



Gordon Onslow Ford, *A Present for the Past*, 1942, oil on canvas, 37 by 46 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

'Five Footnotes to Modern Art History'

Multiple exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art resurrect buried material and attitudes of artists who have been in the background for years, and provide new perspectives on art in California

by Melinda Wortz

The exhibition "California: 5 Footnotes to Modern Art History" represents the first serious effort made by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in many years to examine the historical contributions of artists living in the immediate environs. This kind of exhibition is particularly important in Los Angeles, a city which lacks not only a strong sense of historical perspective but also a museum specializing in modern and contemporary art. Made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the five small exhibitions and their conglomerate catalogue are aptly timed (Janu-

ary 18 to February 28) to coincide with the meeting of the historically-oriented College Art Association in Los Angeles. The multiple exhibitions resurrect buried material and attitudes by and of artists who have been in the background for years, and succeed in providing new perspectives and revelations.

Featured are several canvases of varied styles by Morgan Russell, co-conceiver (along with the Californian Stanton Macdonald-Wright) of the American Synchronist movement. Secondly, a re-creation of the 1951 "Dynaton" exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, with works by Lee Mullican, Gordon Onslow Ford and Wolfgang Paalen, illuminates their Surrealist, oriental and American Indian sources. "Los Angeles Hard Edge: The Fifties and Seventies" includes paintings by

Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley and the late John McLaughlin, a group originally seen in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Four Abstract Classicists" exhibition in 1959. Writings and models by John McLaughlin, lent by the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, comprise a fourth exhibition and are enormously revealing of the artist's attitudes and methodology. The fifth presentation is Environmental Concerns' hip video and slide show of Los Angeles life styles as embodied in its freeways, billboards, buildings and, occasionally, inhabitants.

Time limitation was a major factor in curator Maurice Tuchman's and his associate Stephanie Barron's decision to organize several small exhibitions rather than one major project. Catalogue essays by eight specialists range from Gail Levin's scholarly investigation of the Russell material, to Mullican's and Onslow Ford's personal reminiscences, to Tom Wolfe's pop philosophizing in response to Environmental Communications' media presentation. Other contributors to the catalogue are Sylvia Fink, Susan Larsen, Donald McCallum, Diane Moran and Merle Schipper.

It is among the Morgan Russell paintings that the most dramatic revelations are to be found. Evidently Russell had sent a group of pictures in the 1930s to a journalist friend in Hollywood, Frank L. Stevens, for safekeeping. Stevens subsequently denied possession of them until Mrs. Macdonald-Wright brought successful suit against him in the early 1970s on behalf of her husband's estate. Since then Mrs. Macdonald-Wright has made the canvases available to the Los Angeles County Museum for research and exhibition. The group includes a major, very large scale (ten-by-seven-foot) *Synchromie en Bleu-Violacé* (ca. 1912), several smaller Synchronist studies and a number of vigorous and atypical nudes, some female, some male, and one with androgynous characteristics. The large Synchronist work scintillates with highly saturated hues from the entire spectrum. It is organized in spiraling wedges of color around a central, radiant mass of white in a compositional motif apparently, according to Levin, derived from the imaginary interior spiral in Michelangelo's *Dying Captive*. Both the scale and the non-representational imagery of Russell's *Synchromie en Bleu-Violacé* place it in a major position among the pioneering non-objective works of the period, alongside those of the Delaunays, Kandinsky and Kupka, and of course, Macdonald-Wright.

Although Russell lived most of his life as an impoverished expatriate in France, he did come to Los Angeles for a year in 1931, which may have been when the paintings currently on exhibition were given to Ste-

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vens for "safekeeping." Before this trip Russell had sent works to Macdonald-Wright, who endeavored to sell them on the West Coast in order to provide his colleague with a meager income. During the early years in Paris with Macdonald-Wright, when the first Synchronist exhibitions were held, in 1913, at Der Neue Kunstsalon in Munich and the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery, in Paris, Russell's support came from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. As an expression of gratitude he dedicated his important *Synchronie en Bleu-Violacé* to her, accompanying the dedication with a quotation from Genesis: "And God said, 'let there be light,' and there was light, and God saw that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness." Elaborating on his involvement with light as subject matter Russell wrote to Mrs. Whitney: "In my effort to organize a rhythmic ensemble with the simplest elements of light I could not help but have as a result an artistic synthesis of the motion experienced by the first eye that opened on this world on varied color and light that we are all so familiar with and which has a basis, as far as we humans are concerned, the spectrum, and not the yellow white disk of the sun."

Numerous letters quoted by Levin in the catalogue essay reveal Macdonald-Wright and Russell's mutual interest not only in the depiction of light as color in painting, but

also in the perception of light per se. Repeated references are made by both men to their experimental light machines. Russell, speaking of his response to his experiments with electric lights and paint, wrote in 1923: "... the important thing is to get into and arouse the *senses* [italics mine] of our own species. Get it over on men, not as art necessarily, but as intoxication, as *ivresse* in spite of ourselves."

The sense of euphoria he described could also be related to the experience of any number of environments built by Southern California artists in the past few years with the intent to focus on the process of perceiving light and space. It is interesting to note that both Macdonald-Wright and the contemporary Southern California artists have shared the same light-filled environment, and that Russell lived most of his life in France, equally known for the quality of its environmental light.

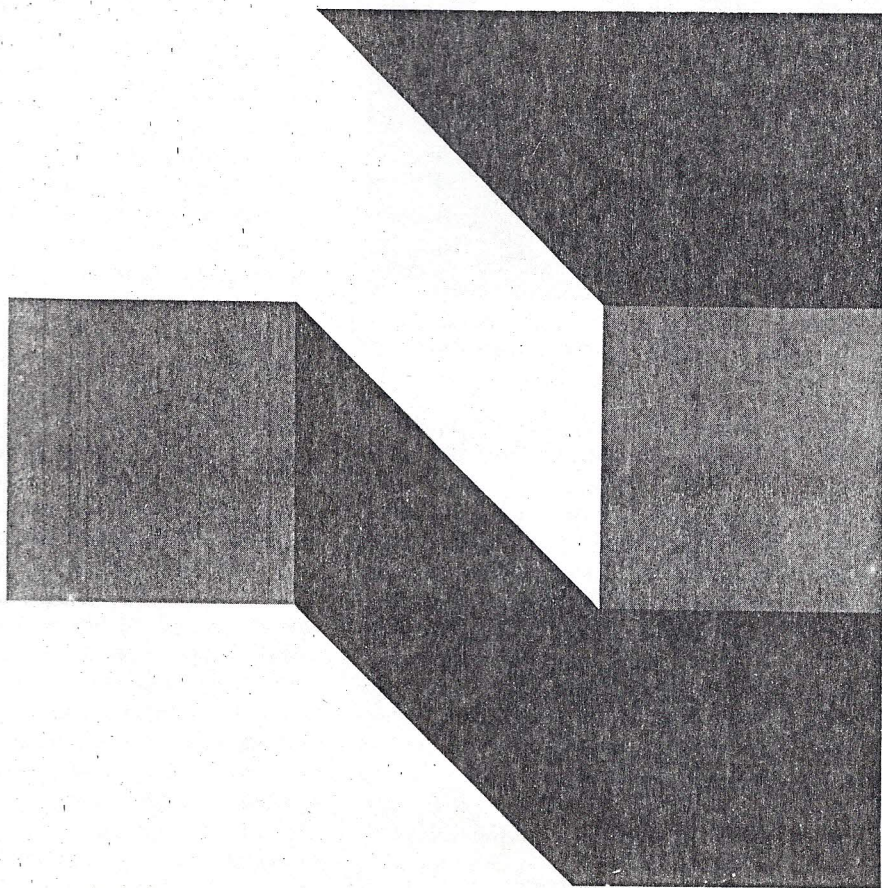
In another letter Russell refers to the Synchronies as "the future expression in art for that innate religiousness in Americans." The equation of religious emotion with the experience of color or light occurs in many mystical writings, as well as in the writings of many 20th-century artists, most notably Kandinsky.

The Russell nudes are executed in various styles. The 1912-13 *Nude* is, as Barron pointed out, remarkably similar in both

composition and color to Matisse's *Nude with Ivy Branch* in the Stein collection, to which Russell could have had access. The face is nearly duplicated, but the vigorously applied strokes of color are more strident than Matisse's. In a work entitled *Siesta*, two female nudes on a bed, one lying and one seated with her back toward the viewer, are positioned in contrasting angular alignments to create a dynamic composition in a formal sense and an ambiguous ambience in a psychological sense. The most curious work is a male nude, *Prometheus*; less heavily color-saturated, it shows a more dramatic, baroque contrapposto and is executed in active curvilinear rhythms. The voluptuous forms depict a primping figure on its toes, with an inflated chest that might be mistaken for breasts, and crossed legs concealing the genitals. Exaggerated upper arms of a male weight lifter are combined with the exaggerated thighs of an earth goddess. The androgynous quality of the robust nude is quite outside Russell's primarily modernist body of work. That the same artist could work simultaneously on bizarre nudes and non-objective Synchronies suggests an esthetic breadth (or eccentricity) hitherto unknown in Russell's work.

As with the Russell exhibition, the original writings of the Dynaton group are perhaps as revealing as the exhibited works. Dynaton—from the Greek, meaning the possible, not having to be justified by the known—was a fellowship of three artists (Mullican, Onslow Ford and Paalen) organized by Paalen in San Francisco following the demise of his magazine, *Dynaton*. (Dynaton's major impact was the result of their single 1951 show.) Paalen and Onslow Ford had both been cited in André Breton's article, "The Latest Tendencies of Surrealist Painting," (*Minotaure* 12-13, 1939) together with de Chirico, Tanguy, Brauner and Matta. Works by these Surrealists and other 20th-century masters—Picasso, Klee, Braque—made up Onslow Ford's collection, which, Mullican notes, was "formed not from wealth but from insight, from action and belief." Mullican also recalls the "formidable dinners—tea with Duchamp," the atmosphere in which Dynaton was conceived.

Paalen, Mullican and Onslow Ford shared with the Surrealists a commitment to exploring the non-rational sources of human experience, but their interests extended far beyond the focus on the Freudian subconscious which so obsessed many Surrealist artists. Their paintings are comprised of motifs and emotions derived from myths and folk tales of all cultures, intimations of beings and forces from outer space, primitive art objects and Zen. In the 1951 Dynaton exhibition in San Francisco the artists included an "Ancestor Room," with tribal



Frederick Hammersley, *Yes and Know*, 1975, oil on canvas, 45 by 45 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

arts from their personal collections. Each of them experimented with automatism, which in Mullican's paintings evolved into abstract strokes applied to the canvas with a palette knife in rhythmic patterns evocative of both the music and the visual imagery of the southwestern Indians. Also included in the current exhibition is Mullican's re-creation of a painted wooden stick sculpture, *Tactile Ecstatic*, originally conceived to be temporary, as the artist notes: "... perhaps to be destroyed like a Tibetan Ghost Trap at the end of the day, even as I had seen a Navajo sand painting brushed away as the sun went down."

Onslow Ford's *A Present for the Past* (1937-46) is executed in a pointillist mosaic which coalesces into symbolic and pictographic images arranged around a central egg form—lines, circles, checkerboards, birds, trees. In the '50s Onslow Ford restricted his form language to lines, circles and dots, and his palette to black and white. Like many of Mullican's, these works are all-over paintings, optically vibrant metaphors for energy fields. Onslow Ford describes this transition: "Many of my paintings in the Dynaton exhibition were in a state of transition from landscapes of the inner-worlds to deeper worlds where, rather than viewing a painting from outside as a spectator, the painting was entered to become an encompassing experience."

A brilliant major work by Paalen, *Messenger from Three Poles*, is evocative of a stained-glass window, glowing with jewel-like fragments of red, blue and yellow. Although very abstract, the imagery suggests an apocalyptic vision of a guardian figure with curved, outstretched arms/wings, a kind of composite, multi-cultural totem.

A reconsideration of both the Dynaton group and the "Four Abstract Classicists" brings important new perspectives to the evaluation of California art of the last 30 years. The County Museum's original "Four Abstract Classicists," in 1959, came in the midst of Los Angeles' avid assimilation of Abstract Expressionist attitudes and techniques. Jules Langsner's 1959 catalogue essay cogently articulates the stylistic and philosophical implications of the four painters—Benjamin, Feitelson, Hammersey and McLaughlin.

Paintings from the '70s by the four are currently on exhibition, as well as those from the '50s. It would have been instructive to have included other artists working in similar directions in order to understand the scope of these attitudes.

Although the Abstract Expressionist hegemony of the '50s may explain the lack of response to the original "Four Abstract Classicists," as well as to New York figures such as Ellsworth Kelly, it does not account for their continued neglect in the '60s, when



Morgan Russell, *Synchronie en Bleu-Violacé*, ca. 1912, oil on canvas, 10 feet 4 inches by 7 feet 6 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

hard-edge painting (and Kelly) became greatly admired on both the East and the West Coasts. It is doubly ironic that this re-evaluation of the "Abstract Classicists" comes so soon after the death of McLaughlin this year. The material on exhibition from the Archives of American Art includes black and white collage mock-ups which McLaughlin used to formulate his paintings. This literalist, even Constructivist methodology presents an interesting polarity to his expressed intent to go beyond the immediate or particular in the finished paintings.

McLaughlin's belief in the active nature of the perceptual process required to experience his paintings is markedly similar to the motivations of such contemporary Southern California artists as Robert Irwin and Larry

Bell, whose works are concurrently on exhibit together with work from the '70s by other California artists, and new acquisitions of work by Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. Several other small exhibitions complete the museum's review of selected moments in recent California art history: four new, large-scale paintings by Norman Zammit; Maxwell Hendler's ten-by-12-inch *Sand-painting*, seven years in the making; and "Private Images: Photographs by Painters"—polaroids, snapshots and more elaborate works by artists who do not customarily use photography in conjunction with their work. By bringing about an enlightened appreciation of our own recent past, these multiple small exhibitions should also make possible a greater understanding of the creations of the present.