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ART REVIEW

Smack in the middle

L.A.'s midcentury style gets a sleek look in 'Birth of the Cool' at OCMA.

October 10, 2007 | Christopher Knight | Times Staff Writer

"BIRTH of the Cool: California Art, Design and Culture at Midcentury" opened Sunday at the Orange County Museum of Art. Whether we knew it or not, it's an exhibition for which we've been waiting -- and waiting for a very long time.

The obvious engine driving this compact, eloquent show is the pandemonium over Southern California's sleek, mid-20th century architecture and design, a fascination that went from cultish to mainstream in the 1990s. Today it's the Official Glamour Style of the L.A. Future, with every fashionable new condominium tower rising around the city offering one high-rise pastiche or another.

"Birth of the Cool" doesn't stint on it. The show is inevitable fun. How could it not be?

Yet there's a lot more at work here than mere star-struck reverence for Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, who re-created the snazzy cocktail ethos of a 1958 Julius Shulman Case Study House photograph for a spread in the July 2005 pages of *W* magazine. The exhibition also represents a small seismic tremor for the way postwar L.A. art history is finally coming to be understood.

"Birth of the Cool" surveys the progressive cultural zeitgeist in Southern California that emerged after the philistine brutalities of World War II. (The title is borrowed from a celebrated Miles Davis jazz album, recorded for Capitol Records in 1949-50.) New York, like every dominant world capital before it, rapidly became a powerfully provincial hothouse, seeding a wondrous array of exotic, self-aggrandizing blooms. By contrast, Los Angeles went in a different artistic direction. L.A., like Latin America, went international.

From Sao Paulo to Santa Monica, threads began to be woven for a visually spare, perceptually rich aesthetic displaying geometric shape, acute color sense, minimal form and an industrial rapport. Usually, it was inflected by informality, equanimity and an organic spin. Familiar elements were revived from prewar German Bauhaus, Dutch De Stijl, Russian Constructivism and the umbrella International Style.

South American artists such as Jesus Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez were picking up where art left off before war interrupted. But L.A. painters were mostly starting fresh. The SoCal soil had been fertilized by German, Austrian and Eastern European-born architects and artists -- R.M. Schindler, Oskar Fischinger, Richard Neutra, Otto and Gertrud Natzler, Jules Engel -- as well as numerous composers, writers and movie directors.

The show is rich but not large, like the '50s L.A. art world itself, and divided into five succinct sections. OCMA chief curator Elizabeth Armstrong smartly engaged artist Jim Isermann, architect Frederick Fisher and graphic designer Lorraine Wild to collaborate on the installation design. A sympathetic understanding of midcentury L.A. Modernism informs their own acclaimed work. Unsurprisingly, their smashing-looking show also deftly illuminates the art.

An introductory gallery starts with some first-rate abstract paintings by John McLaughlin, Karl Benjamin and Lorser Feitelson. Their radical style of still poorly understood painting is the exhibition's centerpiece.

It's framed at one end by Charles and Ray Eames' jazz-inspired black-and-white film of spinning tops, projected as a wall-size mural. The world goes round.

At the other end is an alcove of Shulman's photographs, focusing on Pierre Koenig's iconic Case Study House #22, perched on a Hollywood Hills bluff above the Chateau Marmont. The pictures of this and other steel-and-glass houses, almost all of them including people, reveal how Shulman is as much a domestic scene photographer as a strictly architectural one. The "art of living" is pictured in a famous sunset photograph of Neutra's Palm Springs' Kaufmann House, where a reclining Mrs. Kaufmann is silhouetted against the swimming pool like a Henry Moore sculpture.

The next fascinating room pairs art with events in 1959. The social timeline is remarkable.

Castro in Cuba; Robert Frank's photographic book "The Americans"; Louis Kahn designing La Jolla's Salk Institute; the last residents of Chavez Ravine cleared for Dodger Stadium. The first American soldiers whose names are now recorded on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial were killed. Barbie, Dobie Gillis and William S. Burroughs' "The Naked Lunch" made their debuts. The microchip was invented, and Allan Kaprow performed the first "Happening."

Another gallery is designed as a media lounge, outfitted with pale blue carpet (wall-to-wall, of course) and white "tulip" tables and chairs by Eero Saarinen -- not an Angeleno but a close Eames' friend. Eighteen suave William Claxton photographs of brilliant jazz musicians -- Chet Baker, Dinah Washington, Ornette Coleman, June Christy, etc. -- paper one wall, accompanying selections of their album covers and music.

Black and white describes Claxton's photographs and his racially mixed subjects, noteworthy in still-segregated America. In one corner, "Gerald McBoing-Boing" and other jazz-inspired clips of brightly colored animation that shunned Disney-dominated realism play on flat-screen TVs.

The main event comes in the two largest galleries. One features familiar Midcentury furniture, graphics and pottery, some of it arranged into commercial and domestic tableaux, while the other is a painting gallery.

The design room is dominated by the Eames' much-studied work. It also takes smart advantage of a glass gallery wall overlooking a small outdoor sculpture

court, transformed into a bamboo-walled suburban patio with Van Keppel-Green lounging furniture.

If it could be, the knockout painting gallery ought to be kept intact as a permanent museum display, here or elsewhere. A full-throated review of the first great generation of postwar L.A. painting cannot now be regularly seen in any art museum, in California or elsewhere. This gorgeous room amply demonstrates what a cultural black hole that absence is.

About three dozen works represent five painters -- Benjamin, Feitelson, McLaughlin, Frederick Hammersley and Helen Lundeberg. Some works are displayed on specially designed free-standing walls, upholstered in fine burlap and with black tubular legs that recall Van Keppel-Green furniture motifs.

These walls are more than merely retro-stylish. Instead, the floating planes and their humble appearance of middle-class industrial domesticity help articulate these paintings' inspired content.

California Hard Edge painting is about egalitarian perceptual liberation. A surface skin of calibrated color establishes a subdivided plane of illuminated space, optical and physical.

Like jazz, where the measured silences are as aurally and emotionally resonant as the finely tuned musical notes, Hard Edge brings being and nothingness into equipoise. It's the foundation story, still largely overlooked, for celebrated Light and Space art of the 1960s and 1970s.

The show includes exceptional individual works by every artist, but McLaughlin is reconfirmed as Hard Edge painting's supreme genius. His best work is as profound as anything in the history of Modern art.

So ponder this: The Porsche Speedster parked in the museum lobby to lend the show period atmospherics is probably more expensive than the McLaughlin masterpieces hanging nearby.

The artist was largely self-taught, painting happily in the garage-studio of his Dana Point home. One surprise of "Birth of the Cool" is just how emphatic the middle-class social aura of Hard Edge painting is.

The period's jazz reflects the imminent collapse of Jim Crow segregation, while its architecture and design are commonly described as a utopian response to the explosive growth of the American middle class, created by the stunning success of FDR's New Deal. The clarity, joyful humility and even domestic scale of Hard Edge painting corresponds to these larger inclinations.

Frankly, that may be one of its biggest hurdles, in terms of art historical respectability. Hard Edge is not bohemian. It doesn't readily reflect our romantic prejudices in favor of poverty, suffering and redemption as keys to the Modernist kingdom.

Yet since there is no democracy without a vibrant middle class, it's way past time to reevaluate the unalloyed centrality of Hard Edge painting to postwar art. With the American middle class now a shambles, the show reverberates with a sense of eager adventure and tragic loss. "Birth of the Cool" couldn't be more topical.

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'Birth of the Cool'

Where: Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach

When: 11a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays to Sundays

Ends: Jan. 6

Price: \$10

Contact: (949) 759-1122; www.ocma.net