

LOS ANGELES

by April Kingsley

IN AND OUT OF THE GALLERIES

It seems as though more happened outside the Los Angeles gallery situation than in it during the past few weeks. The most exciting thing this viewer saw was the piece Barbara Munger had set up in her Cal-Arts studio. It was entirely made of string and lit naturally by daylight, and it was the most serene and beautiful piece of art I've seen in a long time. Eleven horizontal fences crossed the twenty-by-forty-three-foot room. Each fence was three feet high and made of six horizontal strings set six inches apart (the fences were set at four-foot intervals). Multiple slanting planes unfolded before your eyes depending on your vantage point in the three-foot walkway space left at the front of the room. Incidental slanting lines descended from the junctures of string and wall, and blocks of space, varying from white to gray, formed and unformed themselves as the light played on this totally static construction. Miss Munger has been working in virtual seclusion for years. She sets a piece up, photographs it, lives with it a while letting a few friends see it, and then replaces it with a new configuration. She has been working with lines of string, wool and monofilament for the past year, following an evolution from painting, to light bulb grids, to faintly rubbed wall drawings. All of her works share a characteristic softness, simplicity and gentleness. They are often so subtle that they border on invisibility. Each piece is strong nonetheless, and shrouded in mystery.

Another Los Angeles artist exhibiting outside the gallery system recently was Ed Ruscha. He held a release party for his latest book *A Few Palm Trees* at Ciro's on Sunset Boulevard, where copies of the new book were suspended from strings on the stage of the night club. Although it was just about impossible to read the books in the darkness pervading the room, they seemed to be selling like the proverbial hot cakes. Even though I still feel that *Thirty-Four Los Angeles Parking Lots* is Ruscha's best book, both *A Few Palm Trees* and another new volume, *records*, have their special merits. About half the pages in *A Few Palm Trees* have been left blank, which is not usual in his books. I presume they are to be filled in by one's imagination and experience of the subject — and it is amazing what variety such a simple subject contains. Like many conceptual artists, Ruscha is making art out of the commonplaces with which our lives are filled. His own bent towards the surreal, the humorous and the ironic causes his

work to be one of the strongest and most genuine current affirmations of the viability of fantasy in a very prosaic world.

Allen Ruppberg who also shows outside the gallery system quite often (as he did with *Al's Cafe*), has made his most ambitiously scaled statement to date with his latest work, *Al's Grand Hotel*. It is located at 7175 Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, and will be open for six weeks on Friday and Saturday nights. It has, as the flyer states, a bar, free TV, a "comfortable, relaxing lobby," juke-box music, "continental" breakfasts (which are obtained at a coffee shop down the street), daily maid service, and souvenirs. There are seven available rooms, each outfitted with a double bed ("linen changed daily"). The bathrooms are "down the hall." The rates run from fifteen to thirty dollars a night.

A sign over the front desk makes it quite clear that the hotel is not an environment. What, then, is it? It is clearly not a normal hotel. All the rooms are open for inspection until midnight, and what's more, each room is "occupied" by art objects. In the "Day Room," for instance, the floor is covered with white paint buckets containing newspapers, photographs, cereal boxes, and the like. Only a path to the bed and the bed itself are object-free. A rope-bound cross of wooden beams slices the "Jesus Room" in half just at the foot of the bed, and the "Al Room" is filled with seven different life-size photos of the artist mounted on upright plywood cut-outs. In spite of all this, the hotel is truly "operational," and people have been staying the night. The lobby is extremely comfortable, and a perfect place to just sit around and talk about art. The hotel is a remarkable achievement. It is a masterful balance between real-life and real-time art. When you are there you become aware of the relevance of every small part of this carefully worked-out piece as it unfolds before your wandering eye. Undoubtedly the totality of this very complex work would be more fully experienced by staying overnight. It must be quite extraordinary to wake up in something like the "Bridal Suite," under a canopy of artificial flowers and facing a stack of beautifully wrapped wedding presents and a many-tiered wedding cake. That room borders on the surreal even on short inspection.

All of which is certainly not to indicate that a great deal has been happening in the Los Angeles

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galleries. Irving Blum had the most outstanding recent exhibition in his show of Roy Lichtenstein's "Mirror" paintings. These are terrific. If it is at all necessary for decoration to be concerned with repetition, weight equivalence, and standardized forms, then there is no way one can consider these new paintings of Lichtenstein's decorative. Moreover, any relation between these fine paintings and Pop Art or Art Deco seems purely coincidental, irrelevant, and slightly misleading. The familiar ben-day dots are present, of course, but there are no commercial Pop associations diluting the strength of these "pure" paintings.

The Lambert 910 gallery showed the paintings and constructions of New Yorker John Willenbecher. The paintings are white on charcoal-gray wrinkled paper, and are especially beautiful. Game board imagery seems to predominate in all these abstractions. The constructions are either wall reliefs boxed under plexiglass, or three-sided hollow triangles of painted glass. An optical effect of spiraling occurs in the boxed reliefs, which have white spheres set beneath crescents of subtly gradated bands of color or grisaille. In the glass constructions, mazes and other game board-like designs are painted or mirrored onto the three surfaces, and one can see the other sides through each image. All the works are involved with the spatial play of positive and negative, flat and solid, opaque and transparent, and an almost subliminal movement seems to be implied by the play of forms.

Adolph Tischler's recent paintings were on view at the Molly Barnes gallery. These are delicately stained or painted sheets of acetate suspended in front of gray, metallic backboards, and gently blown to and fro by a fan located at the back of the gallery. The images, in blue, red, pink, plum, or lilac, are similar to the central, vertical images of Rorschak tests.

The McKenzie gallery showed Richard Mann's smooth-surfaced seas of color on masonite. The technique — catching the ebb and flow of the pigment on a smooth surface, after manipulating it into the desired composition — is identical to that used by Frank Owen. The colors seem to separate like oil in water and to flow together like mercury. Mann doesn't utilize any geometric format, however, and as a result his works meld the expressionist freedom of American painting of the 'fifties and the hard-edges of the 'sixties in fully organic compositions.

In the little Mizuno Gallery, Greg Card showed his latest paintings. They are vertical sheets of opaque and translucent polyester resin which glow like luminescent submarine worlds. □