

LA WEEKLY

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12 Art Moments

by Doug Harvey

1. **Death-Stalking, Sleep-Walking, Barbarian Ninja Terminators** (Fowler Museum).

What does it say about the L.A. art scene when the most vibrant, funny, formally adventurous and life-affirming painting show all year was a collection of hand-painted movie posters from Ghana? Beats me. When I look at these bizarre hybrids of African tribal and American advertising visual traditions, I'm only thinking about how vibrant, funny, formally adventurous and life-affirming they are. Besides, if it weren't for L.A.-based collector Ernie Wolfe, these paintings would have disappeared from the face of the Earth.

2. **"Devices of Wonder"** (Getty Center) and **"The World From Here"** (UCLA Hammer Museum) are like dueling, or at least overlapping, antiquarian wet dreams. These two marvelous one-of-a-kind and only-in-L.A. shows draw together hundreds of extraordinary books and prints (in both cases) and almost as many rare and peculiar optical devices and mechanical curiosities from dozens of collections to depict, respectively, the roots and development of the complex mediated visual environment in which we live, and to remind us what a long, strange trip it's been. Not to mention being kick-ass art experiences. Marshall McLuhan would pee.

3. **The Reverend Ethan Acres** gave three remarkable sermons/performances in L.A. this year, including his over-the-top *Parable of Mothra/Exorcism of the Santa Monica Museum*. His finest moment occurred at Occidental College, where the Rev waxed envious over Brad Pitt's abs, staged a one-man pie-eating contest, did a quick-change into diapers and wings, and performed an aerobic dance routine (with inadvertent full frontal exposure) to "Shake Your Booty," after which he plunked down, pie, diaper and all, on a panel with Lari Pittman and Anne Ayres to discuss the New Sincerity. Awesome!

4. **Pauline Stella Sanchez's** recent turn toward highly idiosyncratic furniture-making belied the rut of her agglomerations of highlight-yellow rudimentary computer-drawing-program ellipses. Her trio of oddly conceived, oddly constructed and oddly installed coffee tables seem to be props for some sort of personal mythology about Louis XIV and Versailles. Like an explosion in a shingle factory frozen in time, dipped in white enamel and populated by little ceramic cornhusk men, these powerfully visionary works aren't much like anything else you'll see around.

5. **CLUI (the Center for Land Use Interpretation)** continued to make inroads in the museum world this year, beginning with a pair of stellar bus tours staged in conjunction with MOCA's otherwise iffy *Flight Patterns* show. In addition to interpretive installations in San Francisco and the Netherlands, CLUI mounted the digitally projected *Curious Orange* at UC Irvine, and a remarkable overview of Los Angeles landscapes that are used extensively as film sets. More important than these and CLUI's many other public programs is its vast Web database (www.clui.org) of



Cornelis Jacobus van Oeckelen, *Android Clarinetist* (1838) from "Devices of Wonder"

information about governmental, military and industrial facilities — the very type of public information that is vanishing from the Internet in the wake of September 11.

6. **“Asylum in the Library”** (Fowler) / **“I’m Thinking of a Place”** (Hammer). As the two first candidates of UCLA’s new graduate program in curatorial studies, **Hannah Miller** and **Lisa Henry** faced tremendous pressure to come up with professional-quality thesis exhibitions. That they both succeeded so admirably, in such diverse ways, is testimony to both their sufficiency to the task and the absence of any precedents or guidelines to confuse them. Miller’s labyrinthine kiosk in the bowels of the Fowler Museum took a kaleidoscopic look at the life and work of anthropologist/madman **Aby Warburg** that was simultaneously a playful interrogation of museum-display vernacular. Henry’s smallish Hammer gallery collected a group of somber and meditative photographs and figurative works by pre-post-black artists **Gary Simmons**, **Lorna Simpson** and **Carrie Mae Weems** that, though already neatly dovetailed, were interwoven with thoughtful wall texts that read more like an intelligent essay than the standard industry admixture of empty buzz words and condescending fluff.

7. **Miriam Dym**’s dizzy, wordless digital street maps were always attractive visually and conceptually, but I felt there was some kind of technological element — animations on a plasma screen or something — missing from the work that would hurl it toward total virtuality. So it came as quite a surprise when the technological breakthrough that pulled it all together was *drawing*. Dym’s POST show of three large works on paper — combining elaborately hand-inked areas with collaged inkjet patterns — depicting generic industrial building interiors were infused with a humanity and charm that her earlier work lacked.

8. **Language Removal Services**, which lists a Hollywood address and maintains a Web site at www.languageremoval.com, combines the ambivalent but deadpan institutionality of organizations like CLUI with exciting contemporary sound art. The elaborate rationale — the use of an “ecstatic language engine” to transform “cultures” of “static language” into the wordless condensations that fill their sampler disc, based on the early research of the late Raymond Chronic — makes for fascinating reading. But it is the actual recordings — which extract and discard the pesky verbiage from speeches by Sylvester Stallone, Princess Diana, Noam Chomsky, John Cage, Gertrude Stein, Malcolm X, Bob Guccione, David Hockney and a host of others — that convince, with a rainlike pattering of breaths, hesitations and silences that, as Chronic asserted, “to find true inspiration, we only have to remove language and plunge forward into the breathtaking and truly pregnant pause that presents itself.”

9. The reliably excellent **Karen Carson** delivered another painterly tour de force in *Making the Seen*, with a Rosamund Felsen roomful each of writhing pastoral meta-banners, glowing hypnotic bar-sign landscapes and trenchant wordplay paintings, which collectively prove that mature artists don’t have to cannibalize their own greatest hits into small bite-size pastiches.

10. Individually, the twin retrospectives of **Stanton Macdonald-Wright** (at LACMA) and **Hideo Date** (at the Japanese American National Museum) uncover largely forgotten bodies of work by gifted individualistic Modernist painters working in L.A. in the early 20th century. Together, they expand into an interlocking (and not always pleasant) story about L.A.’s struggle for a cultural identity during that same period. The most remarkable thing, though, is the similarity between the actual art — quirky, luminous geometric abstractions oscillating into inspiringly weird allegorical figuration and back again — and the hidden template of the best contemporary L.A. painting. (“Living in Color: The Art of Hideo Date” remains on view at the JANM through April 7.)

11. The late **David Tudor**’s elaborate, beautiful and landmark 1973 interactive sound installation *Rainforest IV* was up for only three and a half hours in the Walt Disney Modular Theater at CalArts as part of the Getty’s Tudor Symposium in May. The piece consists of all kinds of strange found or sculpted artifacts — toilet floats, soap dishes, car doors, water jugs — suspended in the space and wired with electromagnetic transducers to transform them into speakers, through which an all-star cast of Tudor’s original collaborators on the piece (including Bill Viola) played various looping, chirping electronic soundtracks. Why can’t we have these kinds of things inhabiting our museums for six-month

stretches?

12. When I decided to write criticism, there was really only one magazine (apart from the *L.A. Weekly*) I wanted to write for. *Art issues* was constantly surprising, with a deep commitment to the intersection of the worlds of art and entertainment and an aversion to puffy booster copy and post-structuralist jargon, and had early on recognized *The Simpsons* and Andy Kaufman's standup as great works of art. The magazine was a springboard for recent MacArthur Grant awardee Dave Hickey's emergence as a major voice in American art criticism. *A.i.* was among the most artistically edited intellectual journals of our time — the vision of editor Gary Kornblau, who encouraged essays on the aesthetic meaning of leaf blowers, smiley-faces, monster trucks and cigarettes from artists as well as professional writers. The last few years have seen its appearance transformed, with a gorgeously printed color gallery section and increasingly virtuosic design by Tracey Schiffman. On December 8, *Art issues* announced it had ceased publication with November's Number 70. Kornblau will continue to run Art issues Press, which published Hickey's collected *A.i.* essays as *Air Guitar* and, just last month, *The Sermons of Reverend Ethan Acres*.