

ART BEAT

CITY LIGHTS *The art of the urban in Orange County* BY DANIELLA WALSH

Orange County might still be a big, fat suburb to many, but around here the city is hot—artistically speaking, at least. Anyone who has visited Laguna Beach's gallery row and the Orange County Museum of Art will have noticed a trend—Urbanscapes. Renditions of Southern California city vistas (Los Angeles and San Francisco for the most part) in all their energetic and sometimes gritty glory, they are the subject to paint or show just now, judging by the crowd-pleasing fare displayed in front-runner Laguna galleries such as Peter Blake and Greenwood-Chebithes.

Thailand native Suong Yangchareon, for example, has painted the architectural underbelly of Los Angeles to commercial and critical acclaim. He learned about America from watching movies (though he says he couldn't tell New York and L.A. apart at first) and, once he moved here, combed the city with camera in hand. The results are starkly linear, brightly lit studio paintings of freeways, bridge underpasses, warehouse districts and crumbling ethnic enclaves. "I got my inspiration from American movies and from studying works by Edward Hopper, Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn," he says. "But I have my own style. Even though I paint in my studio, I still see my work as Plein Air action." Peter Blake, who shows the artist, concurs: "Suong does not prettify what

he sees. He transfers an aura of glamour onto his subject through his mastery of light and the meticulous way he frames images," Blake says.

Co-incidentally, or by design, OCMA currently presents *Cities of Promise: Imaging Urban California*. The exhibition explores the many ways artists, including Phil Dike, Millard Sheets, Charles Payzant and others from the 1930s, '40s and beyond, captured the evolution of places like LA and San Francisco under the banner of American Regionalism. Painters like James Patrick (*The Sulphur Pits*, 1939), Emil Jean Kosa Jr. (*Freeway Beginning*, 1948) and Elmer Plummer (*The Dead Palm*, 1936), to name just a few, grabbed their paints and easels and headed into town. Considering that the adage of "real men don't paint watercolors" still held sway, that move propelled them and their contemporaries into the far avant-garde.

OCMA curator of exhibitions Sarah Viere assembled works from the museum's permanent collection and that of the Automobile Club of Southern California, the show's sponsors. She also included contemporary artists like Peter Alexander, Carlos Almaraz, Robert Bechtle, Larry Cohen, Roger Kuntz, Edward Ruscha and Thiebaud among others.

Kuntz, in particular, captures the stark lines of freeway over and underpasses in monochromatic compositions of grays and whites,

bercft of any illusion of beauty. Alexander, Almaraz and Thiebaud offer more colorful fare, unabashed romanticizations of what others might see as crowding, congestion and pollution-banality. In his painting *Polic Car*, 1984, Thiebaud renders buildings at an intersection in colorful geometric shapes. The cop car is almost an afterthought. Almaraz's *Evening Traffic*, 1985, makes a busy freeway look like the only place to be at night, and Peter Alexander's *Thrasher*, 1992, shows an aerial view of the L.A. basin topped by a glowing red sky more familiar to sailors than city dwellers.

Then again, Ruscha presents an exquisite black and white rendition of a serenely modernist suburban dwelling (*Pine Setting*, 1988). "Ed captured L.A. during the 1960s, a time when the city was growing outward as well as upward. He captures the city in his photographs and paintings without passing judgment," says Cecile Whiting, professor of art history at University of California, Irvine. "His perspective, one taken from a moving car, differs from the traditional Plein Air approach. He shows the city as a collection of facades." (Whiting will hold her lecture *Southern California: The View from the Car* at OCMA on March 2, at noon.)

Chaffey College art history professor and former curator for the Auto Club collection Orville Clarke, Jr. says that artists have been fascinated with cityscapes since the Renaissance, when painters added city views as backdrops even for religious tableaux. "Artists have been painting the urban landscape for a long time. Look at Leonardo, Michelangelo and Masaccio," he says. "Even then artists played fast and loose with 'reality,' inventing vistas more grounded in imagination than pure vision." (Clarke will present his lecture *The Urban Landscape in the Art of the West* at the museum on April 6, at noon.) For example, a 15th century fresco by Pietro Perugino titled *Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter* supports Clarke's assertion. The keeper of heaven gets his keys against the backdrop of a piazza the size of a football field, an architectural anomaly in those days.

Fast forward into the present: The Greenwood-Chebithes Gallery recently presented *Group Cityscapes*, a six-artist show that offered as many takes on modern city life. This does not mean that Plein Air, as we know it, has come back. These artists, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, regard reality as something to be tweaked at will. Bright colors and blurred lines, skewed perspective and seemingly tilted buildings distinguish Larry Morace's views of San Francisco. His aim is to capture the city's kinetic energy. "Cities are our cultural natural parks," he says. "They are full of rhythm and visual patterns that I feel as much as see."

Scott Yeskel found San Francisco too staid and moved to L.A. At age 26, he does not remember the area as the arid Eden it once was, nor does he care. "The city is full of beauty even if it seems banal to many," Yeskel says. "I paint the urban landscape as I see it, showing its rhythm and motion through brushstrokes and choices of color. Everyone is always moving and that is part of modern reality."

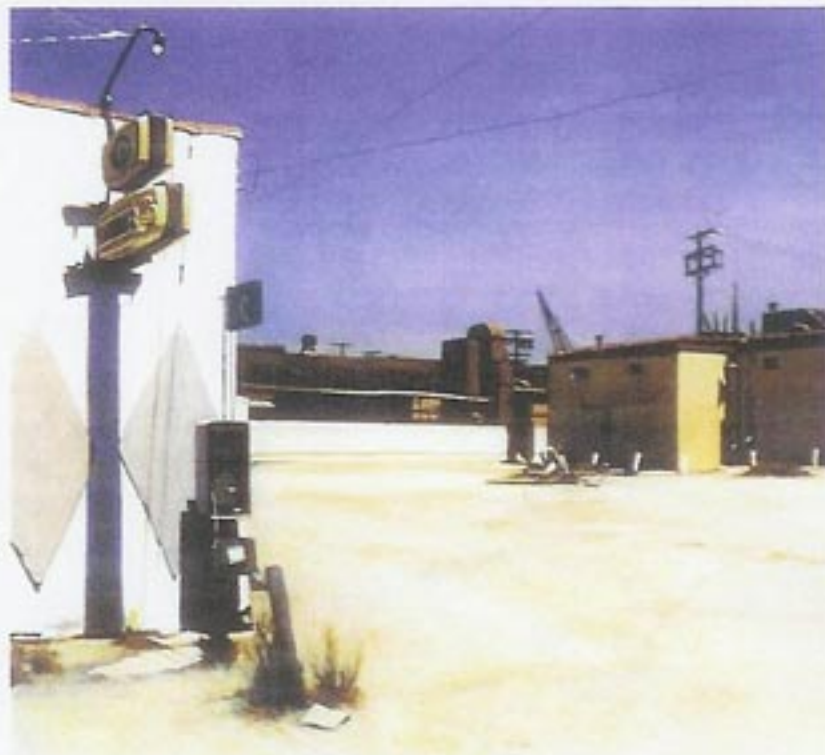
The city has become to contemporary artists what the bucolic vistas of Southern California were to turn of the 20th century Impressionists. Yet, they put their own imprimatur on what the rest of us see. John

Brosio, for example, seems to be enthralled by the placidity of down-at-the-heels suburbs. Closer looks also reveal that the places are always hovering on the brink of disasters like hurricanes and floods. The works, realistic enough to make one want to dive under a table, are purely his invention. As are Tessa Mecham's depictions of chic strollers window-shopping in any town.

"Cityscapes are viable replacements for traditional landscapes. They reflect a natural evolution of Plein Air painting," says Brett Chebithes, a partner at Greenwood-Chebithes. "Artists incorporate photography, digital work and their own imagination into what they paint in their studios. Face it, no one goes outside with a brush anymore. What makes this contemporary mix of impressionist and expressionist elements so exciting is that it reflects our reality—one made up of steel and concrete." ■

Cities of Promise: Imaging Urban California, Orange County Museum of Art through April 25, 2004; Greenwood-Chebithes Gallery, 949.494.0669; Peter Blake Gallery 949.376.9994.

Opposite: *Freeway Beginning*, Emil Jean Kase Jr., OCMA; *Los Angeles I*, Scott Yeskel, Greenwood-Chebithes Gallery
Below: *Factory and Bar*, Sonja Yangchareon, Peter Blake Gallery



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