

A Brief Encounter With British Art

PETER GOULDS

L.A. Louver Maneuvers The Art Scene

I am waiting to interview Peter Goulds, Co-Director of the L.A. Louver Gallery, and all hell is breaking loose around me. Robert, the photographer, is calmly setting up his lights amidst the chaos, workmen are running in and out carrying plastic-wrapped canvases through the small gallery. I am obliged to move back and forth to avoid getting smacked in the backside with Freud (Lucian Freud, that is - the artist/grandson of Sigmund). In from the brilliant Venice sunlight walks Goulds, who begins to tie his tie in preparation for the shoot. His round face and glasses give him an engagingly school-boyish look. He shakes hands, apologizes charmingly for keeping me waiting, and, as he finishes his square knot, informs me that we have exactly 40 minutes to complete the shoot and the interview.

As luck would have it, Goulds is able to disseminate a wealth of information about contemporary British art in a remarkably short period of time (perhaps owing to his years as a teacher). And despite the obvious time pressures, (he is due at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 90 minutes and the show that the harried workmen are carrying around the room is set to open within 40 hours), one has the sense that Goulds resides calmly in the eye of the hurricane. He smiles constantly during the shoot, posing on one foot in front of Therese Oulton's powerful painting "Greek Gifts," all the while directing the workmen to steer their canvases from north wall to south, from south wall to west. "Take the Avis (Newman) there . . . that wall for the Kitaj . . . yes, that looks quite nice there." He explains the whirlwind of activity matter-of-factly. "You see, we hung this entire exhibit, only to discover we'd forgotten to hang a rather large painting." He grins, not a bit sheepishly.

The show that L.A. Louver is mounting in both its Venice spaces (located at 55 N. Venice Blvd. and at 77 Market Street) is called "THE BRITISH PICTURE" and concurrent with the UK/LA Festival, it functions as a concise look at the British contemporary art scene, showing works of such established major artists as Francis Bacon and Leon Kossof side by side with the works of young contemporary artists like Tony Devan and Charlotte Verity. L.A. Louver, since its opening in 1976, has represented some of the finest English artists of our time, notably David

Hockney, Sir William Coldstream, and R.B. Kitaj. In 1979, Goulds put together the seminal "THIS KNOT OF LIFE" exhibit, in which L.A. Louver brought together the work of British figurative artists whom Goulds felt had been largely overlooked. However, when asked if the gallery has placed a special emphasis on the work of British artists, ex-Londoner Goulds replies, "I'm not chauvinistic about British art. We (the gallery) have become equally interested in artists from Germany and Italy." Early on in the existence of L.A. Louver, Goulds had "decided to bring to L.A. an international perspective on art." The aim was to bring the world view of art to Venice, to create a gallery environment in which emerging American artists from diverse artistic backgrounds would be shown in context with their European contemporaries, thereby creating an international forum for contemporary art. Peter adds that now "we're in a period of time where what was perceived to be 'regional' art is over." Thanks to the media, we "rapidly learn about artists living and working abroad, so we have real direct contact with European art . . . with equal enthusiasm, we show artists living in Venice and abroad. We hope it's stimulating to the public. Certainly, it's stimulating for the artists to look at new work. Or to see an established artist find a new language . . . serious artists are always interested in seeing the work of others."

And while "serious" artists are the same the world over, Peter is quite opinionated about a few striking differences between British and American artists, both attitudinal and academic. The commercial basis of American society dictates that as an artist, if one wishes to be successful, one must show their work, should become a darling of the media - the entire situation is an extremely competitive one, which tends to detract from concentration on the work. But in England, where supporters of contemporary art have been few and far between, "You have a particularly interesting situation," says Goulds. "The expectation of the British artist is not that they'll be sought out and collected." Thereby unencumbered by the pressure to show their work, young artists have been able to "grapple with the issues." This has led to London being a very vital and dynamic environment

for painting and sculpture. The generation of artists who are now in their 50's and 60's - Howard Hodgkin, Frank Auerbach, Bach, Freud, et al. - have given birth

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to a body of work that is very "finished, complete and educated," says Goulds. And that generation has helped to influence younger artists, who are "encouraged by the quality of the work . . . to carve out their own response to art history. In a detached and private manner (they) pursue drawing and . . . create their own language." Because of this detachment, says Goulds, there is no temptation to show one's work too early - when work is finally shown, "mature and full-bodied exhibits" of remarkable quality are the result. Young artists like John Virtue, Oulton and Newman seem to spring full-grown onto the art scene.

Peter cites another key factor that separates British art - specifically painting - from American, simply, it is *drawing*. "There's an academic tradition of drawing that is a deep-rooted aspect of British study." Often, an artist will draw day after day, even year after year, using the same model. This daily emphasis on drawing technique provides "a basic skill for a real scrutiny of the world which I think is absent in American painting." He laments the fact that contemporary art schools have removed this all-important emphasis on drawing. "When you lose that," he says, "you lose the ability to see." What this drawing enables one to do is to "constantly feed yourself as an artist. You're looking, relearning, and looking again . . . constantly redefining yourself." Academic tradition and history are crucially important to new work . . . and Goulds is quick to note that all serious artists are rooted in the same tradition. "The foundation that the artist is pulling from is a rigorous assessment of his art in context with history."

Future plans for L.A. Louver are spoken of in the same terms. "We're very excited by the program we've put together. And we hope to pursue the same assiduous analysis of our professional development" day by day. After all, practice makes perfect. ■