

# THE IDOLATERS' REVENGE

NEW LOS ANGELES SCULPTURE

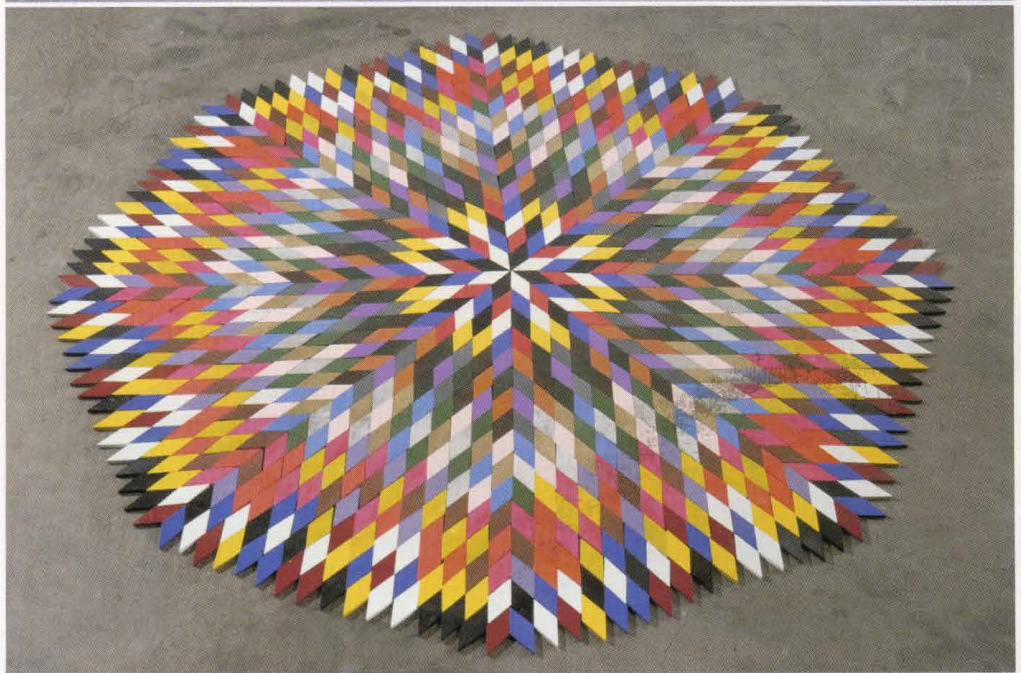
Christopher Miles





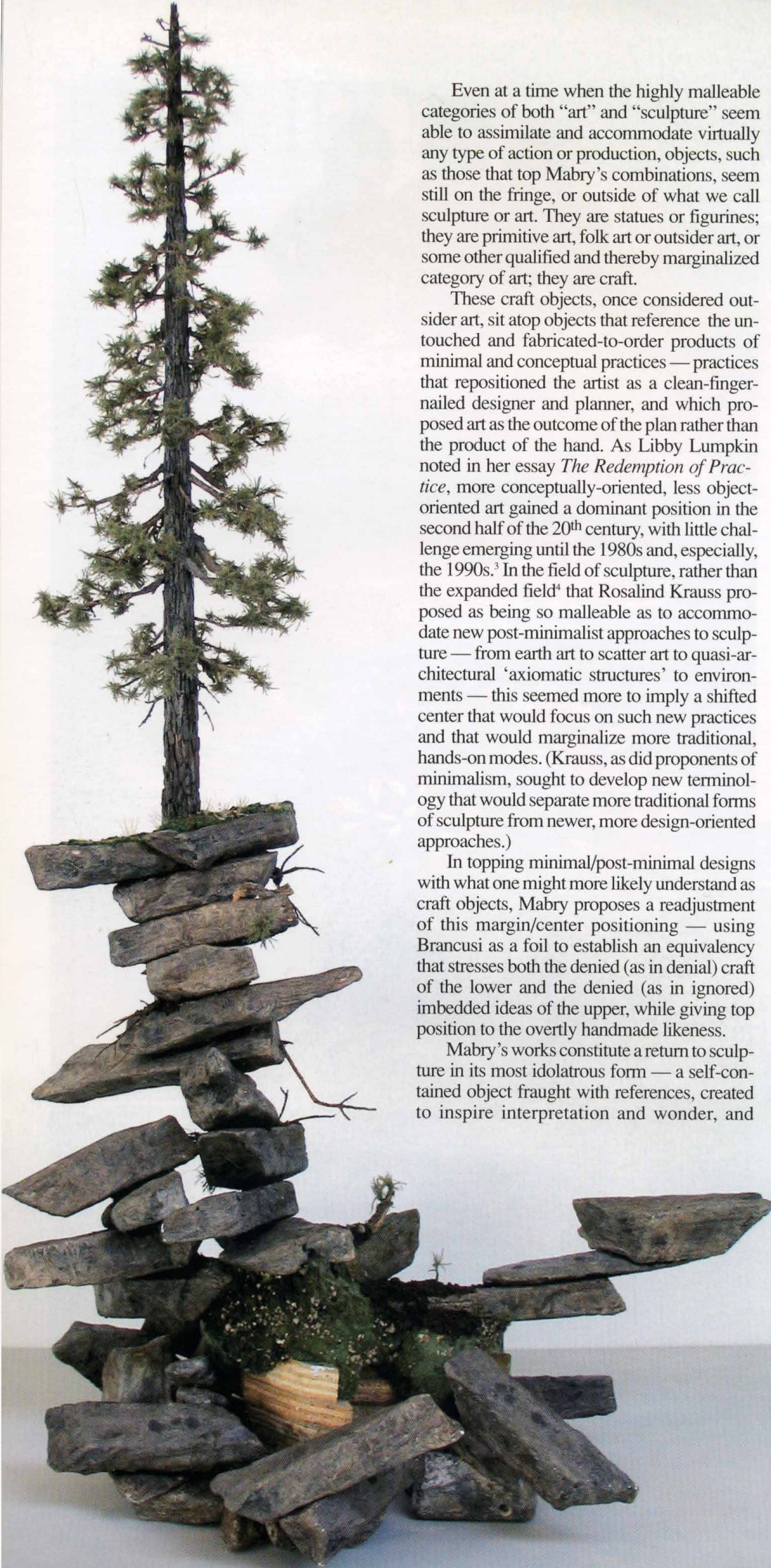
IN A 2004 EXHIBITION of works by graduates of Southern California art schools, sculptor Nathan Mabry displayed a work consisting of a figurative form atop a geometric form: *A Very, Very Touching Moment* (*hear some evil, say some evil, see some evil*), 2004. Recasting the relationship of sculpture and base in simple terms of top and bottom, he nods to Constantin Brancusi and to a notion of sculpture as object, or conglomeration of objects, containing its own internal relationships while also referencing a world external to it. Here, the top is a trio of hand-formed terra-cotta figures, their stylized sensual/skeletal anatomy clearly referencing the pre-Columbian Moche ceramics from which Mabry drew inspiration. Flanked by two females, the central male figure sports a diamond imbedded in his front tooth. Casually touching one another's genitalia, the trio sits in a row atop a white, steel, grid-based structure unmistakably suggestive of modular structures designed by minimal/conceptual artist Sol LeWitt. The piece is indicative of tendencies that run through much of Mabry's work: promiscuous borrowing and quotation across historical and cultural categories (in this case, mixing primitive, modernist and hip-hop), and a penchant for reshuffling the formal, functional, representational and encoded roles of material, style and form in sculpture. Such distinguishing traits rightly could be interpreted as the artist's idiosyncratic variations on what seem broad generational tendencies. These are shared by many emerging artists coming of age in postmodernism's wake, toward stylistic, cultural and historical promiscuity, and, in the case of sculpture, away from both the non-referential *gestalt* of the minimalist object<sup>1</sup> and the dematerialization of post-minimalist practice.<sup>2</sup> Indeed they go back towards the production of referential objects predicated upon relationships between elements within the work.

This and another of Mabry's recent pieces — *A Touching Moment* (*Tooting My Own Horn*), 2005 — in which a Moche-like figure sits with a cat atop a pedestal suggestive of a reconfigured David Smith sculpture, also suggests another generational shift in its comingling of practices, often understood as occupying polar positions in art production.



From top: NATHAN MABRY, *A Very, Very, Very Touching Moment* (*hear some evil, say some evil, see some evil*), 2004. Terra-cotta, steel, paint, diamond, 132 x 107 x 76 cm. Collection of Marcia Goldenfeld Maiten and Barry David Maiten, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White; ARAGNA KER, *Sunburst*, 2004. Wood and spray paint. Courtesy of the artist and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White; JEDEDIAH CAESAR, *Geode*, 2004. Mixed media. Altoids Curiously Strong Collection. Photo: Gene Ogami. Courtesy of Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles. Opposite: CHUCK MOFFIT, *Eros Bruises Thanatos*, 2005. Cast iron, steel, aluminum, carbon fiber, foam, lambskin and wood. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White.





Even at a time when the highly malleable categories of both “art” and “sculpture” seem able to assimilate and accommodate virtually any type of action or production, objects, such as those that top Mabry’s combinations, seem still on the fringe, or outside of what we call sculpture or art. They are statues or figurines; they are primitive art, folk art or outsider art, or some other qualified and thereby marginalized category of art; they are craft.

These craft objects, once considered outsider art, sit atop objects that reference the untouched and fabricated-to-order products of minimal and conceptual practices — practices that repositioned the artist as a clean-finger-nailed designer and planner, and which proposed art as the outcome of the plan rather than the product of the hand. As Libby Lumpkin noted in her essay *The Redemption of Practice*, more conceptually-oriented, less object-oriented art gained a dominant position in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with little challenge emerging until the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> In the field of sculpture, rather than the expanded field<sup>4</sup> that Rosalind Krauss proposed as being so malleable as to accommodate new post-minimalist approaches to sculpture — from earth art to scatter art to quasi-architectural ‘axiomatic structures’ to environments — this seemed more to imply a shifted center that would focus on such new practices and that would marginalize more traditional, hands-on modes. (Krauss, as did proponents of minimalism, sought to develop new terminology that would separate more traditional forms of sculpture from newer, more design-oriented approaches.)

In topping minimal/post-minimal designs with what one might more likely understand as craft objects, Mabry proposes a readjustment of this margin/center positioning — using Brancusi as a foil to establish an equivalency that stresses both the denied (as in denial) craft of the lower and the denied (as in ignored) imbedded ideas of the upper, while giving top position to the overtly handmade likeness.

Mabry’s works constitute a return to sculpture in its most idolatrous form — a self-contained object fraught with references, created to inspire interpretation and wonder, and

flaunting its status as a product of human craft. And Mabry’s works are not alone. They find themselves among the products of many artists in Southern California that evidence, generally, a massive reinvestment in the legitimacy of sculpture in the more traditional form of the self-contained object, and more narrowly, though still pervasively, a movement toward the overtly hand-crafted, referential object. Mabry is one of many Southern California artists embracing genres and processes previously marginalized in the field of contemporary art — in the case of Mabry, the embrace has been of figurative sculpture formed in clay.

Sharing Mabry’s enthusiasm for the figure hand-formed from clay is Kate Costello, whose portrait busts of stylized characters, formed in clay and then cast in plaster and paper pulp, specifically function as studies of how denotation, connotation and implication might be imbedded within and extracted from hand-made likenesses. Kristen Morgin, who creates massive, life-size representations of inanimate bodies, uses similar materials. These bodies, most notably a series of cars and a grand piano formed of a mixture of cement, glue and unfired clay plastered over wood and wire armatures, effectively bring on the sort of totalizing gestalt desired by the minimalists while also embracing traditions of figurative sculpture and the ceramic vessel to suggest layers of possible narrative and metaphor. Also employing hand-formed ceramics is Renee Lotenero. Her hand-carved and decorated, patterned tiles have become the basic quasi-modular, highly non-standardized building blocks of a practice that seems more like that of a *bricoleur* piecing together idiosyncratic monuments (Simon Rodia, creator of Los Angeles’ *Watts Towers*, comes to mind) crossed with the dramatic plays of space found in the works of late-modernist sculptors like Anthony Caro, further jumbling her conglomerations of bits and pieces with wood and steel armatures, rhinestones, cut paper and collaged photographs.

Jared Pankin similarly reveals lessons learned from the dynamism of historical sculptural precedents, but puts these influences into effect via skills gleaned from builders of diora-

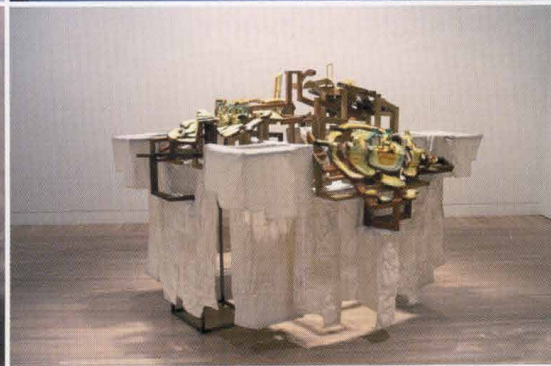
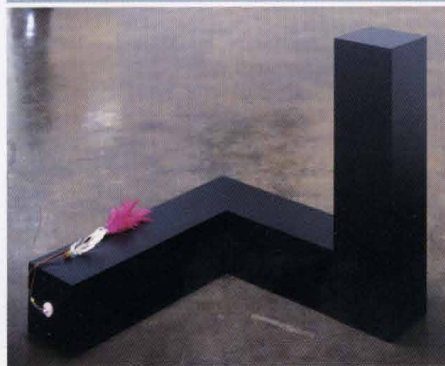
JARED PANKIN, KM 69, 2004. Mixed media, 130 x 64 x 48 cm. Courtesy of Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White.



mas and modern railroad enthusiasts, as well as pack rat woodworkers, who cull together scraps into ambitious *bricoleur* exercises. Scraps of wood also serve, along with bits of fabric, felt, paper and foil, as the essential elements of the rough-hewn yet fastidious work of Aragna Ker, who pieces together and arranges them into elaborate, highly decorative, labor-intensive, shrine-like constructions that conflate minimalist austerity and folksy flamboyance.

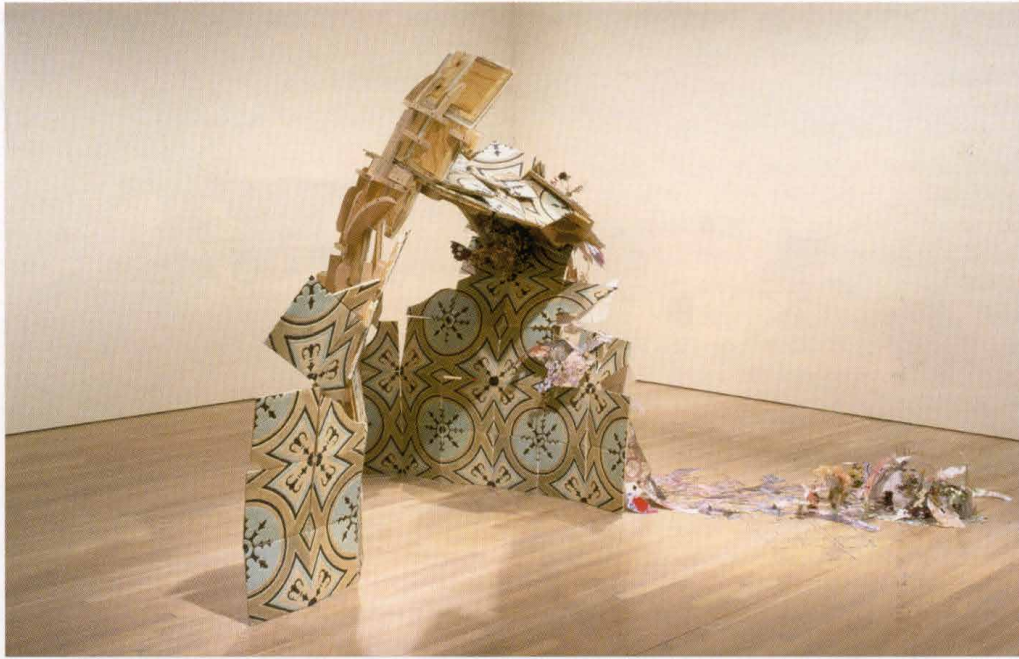
Piecing together — an activity that in its flaunting of labor and handiwork, or, to use an even more debased word, handicraft, runs so contrary to the concept-heavy, hands-off thrust of post-minimalist and conceptual art — has become a common approach among this emerging generation, and often the act of piecing together is fused with debased methods and materials. Jedediah Caesar's geode-like objects, for instance, are split into halves or sliced and arranged serially. They toy with the presentational concerns of minimalism, but they make no apologies for their origins and essences as giant balls of cast, rainbow-tinted resin embedded with found and cast-off objects, cut like stones in a quarry and then polished. Caesar's works unapologetically announce that their list of kin includes resin-encased souvenirs and mementos most commonly known to us in the form of paperweights; the art of assemblage, which despite its avant-garde history has come to assume a marginalized position associated with *bric-a-brac*; and, of course, the little valued 'lapidary arts' of cutting and polishing rocks.

If one has difficulty imagining a more devalued set of craft practices and references than those conjured by Caesar, one need look no further than the works of Krysten Cunningham, Mindy Shapero, Lara Schnitger, David Grant, Chuck Moffit or Anna Sew Hoy. Cunningham uses the yarn-wrapped 'god's eye' as a module for building primary-structure-like objects, while Shapero creates objects that seem to belong in the world of storybooks, and that find their origins in the hobby-shop methods/materials of *papier-mâché* and cut-and-pasted paper. Like a cross between a seamstress and a mad doctor, Schnitger stitches together freestanding fashionista monsters of fabric, fur, lace and jewels stretched over wooden skeletons. Grant's works take on a truly Frankensteinian character, made of fabric, rubber, leather and often rawhide shaped, stuffed and stitched into abstract but anthropomorphic fetish/relics covered in piercings and tattoo-like, hand-painted ornamentation. Moffit's works share Grant's penchant for leather, rubber and metal, but extend their references to a different locale of fetishized bodies, from the tattoo parlor to the body shop, with their aesthetics clearly informed by custom-car culture. Anna Sew Hoy, meanwhile, cobbles together her sculptures using materials ranging from driftwood to ceramics, and from found objects to artificial butterflies. She embellishes them with methods including wood-burning, beadwork, *macramé*, faux finishing and *dé-*



From top, clockwise: View of the exhibition "Thing" at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2005. Works by Krysten Cunningham (left), Kristen Morgin (right), and Rodney McMillian (far wall). Photo: Joshua White; DAVID GRANT, *Swash Rider*, 2004. Hydrocal, rawhide, stainless steel, acrylic and MDF, 157 x 66 x 66 cm. Courtesy of Newspace, Los Angeles; TAFT GREEN, *Reaction Facets: International Seaport; Port 1 of 2; energy distribution, holding light, memory of Vermeer*, 2005. Hardwoods, paint, steel, fabric. Courtesy of the artist and Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White; NATHAN MABRY, *Gentlemen and Scholars (Smoking L's)*, 2004. Wood, oil paint, eagle feathers, turkey feathers, beads, alligator clip, leather, 84 x 84 x 84 cm. Courtesy of the artist and cherrydelosreyes, Los Angeles; ANNA SEW HOY, *Baby* 2004. Iridescent ceramic, rope, shells, twigs, cell phone accessories, 61 x 25 x 18 cm. Courtesy of Peres projects, Los Angeles and Berlin.





Above: RENEE LOTENERO, *La Piazza Tenera*, 2005. Handmade tiles, photographs, grape vines, Plexiglas, lacquer paint, steel, paper, found objects. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo by Joshua White.

Below: HANNAH GREELY, *Joe*, 2004. Polyester resin, oil paint, ink. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

*coupage*, all orchestrated according to ikebana flower-arranging principles.

The works of this emerging generation of crafters and idolaters certainly is not without precedent. On the contrary, these artists are clearly exploring territories opened by other Los Angeles artists, whether the manicured ceramic forms of Adrian Saxe and Ken Price; the funk/assemble works of Betye Saar, George Herms, and Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz; the rough-hewn figuration of Allison Saar and the rough/refined figuration of John Frame; the custom-car works of Rubén Ortiz-Torres; the three-dimensional surrealism of Liz Craft; the tinkered contraptions of Tim Hawkinson; or the softened and humanized formalist objects of Liz Larner and Evan Holloway. What ap-

pears unprecedented, however, is the utter pervasiveness among a new generation of Southern California artists (of whom those noted here constitute a fraction), of practices centered on referential, representational, figurative and quasi-figurative sculptural objects; around hands-on crafting that leaves traces behind; and often around the employment of marginalized crafting processes. And clearly, these interests appear motivated by urges not to wallow in the abject or marginal, but rather to explore the potential of the overlooked and undervalued.

Such a move might well be reactionary, and might be seen as a simple facilitation of the needs of the market — as objects are easier to consume than ideas or experiences, and the hand-crafted object effectively an-

nounces its rarity as a commodity. But in visiting studios and exhibitions around Southern California, one finds a proliferation of objects that seem born more out of impulse and desire than strategy or convenience (little of this work is convenient). If anything, this work is indulgent and seeks to satisfy artists and viewers alike, as art has for most of its history, with unapologetic materiality and with the wonder of ideas imbedded in hand-wrought form at a moment when artists and viewers feel starved by a diet of fleshless data. Like Aaron fashioning the golden calf, these artists look to make objects loaded with ideas, rather than received words to inspire their awe, and if such is a sin, they don't seem too concerned. ■

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Robert Morris and Donald Judd discuss such aspects of objects respectively in Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3: Notes and Non Sequiturs," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 24–29; reprinted in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 23–40. and Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74–82; reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in association with New York University Press, 1975), 181–85.

<sup>2</sup>See "Escape Attempts," in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), vii–xxii.

<sup>3</sup>"The Redemption of Practice," originally published as "Dire Consequences: The Short History of Art as a Liberal Art," *Art Issues*, no. 50 (November–December 1997): 23–27; reprinted in Libby Lumpkin, *Deep Design: Nine Little Art Histories* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1999), 111–21.

<sup>4</sup>Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 276–90 (discussion of sculpture as malleable category on 277); originally published in *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44.

Christopher Miles, an Assistant Professor at California State University, Long Beach, contributed this text at the invitation of Flash Art. Several of the artists discussed here were included in "Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles," which Miles co-curated with Aimee Chang and James Elaine for the UCLA Hammer Museum.

