

CALENDAR

SUNDAY : PART II

E31
Theater
Music
Dance
Art
Architecture

cc /

October 1, 2006

calendarlive.com

THE art EXPLOSION

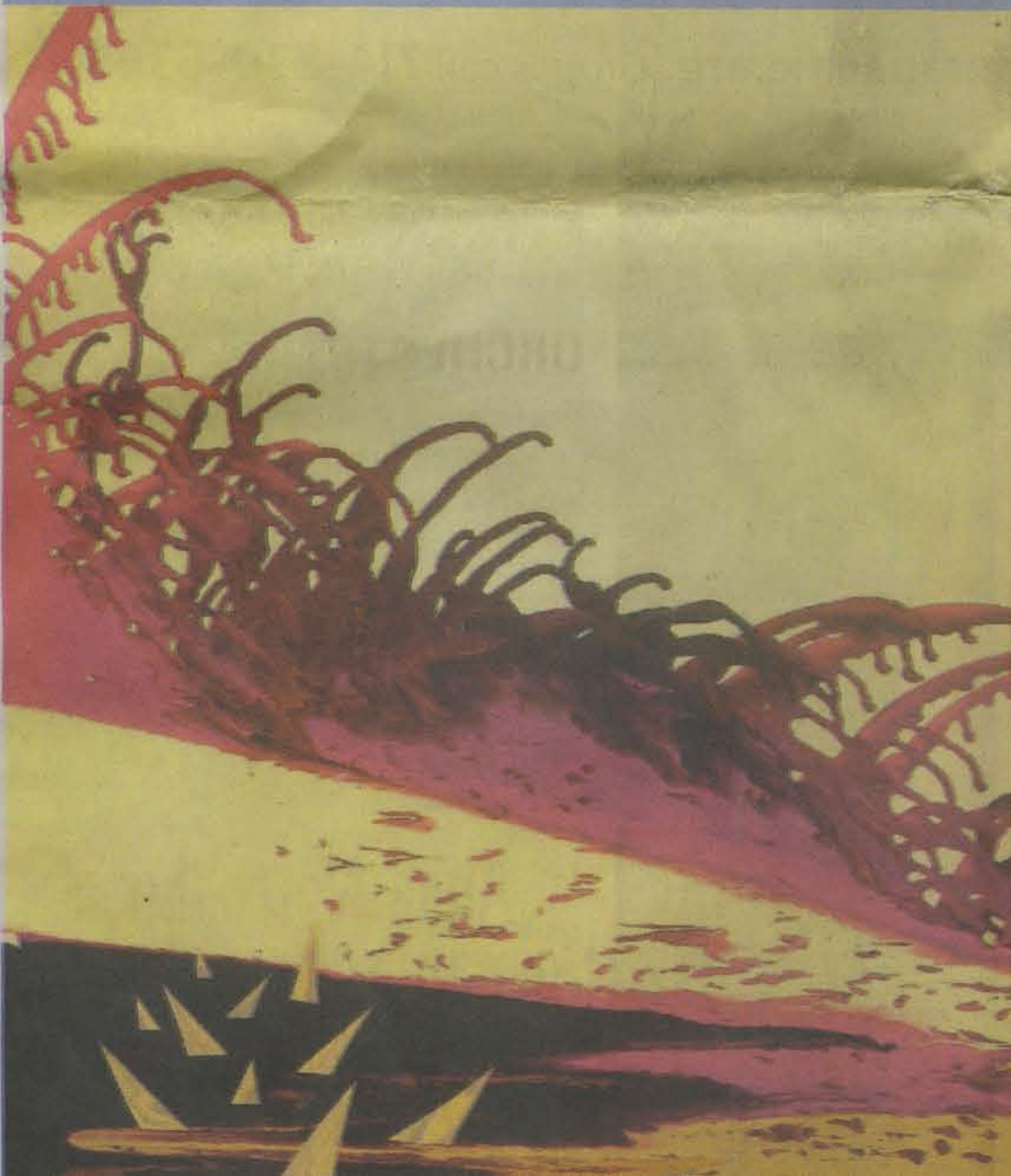
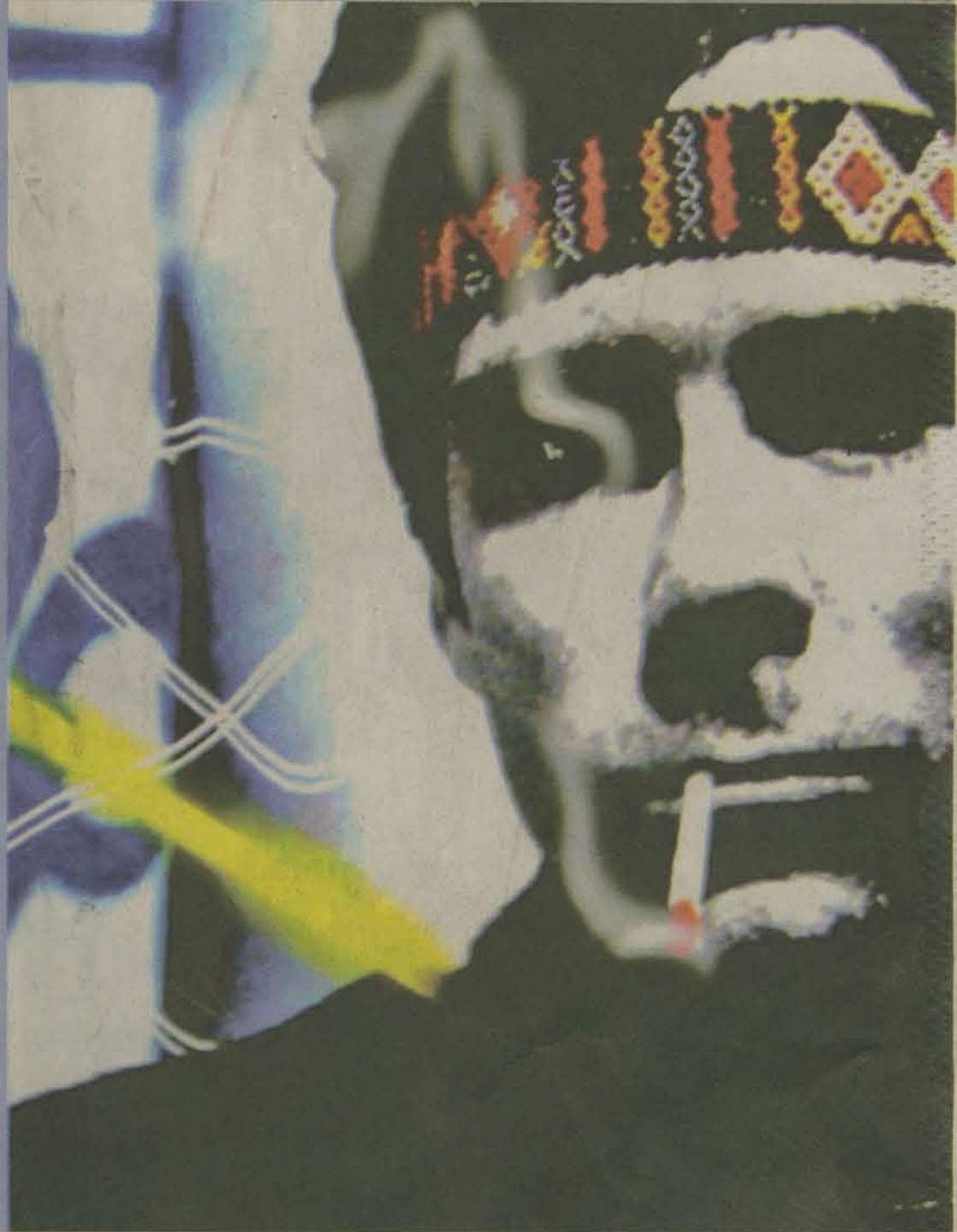
By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
Times Staff Writer

"When I was a student, it was Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg who were clearly the most important artists," said Thomas Lawson, a painter and dean of the School of Art at CalArts. "Them and Andy Warhol. Everybody agreed that they were the ones. Now, because there are such diverse possibilities, it's much harder to say."

Of contemporary art today, two things, and maybe only two things, can be said for sure.

First, there is more of it — made in more styles and materials, by more artists who live, work and have exhibitions in more places — than ever before.

Second, it doesn't fit into neat categories or hierarchies. Thanks to the Internet, the ease of travel and the growth [See Art, Page E40]



SO VERY ECLECTIC

What's going on with contemporary art these days? Many things — in many places. Art critic Christopher Knight sets the scene. *Page 40*



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Forget 'isms' — except eclecticism

Those discrete movements you studied in art history? They're long gone. Today, it's all about diversity — and quality, of course.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

THE question was innocent enough. "What's going on with contemporary art these days?"

My answer was equally candid. "Beats me."

I do spend a sizable chunk of my time looking at, reading about and thinking over new art in Los Angeles and elsewhere, but the days when a succinct response might quickly sum up the art scene are long gone. Partly that's because contemporary art has gone global. The decade of the 1980s was a pivot, when New York's postwar role as serious art's only serious city came to an end.

Mostly, though, it's because art, wherever it is made, no longer subscribes to a single dominant trend with a few rambunctious alternatives jostling for supremacy. Art is eclectic — and today we take that eclecticism for granted. Look around. The extreme breadth of artistic diversity is so familiar and so routine as to border on invisibility.

Take the 2006 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, opening today. It is typical of most such surveys, which are commonplace in an art scene now sprawling from Berlin to Beijing.

This installment includes Jane Callister's punchy abstract paintings, which skillfully exploit the capacity of paint to multi-task. Like a diary, her paint records the artist's physical process in making the work. It also has a tendency to run, mix or separate of its own accord, as if an inert material made from pigment bound in acrylic resin had an independent mind and will. And it possesses a stubborn inclination to represent recognizable things in the world — especially landscape — in wholly unexpected, even apocalyptic ways.

But the California Biennial, without seeming the least bit dissonant, can also accommodate art with no relationship whatever to Callister's inventive reworking of postwar abstraction's various shibboleths. There's the show business shtick of the performance troupe My Barbarian, which turns homemade riffs on TV and Broadway into political entertainment. Mario Ybarra Jr. once fabricated *vato* action figure dolls, transforming gang-culture imagery into icons of Duchampian hip-hop. And the architectural photographs of precarious or ruined buildings by Amir Zaki assert that disintegration and collapse are the inescapable, unseen corollary of the lovely pictures found in our ubiquitous shelter magazines.

Speaking of buildings, for a current show in Pasadena, Carlos Mollura has inserted polyethylene cubes, spheres and other geometric shapes into architectural orifices at a Colorado Boulevard shopping plaza. As each fat, inflatable form strains against the buildings' walls and windows with playful, even comic authority, empty space becomes elastic, muscular and apparently ready to burst. Geometry is ostensibly neutral. But in the context of this shopping arcade, these geometric forms inescapably imply that hidden powers of urban gentrification are at work.

At Blum & Poe Gallery at the edge of Culver City, meanwhile, a carved lump of luxurious sandstone by Matt Johnson begins with Michelangelo's Renaissance dictum that sculpture is a spiritually inclined process of chipping away stone to liberate a natural life force already locked inside. Johnson put his chisel to work, but he uncovered something quite different. A bleary death's head lurked within. Moreover, the skull's distended features recall a famous 1943 bronze memento mori by Picasso, who revolutionized sculpture for the 20th century. Johnson, metaphorically killing off two artistic titans in one deceptively simple gesture, achieves quite a sculptural feat.

Katie Grinnan's sculpture at ACME follows an entirely different track. Her "Rubble Division" mixes such disparate materials as ink-jet prints pasted on board, foam rubber, galvanized steel, concrete, steel rebar and bungee cords. Folding and unfolding pictures of ruined buildings with pictures of vernacular modern architecture, she articulates a disorienting collision between the material world and virtual reality. The sculpture — tall and gangly, with angular flaps held precariously in place by tension cords — looks like a cross between a communications satellite and a homeless shelter scavenged from a freeway underpass.

What's going on with contemporary art these days? Clearly a lot. Yet Callister, My Barbarian, Ybarra and Zaki comfortably cohabit in a single group show. Mollura, Johnson and Grinnan are all first-rate sculptors, and none makes sculpture that even remotely recalls the others. Their disparate works cover the waterfront.

Many of these artists do evoke a world coming apart at the seams. (Given current events, how could they not?) But the stresses and strains of contemporary life register in heterogeneous ways.

Forget 'isms' —

On the cover

The works detailed on Page 31 are shown in full here. From left: Jane Callister's painting "Wasabi Sunrise," a still from the Jeremy Blake film "Sodium Fox" and the Katie Grinnan sculpture "Rubble Division."



And their extreme eclecticism is not exclusive to California. It's the norm everywhere today.

'Pluralism' doesn't do it justice

Use the word "eclectic" rather than "pluralist" for a reason. Eclecticism is a virtue because not only does it draw from a variety of sources and promote divergent positions, it also makes an argument about what is best among the various doctrines, methods or styles it employs. Eclecticism is elitist in the finest sense of that widely misused word, which has nothing to do with old-fashioned notions of exclusive aristocratic taste and everything to do with embracing diversity while also demanding quality.

In the 1980s some critics advanced pluralism as art's natural condition. They were partly right. The idea that two or more kinds of ultimate artistic reality could comfortably coexist hasn't always been in vogue.

Twentieth century art was long charted as an almost linear succession of "isms" — from Fauvism in 1905 to Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s — discrete movements that each expressed its own unitary view of things. The monolithic view that had congealed by the 1960s was a belief that the eye held dominion over art. That limited judgment was toppled by Conceptualism, which devalued everything visual in art and instead polished up the stature of ideas.

"The idea becomes the machine that makes the art," Sol LeWitt famously wrote in 1967 to explain Conceptual art. And the idea could range far and wide, encompassing virtually any subject, attitude or experience one might imagine.

Looking back from today's art world, though, a slightly different history of eclectic art suggests itself. Conceptual art doesn't mark the decisive break, just the elaboration and consolidation of an idea already in play. Pop art marks the most profound rupture. The landmark exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's 1950s hybrids of painting and sculpture that closed recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art convinced me of that. Rauschenberg, together with Jasper Johns, set the stage for Pop. Their work undermined art's established structure. Pop art tipped it over.

With its commercial subject matter, pitch-perfect sense of style, wicked humor, easy sociability and serious refusal to take art too seriously, Pop made hash of the rigid hierarchy of high art (painting, sculpture, drawing) and low art (TV, tabloids, photographs). An entrenched legacy of an aristocratic worldview, this hierarchy of high and low was traded in for a more fluid, porous pecking order. The early-'60s work of Andy Warhol, Edward Ruscha and Roy Lichtenstein is as brainy as the existential subjects of the Abstract Expressionist artists that preceded them, and it is also as dumb as the Sunday funnies are. That's

about as eclectic as a work of art can be.

One place the breadth and scope of the contemporary art scene is creating increasing pressures is in museums. Few were engaged with contemporary art 30 years ago, but many have waded in, desirous of the energy and public interest that come with the territory. Few, however, are equipped to handle the lively situation since it contradicts the orderly traditions of institutional structure. Nowhere has the problem been more keenly felt than in New York, center of not just the art market and art media but traditional museum culture. Contemporary programming at the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan, the Modern and Whitney can most charitably be described as a train wreck.

So, what's going on with contemporary art these days? It's a post-Pop world, "ism"-free and with no end in sight. Pop culture used to be synonymous with mass culture, but in the era of 500 cable channels, iPods and the Internet, broadcasting has faltered and been joined by vibrant narrow-casting. Contemporary art's avid audience now approaches in size the ratings for HBO's latest hit. America's political battles of the past 20 years may center on attempts to repeal or defend the dramatic changes wrought during the 1960s, but our robust artistic bounty today is its resplendent legacy.

christopher.knight@latimes.com