

1987 PHOENIX BIENNIAL

AUGUST 22 — OCTOBER 4

Lew Alquist
Dan Collins
Hoge Day

ARIZONA
Richard Landis
Michael Maglich

David Pennington
Kenneth Shorr
Jim Waid

Larry Bell
John Connell
Allan Graham

NEW MEXICO
Harmony Hammond
Carl Johansen

Ted Kuykendall
Bruce Nauman
Steina Vasulka

John Baldessari
Tim Ebner
Jill Giegerich

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
Raul Guerrero
Jay Johnson

Mike Kelley
John M. Miller
Lari Pittman

David Bates
Jeff De Lude
Susan Harrington

TEXAS
Donald Judd
Bert Long

Bill Lundberg
Nancy O'Connor
Dan Rizzie

Selection Criteria

The selection process for the 1987 Phoenix Biennial involved contacting curators, gallery directors, art critics, alternate space directors, and other art professionals for their recommendations of artists for me to consider. I also compiled lists of my own, based on gallery, museum, and alternate space visits and on my ongoing knowledge of Southwestern contemporary art. From as wide a field of contemporary Southwestern artists as I was able to consider, I then narrowed down the list to artists whose studios I wished to visit. I spent more than six weeks traveling throughout the four states looking at art, not to mention the many months of screening and preparation that preceded my travels.

Why did we choose to concentrate on the regions of Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas rather than the "four corner" states of earlier Biennials? A great deal of very important contemporary art is being produced in Southern California and Texas, which are geographically located in the Southwestern United States. The museum staff felt that representing these two important states of our region would significantly enhance the Phoenix Biennial. That we always want to represent the best contemporary art produced in our own state of Arizona should go without saying. And we continue to represent New Mexico in the Phoenix Biennial because it is our neighboring state and because many important artists live and work there.

I am very happy to write that in my extensive travels throughout these four states I saw a great deal of absolutely first rate contemporary art. I am sure that I did not see all of the best art in the region. No single person could possibly see it all in the time I had available to me.

This show is intended as a cross section of some of the good art being produced in this region, but we do not claim that it represents the best, because claiming that it did so would claim a lesser quality for the many high quality artworks that could not be included because of space restrictions. No single exhibition could possibly contain all of the good art that I saw. I am very pleased that there is a lot more good contemporary Southwestern art available for future exhibitions.

Certain artists were considered ineligible for the 1987 Phoenix Biennial. Artists whose work had been included in previous Biennials were not included unless their work had undergone a major development since we last showed it in a Biennial. Jim Waid, for example, was in our 1976 Biennial but his work has developed significantly since then, so it is included in the 1987 Phoenix Biennial. Artists whose work has been featured prominently in the museum recently were not considered. Artists whose work will be the subjects of future Contemporary Forum Matrix exhibitions also were not considered for the 1987 Phoenix Biennial.

Well established, internationally prominent artists as well as mid-career and emerging artists are included in the 1987 Phoenix Biennial. Showing that mid-career and emerging artists can hold their own in the company of well established artists does more to further their careers than if they were shown separately. Also, including well known artists makes people more aware of the important role Southwestern contemporary art plays in the international scene.

I have attempted to make as many opportunities as possible for Southwestern artists to exhibit in the museum and to represent the full range of genders, races, and ethnic backgrounds in the area. However, I decided very early in the selection process that I would not see a quota system of any kind.

Instead, I based my selections primarily on the quality of the art under consideration, admitting that judgments of quality in art are highly subjective. I also tried to keep in mind the objective of enhancing each artwork by placing it in the company of others which would compliment it; in other words, I tried to select an exhibition that is more than the sum of its parts, that gives an overall impression of consistent high quality and at least some degree of cohesiveness.

Contemporary art, like contemporary life, is complex and messy; consequently, no single theme or artistic viewpoint dominates all of the selections. In fact, Southwestern contemporary artists' concerns are as wide-ranging as those of the best artists producing art elsewhere in the world today.

I can make one more generalization about Southwestern contemporary art: the best of it is as good as the best contemporary art being produced almost anywhere else in the world today.

Bruce D. Kurtz
Curator of 20th Century Art, Phoenix Art Museum

1987 Phoenix Biennial: Regionalism, Nationalism, Internationalism

Good contemporary art produced in the Southwest—or in any region—correlates with concurrent artistic explorations of a national or international scope. Some of the artists in the 1987 Phoenix Biennial reflect Southwestern subjects. Some do not. It is the nature of good contemporary art to be national and international in scope, whether or not it reflects regional issues as well.

For example, in the early 1960s, Pop Art occurred more or less simultaneously in London, New York, and Los Angeles. It was as though artists in those three world capitals intuitively sensed the currentness of the ideas Pop Art represents. All three Pop Art manifestations are intelligible in each of the other locations and other world locations as well, such is the universality of the art. Good contemporary art must travel well, must be sufficiently universal to be intelligible throughout the free world.



Bert Long
Inheritance, 1985

From Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, Michael Maglich, Lari Pittman, Carl Johansen, and Bert Long tend toward pastiche—the sometimes humorous combining of disparate elements from various (often non-art) sources. Pastiche is a key element of Postmodernism, a murky-defined international artistic tendency beginning in the late 1970s and continuing to the present. Pastiche also characterizes much of the most recent art first shown in New York City's East Village galleries two or three years ago, called Neo-Geo or appropriation or simulationism or a host of other fuzzy terms. (The artistic present is a very messy and complex one, with no single style or critical opinion dominating.)

But to return to our main point, it is important to remember in the context of this exhibition that, while the above artists evidence regional issues in their art, their art also transcends regionalism to parallel the artistic mainstream elsewhere. And this largeness of geographic scope characterizes good contemporary art.

On the other hand, from respectively the same states, Kenneth Shorr, John M. Miller, Bruce Nauman, and Donald Judd evidence absolutely no Southwestern regional subject matter or flavor in their art, yet two of the four (Nauman and Judd) are internationally respected as major Conceptual and Minimal artists. Miller works in a minimalistic style, and Shorr's appropriation of photographs from magazines and other printed sources parallels the international appropriators. And so, while we may take pride in Southwestern contemporary art that reflects uniquely Southwestern themes, we do not want to neglect other high-quality contemporary art being produced in the region that does not have a regional flavor.

What makes the art in this exhibition good art? The conviction it conveys and the deep personal commitment of the artists are key factors, along with a host of others. Judgments of quality in contemporary art—in the art of any period—are highly subjective and involve many factors that inevitably vary from one "judge" to another. But there is a difference between saying, "I like it" and saying "I think it is good art." Whether I or anyone else like or dislike an artwork has nothing at all to do with whether it is good art or not.

Of course, all of us like certain visual images which have absolutely no artistic merit—snapshots of loved ones, for example—so liking an image that may not be good art is perfectly legitimate. But calling it good art only because you like it is not. Trying to figure out if an artwork is good or not involves a more complex level of discrimination than "I like it" or "I don't like it."

Questions one asks in trying to determine if an artwork is good or not include: What was the artist's intention? How well did he or she achieve the intention? What is the relationship between the artwork and other art by the same artist? Is it his or her best work, worst work, or is it a pivotal, transitional, or seminal work? What influence has the artist had on other artists? What is the artwork's relation to other contemporary art? What is the artwork's relation to earlier art? And so on. And we are still left with a subjective judgment.

The question "What is the artwork's relation to other contemporary art?" is the one I will address in the sketchy remarks this small publication allows, keeping in mind that the best contemporary art produced anywhere correlates with developments elsewhere in the world.

In Germany Gerhard Richter and the Czech Jiří Georg Dokoupil, in New York City Philip Taaffe, and in Los Angeles Ed Ruscha—just to name a few wildly disparate artists—practice appropriation and/or pastiche, and/or radically change styles sometimes from one art exhibition season to the next. All symptomize an international condition: a loss of faith in, or at least a questioning of, the possibility of the authorship of an original artwork in an age of image glut.

It is as though the swamp of pre-existing images in the world—the sheer incomprehensibility of their volume—prompts artists to interpret, not what they experience in the natural world, but mediations of the natural (isn't it nearly impossible to experience nature unmediated?) mediations that have transpired in visual culture, the full range of it from pinups to masterpieces.

Being subject to the same world condition, many artists in the 1967 *Phoenix Biennial* variously evidence similar questionings of the possibility of authorship.

In his *Standing Figure*, Carl Johansen overlays Southwestern Kachina doll imagery with the image of a Jackson Pollock painting Johansen saw pictured in *Art News*. Unknown to Johansen, the Pollock was based both on Native American art and on a Cézanne and a Picasso Pollock had seen at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Johansen's *Old Black* borrows from Picasso's Cubist constructions; his *Deported* lifts imagery from Max Beckmann and Picasso.

Lew Alquist
Hot Lunch, 1986



Living in the New Mexico desert so remotely that telephone lines don't reach him, Johansen intuitively tuned into international wavelengths. Art historically, the concurrent development of similar ideas in different places in the world without communication between the principals occurs rather often, affirming the ideas' currentness and validity.

Lari Pittman amalgamates and overlays imagery taken from various surrealist and surrealistic styles, from surrealist paintings themselves and from the surge of decorative art adaptations surrealism spawned in the forties and fifties. Nowhere is the surrealist-inspired decorative art binge more evident than in Los Angeles. Native Los Angelino Pittman takes his visual environment as a given, treating it without irony or parody, simply using it as an earlier artist might use a sunset.

Arizonan Michael Maglich makes pastiches of Southwestern Native American pottery—which he makes, breaks, and reconstructs to look like archeological museum artifacts—then overlays with forties-style illustrations from exercise manuals (*Dumbbell Zen Bowls A + B* and *Barbell Zen Bowls A + B*). Texan Bert Long assembles actual objects and frames into his painted and mixed media constructions which often include richly colored surrealist forms, evocative patternings, and the inventive freedom with materials that typifies the best Mexican folk art, always a strong influence on Southwestern (and especially on Texas) art.

Lew Alquist, John Baldessari, Jill Gegerich, Raul Guerrero, Jay Johnson, Mike Kelley, Nancy O'Connor, Dave Pennington, Dan Rizzo and Kenneth Shorr all appropriate and/or simulate, sometimes overlaying, pre-existing images, objects, or narratives from various sources. And so the adoption or appropriation of previously existing images, objects, and ideas is widespread within our own Southwestern region as well as throughout the world today.

Related to questioning the possibility of the authorship of an original artwork, many contemporary artists are utilizing both minimalistic styles and conceptual art strategies.

Minimalism in our exhibition is represented by two of its originators, Larry Bell and Donald Judd, who represent Minimalism's austere elegant abstraction at its best. Resolutely not anthropomorphic, allusive or illusive, Minimalism's concrete singleness of isolation of sculptural phenomena redefined abstraction in the 1960s and continues to be a rich loan from which minimalistic artists have grown.



Carl Johnson
Standing Figure, 1986

With extraordinary singleness of purpose, John M. Miller has worked with the same rigorously limited compositional format since 1972. About his painting he said "To engage it you must leave all your references behind, for the experiencing of it is only about itself," a concept extending from Minimal artists' preoccupation with isolating experiences unique to their artworks, experiences lacking references to anything outside their art. Purely optical interactions within a rigorously disciplined and minutely nuanced structure of this kind are experiences uniquely obtainable in the medium of painting.

A dialogue about what painting is as distinct from sculpture and from all other things preoccupies Alan Graham, too. This latter minimalistic artist extends the notion of painting as paint on a flat, two dimensional canvas into three dimensional forms and tactile sensations more typical of sculpture, creating an abstract dialectic between notions of what painting and sculpture are.

Richard Landis's richly nuanced colors and optional interactions are about as distant as possible from Minimalism's austerity, yet they belong to the same family of recent geometric abstractions which they enrich with a new range and depth.

Tim Ebner's *Color Cue* paintings derive from Minimalism's sparse geometry but stray into strategies taken from Conceptual art as well. Emerging in the 1960s, Conceptual artists stressed the decisions, strategies, and ideas represented by their artworks more than the visual appearances or the actual making of their artworks.

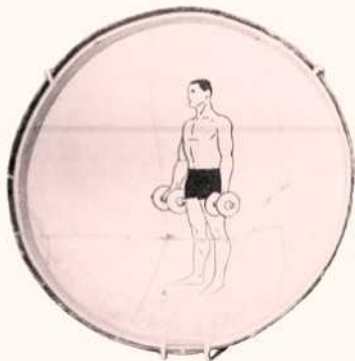
For this series Ebner adopted color combinations suggested by anonymous decorators through color chips in paint stores, thus relinquishing what formerly might have been considered the most important artistic decision in favor of an overriding conceptual scheme which amalgamates not only Minimalism and Conceptual Art but simulation and appropriation as well.

Two of Conceptual art's founders and most consistently important practitioners, John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman, live in California and New Mexico.

For his photographic pieces, Baldessari chooses images from various sources and juxtaposes them to create often puzzling or humorous meanings by their placement and visual syntax, thus using pre-existing images the way a writer uses the alphabet. Conceptual art's de-emphasis of the sensuous in favor of more linguistically derived meanings radically opposed abstract painting's mid-1960s dictum that painting be about purely optical experience. Baldessari's—and other Conceptual artists'—use of pre-existing photographs as a strategy for circumventing painting's traditions challenges abstraction's hermeticism.

Many of Bruce Nauman's works identify discrepancies between linguistic and visual meanings, often through the device of clichés. *Hand to Mouth*, for example (not in our exhibition), is a sculpture depicting a person's mouth, chin, shoulder, and arm: literally, hand to mouth. Yet the cliché "hand to mouth" means something altogether different. Both meanings are

the same but they are totally different, an unresolvable riddle that is at once logical and absurd. *A Dark and Stormy Night* likewise depicts a circular linguistic structure of crystal clear logic but absurd outcome. In the color video, a clown repeats a dialogue that keeps returning upon itself like a dog chasing its tail.



Michael Maylich
*Dumbbell Zen Bowls
A & B, 1981*

Lundberg, who use video and film, the main protagonist, or at least the most visible maker of the event, is not even the artist himself but a surrogate performer. Performance Art gained impe-

tus in the late 1950s and early 1960s, first as "happenings," "events," and "actions," then more formalized—if we can use such a word for an often improvisatory art form—as "performance" and "video art."

Bill Lundberg's art is completely unique and original within perhaps the most iconoclastic art realm in recent history. *Con Tent* creates an environ-

ment that completely envelops viewers and metaphorically transports us from the museum to another place—to "ghost story" time on a camping trip. An aspect of Conceptual art is its challenging of traditional mediums like painting, sculpture, and photography. Is *Con Tent* a sculpture or a film or a performance? Of course, the answer is "Both are all three, and more."

Dan Collins's *Virtual America III* is a video sculpture which, like the two preceding works, ceases to exist when the electricity is turned off, a dimension of Conceptual arts often intended ephemerality. Collins's work compellingly deals with a most simple perceptual phenomenon: the primacy of "point of view." The video camera's raking angle "perceives" as a map of the United States (seen on a small monitor) what appears from a head-on perspective to be an amorphous shape.

Lew Alquist's *Hot Lunch* humorously plays with discrepancies between linguistic and visual meanings, like Nauman's work often does. A radioactive plate slides from one end to another of a motorized tilting table, activating a gieger counter at each end and creating an eerie chatter. Humor characterizes this and many other Conceptual artworks, yet the humor ironically clothes a deadly serious subject.

Since the late 1970s an international tendency toward figurative narrative imagery has flourished. Artists rediscovered the potency of myths, literary themes, tales, contemporary events, and mass media sources for art's subjects. In the last few years, many artists have turned their narrative focus toward poetic or metaphysical subjects, perhaps as antidotes to the nuclear age's perilous threats. Could they be seeking personal refuge in the spiritual realm from daily life's harshness? And might we find some comfort there?

David Bates's *Feeding the Dogs* and *Purple Gairule* invite us into affable worlds inhabited by nurturing living things. Jim Waid's *Sea Ania* and *Nogales* undulate and bloom in idyllic worlds where all things compliment each other. Nancy O'Connor's *Hot Iron-Sharp Knife* and *My Big Mistake in the Dark* tell, in their own words, the poetically worded stories of black Texas cowboys. Hoge Day's *Woman in There* and *Tele-vision-window* imbue course construction salvage materials with a sleepwalker's invisible dreams.

Harmony Hammond's *Composanto I* makes a celestial event out of a field of lush color. Jeff De Lude turns mundane settings into infernally glowing parables. Space and scale coalesce in Susan Harrington's epic *Telling the Bees*. John Connell evokes nature's rhythms in his waterbird sculptures of cranes and herons which migrate over New Mexico. Tod Kuykendall's eerie, tinted and bleached photographic self portraits melancholically place his face in another time. And Steina Vasulka's video installation, *Scapes of Paradox*, juxtaposes the landscapes of her native Iceland with New Mexico's magical terrain. Altogether, these poetical and metaphysical evocations emotionally affirm that life's underpinnings transcend the daily grind.

David Bates
Purple Gairule, 1987



Questioning the possibility of the authorship of an original artwork, mining Minimalism and Conceptual art, and evoking poetic and metaphysical ruminations represent wide ranging artistic explorations which typify much of the best contemporary art being produced in the world today. Attuned to the worldwide scope, the 1987 *Phoenix Biennial* represents some of the best art of these persuasions being produced in the Southwest today.

