

# Critic's farewell a portrait in memories

By Robert L. Pincus  
ART CRITIC

Unassisted memory seems the best guide as I look back through my 11 years-plus at *The San Diego Union* and the *Union-Tribune*. For what lingers in the mind and heart is surely what matters most, in the end.

And this is the end for me, as art critic of the *Union-Tribune*. I'm going to fill the same role at another daily paper, in a city already better known for its Rock and Roll Hall of Fame than for its venerable and stellar art museum.

I'm not casting any aspersions on rock 'n' roll or its hall. However, the instant rise to fame of that

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## COMMENTARY

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pop museum is simply another reminder that art is forever proving its worth, while popular culture doesn't have to.

A smattering of art does make a dent in the collective consciousness. Nearly everybody knows Pablo Picasso's "Guernica," Grant Wood's "American Gothic" and Andy Warhol's soup-can images, or Christo's wrapping events. But they're simply the exceptions that prove the rule. Most art remains obscure.

The critic's role is to aid art, in its ongoing struggle to prove its worth to the culture, and that's a welcome challenge. In San Diego, the battle is even more hard-fought than in art centers such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. But that doesn't make the critic's job any less enjoyable.

So what does linger in my psyche? What did make the job pleasurable?

As much as anything, the thrill of looking at art. Way back when, as an aspiring critic/scholar, I challenged myself to translate that visual experience into a literary one. It's why I tried my hand at art criticism in the first place.

One of the myths about art is that you have to be in an art center to find terrific work. Nonsense. Since 1985, when I arrived in San Diego, I've had an abundance of luminous art to review.

Some artists have been showing as long as I've been writing here — and longer. There's Eugenie Geb, whose drawings are meticulously realized and haunting; Raul Guerrero, whose stylish paintings evoke a world of myth and dream even when the subjects are quotidian; Kenneth Capps, whose sculptures and sculptural installations have a hard-boiled grace to them; Deborah Small, whose multimedia investigations of history are conceptually provocative and visually stunning; Robert Sanchez and Richard Lou, whom I name together because they now collaborate on some witty sendups of ethnocentric archaeology and anthropology; and Manny Farber, whose paintings of everyday things are as good as figurative painting gets these days.

Others surfaced later, such as Alexia Markarian, with some beautifully rendered paintings of curi-

ous creatures, part tree and part mammal, as well as some hauntingly altered 19th-century prints; Liza Lou, whose life-size "Kitchen," with its shimmering, beaded surface, is one of the most astounding environmental works I've ever encountered; and the visionary and politically minded painter Mary Plaisted Austin, who was "discovered" and lauded in 1995 but, poignantly, had only a brief time to savor her recognition. (The 77-year-old Austin died June 10.)

This is just a fraction of the artists who have made my time here fulfilling. If I name them all, this story will start to look like a grocery list. But I can't help but mention a few more: John Rogers, whose sculptures appear to be getting their due; Richard Allen Morris, whose thick abstract paintings have undeservedly slipped into obscurity; and Patricia Patterson, whose paintings and installations about Irish life are charmingly simple, at first glance, but subtly reveal the complexities of life on further inspection.

Sure, much of the art one encounters is poor to middling in any given month or year. But if a critic thinks that isn't — and won't — be the case, he'd be deluding himself.

## Creating context

Translating the process of looking at art into words precisely and lucidly could be a goal big enough for one lifetime, all by itself. But newspaper critics have another large responsibility: to put art in its



social context. That is, to offer a portrait, however subjective, of the art community in which they work: its institutions, its place in the region and nation; the people who help it flourish or hold it back.

Historians and commentators have observed that San Diego, for much of its history, turned its back on Baja California in particular and Mexico in general. But in the '80s, artists, as much as anyone, pointed to the shortcomings and hypocrisies of that mindset.

The bellwether event was the formation of the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo in 1984, at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park. A collaborative of artists with an ever-shifting roster, its shows were (and remain) freewheeling affairs.

The Workshop was the ripple in the proverbial pool. David Avalos, a founding member, got together with Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco back in 1988 and came up with a wickedly funny poster that rode the city buses during Super Bowl week. "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation," it declared. City officials and civic boosters were not amused. Some politicians did what they could to have it removed.

But a point was argued — and argued wittily. The hotel and tourist industries that made Super Bowl hoopla possible were themselves dependent on workers, illegal and legal, from south of the border.

The poster was the first of several local collaborations in the late '80s and early '90s that made San Diego fertile ground for socially critical art. Avalos, Hock and Sisco were involved in nearly all of them, together or singly, including the most notorious one of all: "Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso" (1993).

Like "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation," "Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso" was funny.

Not to those who thought artists shouldn't use National Endowment for the Arts money, however minuscule an amount, for their \$10 handout program (read tax rebate) to undocumented workers. But once again, the trio tweaked the system deftly.

Whatever one thought of these temporary works of public art, they made news across the nation and even beyond. And it was marvelous to a chronicler of those works.

## International recognition

The Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park was another of the great success stories of my years here. It's become, in a mere 13 years, one of the prime American originators and exhibitors of photographers and of artists who make use of photography.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego is still a much-respected venue nationally, with shows devoted to the likes of David Hammons, Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz and José Bedia in recent years. inSITE, too, has boosted San Diego's profile in this regard. The triennial exhibition has a cosmopolitan flair. The '97 version promises to be more ambitious than the '94 event, with four curators and the artists they have chosen representing the Western Hemisphere from top to bottom.

In the public-art arena, The Stuar Collection at UCSD has been luminous — and received international recognition in the process. It possesses two works which fulfill the contemporary concept of a site-specific work profoundly: Bruce Nauman's large-scale neon work, "Virtues and Vices" (1988), and Alexis Smith's grand-scale walkway and garden, "Snake Path" (1992).

And yet, in the leaner economy of the '90s, art institutions have suffered. The Museum of Photographic Arts has been struggling financially, as has the important Centro

Cultural de la Raza. Even the more firmly established Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego had to scale back goals for its expansion; there simply wasn't a big-enough donor pool to fund expanded galleries along with a face lift and renovation of some portions of the building in La Jolla.

Ironically, it's the San Diego Museum of Art, where vision is lacking and curators seem to be given little to do, that has amassed a sizable endowment. Financial stability is one sort of achievement, but the largest visual-arts institution in town needs to improve greatly if the local scene is to thrive the way it should. It has ballyhooed its interactive room devoted to the permanent collection, but displays that collection in generally lackluster fashion. Meanwhile, major acquisitions have been non-existent since 1990.

## Changing scene

Private collectors aren't numerous in San Diego, either. So stalwart local dealers like Mark Quint, Thomas Babeor, Doug Simay, Linda Moore, Ron Stevenson and David Zapf have needed to be ingenious to endure.

But if times have been hard for visual-arts organizations, the scene has hardly remained stagnant. The Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art is about to open a handsome new space in Balboa Park (Aug. 8), furthering the notion of Balboa Park as a center for art museums. The Museum of Photographic Arts is poised to expand as well, probably in 1998, into an adjoining space now occupied by the Hall of Champions.

Two years ago, the county added a significant venue for contemporary art in the form of the California Center for the Arts Museum in Escondido. It has specialized in theme exhibitions that have been intelligent and accessible.

I'd like to think I've been some-

thing of a catalyst rather than an obstacle to artists and institutions during my tenure at the *Union-Tribune*. (And I hope to be the same at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland.) That doesn't mean I've strived to be a booster. People often think that's what a critic should be — and they're wrong.

The way a critic can nurture an art scene is through forthright commentary. Criticizing art or institutions is ultimately a constructive act if done right. To paraphrase the late Thomas Albright, a fine Bay Area critic, false praise can do more damage to an artist's development than honest criticism. I've strived to be fair and frank, to further civilized debate about visual artists and venues. Every critic creates his own standards, of course, and must believe in them passionately to persevere as a critic. But it's his audience who gets to decide if the writing is ignorant and irrelevant or informative and illuminating. You, the reader, will have the last word on the success or failure of my work.