

CULVER CITY: Chelsea West?

In only three years, the intersection of La Cienega and Washington Boulevard on the edge of Culver City has gone from the middle of nowhere to the center of the West Coast art world.

By George Melrod

People: they were everywhere, holding drinks and jostling elbows. The gallery was packed and the crowd spilled out into the lot behind the building and out front across the sidewalk, wandering off into the hot midsummer night. The event was the July 15 opening of "All In The Family" at George Billis Gallery on South La Cienega. Curated by veteran L.A. gallerist Molly Barnes, the show brought together a veritable tribal summit of L.A. artistic clans: painters Ed Moses and son Andy; Pop icon Ed Ruscha and son Eddie; mixed media pioneer Norman Zammitt and son Eric; Laddie John Dill, daughter Ariel, and ex-wife Ann Thornycroft. The span of generations aside, the opening was also noteworthy for its location: on the edge of Culver City, off a dingy concrete creek, along a desolate strip of La Cienega that in the past one might only see through a rearview mirror on the way to the airport. Yet on this torrid July evening, this obscure industrial strip was host to the sort of dense, bohemian art crowd one would usually expect to see thronging an opening for MOCA. In fact, the Billis opening occurred little more than a month after another historic event: the June 3 Culver City Artwalk. Sponsored by Culver City's Cultural Affairs commission, with the aid of local gallery owners, the day-long Culver Artwalk had drawn some 1,500 people ambling festively among 30 galleries tucked amid the faded stucco facades.

What the June 3 Artwalk proved, the mingling generations of the Billis opening confirmed: that Culver City has itself come of age, not just as an art destination but as a nexus for a new generation. Only three years ago, the biggest landmark on the corner of Washington Boulevard and La Cienega was a giant tire advertising a local auto shop. Today, that same intersection on the northeast tip of Culver City has gone from the middle of nowhere to the center of the West Coast art world. Ironically, the new art neighborhood is only three and a half miles south of the first real gallery neighborhood in L.A., which was also grouped on La Cienega, during the 1960s and '70s, in West Hollywood between Melrose and Santa Monica Boulevard. But although it is grittier and more sprawling, Culver City is very much a



FAR LEFT:
OPENING NIGHT AT LAXART

MIDDLE LEFT:
WASHINGTON BOULEVARD AT NIGHT

LEFT:
EXTERIOR VIEW OF BLUM & POE GALLERY

ABOVE RIGHT:
OPENING NIGHT AT BLK/MRKT GALLERY

ABOVE:
"BEMUSED," 2006, Jennifer Vanderpool
INSTALLATION AT BANDINI ART



"WOULDN'T IT BE NICE," 2006, **Ann Thornycroft**, OIL ON CANVAS, 72" x 60"
ON VIEW AT GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY

legitimate successor to the throne. With at least one internationally significant gallery in Blum & Poe, a brash new alternate space in LAXART, and a wide variety of ambitious young dealers, it is now a must-see neighborhood for collectors visiting the city. And it is clearly still expanding.

How it will continue to grow, and where, remains an open question. But that, too, is part of Culver's appeal. Unlike other art centers in L.A., Culver City was not planned; in fact the new gallery district is a mile east of Culver's City tidy, pedestrian-friendly downtown. Rather, the galleries sprouted up organically on their own, in a real, industrial neighborhood. As a result, the art district of Culver does not feel like a compound or a stage set. It feels like part of a city, albeit a quirky one. Bisected by the 10 Freeway and the gaping concrete channel of mysterious Ballona Creek, it is at once unknown territory and central to everything.

"The location is ideal," states Timothy Blum of Blum & Poe. "It's near the freeway, near the airport... You can stop here first on the way to the airport, or stop here last on your way out. And it's near Beverly Hills, where the money people are," he adds, only half-joking. "And that it was on La Cienega [the historic center of the L.A. art world] wasn't lost on us." Neither is the echo of that history lost on Molly Barnes. About the old La Cienega scene where she had her own gallery from 1967-84, Barnes says: "It was just jumping; you never had to go anywhere else. That's what I see going on in Culver City. This is going to be the place," she adds excitedly. "I can feel it. I can feel it. It's just extraordinary."

To some observers, the abrupt rise of Culver City recalls the emergence of another major art neighborhood. A dozen years ago, New York's Chelsea district was best known as site of that renowned venue for installation and earth art, the Dia Foundation, and as a pleasant place to get brunch. In 1994, a small knot of adventurous galleries took root up the block from Dia on 22nd Street west of

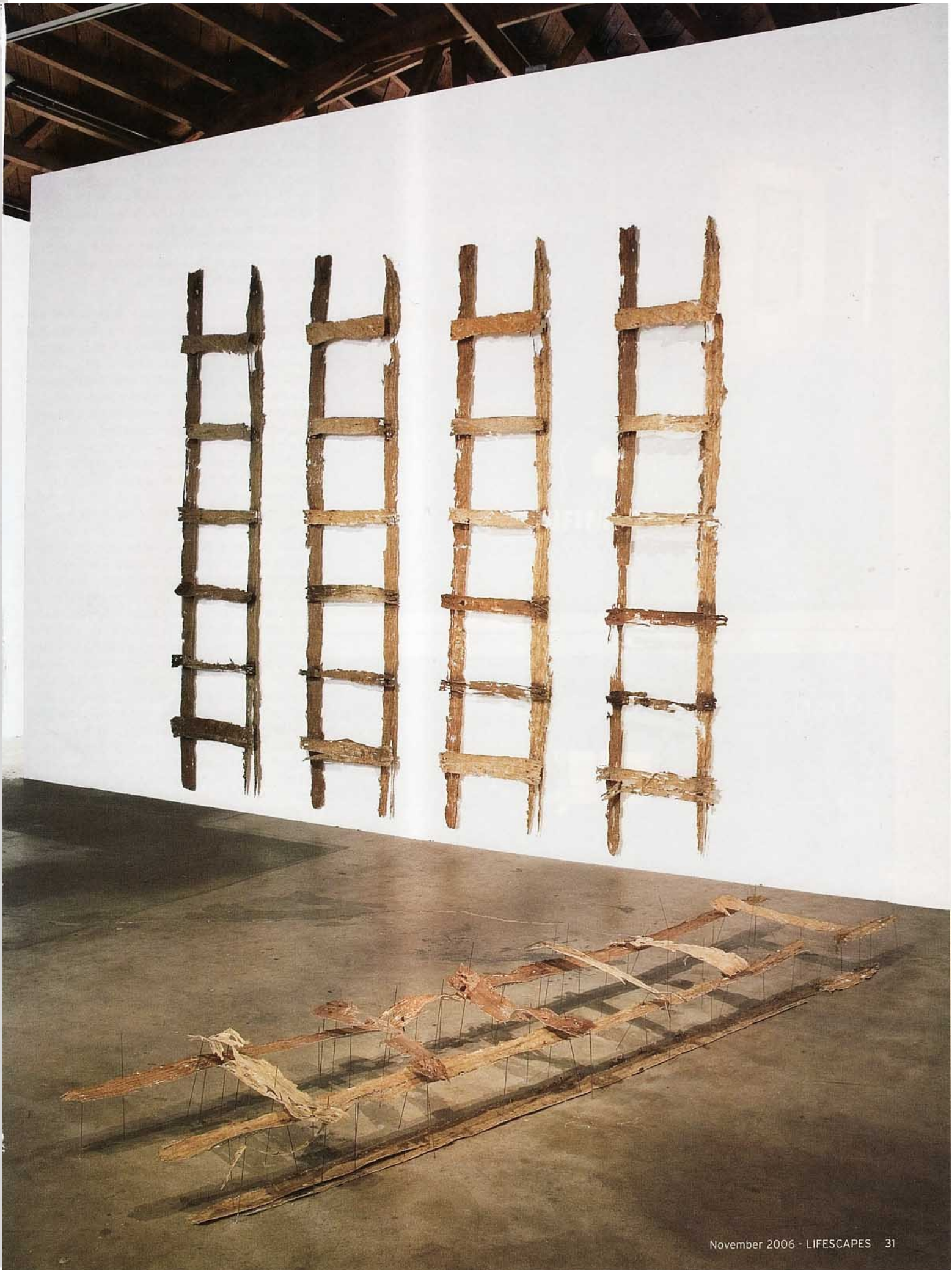
Tenth Avenue, among them Pat Hearn, Morris-Healy and Annina Nosei. Megadealer Matthew Marks cemented the beachhead with a large space of his own. By 1996, Chelsea was officially "hot." Within a decade, it had become the biggest gallery destination in the U.S.

Central among the attractive factors was the combination of large industrial spaces and inexpensive rent. Many ground floor spaces held taxi garages, which could be transformed into roomy storefront galleries, retaining the requisite gritty feel, while the floors above held lofts that could likewise be turned into exhibition spaces or artists' studios. Ambitious art dealers looking to expand their square footage grabbed the opportunity, and in many cases the shift in geography offered a shift in destiny. Galleries with tiny, boxlike spaces situated at the fringes of the downtown art world could now become players with prominent storefronts. In fact, Chelsea's relative remoteness from the art world, and the subway, which seemed like a drawback at first glance, was revealed to be an asset: the remote location weeded out the looky-loo tourists and fashionistas who had taken over SoHo and attracted a more rarified crowd, especially the three C's—collectors, critics, and curators—who were truly interested in the art.

Culver City offers many similar benefits. And, like Chelsea, the area's emergence has been both dramatic and organic. Of course, the map of gallery districts in Los Angeles is fluid and ever-changing. Because L.A. is so dispersed, only the strongest galleries can survive on their own. So dealers have traditionally banded together to create their own ecosystem. Forty years ago, that map was also centered on La Cienega, on the leafy strip of blocks just north of Melrose Avenue. At the heart of it was the celebrated Ferus Gallery, run by Irving Blum and Walter Hopps, who offered the first venue for many of the great California Pop Art and assemblage artists of the era. Next door was *Art Forum* magazine, until they moved to New York "to get advertisements," according to Molly Barnes. Up the block was the Los Angeles Art Association. "It was just fascinating," Barnes recalls. "On that street there must have been 30 galleries. Then the rug people started coming in." In other words, what happened to La Cienega is similar to what happened to New York's SoHo and countless other art districts: art dealers stake out a funky new neighborhood, gentrify it, then local landlords jump the rent and boutiques start moving in, until finally the galleries can't afford to stay and head off to settle new terrain. Eleana Del Rio of Koplin Del Rio had been in four locations in 25 years, until opening her new space on Washington Boulevard this fall. "In our three prior moves, we were last on the bandwagon," she explains. "We were forced out. That's the cycle. You can't compete with high end retail."

Among the new quasi-neighborhoods that emerged in the wake of La Cienega in the '80s were art clusters on La Brea and in Santa Monica. In 1994, around the same time Chelsea was being conceived in New York, Bergamot Station was born when a handful of L.A. art dealers, including Shoshana and Wayne Blank of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Robert Berman of Berman Turner, and Tom Patchett of Track 16, banded together to transform a decaying urban rail station and industrial park into a hive-like cultural enclave. The instant success of Bergamot spurred its own satellite spin-off: the infamous "Baby Bergamot" a half mile north. Featuring such hip, hungry galleries as Marc Foxx, Dan Bernier, and ACME, "Baby Bergamot" was to Bergamot what Slamdance was to Sundance, allowing them to simultaneously parade their rejection of Bergamot and their proximity to it. Three years later, that same trio, looking to redefine themselves with bigger spaces and their own identity, grouped together to establish the all-star gallery complex at 6150 Wilshire, down the block from LACMA. In the past three years, Chinatown has emerged as another bastion of young edgy galleries such as Happy Lion, Mary Goldman, Telix and Mandarin advancing ambitious programs of their own, while Downtown now has its own vibrant scene.

"DESEN-VOLVI-MIENTO OR SEVEN LAYERS OUTWARD," 2005, **Leyla Cardenas**, CANVAS, WOOD (PEELED FROM OLD LADDER) AND PINS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, ON VIEW AT D.E.N., PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE



TIFFANY BOZIC | JOSE PARLA | DAVE KINSEY | JEFF SOTO | MIKE STILKEY | MARION LANE



6009 WASHINGTON BLVD., CULVER CITY, CA | 310 837 1989 | BLKMRKTGALLERY.COM

So in a sense the emergence of Culver City since 2003 is a natural evolutionary step. The city's central location made it an unlikely, but ultimately smart, place to set down roots: like central Kansas, there's not much there, but it's equidistant to pretty much everywhere else. But ask any gallerist in Culver what drew them there, and among the myriad of reasons they'll trot out, after the accessibility, they will inevitably mention the same three words: Blum & Poe. "I think they are the anchor," says Donna Napper, of d.e.n., around the corner on Washington. "Much as some of us aspire to be at that level of recognition, they're already there."

Looking back, it seems that Blum & Poe were reluctant pioneers. Founded by Timothy Blum and Jeff Poe in 1994, Blum & Poe is one of L.A.'s most cutting-edge galleries, with a rigorous conceptual agenda than spans a variety of media, that attracts a top-tier international audience. Their stable includes such heavy hitters as photographer Sharon Lockhart, sculptor Sam Durant, painter Mark Grotjahn and mixed-media Japanese artists Takashi Murakami and Chiho Aoshima: "local and international artists of all stripes." Yet before they moved to Culver they ran their business from a tiny showroom in a complex on Broadway and 20th in Santa Monica. Their space was a mere 1200 square feet, including the back room, leaving just 500 square feet to show their art. Adding insult to injury, by the time they decided they were ready to move, the other half dozen galleries with whom they shared their complex had already abandoned it. "We were looking all over the city," Blum recalls. "Downtown, Hollywood, Chinatown, the whole canvas of the city. Finally we were just driving around and—boom!—we saw this building. A lot of people said that it was weird, or too far south. We just decided to forge ahead. There was nothing here at all, just a lot of weird buildings, you don't know what goes on inside." As for the atmospheric concrete riverbed that runs directly beside the gallery, meandering southward under La Cienega? "The creek was on the list of pros and cons. And it was definitely a pro."

By the time they reopened in fall 2003 they had a handsome, 5000 square foot space, literally 10 times their previous exhibition space. But they also had something they had not anticipated: neighbors. As soon as Blum and Poe began developing their site, other galleries began to follow suit. Among them was Anna Helwing, which opened two stores south of Blum & Poe; eventually, Sandroni.Rey moved in between them, completing the heart of the gallery row just north of Washington Boulevard on the east side of La Cienega. Other pioneers included MC, on Comey Avenue, off Venice by La Cienega, and Billy Shire, with his stable of amiably surreal painters, in a quaint brick storefront four blocks east on Washington.

Onetime Newspace director Susanne Vielmetter opened her current space on the north side of Washington in January 2004

as one of the first wave of gallerists to follow Blum & Poe. "I opened in 2000 at Wilshire and La Brea, and started a little cluster there. So I knew I was able to start a cluster," she laughs. "I saw this space and fell in love with it. But the real reason I moved was Blum & Poe. I knew [with them] this would be a major thing." Because her program includes many difficult, conceptual sculptors and installation artists, like Rodney McMillan and Dutch artist Matilda Ter Heijne, moving to a big space in a remote area felt like "a big risk. I was sweating," she recalls. Clearly, her gamble has paid off. "When people come from out of town or from New York, not one of them misses Culver City," she says emphatically. "Not one of them."

Yet it was north of Blum & Poe, along the east side of La Cienega, that the central strip of galleries took shape (in one of the oddities of the neighborhood, the west side of La Cienega has no galleries at all). Galleries like Q.E.D., LightBox, Taylor De Cordoba, and Lizabeth Oliveria stand primly side by side, like school-children in a holiday pageant vying for their parents attention. "It's amazing, the way it's just blown up around here," marvels Sugar Brown, director of the George Billis Gallery, which also operates a branch in—where else?—Chelsea, and which opened its space in the heart of La Cienega in August 2004. "Because we got in early, we got a great space. So many other galleries want to move here now. And it's just spreading."

Walter Maciel, who opened his La Cienega gallery in March, moved from San Francisco. "When I knew I was going to start my own business, I only looked in Culver City. I fell in love with the neighborhood. The spaces were great for showing art, once you cleaned them up. And when I signed a lease a year ago, it was also very affordable. Much more than San Francisco."

Ironically, although "Culver City" has now passed into the lexicon, the primary art district occupies only the narrow, northeast corner of that convoluted municipality. And like everything north of Washington Boulevard, the gallery row on La Cienega is not even technically in Culver City but rather in Los Angeles. That hasn't stopped Culver City administrators from adopting these geographic orphans as their own. "It's synergistic," says Susan Obrow, events coordinator for the city's Cultural Affairs division, who helped initiate the city's now-famous Artwalk in June. "There didn't seem any point in saying we have an art district and it ends at this line, when you have 10 galleries just across the border saying they're in Culver City. It happened on its own," she explains. "But now we have a responsibility to recognize it and to nurture it."

In fact, Culver City had been angling for years to create an arts district. As far back as 1984, the city added trees and greenery to the median of Washington Boulevard and began to weed out automotive shops in an effort to attract cultural businesses, and in 2001 the city founded a Cultural Affairs commission. "They're

BANDINI ■ ART



Aaron Kramer Gourd Grouping, 2006

■ AARON KRAMER

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"EXTRACTED," 2006, **Rubín Ochoa**, SITE SPECIFIC INSTALLATION, STEEL, WOOD, DIRT, BURLAP, WIRE MESH, EPS BONDING CEMENT, 12' X 20' X 28'

a desired tenant," says Kellee Fritzal, the city's economic development coordinator: "We're holding open the door for them, saying 'Come on in!'" Among the incentives the city offers galleries is a 'fee incentive program' in which the city reimburses desired retailers for all city fees up to \$15,000 and guidance with the planning process. Among the galleries at the vanguard of this movement was Western Projects, which took its lease in late 2003 in downtown Culver City.

Other galleries within the city limits include a row on Washington, just west of the culvert: BLK/MRKT (spoken "Black Market") with its sleek modern storefront space; Donna Napper's d.e.n., which includes such mid-career abstractionists as Alex Couwenberg and Daniel Brice; the new Koplin Del Rio Gallery, which specializes in contemporary realist work; and Kinkead Contemporary, which just opened on September 9. Two blocks south, on Fairfax, is Bandini Art, which opened its fall season with a sumptuous installation by Jennifer Vanderpool. Just beyond the city limits, on Venice west of Sawtelle, is the estimable Cherry & Martin. "It does feel like a community," observes Napper. "You've got these great industrial buildings but it's also residential. It gives it a small-town, workable feel. For me, as a first-time gallery owner, it's been very beneficial being in the midst of all these quality galleries."

Yet even beyond the gallery scene, the simple fact is Culver City has transformed itself into a bona fide cultural mecca. In 2004, the historic art deco Culver Theater was renamed the Kirk Douglas Theatre and became home of the Center Theatre Group. Founded by Gordon Davidson—Mr. L.A. Theater himself—and since handed over to Michael Ritchie, the Center promises to be a major player on the L.A. stage. In 2005, The Actors Gang migrated west from Hollywood to the renovated Ivy Substation in the heart of Culver. The venerable Helms Bakery building has become a pulsing center for jazz. And then there are Smashbox Studios, the West Coast headquarters for NPR and PEN USA, and a new campus for Antioch University. Around the nation, the arts may well be under siege, but in Culver they are clearly a growth industry.

Among the newcomers is MODAA, a modest new museum of design art and architecture, set in a striking new mixed-use building west of Washington's gallery row. With its impressive, jittery tan-and-white checkerboard facade, the building was designed by SPF:a architects, who also have their offices in the building, while



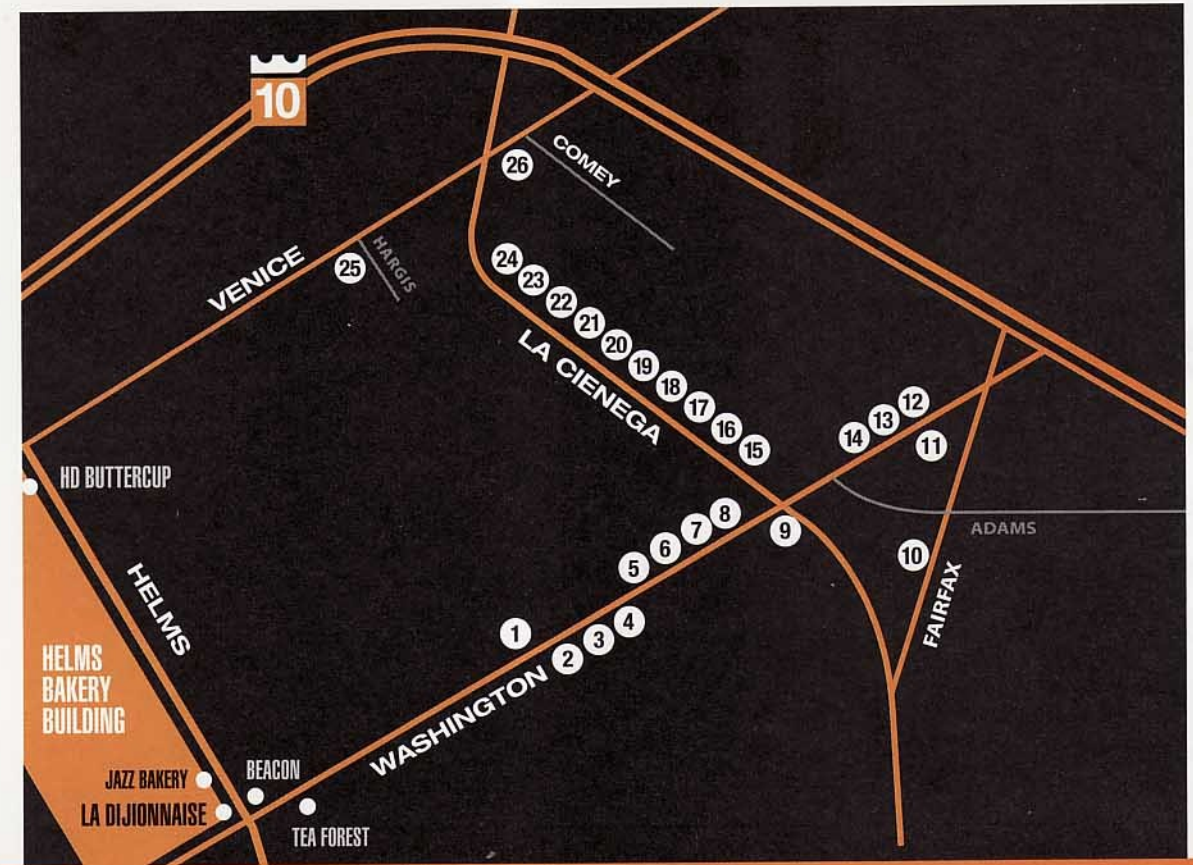
"CAPTURED," 2006, **Hung Lui**, OIL ON CANVAS, 66" X 66"
PHOTO: WALTER MACIEL GALLERY

its upper floors contain seven artist's lofts. On the ground floor is Wilson, a hip new restaurant, the first to descend on Culver's eastern tip. An obscure new museum dedicated to the art of the Cold War from Eastern Europe, the Wende Museum, has opened further west. Meanwhile, befitting its outsider status, just north of Culver on Venice Boulevard is the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a unique conceptual artwork in itself, which was notably lauded by Lawrence Weschler in his book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*. Perhaps the most significant addition to the Culver art scene is its first non-profit alternate space, LAXART, which opened on La Cienega's gallery row in March and inaugurated its fall season with a memorable installation by Ruben Ochoa. Like many of her new neighbors, founder Lauri Firstenberg scoured the city, from Koreatown to MacArthur Park, before settling on Culver for its vitality. With its ambitious conceptual agenda and international curatorial scope, LAXART has already made its mark, attracting the sort of savvy, art-wise audiences commercial galleries crave.

If the only thing missing on South La Cienega so far is a place to grab a good cup of coffee, surely it's just a matter of time before Starbucks and Coffee Bean are facing off across the banks of Ballona Creek. But as of this fall, gallery row has its first official bar. Called Mandrake, it is two stores down from LAXART and even has its own exhibit space. Fittingly, the sponsors of the new bohemian watering hole are none other than Blum & Poe.

The night Mandrake opened, on September 9, the entire art world opened its doors for the fall season. As herds of eager art lovers descended upon the streets of Culver in a collage of elegant dresses, torn jeans, and trendy eyewear, and cars circled the surrounding blocks in a primal quest for parking, a vast white stretch limo jeep perched on the corner of Washington and La Cienega, its golden lights flashing like a beacon, as if summoning the faithful.

Has Culver come of age too fast? Can Baby Culver or Anti-Culver be far behind? Timothy Blum, for one, remains sanguine. "I know there's room for more a little east, over toward Adams. It's still dicey and seedy, so it won't gentrify immediately," he muses. But certainly he seems to speak on behalf of all the other gallerists who've settled this bustling artistic frontier when he adds, "we're definitely invested in the neighborhood for a long, long time."



CULVERCITYARTSDISTRICT

1 MODAA

8609 Washington Blvd / 310 588 0902

2 Cardwell Jimmerson

8568 Washington Blvd / 310 815 1100

3 The Lab 101

8530-B Washington Blvd / 310 588 0911

4 Corey Helford

8522 Washington Blvd / 310 287 2340

5 Kinkead Contemporary

6029 Washington Blvd / 310 838 7474

6 Koplin Del Rio

6031 Washington Blvd / 310 836 9055

7 d.e.n. contemporary

6023 Washington Blvd / 310 559 3023

8 BLK/MRKT

6009 Washington Blvd / 310 837 1989

9 Harvey Levine

5902 Washington Blvd / 323 954 1117

10 Bandini

2635 S. Fairfax Ave / 310 202 2213

11 Billy Shire Fine Arts

5790 Washington Blvd / 323 297 0600

12 Susanne Vielmetter

5795 Washington Blvd / 323 933 2117

13 David

5797 Washington Blvd / 323 939 9069

14 sixspace

5803 Washington Blvd / 323 932 6200

15 Anna Helwing

2766 La Cienega Blvd / 310 202 2213

16 Sandroni.Rey

2762 La Cienega Blvd / 310 280 0111

17 Blum & Poe

2754 La Cienega Blvd / 310 836 2062

18 George Billis

2716 La Cienega Blvd / 310 838 3685

19 Lizabeth Oliveria

2712 La Cienega Blvd / 310 837 1073

20 Taylor de Cordoba

2660 La Cienega Blvd / 310 559 9156

21 Lightbox

2656 La Cienega Blvd / 310 559 1111

22 Walter Maciel

2642 La Cienega Blvd / 310 839 1840

23 LAXART

2640 La Cienega Blvd / 323 868 5893

24 Angstrom

2622 La Cienega Blvd / 310 204 3334

25 Denizen

8600 Venice Blvd / 310 838 1959

26 MC

6088 Comey Ave / 323 939 3777

OFF THE MAP:

Cherry and Martin

12611 Venice Blvd. / 310 398 7404

Fette's Gallery

4255 Baldwin Ave.

Greg Fleishman

3850 Main St. / 310 202 6108

Fresh Paint

9355 Culver Blvd. Ste. B / 310 558 9355

HK Fine Art Gallery

3850 Main Street / 310 202 8749

The Museum of Jurassic Technology

9341 Venice Blvd.

Overtones

11306 Venice Blvd. / 310 915 0346

Western Project

3830 Main St. / 310 838 0609

Map courtesy of
Jana Des Forges, BLK/MRKT