46 N. LOS ROBLES
A HISTORY OF THE PASADENA ART MUSEUM
NOVEMBER 18, 2011 - APRIL 8, 2012
This exhibition, for the first time, traces the entire development of the Pasadena Art Museum in the North Los Robles building that now houses Pacific Asia Museum, and in the Pasadena Art Museum’s final location on Colorado Boulevard, where it became the Norton Simon Museum in 1974. Important works of art, borrowed from the Norton Simon Museum and from artists, galleries and private collections, provide key examples of art in or related to the Pasadena Art Museum collection. The exhibition also presents images of installations of the exhibitions, and the important individuals and organizations involved in the Museum. Excerpts from interviews with artists, former directors, curators and trustees give personal views of the Pasadena Art Museum’s history.

The exhibition provides a brief history of art from the 1910s through the late 1960s. Works by Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger and Alexei Jawlensky—all members of the Blue Four group of artists in Germany after the First World War—show the effects of the development of Cubism. Their use of geometry to create compositions and express imagination (in all four artists), and the use of abstraction to express spirituality (in Kandinsky and Jawlensky), demonstrate the many possibilities of Cubism’s new way of showing space and implied movement on a flat surface. Early 20th century artist Marcel Duchamp, who worked for a period as a Cubist, revolutionized the artistic process by emphasizing the selection of existing objects or art that documented previous works. During the Second World War more loosely-painted abstract art emerged.
to explore new ways of painting, as well as evoking a recognizable subject or an emotion. Works by John Altoon, Walter Askin, William Brice, Hans Burkhardt, Richard Diebenkorn, Ynez Johnston and others reveal where this often abstract and expressionistic art frequently led. In the 1960s artists investigated new materials in their exploration of abstraction, and the three-dimensional works of Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman and Robert Irwin illustrate the so-called Light and Space art which was born in Southern California. Finally, works by Claes Oldenburg, Ken Price, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol present the “Pop Art” that resulted from the artists’ fascination with words and images from the culture of mass production.

The Pasadena Art Museum began its life as the Pasadena Art Institute, a modest organization founded in 1924 which presented exhibitions in a house on Colorado Boulevard, now the site of the Norton Simon Museum. In 1942, the Institute merged with the Pasadena Museum of Art, which had begun just two years earlier, and the new institution relocated to 46 N. Los Robles Avenue. In 1953, the gift of Galka Scheyer’s extraordinary Blue Four Collection was officially made to the Museum. The donation consisted of almost 500 works by important early 20th century artists Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger and Alexei Jawlensky, among other European modernists. The gift occurred during the tenure of Director John Palmer Leeper (1951–53), and with one stroke took the institution to a position of prominence. It was during the directorship of Joseph Fulton (1953–57) that the Institute was renamed the Pasadena Art Museum (1954), reorganizing to reflect that major acquisition and becoming one of the most important museums for...
modern and contemporary art in the United States. The Museum also presented groundbreaking studio art programs for children and adults.

The stage was then set for the extraordinary contemporary exhibitions and collections that followed. The Museum, with very limited funding, began to organize important shows of works by noted Southern California artists of the generation of the 1930s and 1940s such as Helen Lundeberg, John McLaughlin, Ynez Johnston and Sam Francis. Volunteers were essential to the Museum, and the Art Alliance (now the Pasadena Art Alliance) was founded in 1955.

Under Director Thomas Leavitt (1957–63), the Museum presented more recent developments in contemporary art, including solo shows for Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Irwin, John Mason, photographer Edmund Teske and a number of others. As the years passed many of these artists’ works were added to the Museum’s collection. The famous California Design exhibitions were initiated in 1954 and lasted through 1976, in the later years organized by Curator of Design Eudorah Moore.

In 1961, co-owner of the celebrated Ferus Gallery and legendary freelance curator Walter Hopps started his association with the Museum, organizing a show of sculpture by Edward Kienholz. But Hopps’ work in organizing the Marcel Duchamp retrospective exhibition (1963) put the Pasadena Art Museum on the international map. From then until the Museum moved to its new building in late 1969, 46 N. Los Robles initiated or presented some of the most important contemporary exhibitions of the time, including New Painting of Common Objects, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Joseph Cornell, Roy Lichtenstein—the list of significant shows goes on and on. Again, works of many of these artists were acquired for the collection.

In 1964 the Museum began to present the Encounters series, one of the most important series of contemporary music performances in
California, with revolutionary composers like John Cage. The Museum’s program—and Hopps personally—began to attract artists to studio spaces in old buildings nearby. Judy Chicago, Bruce Nauman, artist and critic Peter Plagens and many others moved into what is now known as Old Pasadena.

Founded in 1967, an organization of art-interested individuals, the Fellows of Contemporary Art, helped the Museum with funding for acquisitions of 20th century art, as did the Men’s Committee, which usually included husbands of Art Alliance members. New directors or curators joined the staff, including James Demetrion, John Coplans and Fred Parker, one of the first photography curators at any American museum. Among the Presidents of the Board of Trustees was Robert A. Rowan (1965–70), one of the most prominent contemporary art collectors in Southern California history. When the Museum opened its new building, the high quality of staff members, exhibitions and acquisitions continued. Director of Exhibitions and Collections William Agee and curator Barbara Haskell arrived, and great inaugural exhibitions of contemporary New York and West Coast art were followed by major shows including such artists as Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Donald Judd, Craig Kauffman, Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra and DeWain Valentine, as well as the first Andy Warhol retrospective in 1970.

But the Museum’s funding, always problematic, could not support the operation of an extensive new building or the large exhibitions to fill it. In 1974 the trustees turned to entrepreneur and collector Norton Simon to pay off the accumulated debt and soon Simon assumed management of the institution, which became the Norton Simon Museum and reflected his personal collecting tastes.
The history of the Pasadena Art Museum shows clearly that brilliant decisions and individuals can take a small, local institution, and with great exhibitions, programs and collections create something that is forever memorable and influential. The Pasadena Art Museum contributed significantly to the appreciation of contemporary art in Los Angeles and to the idea that another great contemporary museum could happen. The Pasadena Art Alliance and the Fellows of Contemporary Art have become major funders of contemporary art programs in Southern California. The Pasadena Art Workshops, an outgrowth of the Museum’s education department, began in 1974 and continued later as the Armory Center for the Arts, a national model of a community art center. Pasadena itself now has three major institutions regularly presenting contemporary art, and several—such as Southwest Chamber Music—presenting contemporary music. All of these elements as featured in the exhibition demonstrate the arts legacy left by the Pasadena Art Museum and the ongoing vitality of the arts in the city of Pasadena.

—Jay Belloli

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