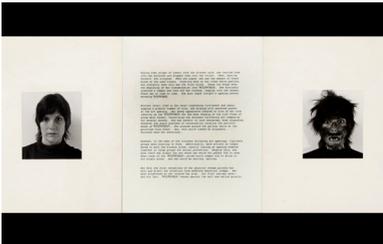


**Chris Burden**  
*Donatello*, 1975  
 private collection



**Nancy Buchanan**  
*Wolfwoman*, 1977  
 courtesy of the artist and  
 Cardwell Jimmerson Contemporary Art



**Rico Lebrun**  
*The Oppressor (after de Sade, 6-8)*  
 1962  
 courtesy of Koplín Del Rio Gallery,  
 Culver City, California



**Hans Burkhardt**  
*My Lai*, 1968  
 courtesy of Jack Rutberg Fine Art, Inc.,  
 Los Angeles



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## "L.A. Raw" RADICAL CALIFORNIA by Patricia Cronin

Maverick independent curator Michael Duncan has mounted a visceral, hair-raising survey exhibition of figurative art by more than 40 Los Angeles artists in "L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945-1980, from Rico LeBrun to Paul McCarthy," Jan. 22-May 20, 2012, at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. The show is a revelatory part of the Getty Initiative's 60-exhibition extravaganza "Pacific Standard Time," whose various events have been reviewed prolifically by *Artnet Magazine's* own Hunter Drohojowska-Philp.

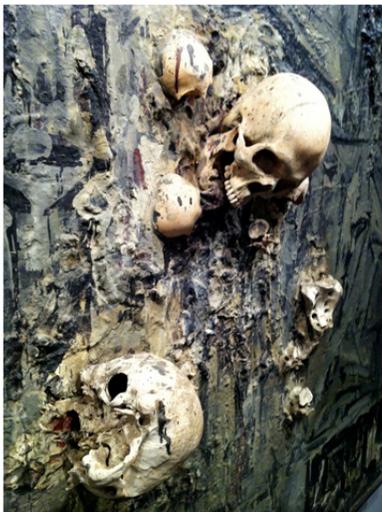
In Los Angeles, artists responded to post-war existential questions in a dramatically different fashion than their East Coast counterparts. While the New York School turned to Abstract Expressionism (simultaneously shifting the epicenter of the art world from Paris and Europe), artists in L.A. fashioned a much more direct and populist response to the realities of the Vietnam war, the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and the threat of McCarthyism. The hallmark of this kind of work is the expressively distorted human body, constituting a new, distinctly West Coast kind of humanism.

Of the 41 artists in the show, ten percent had fled Europe and immigrated to the U.S., and nearly half of them, including the occult performance artist Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995), served in the Armed Forces in WWII. Ben Sakoguchi was sent to a wartime internment camp when he was only four years old, and Kim Jones served in Vietnam. These first-hand experiences of war found their way into their artworks.

The exhibition begins with Rico Lebrun (1900-1964), an Italian immigrant with classic art training who is now celebrated for his graphics, which range from a chilling series on *Dante's Inferno* to a primeval group of works on the Marquis de Sade, works whose large, lumpy figures of bone and flesh resemble beef carcasses more than humans. Back in the real world is Hans Burkhardt's horrific *My Lai* painting, both solemn and riveting, with a thick, textured impasto and actual human skulls attached to the canvas.

Another war picture is Arnold Mesches' *Dance of the Survivors*, a vibrant yet disturbing neo-expressionist painting where the violence of the brush strokes of the ecstatic figures matches the content. Due to Mesches' leftist politics and labor activity, he was followed by the F.B.I. for over 27 years. His paintings take progressive political positions that are both philosophical and emotional.

Judy Chicago  
Red Flag  
1971  
courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York



Hans Burkhardt  
My Lai (detail), 1968  
courtesy of Jack Rutberg Fine Art, Inc.,  
Los Angeles



Arnold Mesches  
Dance of the Survivors 2, 1958  
Vincent Price Art Museum  
Permanent Collection



Jan Stussy  
Untitled (from Man in Box series), 1972  
Woodbury University, Burbank

The themes of isolation and alienation are evidenced by Jan Stussy's *Untitled (from Man in a Box Series)*, which represents an apocalyptic Vitruvian man, crouching and full of anguish, who fills the entirety of the painted masonite picture plane. Robert Cremean's wooden triptych sculpture *Billy's Bath* involves three baby boys, each cradled in a series of three wooden basins, and missing different body parts, which seem to have been sliced off. An innocent image that should be calming -- a baby playing in his bath -- is transfigured in this work into an image of the senselessness of human cruelty. The smooth, controlled surfaces contradict this psychological vibration and make this one of the eeriest works in the show.

Missing parts, excised details and the brutal but elegant removal of extraneous figures from Francisco de Goya's seminal *The Third of May 1808*, focus attention on the suffering in James Strombotne's painting *Political Execution*. This stark contemporary image depicts enough anguish in the remaining three victims to stop you dead in your tracks. Equally evocative is Jack Zajac's *Deposition (Descent from the Cross)*, the first sculpture in the show, in which a nude male defies gravity by touching one hand and a few toes touch the plinth while everything about his pose succumbs to gravitational pull. Based on Enguerrand Quarton's *Deposition in the Louvre*, Zajac's sculpture is about as elegant and as sorrowful a piece of sculpture you might ever see.

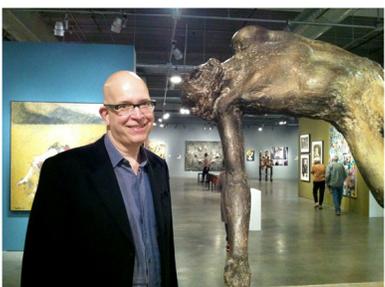
The show deftly follows the post-war existential angst of the returning veterans who educated themselves on the G.I. Bill, tracking their growing disillusionment with the socially and economically ingrained racism, sexism and oppression of the poor and working people. Agitation, engagement and political and social consciousness fill the galleries with excellent work by James Gill, Robert Heineken, Eugene Berman and Wallace Berman, Betye Saar, Charles Garabedian and June Wayne, to name a few.

Also included are respected and pioneering artists whose work deals with racial identity, such as David Hammons, and feminism, such as Judy Chicago. In Hammons' *Boy with Flag*, a print of the artist's body, made with grease and dry pigment, seems to embrace or peer out from behind the American flag, in an ambivalent gesture of national and racial identity. And Chicago's chilling *Love Story* is a vertical photographic diptych depicting the rear view of a naked woman on all fours, with a hand gun about to penetrate her on the top half, and the bottom half bearing text from George Bataille's *Story of O*. The Chicago pieces included in this show are some of her most violent works, markedly distinct from her well-known *Dinner Party*, which is on permanent view at the Brooklyn Museum.

"L.A. Raw" ends with a section devoted to performance art. Included are works by Nancy Buchanan, Barbara T. Smith, Kim Jones, Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy, whose performances are documented in videos, photographs and ephemera. The exhibition effectively illuminates the breadth and scope of the transformation art underwent during this 35-year period. The stylistic, formal and technical experimentation and transitions it documents are rich and varied, but what is equally fascinating in every work exhibited is its manifestation of the human impulse to express itself, its psychic traumas, primal fears and desires. These artists' obsession with man's inhumanity to his own species is strikingly out of step with the frivolity of our currently hyped art market. But it shouldn't be. What is the role of art today? Should it not be to create and express a new humanism? I say yes -- and the time is now.



**James Strombotne**  
*Political Execution, 1962*  
courtesy of the artist



Curator Michael Duncan with Jack Zajac's *Descent from the Cross*, 1959, at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, 2012



**Jirayr Zorthian**  
*Induction Fever, 1952*  
collection of the Zorthian Family Trust



**David Hammons**  
*Boy with Flag, 1968*  
collection of Michele Asselin and Dr. Joseph Meltzer

This exhibition is the perfect complement to two exceptional shows that were mounted last year in New York, both of which focused on the different ways that artists responded to war during their times. First was "Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918 -1936," at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, curated by Kenneth E. Silver. Next was "Abstract Expressionist New York," curated by Ann Tempkin at the Museum of Modern Art. Those two exhibitions seamlessly surveyed Europe after the devastations of WWI and throughout the build up to the 1936 Berlin Olympics. "L.A. Raw" extends the timeline through Vietnam, and completes this 20th-century trilogy of important and timely exhibitions.

"L.A. Raw" is accompanied by an extensive catalogue with critical and biographical entries on each of the 40 artists, written by Michael Duncan with the contribution of one essay by Peter Selz, curator of MoMA's influential 1958 exhibition, "New Images of Man."

"L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945 – 1980, From Rico LeBrun to Paul McCarthy," Jan. 21–May 20, 2012, Pasadena Museum of California Art, 490 East Union Street, Pasadena, Cali. 91101.

**PATRICIA CRONIN** is an artist who lives and works in New York. A solo exhibition of her work, "Patricia Cronin: All Is Not Lost," goes on view at the Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans, April 25-June 30, 2012.

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