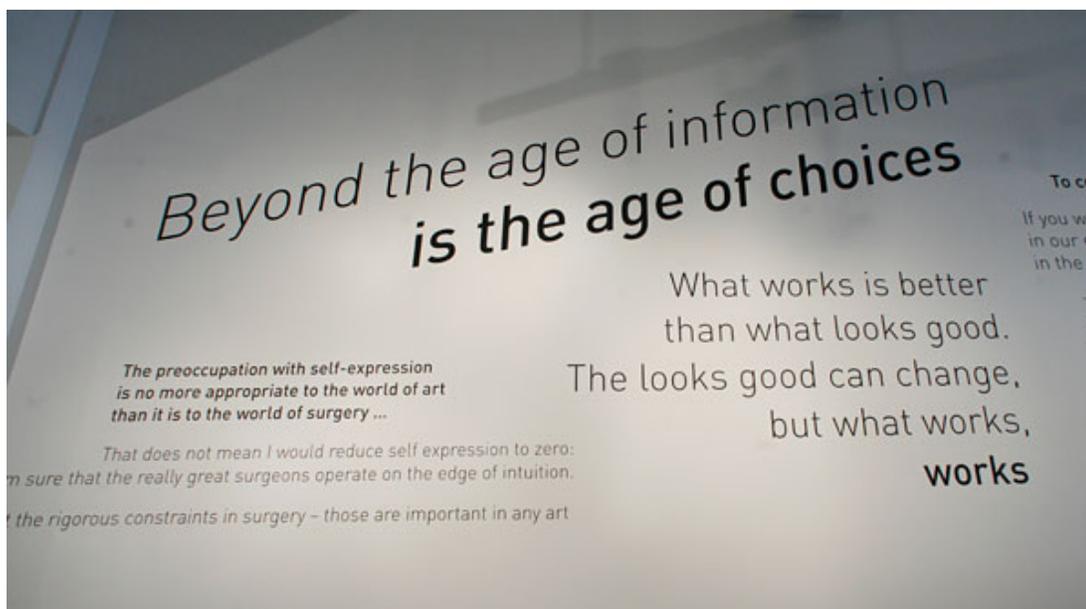


ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

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Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



Text is a central component of two Pacific Standard Time exhibitions, both focused on design: “**Eames Designs: The Guest Host Relationship**” at the A+D Museum, and “**Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design**” at the MAK Center. The former whimsically uses everyday objects to illustrate quotes from midcentury designers Charles and Ray Eames; the latter is an engaging exploration of the life and work of McCoy, a writer and historian who, during her 40-plus-years career, championed and pretty much defined modern architecture in California. The linchpin of each show is the way in which text interacts with the

objects or spaces on view, providing fresh perspectives on icons of Southern California design and architecture.

Throughout the A+D Museum, curators Deborah Sussman and Andrew Byrom have splashed the walls with quotes from husband and wife designers Charles and Ray Eames. Best known for their iconic chairs, the couple were inspired not by theory or style, but by the simple usefulness of everyday things. Their appreciation for vernacular design and commitment to education come across clearly in the show, although its presentation is at times a bit gimmicky.

Most of the quotes are “illustrated” with actual objects, either freestanding, tacked to the walls, or displayed on custom-designed, E-shaped (for “Eames” of course) shelving units. Most are not



Eames creations, but range anachronistically from foodstuffs to Legos to Indian water vessels to diving flippers to an iPad. A quote that mentions a braided loaf of egg bread is accompanied by, what else? A braided loaf of egg bread.

This technique is often too cute, but sometimes works well. One quote compares an Eames chair to one by early Dutch modern designer Gerrit Rietveld, claiming that although “mine is much more naive,” the Rietveld is too intellectual. Nearby, the two chairs sit side by side: The Rietveld looks like a folded Mondrian painting, all angles and hard edges. The Eames, a sinuous bent plywood chair, is organic and inviting. It’s not hard to guess which is better at fulfilling the mission of comfortable seating.

The quotes come from the Eames collection in the Library of

Congress, and from a rather more personal source: the memories of Sussman (who once worked for the Eameses) and her collaborators. Unfortunately, the sources aren't provided, so it's impossible to know which quotes are public record and which are anecdotal. While this omission is a bit cavalier, the show's focus on text and ideas over the much-fetishized chairs is still a valuable reminder that the Eameses were interested not in stardom or even technical innovation, but in solving — simply and elegantly — the basic problems of life.



Esther McCoy wrote about how the Eameses' straightforward aesthetic arose from the constraints imposed by the Great Depression. Similar themes — a desire to return to basics and a concern for the everyday lives of working people— percolate through both shows, but McCoy's writings, publications, and letters interact with their surroundings — the concrete and wood house

that R.M. Schindler built for himself in 1922 — in much more subtle ways.

McCoy's texts, displayed in vitrines or printed on clear plastic panels affixed to the walls, appear like a scrim over exactly the type of surfaces and spaces she wrote about. In some ways the show operates similarly to "Eames Designs" in that it imbues a space with words. However, where that show sometimes feels contrived, McCoy's words come almost magically alive inside the

Schindler house.

A Schindler expert who had once worked as a draftsman in his studio, McCoy wrote specifically about the vaguely Japanese-style structure with a somewhat labyrinthine floor plan. She found it at first “disorienting,” but then discovered an “inner dynamism in the forms that involved the muscles of the body as well as the eye.”

This evocative style characterizes her writing. Of the Eameses and the economic straits of the 1930s, she wrote, “The eye was on the sparrow.” And in a 1979 book about Schindler and fellow Viennese transplant Richard Neutra, she declared, “Beauty was morality during the Depression years.”

This poetic impulse is less surprising when we learn that McCoy, who died in 1989 at the age of 85, also wrote fiction: novellas, short stories, and — a delightful discovery — pulpy whodunits with collaborator Allan Read (also a woman) under the pseudonym Allan McRoyd. She was also active in radical left-wing politics in the 1930s, advocating for affordable housing and exposing slum conditions in papers like Upton Sinclair’s National Epic News.

She began writing about architecture in 1945, and is best known for her landmark book, "Five California Architects," a study of Bernard Maybeck, Irving Gill, Charles and Henry Greene, and Schindler (See Christopher Hawthorne’s



assessment in his "Reading L.A." series). She also contributed to numerous newspapers, magazines, and exhibition catalogs, from

the specialized — Arts and Architecture, the leftist journal *Direction* — to the mainstream — the *New Yorker*, Harper's *Bazaar* and *Living for Young Homemakers*.

The show includes a wide sampling of her writing, but the most resonant piece is a longish excerpt from an unpublished, undated memoir. In it, McCoy beautifully describes a Los Angeles street in 1933, contrasting the California Bank building, with its “pinched, businesslike, well-maintained lobby,” with the offices, a little farther down Broadway, of International Labor Defense, where the “desks, and the pine kitchen chairs and swivel desk chairs bear endless raid scars.” In this lovely exhibition, McCoy's visceral accounts of how spaces carry and reflect the values of those who create, occupy and destroy them reverberate through the Schindler house.

-- Sharon Mizota

Architecture and Design Museum, 6032 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 932-9393, through Jan. 16. Closed Mondays. www.aplusd.org

MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House, 835 North Kings Road, West Hollywood, (323) 651-1510, through Jan. 8. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.makcenter.org

Photos, from top: "Eames Designs: The Guest Host Relationship," A+D Museum. Credit: William Larsen.

"Eames Designs: The Guest Host Relationship," A+D Museum. Credit: William Larsen.

Esther McCoy at work, Santa Monica, c. 1985. From Esther McCoy Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

"Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design" (Sept. 28–Jan. 8, 2012),

MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House ©

MAK Center / Joshua White
