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COUNTY
MUSEUM
OF ART

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THE ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
PRESENTS FIRST EXHIBITION ON
CALIFORNIA'S FORMATIVE ROLE IN MIDCENTURY MODERNISM

Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury
On view October 7, 2007, through January 6, 2008



Karl Benjamin, [Black Pillars](#),
1957, oil on canvas, private
collection. ©Karl Benjamin,
courtesy Louis Stern Fine
Arts, West Hollywood

NEWPORT BEACH, CA—***Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury***—opening October 7 at the Orange County Museum of Art—is one of the most ambitious exhibitions ever organized on this seminal period, encompassing the painting, architecture, furniture design, decorative and graphic arts, film, and music that launched midcentury modernism in the United States and established Los Angeles as a major American cultural center. The influence of these modernist practices on contemporary art and culture has been widespread, and today the styles associated with this period have become shorthand for beauty, sophistication, and confident urbanity. ***Birth of the Cool***—organized by Elizabeth Armstrong, OCMA deputy director of public programs and chief curator—is on view from October 7, 2007, through January 6, 2008, and will then travel to three venues throughout the United States.

In sync with the interdisciplinary nature of the project, the *Birth of the Cool* installation features a jazz lounge; film, animation, and television programming; an outdoor area with Van Keppel Green furniture and architectural pottery; a period art gallery of hard-edge abstract paintings; selections of art, architectural, and documentary photography; and an interactive timeline that highlights examples of California, national, and international culture and history in the 1950s.

Through more than 200 objects, *Birth of the Cool* examines the dynamic community of architects, designers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians who overlapped and interacted in Southern California at midcentury. An international roster of creative artists—including Chet Baker, Karl Benjamin, William Claxton, Louis Danziger, Charles and Ray Eames, Jules Engel, Lorser Feitelson, Greta Magnusson Grossman, Frederick Hammersley, Pierre Koenig, John Lautner, Helen Lundeberg, John McLaughlin, Gerald Mulligan, Richard Neutra, and Julius Shulman—many of whom made their way to the West Coast from various locations throughout Europe and North America, played a germinal role in the development of this influential and iconic style of high modernism. In the spirit of “cool,” inspired by Miles Davis’s album *Birth of the Cool*, the exhibition explores the affinities among these innovators of art, design, and style working on the West Coast in the postwar era.



Album cover for Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* (Capitol Records, 1957).
Courtesy Blue Note Records

Despite the lack of major cultural institutions or patronage, Los Angeles at midcentury had attracted a number of innovative and original cultural thinkers. In the late 1930s and 1940s Hollywood provided employment and a safe haven for numerous artists and intellectuals fleeing the impending war in Europe, who carried with them the tenets of international modernism. At the same time new inhabitants migrated to Los Angeles from all over America. Attracted to the favorable climate, optimistic spirit, and relative prosperity of postwar Southern California, a disparate group of painters, filmmakers, designers, and musicians developed new strains of midcentury American modernism.



Julius Shulman, photograph of Case Study House #22 (Pierre Koenig, Los Angeles, 1959–60), 1960. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute

By the 1950s the clean, straight lines of International Style architecture were embodied in the glass and steel houses spreading into the Hollywood Hills, Pacific Palisades, and Palm Springs. The visionary influence of German-born filmmaker Oskar Fischinger could be felt even in the conservative studios of Walt Disney, and innovators such as Jules Engel at United Productions of America developed the flat, graphic style of midcentury animation. The smooth, mellow sounds of West Coast jazz musicians were now distinguishable from those of their East Coast counterparts. A nascent Los Angeles art scene was

beginning to attract international attention, and through the pages of John Entenza's *Arts & Architecture* magazine a larger audience became aware of developments in architecture and design in Southern California.



Lorser Feitelson, Dichotomic Organization, 1959, oil on canvas, Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, Marie Eccles Caine Foundation Gift
© Feitelson Arts Foundation

Birth of the Cool was inspired in part by the formal parallels between modernist architecture and the West Coast hard-edge paintings of the 1950s. Just as the light-filled modernist house is open to the elements, with walls and ceilings more like planes floating in space than enclosures, hard-edge paintings of the period are characterized by an instability of spatial division, an ambiguity between flatness and depth. The exhibition brings together a stunning group of paintings including period works by Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, and John McLaughlin, along with the paintings of Helen Lundeberg. It is a long-overdue reevaluation of a group of dynamic abstract paintings, which have a vitality and currency that is evident today.

The reductive and restrained sensibility of these painters offered a distinct alternative to the gestural and emotive fervency of East Coast abstract expressionism—in much the same way that California “cool jazz” launched a reaction to the predominant bebop form. Miles Davis, whose 1949–50 recordings for Capitol Records were released in 1957 under the title *Birth of the Cool*, helped define “cool” for a national and global audience and was an important influence on the West Coast scene in the 1950s. Chet Baker and other superb jazz artists of the time—including Dave Brubeck, June Christy, Shelly Manne, Gerald Mulligan, Art Pepper, and Sonny Rollins—are featured in the exhibition, along with William Claxton's striking photographic portraits and record covers.



William Claxton, album cover for Chet Baker & Crew (World Pacific Records, 1956)
©William Claxton; courtesy Demont Photo Management

In the exhibition, architectural and design innovations are examined in the work of such important modernist architects as Richard Neutra, Pierre Koenig, and John Lautner, among others, in the context of their projects for *Arts & Architecture's* Case Study House program. Their designs for residential dwellings are among the iconic midcentury architectural gems captured in Julius Shulman's



Julius Shulman, photograph of Case Study House #21 (Pierre Koenig, Los Angeles, 1958), 1958. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute

photographs. Shulman's images, reproduced extensively in period newspapers and magazines, were purveyors of West Coast cool, offering glimpses inside modern glass houses, where carefully staged scenes showed elegant middle-class couples acting out the suburban American dream of home ownership with Hollywood sophistication. The exhibition includes many of Shulman's potent images of midcentury modernist architecture, which have played a critical role in the revival of interest in this period.

Considered the most influential American designers of the twentieth century, Charles and Ray Eames exemplify the joining of American ideals of creativity, optimism, and hard work with the rigors of international modernism. After moving to Los Angeles in 1941, the couple embarked on four decades of design, working out of their office in Venice. Their molded-plywood furniture designs, plastic chairs, and famous lounge chair embodied a modernist design sensibility while being affordable and accessible. *Birth of the Cool* showcases early and rare examples of Eames furniture, films, and archival materials.

The art forms included in the exhibition flowered around the city of Los Angeles, from Silver Lake to Palm Springs, Laguna Beach to Venice, and Hollywood to Pomona. The exhibition seeks to bring into focus the distinctive sensibilities of the artists whose work is on view, exploring their underlying interests, formal relationships, and groundbreaking accomplishments, along with their influence on contemporary culture. The tremendous resurgence of interest in this period today is at the core of curator Elizabeth Armstrong's examination of the distinctive fusion of high modernism and the aesthetic of cool now associated with this progressive time and place.



Charles and Ray Eames, prototype plywood chairs (photograph by Charles Eames), c. 1950, Boyd Collection

Publication

Birth of the Cool is accompanied by a 300-page, fully illustrated book published in association with Prestel Publishers, which provides a thorough reassessment of this important period. The art writers and cultural historians contributing to the book include Thomas Hine on the culture of cool in midcentury art and popular culture; Elizabeth Smith on aspects of the domestic in midcentury modern architecture; Lorraine Wild on graphic design and advertising; Frances Colpitt on the hard-edge abstract painting of the 1950s; Dave Hickey on West Coast jazz; Bruce Jenkins on the crossover between animation and experimental film; and Michael Boyd on the migration of modernist architecture and design from Europe to California. Curator Elizabeth Armstrong's introduction to the book explores the parallels and affinities among the distinctive rhythmic and formal vocabularies found in these various cultural forms and attitudes and the resurgence of interest in this period and style today. This retrospective volume also includes a timeline, bibliography, and contemporaneous texts from key publications of the period.

Exhibition National Tour

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA

Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis, MO

Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX

Exhibition Credit

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Museum Information

Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach is located at 850 San Clemente Drive. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday, with extended hours Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$10/adults; \$8/seniors and students; children twelve and under and OCMA members are free. OCMA is open free to the public every third Thursday. For more information, call 949.759.1122 or visit www.ocma.net.