

## Declaration of Independence

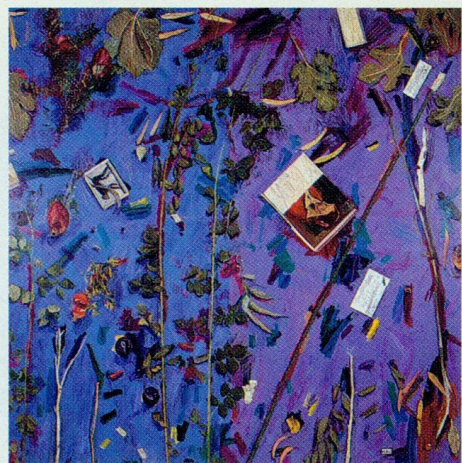
**S**an Diego is a contradictory city. It touts its status as the nation's seventh-largest metropolis yet boasts no major corporate headquarters. Its Latino population has increased dramatically in the last quarter-century, yet that shift has manifested itself very little in the make-up of the city's government. San Diego's ambivalence extends to the art world as well, which has often appeared unable to decide whether it should play the role of satellite to Los Angeles or establish a distinct identity. Lately, it seems to have chosen greater independence.

San Diego has its share of art institutions with international reputations. The respected Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, under Hugh Davies's leadership, reopened its longtime home in La Jolla last year after a renovation designed by Robert Venturi. This month the museum is exhibiting images by Canadian photographer Geoffrey James, whom it commissioned to produce a new series about the fence that separates the United States from Mexico and the landscape that surrounds it. Also on view is: "Performance Anxiety," an exhibition that originated in Chicago and includes interactive installations by Jim Shaw, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Charles Long working in concert with the British music group Stereolab.

The Museum of Photographic Arts, operating in cramped quarters in the city's centrally located Balboa Park, has also garnered widespread respect during its 14-year history. Director Arthur Ollman organized the first American retrospectives for such important artists as



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Hugh Davies, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art; *24-Hour Crossing Supply Tent*, 1997, from Geoffrey James's series on the United States-Mexico border zone; Manny Farber's 1996 oil, *Corot's Italian Women*; Karen Halverson's *Lake Powell*, near Page, AZ, 1987.



COURTESY QUINT GALLERY

Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Duane Michals, while developing a fine collection of images that embraces the entire history of the medium. Two years from now, when it annexes adjacent space now devoted to a sports museum, it will have sufficient room to exhibit the works on an ongoing basis. The current exhibition, organized by Diane Gaston, is the 15-artist "Under the Dark Cloth: The View Camera in Contemporary Photography."

However, the city's largest and oldest showcase, the 71-year-old San Diego Museum of Art, is little known—locally, regionally, or nationally. Though there is the occasional exhibition of note, such as the eccentric architectural visions of A. G. Rizzoli, presented earlier this year, the museum hasn't produced any substantial shows in several years. Director Steven Brezzo has been content to run the venue much like a Kunsthalle, so major acquisitions have been scarce. The current attraction, "Jewels of the Romanovs: Treasures of the Russian Imperial Court," which became the subject of a diplomatic tangle while in Washington,

D.C., earlier this year, typifies the museum's penchant for glitter and visual spectacle.

One of San Diego's smallest institutions, the nonprofit gallery called Installation, has raised the city's profile in a constructive way with its inSITE exhibitions. The first, presented in 1992, was assembled with little lead time and was mostly a local affair. By 1994 it had become a formal triennial event—an extravaganza of site-specific works by artists from several countries, with projects in nearly every corner of San Diego County and every *colonia* in nearby Tijuana.

inSITE94 garnered a prodigious amount of ink and a sizable audience on both sides of the border. InSITE97, up through the 30th of next month, picks up where the last one left off, thematically speaking. Many of the 60 or so artists involved offer a response to the region. For instance, conceptualist Rubín Ortiz Torres, who divides his time between Los Angeles and Mexico City, has collaborated with a car customizer, Salvador Muñoz, on fashioning a truck into a mobile video-projection theater.

The list of participants—which includes familiar names like Vito Acconci, Gary Simmons, and Lorna Simpson as well as a number of lesser-known artists—spans the Western hemisphere, as does the team of inSITE97 curators: Jessica Bradley (Canadian), Sally Yard (American), Olivier Debrouse (Mexican), and Ivo Mexquita (Brazilian). But San Diego and Tijuana artists are part of the show's mix, too—a sign of the general increase in institutional support for local artists.

"This art community, partly as a result of programs at the University of California, San Diego, and San Diego State University has reached a critical mass in



COURTESY MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS



# San Diego

terms of good artists,” says Davies. “I’m personally committed to doing more with regional artists.” Putting his words into practice, the museum mounted the first retrospective of a San Diego artist to take place during the director’s 14-year tenure this past summer, “Jay Johnson: Look in out 1984–1997, Painted Sculptures.”

The fledgling California Center for the Arts Museum has consistently integrated area artists into its shows since opening in 1994. This summer it mounted five separate exhibitions for San Diego artists: painters Manny Farber, Kim MacConnel, and David Anderson were featured, along with the hard-to-categorize object-maker Liza Lou and sculptor Kenneth Capps. Generally, it has favored sprawling theme exhibitions, which have been lively and accessible; the current example, “Tabletops,” runs the gamut, with work from Robert Mapplethorpe to Giorgio Morandi.

Major collectors in San Diego are few. But the city’s galleries have achieved a balance between in-town and out-of-town art that allowed most of them to survive the lean years in the first half of this decade. Dealers are sounding upbeat again, too. “In general, the work (in gal-

leries) is of a higher quality than a decade ago,” gallery owner David Zapf comments, “and the collecting base has definitely grown.”

For nearly two decades, there have been two centers of activity for galleries: downtown San Diego and nearby La Jolla. In San Diego proper, the commercial nexus is scattered in and around the downtown area and includes galleries such as Simayspace, David Zapf, and Porter Troupe, along with Galeria Dos Damas. A pair of ambitious nonprofit spaces, the Centro Cultural de La Raza and the Spruce Street Forum, supplement their offerings. Between them, these showcases encompass a wide range of Tijuana, San Diego, and Los Angeles artists. Zapf, for instance, has been a stalwart champion of local figurative artists such as David Baze and Eugenie Geb; he is exhibiting San Diegan Gail Roberts, an accomplished landscape painter and assemblagist, this month.

In a savvy move, three leading spaces have grouped themselves together in an elegant former department store across town in La Jolla. SOMA Gallery is the largest, with 3,200 square feet of exhibition space. The roster there includes

emerging and mid-career artists from the East and West coasts, as well as a few solid locals. This month, the featured artist is New York post-Minimalist Peter Ambrose. SOMA’s companions in the complex are Quint Contemporary Art and the R. B. Stevenson Gallery. And just a few blocks away is the blue-chip Tasende Gallery, the oldest continuously operating space in La Jolla, which is currently showing works by Helen Frankenthaler.

The current dynamism among galleries and major museums is also evident in smaller institutions like the Mingei International Museum of Folk Art—which not long ago moved from a hard-to-find mall location to sparkling new quarters in Balboa Park—and one of its neighbors there, the Timken Museum of Art. Shows are typically intermittent at the Timken, which possesses a small but stellar collection of paintings and Russian icons, but this season it has two: a current display of newly donated icons and, following in December, “Art and Devotion in Siena After 1350.” In a city that often appears uncertain about its identity, the San Diego art world seems increasingly self-assured.

**ROBERT L. PINCUS**