

Recessionary Blue Period for Art Dealers

■ **Economy:** Major galleries have closed and others aren't far behind as evidence of hard times multiplies in Southern California art scene.

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Most Southern California art dealers haven't had a nice day since the recession hit, but it has taken a long time for their distress to become visible. Shows have gone on and openings have bustled even as fear has gripped the bank accounts of former big spenders. As the recession drags on, energetic entrepreneurs continue to open new galleries. But now, more than a year after the art market took a nose dive, evidence of economic hard times is mounting in Southern California's art scene.

Five galleries—BlumHelman, Walker and Walker, Andrea Ross and Marc Richards of Santa Monica and Art Space of West Los Angeles—have closed since June. Three others—Santa Monica's Luhring, Augustine Hetzler and Pence galleries, and La Brea Avenue's Parker/Zanic—recently announced that their current shows will be the last, although Parker/Zanic plans to reorganize and open at another location. The only owner of a vanishing gallery who has not cited economic difficulties is Putter Pence, who is closing up shop to become a full-time mother and is in the process of subleasing her space at 908 Colorado Ave.

Also recently closed is the Gallery at 817, a conceptual photography gallery at 817 N. La Brea Ave. Building owner Steve Kaner closed the gallery abruptly Jan. 11, forc-



RANDY LEFFINGWELL / Los Angeles Times

Patrons at Ovsey Gallery show by F. Scott Hess. Neil Ovsey says crowds began thinning with the Gulf War.

ing the departure of director Catherine Whyte Rhodes, who is considering opening her own space in Pasadena's Old Town area.

Meanwhile, Kaner says he is seeking nonprofit status for the space and hopes to reopen in April with a new director.

Some insiders say that additional galleries are likely to fold when their leases come due, while others

contend that galleries' life spans are more closely tied to their particular mode of financing.

If backers who initially welcomed a financial loss for tax purposes no longer want a loss, for example, the gallery may go under.

"In terms of the economy, I think Los Angeles is finally catching up with New York, where this happened several months ago, and there are going to be a lot more

closures," says Christopher Ford, co-director of Pence Gallery.

In other signs of the times, some dealers have reduced their exhibition space and programs. Richard/Bennett Gallery, for example, moved from La Brea to much smaller digs at 2200 Main St. in Santa Monica. "It has been a good move for us," says gallery co-di-

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Director Bennett Roberts, noting that he and partner Richard Heller may extend their lease for six months but are "playing it by ear" as new spaces become available.

Longtime dealer Sigmund Wenzler will reduce his customary agenda of eight or 10 shows per year to three or four, beginning Feb. 1, when he moves from 828 N. La Brea Ave. to a smaller gallery at 638½ Robertson Blvd. Some other dealers who have not formally announced changes in their programs have taken to extending exhibitions as a means of holding down costs and allowing more time to awaken collectors' interest.

"I don't think business is good for anyone. If they tell you so, they're lying," says dealer Dan Saxon, whose success with Chicano art has helped to offset slackened sales in other areas at his gallery on Beverly Boulevard.

"Business started to tumble when Iraq invaded Kuwait. That scared people. Then there was the bank fiasco, so many clients—out of guilt or fear—stopped buying," says dealer Neil Ousey, repeating an oft-heard scenario. "It used to be that if you had 10 deals in the air, eight of them would close. Now if two or three close, that's OK," Ousey says.

Many dealers attribute the gallery slump in part to psychological factors. "True collectors will always collect. It's the most wonderful debilitating disease you can have," Ford says. But those who treat their collections as hobbies have pulled back, and those who had built a social life around art may not want to be perceived as frivolous. Art ceased to be "fun" when a worried mood overtook the country and speculative fever burned out in the art market.

Whether collectors' problems are in their heads or their pocketbooks, the effects are real. For-lease signs—including one that's prominently displayed at Santa Monica's prestigious complex on Colorado Avenue—bear silent testimony to the gloomy situation.

But it's difficult to assess the scene because individual dealers' reports to the press depend upon their expectations and experience, as well as hard figures.

The news from the gallery front is certainly not all bad. Half a dozen new galleries—including Remba, at 918 Colorado Ave. in Santa Monica; Bobbie Greenfield Fine Art, at 74 Market St. in Venice; and Jansen-Perez at 5750 Wilshire Blvd.—counteract losses, although some newcomers remain to be tested. Kimberly Gallery, a branch of a Washington gallery that opened in conjunction with "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," the County Museum of Art's recent blockbuster, may not extend its six-month lease because of a drop-off in business, says director Elyse Klaidman.

Still, there seems to be a ready

supply of enthusiastic new arrivals. "The economy is an illusion," says dealer Bill Lowe, who has opened a branch of Atlanta's Lowe Gallery in Andrea Ross' former space, at 2110 Broadway in Santa Monica. Lowe says that coming to Los Angeles is part of a long-range plan, including galleries in Europe, and that the "strong art" he sells is always in demand. He opened his first show last week—paintings by Atlanta artist **Todd Murphy**—and says he has already made sales.

"I think this is just a time of change," says dealer Claudette Lussier, who opened Studio Raid, at 7384 Beverly Blvd., 18 months ago. "I feel very lucky to be covering my costs with sales of work by emerging young artists," she says.

Paul Kopeikin has been besieged with "Why now?" questions during the two months since he opened his photography gallery at 964 N. La Brea Ave. But he has a ready answer: "This isn't the worst time to open a gallery. It's the best time because it's the time I'm doing it."

After collecting photography for 10 years and presenting one exhibition in his home, Kopeikin decided to quit his job in the film industry and become a full-time dealer. Using the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco as a model, he opened with a show of Mark Klett's work, followed with Harold Edgerton's photographs and he has booked other solo exhibitions for the rest of the year.

Kopeikin says Los Angeles isn't quite the art town he thought it was, but he isn't discouraged. "Sales haven't been what I had hoped, but every other aspect of the gallery's emergence has been great," he says.

In an effort to combat the recession, Lussier and Kopeikin have banded together with more experienced dealers in a new promotional consortium, Los Angeles Art Galleries. The group hopes to foster awareness that all galleries did not move to Santa Monica during the boom in the late '80s.

"We want to show that there's life east of Sepulveda," as dealer Manny Silverman puts it.

Los Angeles Art Galleries, which claims about 30 members from Beverly Hills and West Hollywood, will launch its program with a joint opening on Feb. 5, 6-9 p.m. Most member galleries also will open on subsequent Wednesday nights, but some may only participate once or twice a month. A schedule detailing each gallery's program will be available.

The consortium's membership roster includes a diverse sampling of galleries offering everything from children's book illustrations to decorative arts, but the majority specialize in contemporary art.

To join the group, galleries must be nominated by a member and approved by a six-member committee chaired by dealer Tobey C. Moss. The annual membership fee

is \$50, according to presiding member Darrel Couturier of Couturier Gallery.

In addition to cooperating on Wednesday night openings, members will advertise together in newspapers and magazines, post banners and occasionally sponsor special events. One idea in the works is a billboard near the County Museum of Art asking, "Did you know you are within one mile of 48 art galleries?"

"We have quite an amazing resource, but many people don't know we're here. We need to advertise in very cost-effective ways," Couturier says.

"There's nothing revolutionary in this," Saxon says of the new program. "We simply feel that there are times when people can't come in during the work day or Saturday, particularly when people are working harder to make a living. . . . None of us expect lots of traffic at the beginning. This kind of thing spreads by word of mouth."

However, most dealers agree that the Wednesday openings won't be successful unless they are a regular occurrence at all member galleries—like the old Monday night "art walks" on La Cienega Boulevard in the '50s and '60s.

"I come from a promotional background and I understand the benefit of promotion," says Saxon, a former advertising executive, who will open his gallery each Wednesday night. "I also understand that no promotion is short term; it's all long term."

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