

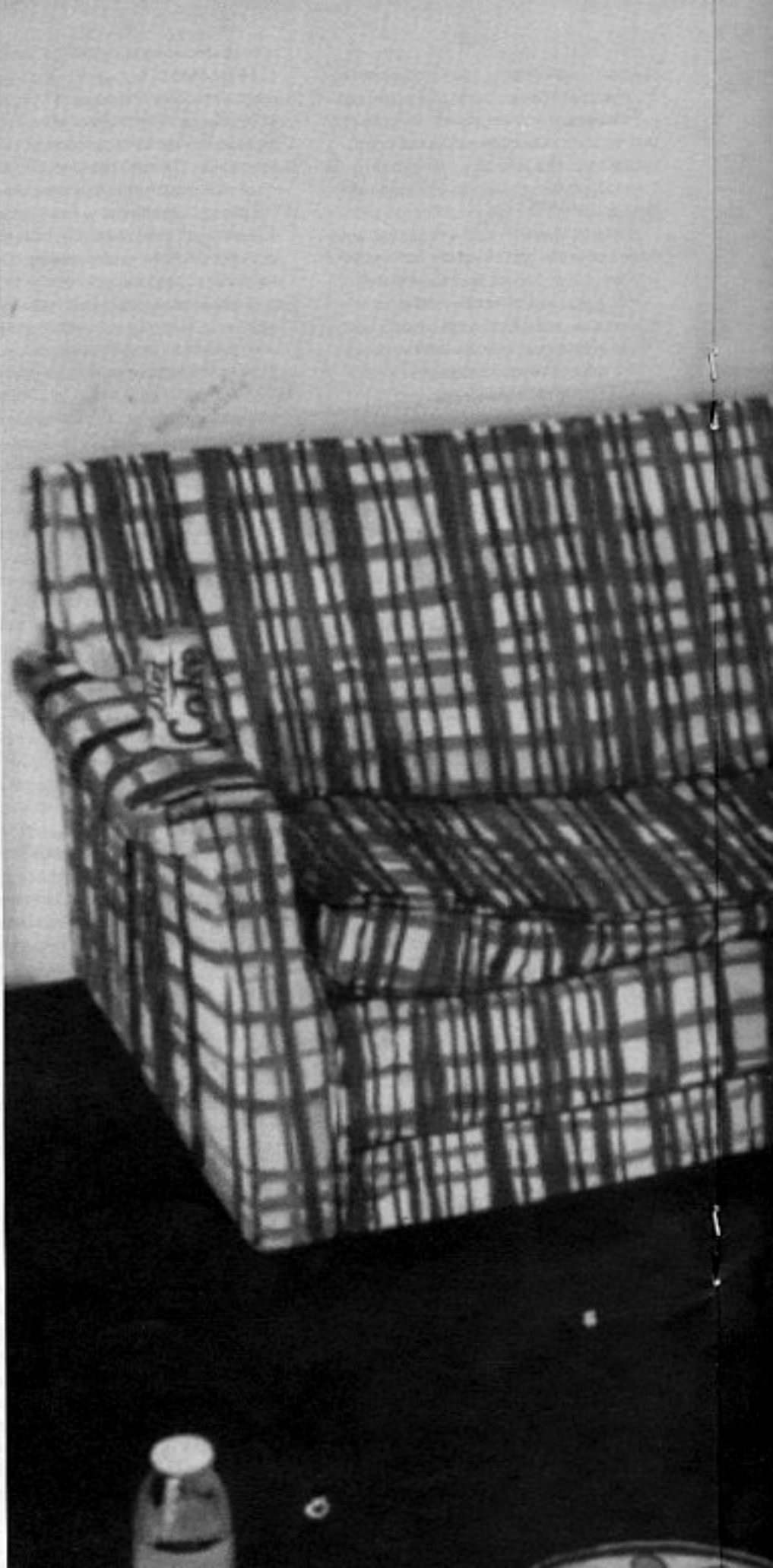
After the Hangover:

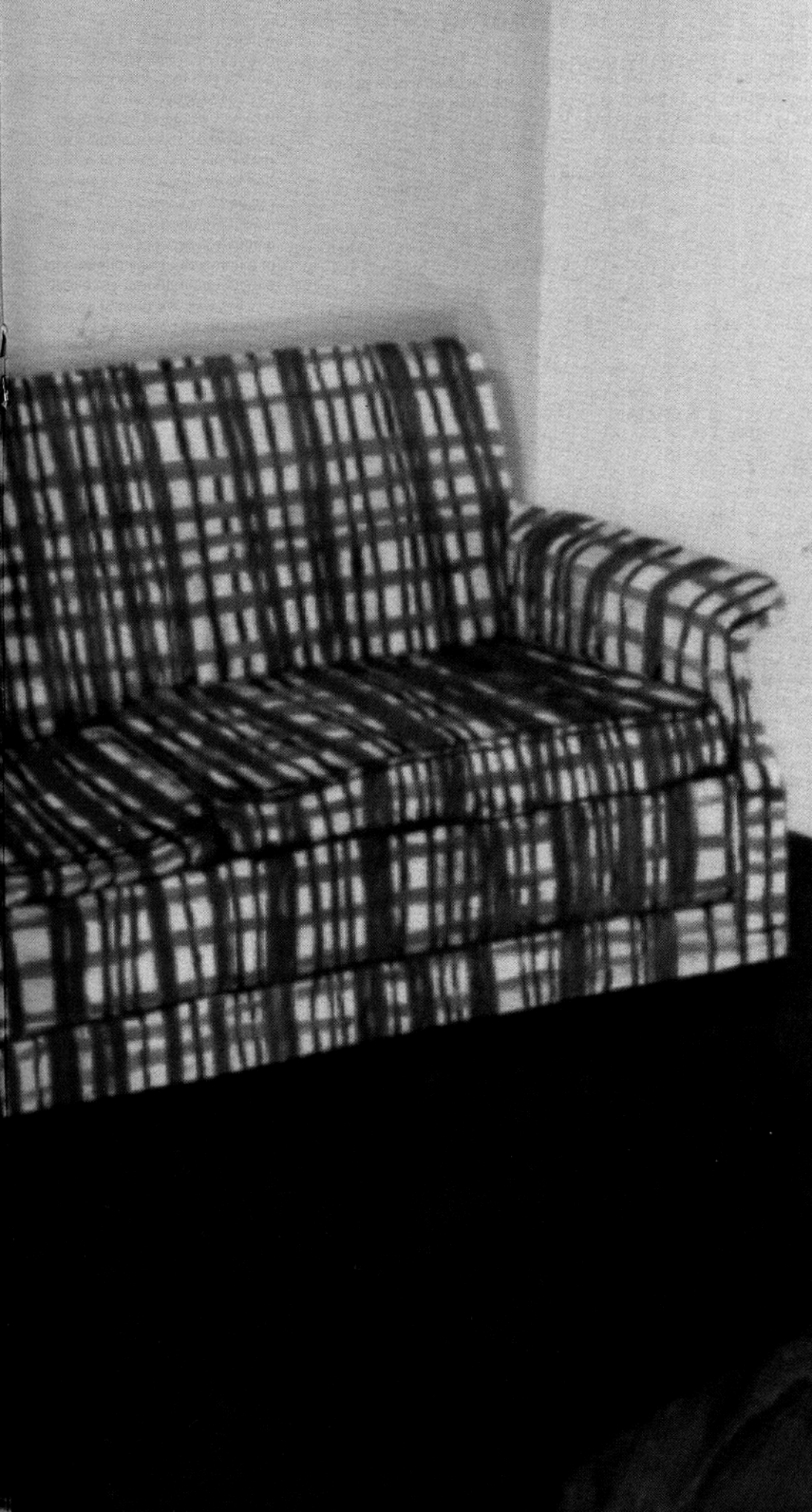
Graduate Schools in

Los Angeles at the

Close of the Millennium

by Jacqueline Cooper





"When I was there [Cal Arts]," adds New York painter Matt Mullican, "the goal wasn't to get a degree, it was to become a famous and successful artist."

-Ralph Rugoff

Vogue, August 1989¹

You cannot have an orgy like the '80s without a hangover, and now we have a big one. The population of the art world expanded enormously in the '80s, thanks to overproduction of art school degrees in the '70s and the sudden lure of the market. . . . There are probably 200,000 artists in America, and assuming that each of them makes forty works a year, that yields eight million objects, most of which don't have a ghost of a chance of survival.

-Robert Hughes

*The Culture of Complaint*²

Scanning the *Los Angeles Times* calendar listings for commercial galleries in the city, it becomes apparent that a pattern, begun perhaps five years ago, is firmly in place. The Los Angeles graduate schools are the breeding ground for most of the innovative, provocative, and necessary work being produced and subsequently exhibited on the West (and increasingly the East) Coast. If the work represented by the galleries is not being made by recent graduates (and occasionally current graduate students), it is being produced by those who teach in the institutions. The reciprocity engendered by the close proximity of establishment, student, and instructor is replicated in the commercial world, and if anyone in Los Angeles still believes that the nepotism inherent in an academic situation works against an artist finding her/his niche in the real-life economy of the art world, all they need to do

Kristin Calabrese

The Couch, 1997. Oil on canvas, 72" x 72".

is step outside and go look at some of the work currently being shown, sold, and reviewed.

As I write this, Charles Ray's show—a *crie de coeur* comment on the status of Modern sculptural objects: a free-standing, monochrome replica of a totaled 1991 Pontiac Grand Am—has just closed at Stuart Regen; Casey Cook (a recent University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) graduate) has opened her second solo show, "Woo," at Dan Bernier Gallery, following her move from Richard Heller Gallery at Bergamot station. Casey's wry, Postmodern take on film theory, feminism, and francophilia becomes adroitly disjunctive painterly abstraction, and funny, sexy, Godardesque films. Her move from one commercial gallery to another, one year after graduation, neatly illustrates a point that distinguishes the renaissance of interest in recent graduate students from the hyperbole surrounding the local graduate programs ten years ago. This is particularly appropriate in an examination of California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, the prominence of which was dissected in a 1989 *Vogue* article by Ralph Rugoff. This piece can be seen as something of a parallel to Dennis Cooper's controversial exposé of the UCLA spectacle published in *Spin* magazine this past summer.³ In short, many of the galleries no longer want to wait for the fruition of the graduate experience, nor do they care, for the most part, about nurturing a career.

In 1994 Rosamund Felsen showed the abundantly scatological installation *Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts* by UCLA graduate Jason Rhoades, and heralded renewed interest in the work of that program's students in addition to the work of their instructors. Previously, the galleries helped bolster the fledgling and mid-career artists who became the *mentors* of new crops of graduate students. In particular, galleries supported the strong group of post-*Woman House*⁴ feminist artists, such as Linda Burnham,

Carole Caroompas, and Renee Petropoulos, along with Tom Knechtel and Roy Dowell (all five are on faculty at Otis College of Art and Design); Lari Pittman and Mike Kelley (both at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena (Art Center)); Chris Burden, Charles Ray, and Paul McCarthy (all three at UCLA).

The track record of recent UCLA graduates indicates the extent to which galleries are now supporting the *products* of these faculty's programs. Following their UCLA MFA show of 1995, Martin Kersels, Ginny Bishton, and Kurt Kauper continued with group and solo shows on both the East and the West Coasts. Kersels joined Toba Khedoori, Jennifer Pastor, and Jason Rhoades in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. Since then, similar expectations have been met by subsequent graduates, including Jenny Bornstein, Santos Vasquez, Jeremy Siegler, and Bia Gayotto, all 1996 graduates who have continued to show in Los Angeles and New York. That this meteoric success has become bi-coastal stems from the strong ties that many of the UCLA faculty have with institutions on the East Coast. These connections, both institutional and conceptual, are also allowing UCLA to revamp the way theory and critique are incorporated in its program. In particular, consider Mary Kelly, the new Chair of Fine Arts. Her affiliation with the theoretical publication *October* and her liminal influence at the Whitney Program in New York can only help to encourage renewed vigor in what has traditionally been one of UCLA's weakest suits. In addition, Kelly's emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature of art production (UCLA still maintains discrete areas within its program, unlike the other four institutions, which have abandoned the isolating practice of separating artists according to their chosen media) and her understanding of the necessity of sharing information and resources between institutions (she was on faculty at CalArts between 1987 and 1989), suggests a rather hopeful vision of the possible future of the UCLA graduate program. Kelly writes: How do graduate students, for example, assess their own work and that of their peers? Are they bound by, going beyond, or simply indifferent to the precedents in their field? Do their aspirations take a harder shape or soften

in the succeeding demi-decade that propels "emerging artists" into "mid-career"? Most importantly, what conditions do they impose for the necessity and intelligibility of their practice?⁵

Unfortunately, such idealism and potential altruism are often tempered by an intractable economic reality, and by the elusive spectre of fame that haunts the dreams of many incoming graduate students. With a slim but important resurgence of interest on the part of the art buyer, careers have become compressed. Whereas Eric Fischl took ten years to produce what is considered mature work following his graduation from CalArts in 1972, Evan Holloway's *Black Box*⁶ at Marc Foxx was a remarkably well-articulated and elegant installation by a young artist, produced six months after graduation. What the galleries want is product, and a little advance marketing in order to sell it, so that an artist such as Casey Cook or Holloway is incredibly empowered by the pedigree of his or her degree and by the current "buzz" surrounding the UCLA graduate program. Suddenly, graduate school is fashionable again, and nothing sells quite as well as fashion.

The high profile of CalArts alumni in concocting the conceptual curve balls and aesthetic upheavals of the last fifteen years has brought the school international renown. It's also prompted a bit of a backlash. As early as 1980, there was talk in New York art circles of a "CalArts Mafia," complaints of old school chums helping each other get a foot in gallery doors. . . . Similar gripes have recently been aired on the West Coast, as CalArts graduates have come to dominate the L.A. Art Scene as well.

—Ralph Rugoff
Vogue, August 1989⁷

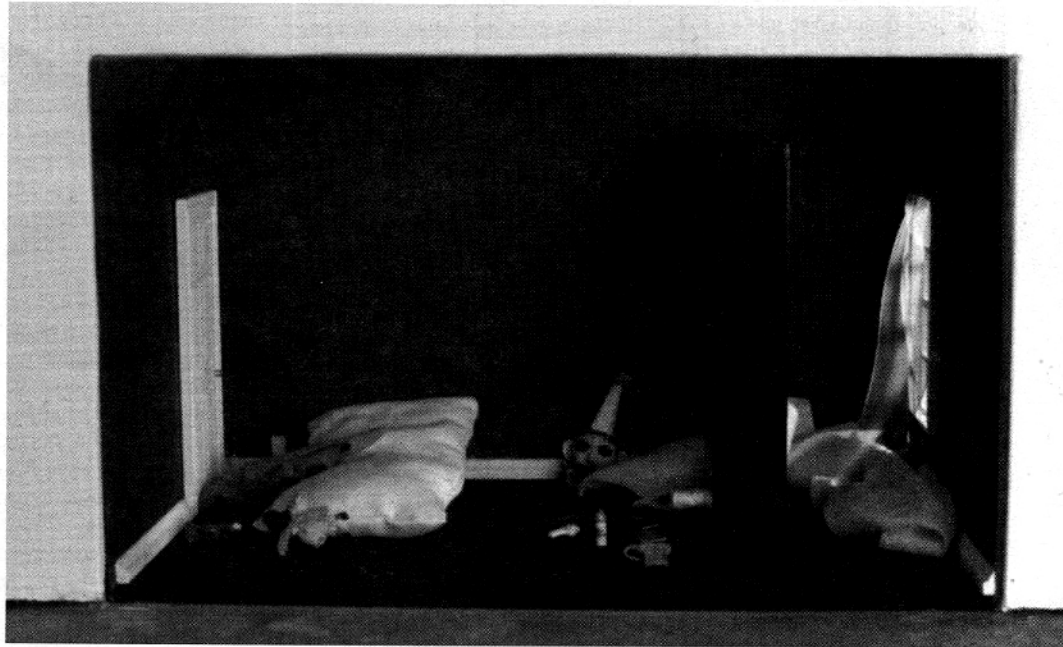
The invigoration of the art scene and the challenge (albeit highly manipulated by the establishment) that the students might represent to the status quo are welcome. What is less so is the concept that the reason for attending an academic institution

of higher learning is to attain the stamp of credibility that will lead directly to a high-profile career. The desire to work with particular faculty is mitigated by the desire for commercial recognition, and rivalry among students in competition for particular faculty members can be fairly aggressive. As with much that appears in vogue, the graduate experience is composed of a few truths, many rumors, and some outright lies. For the visual arts and with the singular exception of the Ph.D. program at New York University, the Master of Fine Arts is the terminal degree. If it buys access to anything, that accomplishment is the ability to apply for an increasingly elusive teaching job. Most graduates leave school feeling ambivalent about the relevance of their particular programs. For example, Samara Caughey, who graduated in 1997, found the small, close-knit structure of the University of Southern California (USC)'s graduate program and its isolation from much of the reality-based discourse and intervention felt at the other programs particularly frustrating. However, what the sense of alienation allowed for was the development of truly quirky and delicately fabricated sculptural works that occupy the interstices between a movie "reality" and an imagined interpretation of the genre. As Caughey explains:

Graduate school is hard. Yes, you get to spend time making your own work, but it's not always fun. No matter what school you go to, it's full of constant self-realization, epiphanies, and self-doubt. You'll probably have studio visits that seem irrelevant or a waste of time, but you know you're ready to leave graduate school when you've one by one eliminated professors from your studio. Then you know you're ready to do it alone.⁸

One of the most positive reactions to the increased competitive edge of the Los Angeles graduate programs is that work currently produced engages in a critical discussion of issues and experiences beyond the confines of academia, where in the past, as students languished in graduate programs for four or five years before being forced to leave, much work was made in reaction to the graduate experience: a complaint about the comfortable. The five main Los Angeles Graduate

The Los Angeles graduate schools are the breeding ground for most of the innovative, provocative, and necessary work being produced.



Samara Caughey
St. Elmo's Fire: A Space Odyssey, 1997.
 Wood, cloth, and plastic, 12" x 10" x 8".

schools—UCLA, Art Center, Otis College of Art and Design, USC, and CalArts—all require their students to complete the degree course within three years. Most students have finished in two, which belies any claim to maturity, other than that which is accidental.

The recent ascendancy of the UCLA graduate program can be traced to two factors. First, and quite simply, the current tenured faculty are probably the strongest collection of contemporary artists teaching today within a single institution. That Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman, Chris Burden, John Baldessari, Nancy Rubins, James Welling, Adrian Saxe, Mary Kelly, et al form the core of the program has only helped bolster the reputation of the institution, as well as attract a diverse range of applicants. Although the tenure system in place in the public university would suggest that this stimulating scenario should be highly unlikely, the impact of specific faculty appointments and the single-minded determination of a couple of members of the present faculty engineered a context in which this situation could occur. However, the tenure system remains notoriously brutal to women and minorities, and may prove detrimental in the long run. For the moment, however, the prolonged commitment to faculty protects the university's interest in maintaining a highly successful and visible program. During the last few years, it has come to realize the financial and public-relations value of its gradu-

ate arts school. Tenured UCLA faculty are not free to teach at other institutions, which means contact with professors from other schools is still conducted at a somewhat rarefied level. In order to continually re-invigorate the program, UCLA relies upon the enthusiasm of visiting professors and guest artists (most of whom *are* shared with the other institutions). Nonetheless, the quality and allegiance of the core faculty remain the defining factors in regards to the overall caliber of the program.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, UCLA is still an arena where the greatest emphasis is placed on production. Critiques and seminars have traditionally revolved around the discussion of a definite product, with theory being applied to the concrete object at hand, rather than the artist's *a priori* ideas and intentions. This may be changing, but for the moment, the students produce vast amounts of work within a system that nurtures analysis in conjunction with production, rather than paralyzing students within a loop of theoretical feedback. This productivity has led to UCLA having something of a reputation among the other graduate schools as a troglodyte, but it's an affectionate moniker, and in a real-world system, where the rewards are based on the purchase of discrete objects as well as institutional support, it remains an important distinction.

They're not careerists; they're oddballs.

—Dennis Cooper

*Spin*⁹

UCLA is undoubtedly careerist at present. This leads to ugly myths and gossip, such as the rumor about a student who regularly drank quantities of Pepto-Bismol to relieve the symptoms of stress-induced stomachaches. While this may seem amusing, and certainly consistent with other student practices, including sleep deprivation, alcohol consumption, and random bouts of "acting out," what may prove more deleterious is the stupefying effect of competition. It is not uncommon for third-year students to move out of the studios gifted by the university, to a more neutral space where the transition from student to professional can be made beyond the glare of public or peers. The need to escape such attention is also due in part to the fact that graduate reviews, commonly held behind closed doors at CalArts, Art Center, and Otis College of Art and Design, are very much public events at UCLA.

The other four institutions support programs of various sizes and character. As CalArts might be the first to admit, the imagined popularity of one program over

another is based largely on practices that never really existed (such as CalArts' notoriously poor treatment of painters, despite the emergence of Eric Fischl, David Salle, Jonathan Lasker, and a newly painterly Ashley Bickerton) and, therefore, prove impossible to sustain. Fashion, as anybody who has ever held on to a pair of shoes for longer than a decade recognizes, is cyclical. Currently, painting is strong in Valencia, with the emergence of recent graduates Laura Owens and Monique Prieto. Prieto's recent show at Acme was a tour de force of painterly control and graphic manipulation. If CalArts dropped the baton of dry Conceptualism in the late '80s, Art Center in Pasadena picked it up and ran. With a two-track graduate program, one in studio practice and the other in theory and criticism, Art Center students alternately benefit and suffer from a truly interdisciplinary program. Occasionally the work produced is enlivened by a levity gained through experiencing the most entertaining and the turgid of the theoretical discourse. Michelle Alperin, who graduated from Art Center in 1997, makes funny, slightly self-deprecating videos about societies' inability to deal with those who refuse to fit their culturally proscribed norms. The subtext of all the work is something like a reverse of "the meek shall inherit the earth." In Alperin's work the large, the strong, and the outrageously vulnerable always win (or at least win over the viewer).

USC's program is a fledgling one, and at present suffering under the need to find its own voice. However, the students consistently produce interesting work, which suggests an echo of the late '80s at UCLA: a major university, encumbered with tenure problems, searching to forge an identity through a combination of faculty and students. Otis College of Art and Design is engaged in a similar

situation. Having moved into a new building for its graduate school in El Segundo, the program is now finding its feet and relies on a strong roster of visiting artists to augment a small permanent faculty. What is historically interesting to note, however, is the role the undergraduate program at Otis played in supporting the graduate program at UCLA. For many years instructors encouraged seniors to apply when UCLA was not quite as fashionable as it appears now. Casey Cook, Elizabeth Craft (whose graduating show was held at Richard Telles Gallery in 1997), Michelle Frantz, Justin Siegel, and Sandeep Mukherjee are among those who transferred from Otis to UCLA, and as the program at Otis grows, UCLA is beginning to send seniors in the opposite direction. Although this maintains the familiar alignment of students, faculty, and institutions, it also implies a deeper understanding that the quality of particular students remains the vital ingredient for the continued strength of a program.

Ultimately, it is important that the graduate schools and the galleries refuse to see the programs as simply a basis for commerce. The strength of the work currently produced relies to a great extent on the ability of students to flourish in a state of neglect. It has already been rumored that UCLA has finally run

its course and that the galleries are sniffing around for the next new thing. Hopefully, the skills and strategies learned in any graduate program are enough to sustain the indifference of a fickle, if insatiable market. Kristin Calabrese, a third-year painting student at UCLA whose ambitious, large-scale pieces evoke memories of a dysfunctional, but still strangely palliative and invulnerable domesticity, is particularly aware of the intangibles graduate school can offer a student. Her time at UCLA has been marked by a remarkably burning desire to search and experiment, with the third year acting as a consolidation of the previous two. Subsequently, her work is the sum of perfected painterly skill and an articulation honed through discussion and critique. This remains, I think, the way in which graduate school should affect the student, and suggests that the control of both market and philosophical directions lies in the ambition and integrity of the individual.

I have learned a lot at UCLA.... I am very grateful for the time our teachers gave us. I was actually raised at art school. Undergrad at the San Francisco Art Institute was where I learned about the passion of being an artist and about immersion in art and obsession. Graduate school at UCLA is where I

learned to "socialize" my work. That was Lari Pittman's phrase. He explained it saying he was sure that I had a very intense personal connection with my work, but graduate school was going to make my work communicate with the rest of the world.

—Kristen Calabrese

Jacqueline Cooper is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. She will graduate from UCLA in the Spring of 1998.

¹Ralph Rugoff, "Liberal Arts," *Vogue*, August 1989, 331.

²Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1993), 194.

³Dennis Cooper, "Too Cool for School," *Spin*, July 1997, 87-94.

⁴*Woman House* was a large-scale cooperative installation/project executed by the Feminist Art Program at CalArts and developed and overseen by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Many of the current women faculty in prominent positions throughout the Los Angeles institutions were part of the Feminist Art Program. The program has, itself, translated into a type of discourse and an approach to art-making that still has resonance among the Los Angeles art community.

⁵Mary Kelly, *The Wight Biennial*, a catalogue produced in conjunction with the 1997 UCLA Wight Biennial, UCLA, 1997, 9.

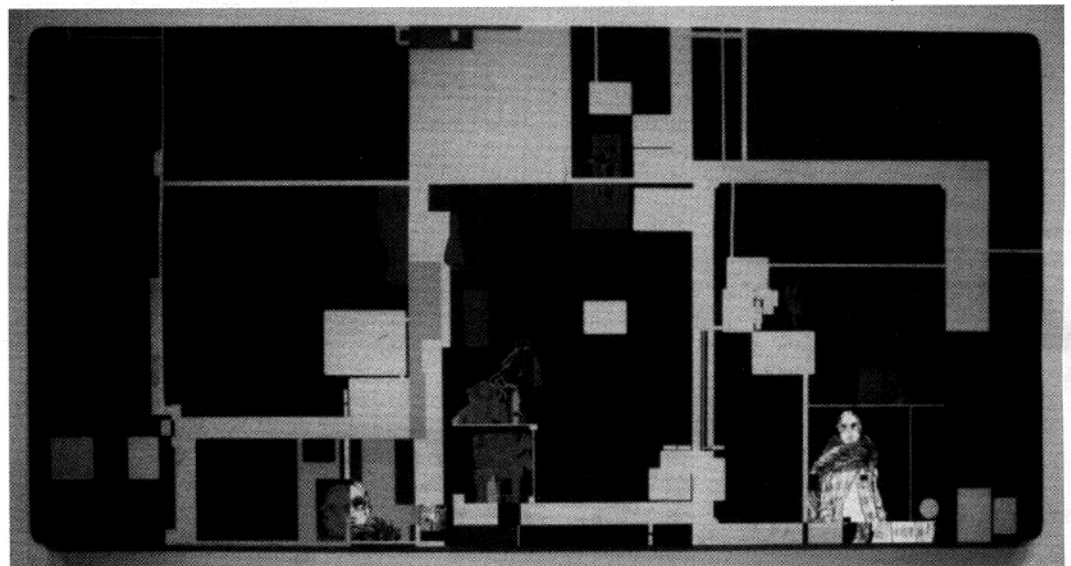
⁶Jacqueline Cooper, "Review: Evan Holloway," *NAE*, February, 1997, 53-54.

⁷Rugoff, 331.

⁸Conversation with the writer.

⁹Cooper, 5

Casey Cook
Nineteen Seventy One, 1997. Courtesy of Dan Bernier Gallery.



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