

# Art: Paradoxical period continued, with no shift toward coherence

By **ROBERT L. PINCUS**  
Art Critic

**F**ew conversations about art in 1992 reached a conclusion without a mention of Henri Matisse. The massive and moving retrospective of his art at New York Museum of Modern Art is to the '90s what the behemoth Picasso retrospective at MOMA was to the '80s.

The Matisse show has been immensely popular, but does that reveal anything about our time aside from the fact that a lot of people love his art?

Yes. Matisse made beautiful paintings — and beauty, an unpopular notion in recent decades, has slowly crept back into art.

*And no.* It is Marcel Duchamp, the proto-Conceptual artist, rather than Matisse whose example exerts the greatest influence on the current scene. His presence is ever-present in the vast, highly uneven quantity of art that uses found objects and recycled images.

The only reasonable conclusion: We live in a paradoxical time for art. This has been true since the advent of modern times — that is, beginning with the Romantics in the early 1800s. But some eras, like our own, are more paradoxical than others.

The last two decades have yielded a vibrant variety of disorder. And the events of this year didn't suggest any

turn toward coherence or cogency. But even in the midst of great cultural flux, things ignoble and exemplary can be discerned:

## **Milton regained**

Who would have thought that **Alexis Smith**, a connoisseur of hard-boiled fiction and film noir in her art, would turn to "Paradise Lost" for inspiration in her sprawling outdoor work for UCSD's Stuart Collection? Smith's marvelous "Snake Path," dedicated in October, leads to the renovated Central Library, conjuring up the history of poetic paeans to Eden.

## **Will this art have to split?**

Even before **Andrea Blum's** ambitious and flawed project for the Carlsbad coastline, "Split Pavilion," was complete, detractors were crusading to have it taken down. Fortunately, they haven't succeeded. Blum has agreed to changes in the landscaping and is contemplating removal of some of its bars.

## **Botero bust**

During skipper **William Koch's** successful run for the America's Cup trophy, he placed a typically rotund bronze nude by **Fernando Botero** in public view outside his rented residence in Point Loma.

Then the Museum of Contemporary

Art in La Jolla came up with a bad idea for a summer show: Exhibit this Botero outside the museum and display Koch's hodgepodge of a collection inside the museum.

## **Bumper crop**

**Manny Farber's** latest batch of paintings at Quint Krichman Projects contained his usual absorbing array of fruit, vegetables, garden tools and notes to himself. It also provided some of his most brilliant use of color. That October exhibition and a second show at UCSD's Mandeville Gallery showed the Leucadia-based artist is one of the best painters at work, anywhere.

## **In the local galleries**

January was a harbinger of a fine year in commercial and university spaces, with a pair of memorable shows. Even a few works by Oakland painter **Oliver Jackson** made for a compelling display of effects, both figurative and abstract, at the Porter Randall Gallery. Focusing on miscegenation and Helen Hunt Jackson's famous novel, "Ramona," **David Avalos** and **Deborah Small** created a satirical, insightful videotape for their wry installation, "Ramona's Bedroom," at UCSD's Grove Gallery.

**Eugenie Geb's** drawings at the David Zapf Gallery, seen in February and March, proved that a single subject —

in her hands, the pumpkin — can continue to be immensely absorbing. **Jay Johnson**, for several years a strong sculptor, exhibited his most confident work to date at the Thomas Babeor Gallery in June. **Johnny Coleman's** poetic "Ruminations" about the L.A. riots, at the David Zapf Gallery in August and September, proved to be a memorable installation. **Deborah Small**, continuing her investigation of relations between American Indians and other Americans, displayed a challenging and moving installation, "MA-CON-A-QUA" at the Linda Moore Gallery in November.

#### **In the museums (close to home)**

The Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park co-organized a valuable retrospective for the obscure **Josep Renau** (it premiered in April). It was a good year for British sculptors at the Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla; in addition to an elegant **Anish Kapoor** show, it featured a compelling if modest show devoted to **Antony Gormley**, which opened in October.

Perhaps the San Diego Museum of Art was simply trying to capitalize on America's Cup '92 when it organized the "Great Age of Sail." But the riches of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, which went on display in March, provided sumptuous evi-

dence of the visual poetry of ships and sea.

Lamentably, only one touring retrospective of note came to San Diego this year: "**Mary Ellen Mark: 25 Years**," currently at the Museum of Photographic Arts.

#### **More than a show 1**

In a project that combined billboard, book, performance art and an exhibition (unveiled in February), local artists **Deborah Small, Louis Hock, Carla Kirkwood, Elizabeth Sisco and Scott Kessler** produced a deeply disturbing look at the murders of 45 local women, many of them prostitutes and some of them police informers, and the subsequent handling of the cases by a police task force. "No Humans Involved" confronted the subtle and not-so subtle ways women are depersonalized and brutalized.

#### **More than a show 2**

Kudos to artist **Ernest Silva** and art dealer **Mark Quint** for coming up with the idea for "IN/SITE '92," a series of shows devoted to installations that stretched from San Marcos to Tijuana. Thus the faltering Installation, as the sponsoring organization, acquired a new reason to exist, and a vast segment of the art community deserves credit for making the event a success with little lead time.

# Critic's choice

Michael Soriano is thinking about the divide between failed and fulfilled aspirations in art. His reflections on this wide subject fill two window spaces at JAVA Coffee-house/Gallery (837 G St., 235-4012, through Nov. 1) The installation is called "The Flight of Waxed Dreams."

The title refers to the mythological tale of Daedalus' ancient, failed dream of flight. Soriano seems to identify with both Daedalus' dream and its consequences; the Athenian architect Daedalus created wax wings, only to see his son, Icarus, use them and fall to his death.

Soriano isn't sure whether the wings of his imagination are wax or not. The first clue is his inclusion of an open book in the left window. He has opened its pages to a chapter titled "The Mental Laboratory," and a key passage says, "Gather together all of the ideas or the things at all likely to be called into the creative process."

Soriano has done his gathering, but he isn't sure whether he has molded his conglomeration of objects — or this installation as a whole — into art.

Refer to the words in the other window and you will know this is the case. They praise the "doer of deeds" and chide the critic, declaring a grand failure to be more worthwhile than any kind of commentary.

Soriano is trying to head off commentary before it is offered by declaring it irrelevant. Of course, when an artist concocts elaborate devices to defuse criticism, it does matter to him.

Soriano, who also designs nightclub environments, clearly isn't sure of himself in the art arena. His assemblages aren't terribly inventive, though they are elegant. Metal poles rise from circular bases filled with rock or sand. Atop one is a pair of standing figurines; atop the other is a wistful-looking bust.

Soriano seems to be asking himself: Are these constructions art or just handsome design? What kind of artist can I become? The virtue of this installation is that he communicates his anxieties well. He could have a promising future as an expressive conceptual artist, if he so chooses.

— Robert L. Pincus