California Design 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
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The Pacific Standard Time shows scattered across Southern California are at once a condensation and a cornucopia of the arts stemming from this region. That this is a fraught starting point goes without saying, but the value of pulling together nearly seventy exhibitions in dozens of museums outweighs those concerns. For all the predictable kvetching by the likes of Dave Hickey in the New York Times about California’s provincial promotionism, the grand curatorial idea and collaboration among disparate institutions provided the momentum for some remarkable shows, to name a few: two installations in the San Diego area about light, the Hammer Museum’s show Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980, and the subject of this review: Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s exhibition California Design 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way (Figure 1). These three-and-a-half decades capture the era when modern design evolved in California, particularly in the Los Angeles region, to not only accommodate but shape modern life. A host of objects provides the evidence. Visitors see a quirky beauty in the Raymond Loewy Avanti car or Googie architecture, next to sexy backyard play-suits for homemakers, Henry Keck’s ubiquitous and functionally elegant salt, pepper, and sugar shakers, alongside Greta Magnusson Grossman’s sleek Formica desk and cheaply manufactured floor lamps. It was Grossman’s characterization of California’s predilection for “living in a modern way” that gave the show its title. The show valorizes common objects and brings some little-known geniuses to light. It testifies to the collapse of popular and academic art, collecting and consuming, the living room and the gallery, the studio and the factory. The power of these familiar, domestic objects is apparent with a little eavesdropping in the galleries: “I had one of these when I was in high school” or “This looks just like the chair in my grandparent’s family room.”

If you thought the appetite for mid-century modern was sated by Dwell magazine, the LACMA design show will disabuse you of that notion. All the trappings of California’s suburban norm are on display here. There is an ironic twist that these popular design products have been elevated from the tract house to the museum, but the installation does its best to keep things in their places without fetishizing them. Studebaker’s Avanti sits on a bed of the sparkling white gravel that stands in for the Arizona lawn; the furniture and furnishings are lined up for viewing in a manner more reminiscent of Barker Brothers or Ikea than the Museum of Modern Art. Design for the masses, as brought to California by the European émigrés (the subject of the excellent Exiles and Émigrés show at LACMA in 1997) grew less pretentious and less ideological in California. Rather than Bauhaus totalizations or the technical parameters of the Existenzminimum that arose in Germany, modernism in the American West could relax. Sunset magazine, graphically sophisticated record album covers, and Barbie demonstrate how the modern aesthetic slipped like so much high-fructose corn syrup into our daily diet. (Barbie of Mattel was the corporate sponsor of the show.)

The ambitious exhibition sets itself a nearly impossible task: to display decades of California design defined in the broadest of terms to include clothing, architecture, cars, toys, textiles, graphics, furniture, ceramics, interiors, and metalwork. On top of that, unlike other PST shows, this one admits design from all of California rather than just Southern California. The introductory wall text succinctly states the purpose: “This exhibition explores how the California of our collective imagination—a democratic utopia where a benign climate permitted life to be led informally and largely outdoors—was translated into a material culture that defined an era.” California is characterized as an exceptional rather than emblematic setting within popular modern American life, emerging...
in the twentieth century with “optimism and democracy, fearless experimentalism, and a love of new technology.” Though a caricature, it fits the California of a wider imaginary and sets up a reading of the show’s objects. Visitors watch the suburban, domestic lifestyle as it became modern. From the textiles that upholstered our divans, to the FiestaWare we dined on, and the Polaroid camera we used to document it all—there is an abundance of objects to convince the visitor that design touched everything we touched.

Faced with the task of organizing what might have started out looking like the dream unit from the TV series “Storage Wars,” curators Wendy Kaplan and Bobbye Tigerman established four active themes: Shaping, Making, Living, and Selling. Shaping refers to the earliest historical period starting in the boom years of the 1920s and ’30s, when the first wave of popular modernism took hold in the building of homes and the creation of their contents. Making concerns the production of objects, from postwar defense technologies transformed to domestic purpose such as replacing the traditional crafts, most particularly, ceramics. The Living section is dedicated to all the contents of the California home. Selling considers how modern design was disseminated, and its intersections with consumerism.

Drawing the line both literally and curatorially around the objects for each theme was problematic. The categories are unhelpful, since nearly every object fits every label (the chair, like the architectural drawing, has something to do with shaping, making, living, and selling). This means that the work of individual designers, like Charles and Ray Eames, is sprinkled throughout the show, while other particular pieces, like issues of Arts and Architecture, occur in more than one place, and historical continuity is difficult to discern. With all types of objects appearing in each category, there was a weak attempt to graphically color-code each theme. The show’s catalog is a valuable reader since it compensates for some of these shortcomings, situating the objects in an intellectual, aesthetic, and historical trajectory.

While the furnishings portraying modern life are both informative and stunning, the containers they sit within are shown in hit-or-miss fashion. There is the fantastic, faceted 1936 Airstream “Clipper” trailer at the start of the show, some representations of the Case Study house program including a number of Julius Shulman’s photographs and Arts and Architecture magazines, a few Victor Gruen interiors (though these are not residential and thus feel out of place), and an occasional architectural or landscape rendering. Surprisingly absent are Cliff May’s residential projects, along with most of Northern California’s defining architectural contributions, such as that by Bay Area Regionalists like Joseph Esherick or the seminal Sea Ranch development by Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull and Whitaker. Moreover, architecture has always struggled with life in the museum since its drawings and photographs are objects in themselves as well as representations of objects at a remove. At LACMA, the few and sometimes beautiful architectural drawings stand apart from the rest of the show’s emphasis on the real McCoy, the fabrics and household objects themselves. In fact, the architecture of California during this period is so rich that it deserved its own show. The Getty, as it turns out, will have an exhibition that could well have complemented the other PST shows, called Los Angeles Architecture: 1940–1980, that will open in spring 2013. Given that nearly a million dollars of Getty funds supported the LACMA design show, they are the ones to know that architecture’s Southern California story was inadequately told.

There are, however, two exceptions that bring architecture into the heart of LACMA’s Resnick Pavilion: one ironic, and the other so adept that it nearly recedes into the background. Perhaps the most elaborate and certainly the largest object in the show is a full-scale mock-up of the Eames House and all the actual objects Ray and Charles Eames assembled to form their own statement about living in a modern way. This is effectively a show within a show. Since the house was being restored simultaneous with the exhibition, the curators brought the interior to LACMA in part to show the architecture, and in part to demonstrate how these designers curated their own spaces. As part of the Case Study program, the Eames house adds an important dimension to an understanding of California modernism. But it also brings to light that such a canonical architectural work is actually quite inaccessible, given its private context in Pacific Palisades—a classic southern California problem where houses are located off the public transit grid, in gated communities on streets that are themselves private. For all their populist leanings, the Eameses’ house is private, fragile, and tough to maintain, forcing Eames heirs to raise funds inventively, including by marketing overnight stays to well-heeled design aficionados.

The second remarkable work of architecture in LACMA is the Hodgetts + Fung installation, which turns the Resnick Pavilion into a bona fide gallery. The pavilion, part of the unfortunate LACMA expansion designed by Renzo Piano in 2010, is warehouse-like in scale and stripped-down expression. The offspring little resembles Frank Gehry’s gritty remake of a real warehouse into the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, but instead is too much like a new big-box discount store. Enter architects Craig Hodgetts and Ming Fung, with their sinuous, raked display wall that turns all that empty space into a series of connected rooms. Led along by the design works sitting on a curved, raised ledge, visitors amble through the exhibition. The installation’s straightforward component assembly, its use of off-the-shelf materials like polycarbonate and rectangular metal tubes, its ad hoc accommodation of objects large and small, and its easy, meandering experience, are absolutely in keeping with the modern California design tradition. The exhibition’s design brings the show together, illustrating a Southern California architectural ethos as indelibly as any other object in the show.

DANA CUFF
University of California, Los Angeles

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