Low Key, High Energy

What’s happening in Los Angeles,” says Eli Broad, contemporary-art collector, philanthropist, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) board member, “is that we’re going to end up with more gallery space for contemporary art than any city in the United States, if not the world.”

Gallerists, artists, collectors, and curators agree that it’s a pivotal time to be a part of the art world in Los Angeles. The city’s museums are expanding, the gallery scene is a flurry of activity, the art schools are thriving, and more talented, young artists than ever before, are making Los Angeles their home.

One of the most dramatic examples of activity is the plan for a new $50 million, 80,000-square-foot contemporary-art building at LACMA, to be funded entirely by Broad, who has also pledged more than $10 million toward the acquisition of contemporary art for the museum and promised the long-term loan of at least 200 artworks from his foundation’s collection. Italian architect Renzo Piano is designing the building as well as renovations to LACMA’s current facilities, including changes to the Wilshire Boulevard facade, a new entrance, and various developments to improve the connection between the museum’s main campus and its nearby annex, LACMA West. (A considerably more ambitious plan to overhaul the campus entirely was abandoned last year for lack of funds.) Construction on the building, which will be called the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, is expected to begin in about a year. “It will be a boon to cultural tourism,” says Broad. “Los Angeles can well become the contemporary-art capital.”

Jeremy Strick, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, looks forward to LACMA’s expansion. “In the last several years, there has been an efflorescence of institutions that show contemporary art, and it’s really to the benefit of all of us. The result is an increasing audience for contemporary art,” he says. With another major show of abstract art, LACMA’s “Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form 1940s–70s” (on view from the 13th of this month to October 3), Los Angeles is a formalist’s paradise this summer.

MOCA, which has three venues throughout the city, including Frank Gehry’s first museum building, has recently attracted international attention with its blockbuster exhibition “A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968.” Curated by MOCA’s Ann Goldstein, it is the first major American retrospective of Minimalism (on view through August 2).

MOCA also recently scored a hit with its acquisition of Ed Ruscha’s seminal 1970 installation Chocolate Room. Constructed of 360 sheets of paper silk-screened with chocolate, the room will be re-created in October in an exhibition of Ruscha’s drawings.

The wave of renewal sweeping the city’s art venues extends beyond the contemporary sector. The UCLA Hammer Museum, which has a strong collection of 18th- through 20th-century art, is close to wrapping up a $26.5 million fund-raising campaign for a renovation that will complete the museum’s original design, the construction of which was halted after the death of founder Armand Hammer in 1990. The first phase of the project—a 288-seat theater that will be named after film director Billy Wilder, whose widow contributed $5 million to its construction—began in March.

Closed since 1997 for what has become a $275 million renovation (up from an original estimate of $150 million, largely due to an extended legal battle with nearby residents), the

Helen Lundeberg’s Tidelands, 1967, is featured in a retrospective of the Los Angeles artist’s work at Louis Stern Fine Arts through August.

By Holly Myers

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Los Angeles philanthropist and collector Eli Broad with Roy Lichtenstein's *Reflections on Interior with Girl Drawing*, 1990. Broad is funding a new 80,000-square-foot building for contemporary art at LACMA.

Getty Center’s Roman-inspired Getty Villa, built in the 1960s, is set to open in the fall of next year. Meanwhile, the J. Paul Getty Museum, best known for its collection of antiquities and Old Master works, is celebrating 20 years of collecting photographs with “Photographers of Genius at the Getty” (through July 25).

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is currently completing construction on four different projects, including improved research facilities and a new botanical education center, and is about to break ground on a 12-acre Chinese garden that will open to the public in 2007. The Skirball Cultural Center is adding exhibition space, children’s facilities, and a new amphitheater. And the historical home of the Southwest Museum—the city’s oldest museum, founded in 1907—is receiving much-needed preservation work following its merger last year with the more substantially endowed Autry Museum of Western Heritage, now called the Museum of the American West.

After 16 years of fits and starts, Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall—an explosion of silver and glass—opened its doors last October on the crest of downtown’s Bunker Hill. The opening came as a sign of the city’s optimism in the civic potential of the much-neglected downtown region.

Thanks to a growing pool of artists, the relative availability of low-cost space, and an increasingly art-hungry population, the city’s galleries are also flourishing. “Things are really happening right now,” says the young dealer Mary Leigh Cherry, who ran a gallery in her garage before joining forces with now-husband Tony de los Reyes to form cherrysdelosreyes, near Culver City. The area is home to the most recent blossoming of galleries. This activity exemplifies the energy and optimism of the Los Angeles art world today. “When there’s something new,” says Cherry, “people go out to galleries again.” The same thing happened several years ago in Chinatown, where numerous galleries continue to thrive.

One of the first galleries to open in the Culver City area was Blum & Poe, which moved to a spacious storefront there last summer from a Santa Monica office park, its location of nine years. Sandroni Rey moved there from Venice last month (the inaugural show, which features Herman Bas, Sue de Beer, Iona Brown, and other gallery artists, runs through the end of the month), while Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects relocated there from its Wilshire Boulevard location in January. Anna Helwing, Western Project, Overtones, and ArtICultural galleries are among the new spaces to have opened nearby.

The bedrock of established galleries remains as strong as ever. LA Louver has been an anchor in Venice for nearly three decades and remains vital by supplementing its roster of heavy hitters (Ed Moses, David Hockney, John McCracken, Frederick Hammersley, and Charles Garabedian, for example) with younger artists like Gajan Fujita and Rebecca Campbell.

Santa Monica’s Bergamot Station, a historic train station converted into an arts complex, celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. It remains the best bet for on-foot gallery hopping, with Patricia Faure, Rosamund Felsen, Shoshana Wayne, Richard Heller, Robert Berman, Patricia Correia, Mark Moore, Track 16, Gallery Lusisotti, and nearly two-dozen others clustered around a single parking lot. Also in Santa Monica are Griffin Contemporary, which moved into a new 10,000-square-foot warehouse last October, and Christopher Grimes Gallery, which celebrated its 25th anniversary this spring.

Giulio Paolini’s cardboard, wood, and polyethylene *Untitled (Plakat Carton)*, 1962, is on view in “Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form 1940s–70s,” opening the 13th of this month at LACMA.
The inaugural show of gallery artists at Sandroni Rey’s new space in Culver City includes Herman Bas’s acrylic-on-paper *Night Trawling (A Little Moby Dick in All of Us)*, 2003.

Gagosian Gallery is the powerhouse in Beverly Hills, also home to Galerie YoramGil, while Margo Leavin Gallery, founded in 1970, leads the pack in West Hollywood. Louis Stern Fine Arts, Tasende Gallery, Chac Mool Gallery, Galerie Dionisi, and White Room Gallery are all grouped along nearby Melrose Boulevard, with Regen Projects and Manny Silverman Gallery on an adjacent side street. Just east, on Beverly Boulevard—a celebrated hot spot in the city’s booming restaurant scene—are Forum, Michael Kohn, Stephen Cohen, Richard Telles Fine Art, and Hayworth galleries. Just south is the 6150 complex, home to ACME, Roberts & Tilton, Marc Foxx, Karyn Lovegrove, Paul Kopeikin, and Daniel Weinberg galleries. With the exception of Louis Stern, which specializes in 19th- and 20th-century art, and Manny Silverman, which deals in postwar American art, these galleries show contemporary art.

Dealers agree that the city’s galleries are all profiting from the presence of an increasingly active and enthusiastic public. “Angelenos seem to be out and about and needing to look at art,” says Eleana Del Rio, director of West Hollywood’s Koplin Del Rio Gallery. Niccolo Brooker, director of Forum Gallery, which opened in Los Angeles last year but has its headquarters in New York, agrees. “In terms of cultural activity and awareness,” he says, “Los Angeles is far from the cultural wasteland that other cities like to think it is. It’s a vibrant cultural place.” According to Esthella Provos of Chac Mool Gallery, who helped form a committee at MOCA for acquiring Latin American art, one of the benefits of the city is the varied array of buyers. “There are more younger collectors here than elsewhere, and a bigger mix,” she says. At the same time, Los Angeles has become a destination for out-of-town collectors. “Many of our buyers are from New York,” says José Tasende of Tasende Gallery, operating in Los Angeles for 5 years, and La Jolla, California, for 25 years.

Many dealers cite the notoriously laid-back environment of Los Angeles as a major asset to its art scene. “In New York, there is a feeling that if you snooze, you lose. It’s not like that here,” says Robert Shapazian, director of Gagosian Gallery, which opened a Los Angeles branch nine years ago. “The casual atmosphere allows you to do things you might not be able to do as quickly or in the same way in a more frenetic city like New York or London.”

Still, some warn that the easygoing image of Los Angeles can be deceiving. “I’m always lulled by the beauty and ease of living and then surprised by the intensity here,” says Jenny Liu, director of the Project in Los Angeles and New York. “On the one hand, there are fewer players than in New York, but within this smaller pool, it’s as if there’s been a compression of all the personalities and issues and passions that drive the New York art world.” The gallery, which opened downtown in 2001, is closed for renovations this summer while working on its new space in Culver City, where it will relocate this September.

Jack Rutberg, who has run a gallery on La Brea Avenue specializing in established contemporary artists for nearly 20 years, finds that the art world is under a different kind of strain in Los Angeles. “There’s a tremendous amount of pressure on curators and dealers to be sexy above all else,” he says.

Louis Stern, a second-generation dealer who has been in the business for 43 years, takes a long-range approach. With his ex-
"Los Angeles is probably the best place in the world to study art right now," says artist and longtime professor John Baldessari. Since he began teaching in the 1970s at the California Institute of the Arts (commonly known as CalArts), the school’s faculty has launched Eric Fischl, David Salle, Lari Pittman, and Mike Kelley, among others, into international prominence. "When you’ve got good artists teaching, they’re going to attract good students," he says.

Shapazian credits the city’s lower-key lifestyle with providing fertile ground for creativity. "Artists can really pull back and work here without feeling pressured or pestered by a huge market-driven art industry," he explains.

Today CalArts counts among its full-time faculty Martin Kersels, Sam Durant, Jessica Bronson, and Allan Sekula. Baldessari is now at the University of California, Los Angeles, which boasts Pittman, Chris Burden, Mary Kelly, Catherine Opie, Charles Ray, and Nancy Rubins. Art Center College of Design has Kelley, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and Liz Larner on its staff; Otis College of Art and Design has Roy Dowell and Carole Caroompas; and the University of Southern California has Sharon Lockhart and Gary Simmons, to name just a few.

The vitality of this community makes it more appealing for young artists to stay in Los Angeles after graduation, a tendency that has noticeably increased in recent years. "When I was young, they all went to New York," says artist Judy Fiskin, who has taught at CalArts since 1977. "Now you can stay in Los Angeles and have a perfectly good career—an international career."