Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Space-age art pulsates with the spirit of exploration at Palm Springs museum

Oskar Fischinger, “Multi wave,” 1948; oil on canvas. (Palm Springs Art Museum)

By Christopher Knight
Art Critic

Oct. 29, 2024 3 AM PT

- The ‘PST Art: Art & Science Collide’ exhibition features Larry Bell, Fred Eversley, Claire Falkenstein, Man Ray and Robert Irwin, among others.
- Sections of the show may focus on math and what some may consider dry subjects, but the through-line is on process: how artists make interesting art.

In Los Angeles, the baby boomer generation that arose after World War II coincided with the military-backed efflorescence of the aerospace industry. At the Palm Springs Art Museum, “Particles and Waves: Southern California Abstraction and Science, 1945-1990” takes good account of the general impact the postwar tech boom had on the region’s painters and sculptors. The exhibition assembles 66 works by 34 artists.

The show is part of the Getty-subsidized festival “PST Art: Art & Science Collide.” Its particle/wave title alludes to the often mystifying duality of subatomic reality, which drove major scientific discovery for three centuries, from Isaac Newton to Albert Einstein. The subject of advanced technology and its impact on abstraction in Southern California art isn’t new. But perceptual experience has been a through-line in the region’s contemporary art history, so it’s good to see a festival exhibition focused on Southern California. Few others are.

For art, knowledge is embedded in experience — for example, in the discernment of rhythmic patterns and spatial sensation in the undulations of blue, violet, green and neutral tones in Oskar Fischinger’s beautiful “Multi wave” oil painting from 1948. White edges turn the pulsing shapes into suggestions of natural phenomena — blossoming flower petals and breaking ocean waves — but neither one is realistically described. The German-American artist, who worked at Paramount Studios after fleeing Adolf Hitler in 1936, was making visual music.

Fischinger, though hardly unknown, emerges as a standout in the exhibition, the geometric complexities of his paintings and films maintaining a high level of sophisticated panache. (Wildly inventive abstract films by Fischinger, as well as by Charles and Ray Eames, Charles Dockum and brothers John and James Whitney are screened continuously in the museum's third-floor lecture hall.) So does Helen Lundeberg, whose familiar architectural geometries in landscape paintings get an unexpected twist in three 1960s canvases inspired by extraterrestrial musings.

Helen Lundeberg, “Among the Planets,” 1961; oil on canvas. (Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times)

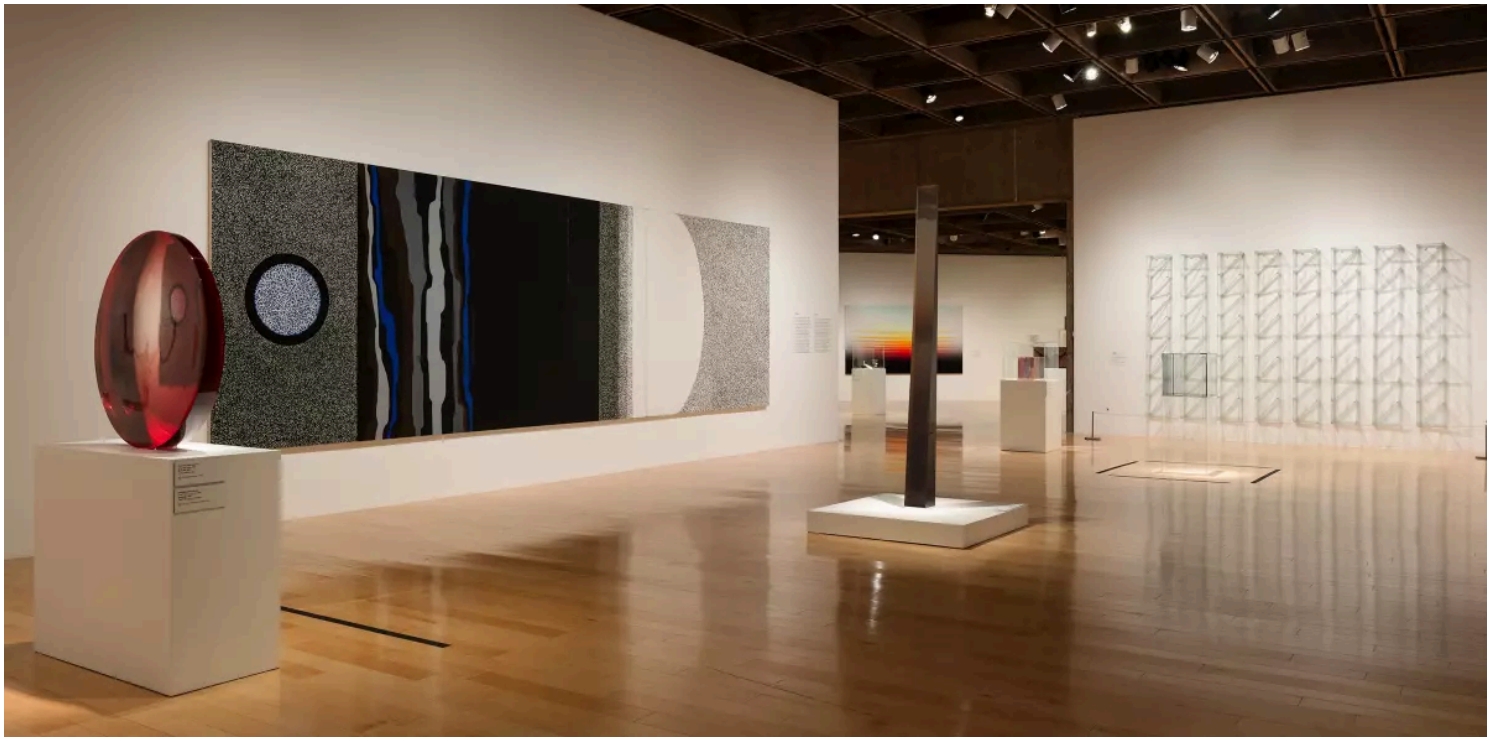
“Among the Planets” is a flat plane of slate gray color interrupted by large, grayish-brown arcs at top and bottom. A small dot down in the lower right-hand corner visually transforms the austere composition into an essay on the perceptual dynamics of deep space, as if we — like that little dot — are floating untethered. Lundeberg creates visual space through color, shape, scale and composition. She began in the 1930s as a Surrealist mining the mysteries of human memory, but these exceptional abstract paintings fully unshackle imagination.

Postwar American culture’s newfound confidence in art, which hadn’t yet generated much popular enthusiasm in the 20th century, would quickly meld with entrenched sensibilities first established by a technologically thrilling Southern California event. In 1910, a quarter of a million people had spent 10 days swooning over the Los Angeles International Aviation Meet — the nation’s first daredevil airshow. A thundering media sensation in the city of Carson extolled the promises and perils of earthly departure. The extravaganza was mounted barely six years after the Wright brothers took off at Kitty Hawk, N.C. in the first heavier-than-air manned flight. (In no time at all, 53 airplane landing fields were reportedly built within 30 miles of L.A. City Hall.) California aerospace instantly became a thing.

The industry ebbed and flowed over the next half-century. When a “space race” between the United States and the Soviet Union erupted in 1957, however, the Cold War amplified the region’s flourishing commercial behemoth.

The exhibition applies a generally tight focus on familiar artists — Larry Bell, Fred Eversley, Claire Falkenstein, Robert Irwin and more — adding a few that are not. Some are entirely new to me.

Eva Slater's 1954 "Galaxy" insets a syncopated network of painted forms within a wooden panel, merging optical motion with material stasis. (The same triangulated pattern turns up in a recent kaleidoscopic sculpture at the smashing exhibition of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson currently at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art.) Robert Bassler made groups of tall, chunky, chromatically luxurious cast-resin forms that bend light to visually bond together, like a space-age version of Constantin Brancusi's "The Kiss."



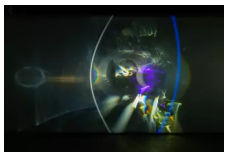
Bettina Brendel's six-panel 1969 painting, "Particles or Waves?" gave the Palm Springs Museum's show its title. (Lance Gerber)

Bettina Brendel, whose mammoth, six-panel 1969 painting "Particles or Waves?" gave the show its title, attempts with mixed success to evoke the foundational duality's puzzling contradictions, laying out a sequence of crosshatch marks, jagged stripes and swollen curves. The hazy shapes floating through dark space in Frank J. Malina's wacky

kinetic light box, “Spring II” (1959), animates the visualization of psychic thought patterns in the great Surrealist paintings of Roberto Matta.

None of these works steps forward to suggest a forgotten major artist. But a group show like this one benefits from a breadth that exceeds just superlative quality. The range demonstrates how widespread one powerful element of the zeitgeist was, while also underscoring by comparison how significant the accomplishment of vital artists like Irwin and Bell has been. Insight into art we thought we knew is enlarged.

One example: Irwin’s eye-bending “dot painting,” the exhibition’s preeminent work.



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Artist Olafur Eliasson’s thrilling new L.A. show whips up magic to pry open perception

Sept. 17, 2024

It’s one from a group shown in South America at the 1965 São Paulo Bienal, which coincided with the start of a reactionary military dictatorship in Brazil. Two Irwin dot paintings were physically attacked and destroyed. Imagine such an uproarious response today, when merely confronted with a slightly bowed square canvas featuring thousands of tiny green and red dots. Impossible.

When viewed from several feet away, the dots coalesce into a halation of amorphous color. The painting’s surface appears squishy, dissolving from a static plane into an optical cloud. Artistic emphasis dramatically shifts away from an object’s traditional role of delivering specific meaning and toward a viewer’s individualized discernment. That radical change in perceptual empowerment speaks volumes about conflicting forces in the era’s cultural ethos. For starkly conformist Brazil, Irwin’s sense of unconstrained freedom may help clarify just what enraged those destructive observers.

A few omissions from the show are surprising — especially the so-called "erotic thermometers" formed in industrially colored plastic relief that Craig Kaufmann made in the 1960s, as well as a radiant light-environment by Doug Wheeler. (James Turrell's "Afrum," a cubic optical illusion made with projected light, is on view, but a Wheeler installation would certainly gobble up more space than the Palm Springs museum could provide; drawings might compensate.) Other surprises are enticing.

Claire Falkenstein's 20-foot 1963 mural, seen through an entry door, greets visitors to the exhibition "Particles and Waves." (Lance Gerber)

Falkenstein's "Orbit the Earth (Moving Point)," a nearly 20-foot-wide mural on nine panels, dates from 1963. Perhaps not coincidentally, that's the same year Russian cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman to venture into space.

The lively canvas, hardly an illustration of an event, employs light-reflective silver and golden-brown metallic paints applied in vast fields of paisley-like commas that

dematerialize into a spatially ambiguous surface shimmer. The ancient Persian paisley motif has long been a symbol for strength and fertility, and a brushed Zen circle filling one panel represents inner peace while doubling as a planetary emblem. Tracking lines arc through the expansive field, recalling cosmic rays shooting across a cloud chamber. Falkenstein's mural amply demonstrates the painterly skills of an artist better known as a sculptor (a fine wall relief and four less interesting sculptures are also on view).

PSAM curator Sharrissa Iqbal and guest curator Michael Duncan, adept organizers of the show and its document-filled catalog, have also included one of Man Ray's wonderfully eccentric "Shakespeare Equations." That group of paintings was made during his time in Hollywood, but they derive from photographs of complex mathematical models by physicist Henri Poincaré that the artist shot in Paris. Rivulets of paint dribbling from the edges of a trumpeting, undulating, otherwise indescribable robotic form are said to represent the tears of grief-stricken King Lear, wildly attempting to humanize the cold if nearly inexplicable scientific reality of Man Ray's source.

Man Ray, “Shakespeare Equation: King Lear,” 1948, oil on canvas. (Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times)

The painting hangs in a gallery examining artists’ use of math — one of the show’s five informative segments. The others consider color in motion, space age abstraction, optics and experimental film. Some artists turn up in multiple sections.

What makes it all work is that the scientific commentary is tangential. Man Ray was as interested in Shakespeare, poetry and theater as he was in Poincaré, physics and the philosophy of science. The show is focused on how artists make art rather than pretending that art and science are on parallel tracks. As a bonus, it provides worthwhile historical background for "Olafur Eliasson: OPEN," that great, sprawling, eye-opening site-specific installation made for the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA.

'Particles and Waves'

Where: Palm Springs Art Museum, 101 N. Museum Drive
When: Thursdays-Sundays, through Feb. 24
Admission: $12-$20
Info: (760) 322-4800, www.psmuseum.org

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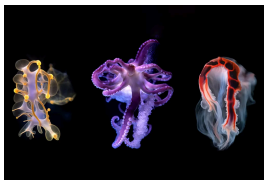

Christopher Knight

Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for criticism (he was a finalist for the prize in 1991, 2001 and 2007). In 2020, he also

received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Art Journalism from the Rabkin Foundation.
