harden, who has organized exhibitions at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and the Museum of the



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

African Diaspora, brings a millennial perspective.

Distinguishing the biennial from the Hammer Museum's popular "Made in L.A." biennial, which showcases emerging and under-recognized artists largely from the L.A. area, was a consideration, says Armstrong, who during her tenure at OCMA co-curated the 2002, '04 and '06 California Biennials.

"I'd always been interested in getting outside of L.A. and getting out into all those different parts of California where artists are working," Armstrong says, "and it seemed natural to do that again."

In that way, the curators' distinct geographic backgrounds factored in as well. "Essence spent a lot of her career and life in Berkeley and Oakland and now lives in L.A. Gilbert grew up in San Diego [near] the

OCMA'S
Heidi Zuckerman, center, with Martinez, left, chief curator Courtenay Finn, artists Alex Anderson and Laurie Steelink and biennial co-curator Essence Harden.

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border, so they both have perspectives outside of the cultural center of Los Angeles," Armstrong says. "I grew up on the East Coast and spent phases of my career in California, including the high desert, and I've been really intrigued by artists working there. We really tried to make time to get into studios in slightly hard-to-reach places."

After sorting through hundreds of artists' work, Armstrong, Harden and Vicario visited about 150 studios in person or via Zoom throughout 2021. They traveled north, traversing the Sonoma and Napa regions as well as Oakland and its perimeters; and south, to National City on the border of Mexico. They spent time in remote studios in the high desert, including in Joshua Tree and Flamingo Heights in Yucca Valley, as well as in bustling cities including

San Francisco, San Diego and L.A. “We really wanted to get a feel for the pulse of what was going on, no matter what part of California,” Armstrong says.

What emerged was particularly of-the-moment work, at a critical time given the pandemic, much of it infused with a visceral materiality and multisensory feel. There’s no overriding theme to the resulting biennial beyond “just what inspired artists during the pandemic,” Armstrong says.

Still, throughlines in the work emerged. The weight of history — including artists’ personal histories, California’s history and the impulse to revisit, reimagine and revise history — was one of them. Spirituality and healing was another, both works that looked or felt optimistic and materials addressing the idea of healing. A speculative focus on the future was another.

“And some of these artists embody all of these things,” Armstrong says.

The curators also saw a binding spirit of resilience and optimism. “People just really persevered,” Armstrong says. “It’s about not giving up and just being so inspired by what you’re making and the times you’re living through.”

That’s particularly true of some of the older artists in the exhibition, she points out. National City-based Raul Guerrero, 76, and Yucca Valley-based Sharon Ellis, 66, are both artists who have been making increasingly powerful work for decades, and doing so somewhat under

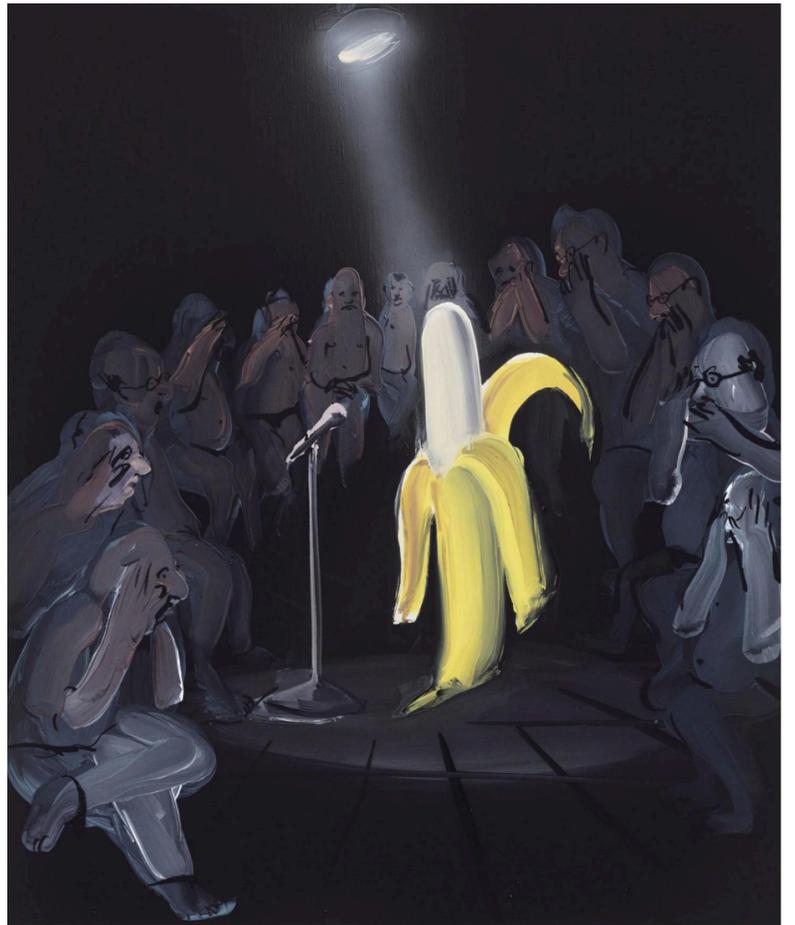


From Lily Stockman and Charles Moffett

“CANYON Fire” by Lily Stockman reflects on a rugged desert road.

Joshua Tree- and L.A.-based Lily Stockman’s work in the exhibition feels meditative. It’s a series of three oil-based, abstract paintings reflecting on a stretch of road, Burns Canyon, in the Mojave Desert and referencing trips the artist has taken there.

“The road is a rugged expanse but it’s a reflective space she keeps coming back to,” Harden says. “They feel like spirit work to me because they’re portal-like — they really hold you and there’s a calmness in her use of color and line



FREDRIK NILSEN

MOCA to spotlight Tala Madani. “A Banana Is Speaking,” above.



WHAT OUR ARTS CRITICS CAN'T WAIT TO DO, SEE AND LISTEN TO

LN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, the balmy summer doldrums tend to give way to a packed slate of cool arts and cultural happenings. This autumn’s no exception. Decades-long retrospectives from contemporary artists and never-before-seen works live alongside genre-bending local theatrical premieres, inventive operas and exciting classical events. Though far from exhaustive, we’ve compiled a list of 21 shows our critics can’t wait to go out and see this fall.

VISUAL ARTS

SEPT. 10 THROUGH FEB. 19
‘Tala Madani: Biscuits’
 Paintings and animations by the Iranian-born Los Angeles artist engage burlesque humor to indict serious social and cultural inequities. A 15-year survey considers an artist whose witty lacerations of power relations are as comfortable taking on motherhood as they are the degradations of corporate culture. > *Museum of Contemporary Art*

— CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

SEPT. 11 THROUGH FEB. 19
‘The Space Between: The Modern in Korean Art’

The early 20th century marked a period of tremendous upheaval in Korea. In 1910, after the centuries-old Joseon Dynasty had crumbled, the country was colonized by Japan. Liberation came in 1945, but it was soon followed by the Korean War, which left the peninsula divided. Like politics, culture was in a wild state of flux. Modernism seeped into the country through Japanese and, later, U.S. influences. Photography revolutionized portraiture and painters embraced Western styles. The show, organized with Korea’s National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art is bringing more than 130 works to L.A. that have never been shown outside of Korea. > *Los Angeles County Museum of Art*

— CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

SEPT. 15 THROUGH JAN. 29
‘Alexis Smith: The American Way’

In witty and incisive collages ranging from single sheets of paper to room-size environments, L.A.’s Alexis Smith, 73, emerged into national prominence in the late



KATHY WILLENS AP

A HAMMER exhibit will pay tribute to Joan Didion, above.

1970s and early 1980s. A profound meditation on the distinctive absurdities of modern American life, shaped by the unprecedented eruption of mass culture, Smith’s art is the subject of a much-anticipated retrospective, her first large survey in 30 years. (CK) > *Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego*

OCT. 1 THROUGH JAN. 15
‘Rebecca Morris: 2001-2022’

Abstraction, figuration, gesture, geometry, pattern — Rebecca Morris wields all those elements in her large-scale canvases, but abstraction is first among equals. In a period when working representationally tends to dominate painting, the Los Angeles-based artist chooses otherwise. No reactionary, neither is Morris being ironic. Thirty paintings are planned for the show. (CK) > *Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles*

OCT. 11 THROUGH JAN. 8

‘Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine’
 When painter Bob Thompson died in Rome

in 1966 of complications following gall bladder surgery, he was a month shy of his 29th birthday. His career had been on a meteoric rise, and he’d gone there to study Renaissance painting. American art lost one of its most promising young artists. Thompson has been a virtual cult figure ever since, and this traveling exhibition will survey his visceral, vividly colored figurative canvases. (CK) > *UCLA Hammer Museum*

OCT. 11 THROUGH JAN. 22
‘Joan Didion: What She Means’

You may imagine that a show devoted to a writer would consist of vitrines stuffed with marked-up manuscripts and testy letters to publishers. But this exhibition, organized by Pulitzer Prize-winning essayist Hilton Als in collaboration with Hammer curatorial team Connie Butler and Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, is going a more poetic route. Yes, there will be ephemera linked to the celebrated California-born essayist, who died late last year. But it will also include plenty of art — works by figures such as Betye Saar, Ana Mendieta and Ed Ruscha — that will be used to articulate the evolution of Didion’s life and voice. (CAM) > *UCLA Hammer Museum*

OCT. 18 THROUGH JAN. 15

‘Códice Maya de México’
 In the ’60s, a precolonial Mayan codex, looted from some unknown locale in southwestern Mexico, materialized in a private collection in Mexico City. For decades, its veracity lay in question — until its authenticity was verified by international teams of archaeologists. Created about 900 years ago by a single artist (it is thought to be the oldest surviving book in the Americas), the Códice Maya de México, as it is known, records the 584-day journey of the planet Venus as it shifts from morning to evening star. The show at the Getty marks only the third time ever the codex will go on public display. (CAM) > *Getty Center*

OCT. 21 THROUGH JAN. 30

‘Picasso Ingres: Face to Face’
 Just two paintings are in this show, but given a) how great each one is, b) how one was born of the other, and c) how the two have never been seen together before, this is an [See Arts, F6]



ERIC RUBY

CLARE ROJAS’ “Circle of Infinite Chaos,” part of “California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold” at the Orange County Museum of Art.

the radar, Armstrong says. For the biennial, Guerrero will show a group of large-scale, narrative paintings from an ongoing series called “An Abbreviated History of the Americas”; Ellis is showing seven tiny, vibrantly colored “ecstatic landscapes,” as Armstrong calls them. Their work is extremely different — one historical in nature, the other more cosmic-feeling — but both artists’ work display a spirit of regeneration.

Oakland-based Sadie Barnette’s work in the biennial — seven large-scale, powdered graphite drawings that incorporate text — addresses her own history in a particularly poignant way, Harden says. Barnette made the works in 2021 during a period of isolation. They touch on the history of her father, a former Black Panther, who also opened the first Black-owned gay bar in San Francisco from 1990 to 1993, the Eagle Creek Saloon.

“They all contain that element of family and her interpersonal history,” Harden says of Barnette’s work, “and these declarations of a more liberated equitable future. They’re of history and they are glimmers or desires for belonging or hope. They’re bold statements.”

Simphiwe Ndzube is an artist from Cape Town, South Africa, who’s now based in L.A. He made a new sculpture for the biennial informed by South African folklore. It’s a 6-foot-tall, 20-foot-long creature, a chimera, made of clay and featuring fake eyelashes and dentures, which speaks to both healing and the future.

“It’s a form that’s both of the earth and points to something unearthly,” Harden says. “It’s a type of magical realism existing in a time of nonlinearity. A body and a creature ushering in care, with a saddle on its back, to attend to humanity.”

work. They take you on a journey.”

Of all the works in the show, Vicario says, a large, multipanel painting by 84-year-old L.A.-based Ben Sakoguchi moved him the most. The piece is called “Comparative Religions.” A central panel depicts Albert Einstein in running shorts atop a rock in the Grand Canyon. Fourteen smaller panels paintings surround it depicting different aspects of world religions.

“I find it powerful,” Vicario says, “because he’s an artist who has been at this for about 40 years who has a visual literacy and ability to illustrate his particular view of the world through this format. It’s very satirical — in a way it reminds me of part Mad magazine and part political cartoons. You get an immediate visceral reaction. It’s completely present and of-the-moment and unlike anything we saw.”

Visiting so many artists in such a condensed period of time — at such an urgent-feeling time in history — turned out to be unexpectedly encouraging, Harden says.

“Everyone was out of work or not in great economic shape, especially artists, and I kept seeing everyone’s love for each other and their effort to find their way back to each other,” she says. “Sharing resources, trying to find ways to hire people in their studios — it was very much a part of our conversations with artists.”

The biennial promises to be a cross-disciplinary record of that time.

“It’s an explosion of emotions and thoughts coming out of a lockdown,” Armstrong says. “I’ve been using the metaphor of a snake shedding its skin. It’s a really interesting time to be doing a biennial. It’s the energy of a new skin — this energy of what could be.”