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ART REVIEW

A Bicoastal Flashback

■ 'Out West and Back East,' at the Santa Monica Museum, is a collection of obscure artists whose work mostly addresses concerns that were ascendant in the 1960s.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

In her short, wickedly funny videotape "Kiss My Royal Irish," Cheryl Donegan, clad in a bikini and boots, sits in a small puddle of green paint. She stands, then prints her posterior twice, in the pattern of a four-leaf clover, on a sheet of white paper.

This she tacks on the wall, then sets to work on another one. Slowly, Donegan creates a display of performance paintings of a wholly different order.

The order from which they are wholly different is that of Yves Klein's famous performance paintings of 1960. As a similar printing tool, he employed nude women slathered with a paint he had proprietarily dubbed International Klein Blue.

What Klein was to the gesturally expressive action painters of the 1950s, Donegan is to Klein: a parodist, debunker and usurper, making witty fun of an older generation while upending (quite literally, in the case of Donegan's "butt prints") many of its now deeply cherished pieties.

Donegan is one among 15 artists in "Out West and Back East: New Work From Los Angeles and New York," which is on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art through March 6. If a theme emerges from this otherwise theme-less but enjoyable grouping of artists who, according to the museum's director Thomas Rhodes, might best be characterized as sharing "a strong sense of individual vision," it is in fact the degree to which the artistic issues and upheavals of the watershed 1960s create a context for their work of the 1990s.

Along with many people in other disciplines these days, artists are rethinking the tumultuous '60s and their

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aftermath. Most—though by no means all—of the artists in the show were born during that decade. Performance, Minimal, Conceptual and Pop art are the artistic ground zero they share, and they are busily reconsidering the legacy.

For instance, Matthew Antezzo makes realist, black-and-white drawings and paintings that depict works of Minimal and Conceptual art, as documented in contemporary periodicals. Antezzo's renderings are oddly disconcerting, especially as their Photorealist strategy represents the conservative end of the period's adventurous spectrum: What Minimal and Conceptual artists tore asunder, Antezzo now slyly uses to represent their work.

In a videotape accompanied by a rickety chair that has been sawed apart and then ineptly reassembled, and whose fabrication is recorded by the videotape itself, Phyllis Baldino takes on artist and theorist Robert Morris' famous sculpture "Box With the Sound of Its Own Making." Baldino wears a tight, flowered minidress for her assembling job, which pointedly acts to restrict her freedom of movement.

Baldino's TV chair, which relies on the quintessential 1960s medium of video, throws out a question mark that calls to mind Matisse's famous dictum: For him, art was like a comfortable arm chair into which a weary businessman might sink at the end of the day. For her, it's a collapsing nest for a gallery-going couch-potato.

There are Pop art and Op art extrapolations, such as Jason McKechnie's psychedelic abstractions that ooze out of the painting's rectangle and smear across the wall. Lisa Yuskavage's lurid pictures of nymphets merge Hallmark greetings with Andrew Wyeth's Helga, in a withering style that could be called Feminist Pop.

Pop piece (after LOVE, after AIDS) is John Souza's reworking of the famous Robert Indiana logo "LOVE," which was later reworked by the Conceptual collaborative General Idea into a devastating icon of the 1980s. "LIAR," Souza's literary epigram for today, is blunt, accusatory and bleak.

Souza also was given the task of installing Adam Ross' beautiful abstract paintings, which he has done in a manner that is as much about the unconscious habits of gallery and museum-goers as it is about abstract art. For instance, some labels thank the sign-maker and proof-reader who helped with the installation.

Other labels, placed adjacent to a row of abstract paintings on paper, identify the names of elementary school children. Did children make the abstract paintings, or did Ross? Is this an affirmation that "My 5-year-old could do that"? Or is it a subversion of the audience, which is accustomed to connecting wall labels to the closest works of art at hand, and willing to believe whatever the museum gives him to read?

Not everything in the show addresses concerns that were ascendant in the 1960s, such as questioning the place of abstraction in artistic discourse. Daniel Wiener's odd, suspended sculpture of sewn fabric, wire and gloppy plaster, which seems to creep spiderlike along the floor, or Christian Schumann's wonderful, collage-style paintings, in which the field becomes a site for a seemingly random accumulation of unrelated, individually compelling pictures and abstract markings, connect only indirectly to earlier art.

So do Catherine Opie's stark portrait photographs in highly saturated color, which show elaborately pierced and tattooed people sometimes of indeterminate gender. It may be that body art of the '60s and '70s could be claimed as Opie ancestor. However, political fistfights since the 1980s are more to the point. Her pictures are compelling documents of men and women who permanently mark gear and ornament themselves in extreme defiance of any suggestion that someone else has the right to control their bodies.

As with "Bad Girls West" currently at UCLA, the work of Opie, Donegan, Baldino and several others indicates the degree to which feminism has now become central to artistic dialogue. In that way too the dominant ethos of the show is its pointed rethinking of the watershed represented by the 1960s.

Subtle further evidence is offered in the exclusive focus on artists working in New York and Los Angeles. Generally, you'd hard-pressed to distinguish between representatives of the two cities just from looking at the work. (Notably, four of the eight New Yorkers went to art school in California.) That's another categorical shift traceable to the '60s. The dialogue has expanded.

If there's a down side to "Out West and Back East," it's the museum's unwillingness to organize this group show around an idea more specific than simply being a bicoastal presentation of artists who have not developed, in the words of a handout accompanying the show, "significant museum exposure or commercial success." (More pressing artistic issues might come forward tonight, with a panel discussion featuring several of the artists convenes for a public discussion at the museum 7:30 p.m.)

Of course, given the pre-condition of American art museums, which are increasingly reliant on the sales power of name-brand art and artists for their shows, relative "obscurity" of these artists, several of whom are eminently worth watching, might not be enough. Perhaps the Santa Monica Museum has come up with a pleasing issue in spite of itself.

■ Santa Monica Museum of Art, 24 Main St., Santa Monica, (310) 399-0433, through March 6. Closed Mon. and Tue.