

“Inland Art Empire” - Art Ltd. Magazine, October 2007

If California's art landscape has an underrated region, it's encompassed within Claremont and Pomona. Even many who are thoroughly engulfed in the Southern California art scene aren't fully aware of the double magnitude of these bordering towns on L.A. County's eastern edge. Claremont is, after all, where a young native son named Millard Sheets became an art professor at Scripps College in 1932. Even while emerging as a leader of the California school of watercolor painting, he was shaping the college and the community, serving a dual role as educator and artist, recruiting an enviable faculty of respected artists. This attracted talented students to Scripps and the other Claremont Colleges, and a vital artistic community was born. In 1952, Karl Benjamin, the famous hard-edge abstractionist painter, moved to Claremont, where he taught at Pomona College (he still lives in town). Likewise, his hard-edge peer, painter Frederick Hammersley, came of age as a professor at Pomona College in the 1950s.

Though it has always had a strong art presence because of its schools, today, a critical mass of hip galleries is now taking root. Pomona, sometimes referred to as "the SoHo of the West," has

acquired a funky vibe perpetuated by the fact that even businesses that aren't art-related are likely to be owned by artists, and even likelier to hang local art. "Everyone is very supportive of each other here," says Andi Campognone, previously the exhibitions curator at the Riverside Art Museum, who now owns a new downtown gallery called dba256.

As evidence, she points out that the Pomona Arts Colony Art Walk, which happens the second Saturday of each month, is always "jam-packed." It's true: hundreds of art patrons show up, many with intentions of purchasing art. Nearby, musicians play and a farmer's market bustles. "In the last six months," Campognone says, Pomona "is really energized. People are saying, 'Oh, there's real art in Pomona.' Right now, it's building to a pretty loud crescendo, but I don't think it's peaked yet," she adds.

Pomona, named for the Roman goddess of fruit trees (depicted in a relief sculpture above a portal at Pomona College), was incorporated in 1888 and is now L.A. County's fifth-largest city, with more than 163,000 residents. Within its 23 square miles is Fairplex, home of America's largest county fair, the L.A. County Fair. It was in Pomona that Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz spent their honeymoon in 1940, and in 1963 and 1981, respectively, Mark McGwire and Jessica Alba were born there. More recently, prominent artists, including Susan Rankaitis, Nancy Macko, Michael O'Malley and Mercedes Teixido, have moved their studios from L.A. here.

Claremont, too, is and has been home to a remarkable concentration of important artists. William Moreno, who was recruited away from San Francisco's Mexican Museum to direct the Claremont Museum of Art, has been around since last December. He admits, "Claremont would never have been something I thought about until I moved back to L.A.—and then I found that there's a lot going on here. What really convinced me was the intellectual capital here, and the enthusiasm for building a new institution... When you think of the arts," he went on, "the Inland Empire doesn't necessarily pop to mind. I was aware that there were schools here and of the Art Colony in a vague sort of way. When I actually came down here, I saw the art production and studios. It was kind of an epiphany moment for me."

To Moreno, the area is in the throes of what he calls "new urbanism"—people creating opportunities within their own community: "It's just a stark reality of the dismal transportation system—people in this area want to go somewhere to spend the day and not necessarily fight the transportation agenda. So communities that have the wherewithal to do it are creating cultural amenities to cater to their own." No wonder, then, that Claremont ranks fifth on Money magazine's "America's Best Places to Live" list, it is the top California city on it. "The City of Trees and Ph.D.s," as it is called, has a downtown enlivened by hip boutiques, artists' lofts, and the new Claremont Art Museum. And then, of course, there are the galleries, of which 13 are volunteer-based and two are for-profit. Notes Campognone, of Pomona's burgeoning gallery scene: "They provide a place for artists to get their feet wet in the art market, give them their first show out of art school." She adds, "Community members are very excited to be able to buy work by established artists that before they'd have to drive to L.A. to get."

One of the two for-profits, Campognone's dba256 just opened this fall. "The inland region was lacking a viable high-end commercial gallery to support regional artists," she says. "That was my motivation. Pomona has an amazing and vibrant art community, so that's why I came." It gratifies her to give locals a place to show their work—she dedicates a wall to emerging artists. The response has been huge. "Obviously, there's a need here...my phone was ringing off the hook with, 'When are you going to open?'"

When she opened dba256 in September, it was with a thematic, museum-quality exhibit called "Inland Emperors" celebrating the region's artistic prolificacy. The show, which runs through October 27, features works by internationally recognized local artists, including Karl Benjamin, Paul Soldner, Robbert Flick and Susan Rankaitis. Campognone's next show, "Liquid Light," is

planned concurrently with the Claremont Museum's "Ephemeral Light" exhibition.

Campognone cites one big reason for the burgeoning of galleries: the Tessier family. The Tessiers, it seems, are to Pomona what the Medicis were to Florence. Two of its brothers, Ed and Jerry, inherited many of Pomona's important buildings, then donated space to fledgling galleries and kept rent livably low on artist's lofts. One of the Tessiers' beneficiaries is the 20-year-old dA Center for the Arts, which supports emerging artists by providing exhibition space and hosting community programs. The Tessiers also donated space for Cal Poly's downtown gallery and for the Latino Art Museum.

George Cuttress is another advocate whose efforts have been instrumental in getting people to take Pomona seriously. He opened a gallery in Pomona about 15 years ago, selling the works of established artists, but it was before its time. People in the community couldn't afford to spend \$50,000 on an artwork, so his doors closed, but the impact remained.

Christy Johnson, director and curator of Pomona's American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA), summed up the shift thus: "Art and galleries began to be seen as the key to redevelopment in this area. Over the years, galleries have come and gone, with one step back to every two or three forward, but overall progress has been positive. Today, like a car in motion, this momentum is picking up speed." She points to Pomona's hugely popular Art Walk as an indicator of that success. Participating galleries include 57 Underground and the Tessier-funded SCA Project Gallery, both forums for cutting-edge art, especially installations. In contrast, Soho Gallery, a co-op run by the Pomona Valley Art Association, presents more traditional art.

Pomona's other for-profit is Armstrong's Gallery, owned by David Armstrong, a key community leader who also founded AMOCA. In 1969, he transformed his father's furniture business into a gallery showcasing ceramic collectibles from all over the world, including limited-edition porcelain figurines from Royal Worcester, Royal Doulton and Lladro. Later, Armstrong added a ceramic-production studio, and today, Armstrong's has become a nationally recognized source for contemporary ceramic art.

The Millard Sheets Center for the Arts, located on the grounds of the Fairplex in Pomona, began as the fine arts program of the L.A. County Fair. The current exhibition, "A Tapestry of Life: The World of Millard Sheets," celebrates the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Center's namesake. Among Sheets' most memorable, and most visible, works are the striking murals, sculpture, stained glass and interiors he did for approximately 45 branches of Home Savings & Loan from around California starting in 1952, a monument to the versatility of Sheets' talent.

As for the region's museums, Campognone calls them "incredible." The Claremont Colleges play a large role: the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery at Scripps presents substantive exhibitions, such as "Millard Sheets: The Scripps Years" and their 60-plus-year-old Scripps Ceramic Annual. Always predictive of clay art's future, this prestigious, long-running annual group show attracts a huge following, especially among students studying ceramics.

Pomona College Museum of Art also mounts significant exhibitions: earlier this year, a retrospective of Hammersley's abstract paintings took the spotlight. Currently, it's "James Turrell at Pomona College" (through May 17, 2008), honoring an important light-and-space artist whose major new architectural installation on campus (called Skyspace) is garnering much attention. Turrell, a Pomona College alumnus and the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant, is the architect of Arizona's Roden Crater Project, an ancient volcano being transformed into a complex interplay of light, sky and perception. At a recent Pomona College-hosted symposium called "James Turrell: Knowing Light," the keynote speaker was Michael Govan, LACMA's new director—an indication of how Pomona is angling into the center of Southern California's art life.

Pomona College Museum also houses an impressive permanent collection in its Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center. Holdings include the Kress Collection of Renaissance-era Italian paintings and more than 5,000 Native American artifacts spanning from the Pre-Columbian era. But the non-academic institutions more than hold their own. The new Claremont Museum of Art (CMA) is a decidedly sophisticated addition to the region's art landscape. CMA is in downtown Claremont's largest historic building, the College Heights Lemon Packing House, built in 1922. Slated for demolition before community preservationists (led by the Tessiers) saved it, this light-filled, environmentally friendly edifice is industrial-chic, with corrugated metal walls and a saw-tooth roof. It opened in April; the museum occupies the building's rear. Upstairs, artists work in live-in studios, and the ground floor boasts restaurants, stores, and a jazz club.

Under William Moreno's direction, CMA's inaugural exhibition was a Karl Benjamin retrospective. A recent show, "Locus 1: Art and Craft of Claremont and the Region," featured works by Amy Maloof, Thomas Pathé, and 10 others. Its statement said, "This region is home to a vibrant and ever-changing community of artists and craftspersons of the highest caliber." The current exhibit, "Ephemeral: Explorations in Light" (until Nov. 18), timed concurrently with Pomona College's Turrell events, includes artists who use light as a medium.

"The idea," Moreno says, "was to create a show completely antithetical to the typical painting show. It's experiential in a very direct way... Not every individual responds to painting. That's what the art world is really about: expression and how people respond to the work. There's something for everybody out there, and there's no right or wrong."

Another recent addition is AMOCA, which opened in downtown Pomona three years ago thanks to Armstrong's driving vision and Johnson's leadership. Ceramic is an important medium in Pomona, so it stands to reason Pomona should be home to the only all-ceramic museum west of the Rockies. AMOCA's stellar exhibits draw up to 1,200 guests on opening night. Their newest show, "Form and Imagination: Women Ceramic Sculptors" (until Nov. 24) highlights 15 American female sculptors, including Esther Shimazu, Kathy Ruttenberg and Cynthia Consentino.

In line with its mission of art education, AMOCA sends packets about each exhibition to 450 local ceramic teachers; many take advantage of their wealth of offerings. AMOCA's permanent collection boasts more than 750 pieces of contemporary ceramic art, most of it representing the Studio Pottery Era of wheel-thrown, utilitarian works—or abstract expressionist forms like those in the Paul Soldner collection. Says Armstrong, "My goal has been to create a destination for those interested in ceramic art."

Meanwhile, the Latino Art Museum, founded by painter Graciela H. Nardi, promotes Latin American contemporary artists living in the U.S. It aims to instill appreciation for Latino art, a goal carried out with exhibits featuring colorful pieces by Central and South American artists, art-making classes, and a small store selling crafts and jewelry.

Unsurprisingly, schools play a large role in the Pomona-Claremont art scene; their emphasis on craft and medium promotes a formal approach to art-making, though the works are often conceptually driven or experimental. At the hub of this educational ferment are those institutions comprising the highly respected Claremont Colleges. The founding member of the Claremont consortium is Pomona College (which is actually in Claremont), currently ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as America's No. 7 liberal arts school. Their distinguished art faculty produces a wealth of exhibitions and lectures, and the school's annual Senior Art Show draws a large crowd each spring.

Scripps College, also in Claremont, is a women's college, founded in 1926 by publisher Ellen

Browning Scripps. The art school that Millard Sheets built, predictably, is active locally, most directly, through its Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, which also hosts a famous annual ceramic sale. Its heavyweight faculty has included conceptual photographer Susan Rankaitis, muralist Alfredo Ramos Martinez, and ceramicist Paul Soldner, widely considered a seminal figure here. Scripps is also home to the new Samella Lewis Contemporary Art Collection, named for a professor *Emerita* and pioneering art historian. The collection includes works by Dr. Lewis and other contemporary artists, with a special focus on work by women and leading African-American artists. Notes Mary MacNaughton, the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery's director, "At Scripps, our focus on is teaching and training future arts leaders."

Cal Poly Pomona boasts two venues to display its students' works—one on campus, one downtown. The campus venue, Kellogg University Art Gallery, coordinates the annual "Ink and Clay" competition between artists from the Western U.S. Another school producing amazing artists—particularly painters—is Claremont Graduate University; a huge percentage of CGU's MFAs enjoy lucrative art careers, while CGU's Peggy Phelps Gallery presents new MFA work.

In short, all the major indicators of a local art boom are here: an escalating number of museums, galleries and studios, excellent instruction at the university level. And, most hearteningly, inclusive, synergistic relationships between everyone. "A lot of effort is being made to make this into a consistent and sustainable art center," Moreno observes.

"Today, Pomona is a community that is being revitalized with fine art as its most important theme," states Armstrong. "This region has a lot to offer," he adds, echoing a point that many other arts figures here agree on. "I'd definitely encourage people to visit."

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