



surf
culture

THE ART HISTORY OF SURFING



THE '80S AND '90S: SURFING AS METAPHOR

FOSTERED BY AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY, SURFING AS A LIFESTYLE HAS PERVADED U.S. POP CULTURE DURING THE PAST TWO DECADES. SURFING BECAME A PROFESSIONAL SPORT, AND CALIFORNIA-BASED MANUFACTURERS LAUNCHED TRENDY NEW CLOTHING BRANDS AVAILABLE NATIONWIDE. AT THE SAME TIME, A VARIOUS GROUP OF ARTISTS—MOST OF WHOM ARE THEMSELVES SURFERS—RESPONDED TO THIS CULTURAL PHENOMENON IN DISTINCTIVE WAYS.

In the '60s and '70s, artist-surfers such as Billy Al Bengston and Craig Kauffman were using new materials developed by the aerospace industry to change both their style of surfing and the subjects they explored in their artwork. They pursued an aesthetics of the sublime, an attempt to capture a surfer's feeling of communion with the ocean.

However, the sport itself didn't become a subject in the contemporary art world until the late '80s. A new generation trained in art school to view everyday objects as repositories of meaning became fascinated by the cultural resonance of surfing. Some viewed it as a metaphor for the dark side of the California Dream; others saw it as an example of the commercialization of a subculture; still others were intrigued by its global reach and intersection with themes of imperialism and exile.

It is in his waves that he states his ideas most unmistakably.



RAYMOND PETTIBON, *IT IS IN HIS WAVES THAT HE STATES HIS IDEAS MOST UNMISTAKABLY*, 1989, SERI-
GRAPH, 22-1/2 x 17 INCHES, COLLECTION OF LAGUNA ART MUSEUM/ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, ART
COLLECTION TRUST, GIFT OF ED BOSWELL. PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.

ANY waves?

RUSSELL CROTTY was one of the first artists to receive serious attention from contemporary art collectors and curators for surfing-related work. He based his series of large and small gestural drawings in ballpoint ink on journals he had kept since 1974, when he was eighteen years old. The journals provided space to explore his personal connection with surfing. He sometimes jotted down fragments of conversations overheard on the beach, some of which he incorporated into larger-scaled exhibited work.

CROTTY IS A "SOUL SURFER," like the late Miki Dora, known for his graceful style, unlike today's contest-hungry, sponsored surfer, focused solely on performance. The proliferation of aggressive surfers crowding out the stylists is reflected in Crotty's monotype *Welcome to Oxnard*, which contains the scribbled phrase, "No More Frat Boys Round Here." It speaks to the changing cultural landscape in surfing, the difference between recreation and "lifestyle." Crotty's drawings combine the repetition and the grid format of Minimalism with hallucinatory and expressionistic painterly language. His work explores the two poles of surfing: contemplation and action.

BRIAN TAYLOR'S *THE SEARCH*, a group of twelve framed

eight-by-ten-inch photographs, invests household objects—a used toothpaste tube, a curled piece of paper, a potato chip—with the mystique of the perfect wave. Taylor humorously explores the fine line between the banal and the sublime, proposing each item as the object of surfers' obsession, as if they were suddenly stranded inland.

ESTABAN BOJORQUEZ creates shrines to the equipment that makes surfing possible, the board. Known within surfing circles as "The Missing Link," Bojorquez is considered the transitional figure between longboarders and the shortboarders of the late '60s. He explored new moves with the shortboard yet maintained the artful longboard style of his mentor, Miki Dora. Bojorquez's works are highly detailed reliquaries. At the center of each shrine

is a miniature board based on a famous, breakthrough design: the Simmons "Twin Fin," the Yater "Spoon", the McTavish V-bottom, and the Noll "Da Cat." Like Dora, Bojorquez worships the magic-carpet aspect of surfing. He has spent thirty years creating an instrument meant to deliver the perfect Malibu ride.

ABSORBED BY THE SPEED and direction of wind and waves, surfers enjoy a sublime detachment from land-based concerns. Amy Blount explores this experience in her tongue-in-cheek work, *The Wave Machine*. A scroll of paper passes through a mechanical device outfitted with a viewfinder on rollers, causing a simple line drawing to undulate as if it were an oscilloscope measuring ocean swells. Blount's all-too-perfect wave can be seen as a satire on the human fascination with machine-made uniformity. The piece could also be viewed an ironic commentary on the increasing popularity among surfers of wave machines, which—for a fee—replace the thrilling unpredictability of a natural phenomenon with a standardized product.

CHRIS WILDER takes an ironic view of the transcendent aspect of wave-riding in *Ultimate Experience*, *UFO Sighting Malibu*, an installation that conflates contemporary art concerns with aspects of popular culture. A fragment of a letter to the editor of *Surfer* magazine about an article titled "Curse of the Chumash" is screen-printed on a large canvas. Flanking it are two brilliant blue panels, each with a small red dot in the center. As you approach this altar-



KEVIN ANCELL, DETAIL OF *ALOHA OE*, INSTALLATION OF TWENTY-THREE MOTORIZED CAST RESIN HULA DANCERS WITH WEAPONS, FROM THE EXHIBITION *SURF TRIP* AT THE CENTER FOR THE ARTS



SANDOW BIRK, NORTH SWELL (WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE), 1990, OIL ON CANVAS, 37-1/2 x 63 INCHES, COLLECTION OF LAGUNA ART MUSEUM, FROM THE STUART AND JUDY SPENCE COLLECTION, DONATED APRIL 1999. PHOTO: CHRIS BLISS.

like work, the red seat of a stool in front of the canvas suggests a hovering flying saucer. Seated, you read the article while the red dots in your peripheral vision appear to vibrate and hover above the blue canvases, evoking the optical phenomenon of the UFO sightings.

ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE refers to the desire for a transcendent experience that unites surfers and modernist artists such as Mark Rothko, whose thinly painted fields of color convey an otherworldly intensity. Wilder presents Malibu as the site of "ultimate experience" at various times in its history: as ground-zero for mid-twentieth-century surfing legends, UFO sightings, and an ancient maritime culture.

NON-SURFERS may find all this talk of transcendence overly abstract, even irresponsible in its disregard of the outside world. Ironically, the surfer's search for personal bliss has become a marketing tool used to bolster surfwear sales around the world. Yet the purely physical act of riding a wave ultimately escapes the influence of culture, even in the sense of being virtually impossible to pin down in words.

RAYMOND PETTIBON'S WORK, however, suggests that the

separation between nature and culture is impossible. Unlike Crotty, whose journals document observations of nature, Pettibon uses his to capture the complexities and contradictions of a media-saturated society. Pettibon has created wall murals of a surfer on a giant wave that literally engulfs a viewer's peripheral vision. Scattered among the other waves is a litany of non-sequiturs: "The next president should be a surfer. / Not just a Kennedy. / And a president who can shoot back. / And what's wrong with bushy, blond hair-do's? / No gremmies." This stream of consciousness suggests the ravings of some mad newspaper political cartoonist, trying to make sense of America's appetite for not only surfing but sex, crime, religion, and rock-and-roll.

B e a c h e d

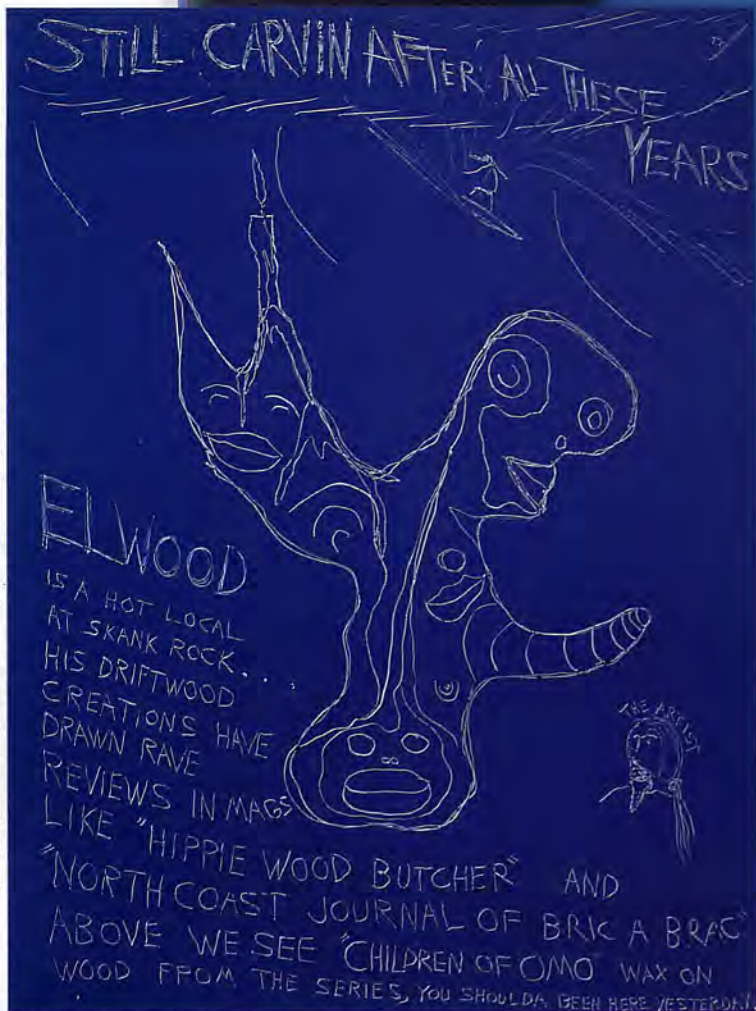
SURFBOARD MANUFACTURING is still a cottage industry, despite several failed attempts at mass-production. Surfwear, however, became a nationwide fad, with logo-emblazoned trunks

and T-shirts providing an image for youths living far from the ocean. This image—tan, healthy, laid-back—has supported a multi-million-dollar industry.

KEN AUSTER'S T-shirts, screen-printed with stylized images of California, blossomed into flourishing brands in the '70s. Auster then decided to become a fine artist, painting out-of-doors in an effort to capture the camaraderie among surfers on the beach. He has also painted several urban scenes, such as *Urban Surfin'*, in which a surfboard shape appears—and is immediately recognizable—in the context of a crowded city street. This image may be a comment on the spread of surfing beyond the beach, or a representation of the encroachment of urbanization in areas once sacred to surfing.

CRIS HICKS, a longboarder, graphic artist and surfing historian, confronted what appeared to be a lack of civic concern for surfers' well-being when she requested permission to post signs on a roadway in Encinitas warning drivers that this was a surfers' crossing. Stylized images similar to the international symbols on real street signs depict a young girl with a longboard balanced on her head; a young male surfer carrying a shortboard under his arm; and an older female longboarder. Reluctant to post the signs as a public service, members of the local city council changed their minds when Hicks suggested they view the signs as public art. Hicks's work is an example of a trend among younger contemporary artists: collapsing the boundaries and hierarchies that separate art and design.

LIKE AUSTER, **JIM GANZER** also developed a popular line of surf-wear in the '80s, **JIMMY-Z**, which he later sold to Ocean Pacific. But Ganzer—who attended Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles in the '60s, along with Ed Ruscha and Laddie John Dill—has always been a fine artist. He is best known for room-sized work utilizing a range of industrial materials, from weather balloons to large wood beams. This show includes *Mercury*, a seventeen-foot-long surfboard made of mahogany, a dense wood that would make an impractically heavy surfboard by today's standards. Ganzer's choice of material was deliberate—a way of emphasizing that he was making a sculpture resembling a surfboard, not a real surfboard that an enthusiast might choose to enshrine. (Ironically, many classic boards are often remade today, ridden once, and then displayed like fine pieces of antique furniture, their design and historical importance now making them collectibles.) Although solid wood behemoths—redwood planks weighing up to 150 pounds—were ridden by pre-colonial islanders, mahogany is not indigenous to Hawaii. The soaring, upright form of Ganzer's sculpture suggests a memorial to a long-gone era of surfing, a time-traveling image linked to the title (*Mercury* is the Roman god of voyagers). *Mercury* is also a notoriously slippery element, an apt metaphor for the physicality of



surfing. **WHILE GANZER MAKES** sculptures that look like surfboards, **MICHAEL ROBERTS** transforms actual surfboards into sculptures. Using a broken board as his canvas, he removes a portion of the fiberglass, exposing enough of the foam to accommodate drawing. As a sign of respect, he usually retains the shaper's signature in the foam. Roberts also keeps the logo intact by incorporating his seascape around it and then matching the coral and tropical fish he paints to the colors of the logo. Logos and branding are central to contemporary surf culture. Today, whether or not you've actually ever ridden a wave, the surfing lifestyle is available in styles ranging from laid-back to X-treme. The surf industry wants its brands to be perceived as "core" (short for "hard-core"): associated with an active, aggressive outlook. The irony is that this anti-Establishment vibe is marketed with as much vigor as such mainstream brands as Coca-Cola, to ensure that trend-setters pick it up and pass it on, coast to coast. **THIS CULTURAL CONTRADICTION** is evident to artist **ASHLEY BICKERTON**. While Roberts's reverence for surfboard

^^Russell Crotty, *Still Carvin After All These Years* 1991, monotype, 42-5/8 x 34-1/8 inches, Collection of Laguna Art Museum/Orange County Museum of Art, Art Collection Trust, Gift of Charlie Miller. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

logos is a way of connecting to a lifestyle and a history whose changes he has witnessed during his years as a surfer, Bickerton views surf logos in a larger context of branding and commodity culture. *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles) #2* is a wall sculpture that features a pile-up of logos for products the artist uses in his personal life. He has come to define himself by—among other things—Fruit of the Loom and *Surfer* magazine, founded in 1960 by John Severson, a surfer and artist who wanted a periodical that would serve both his interests. Bickerton suggests that the “laid-back surfer” and the “tormented artist”—exemplified by Vincent van Gogh, who retreated to Arles, in the South of France, after two years in the heady art world of Paris—are equally suspect. For surfers and artists alike, emulating a lifestyle has supplanted the search for authenticity.

PIPELINE POLITICS

For the most part, surfers and artists have concentrated on their own spheres, seeking the perfect wave or the perfect means of expression. But in the '80s, a new spirit of activism led some surfers to found such groups as the Surfrider Foundation, a California-based environmental activist group; Surfers Against Apartheid, which boycotted surfing competitions in South Africa from 1985-1990; the Surfer's Medical Association; and, in Australia, Surfers for Rainforests and Surfers against Nuclear Destruction. Contemporary artists, while generally avoiding the didactic, emotional response of an earlier generation, began to examine political and social dysfunction in their work.

IN THE LATE '80S, SANDOW BIRK began thinking about similarities between the art world's disdain for surfing as a theme and the second-class status of marine painting. (Paintings of ships traditionally ranked much lower than works with historical, religious, or mythological subject matter.) Recognizing that surfing was a type of maritime activity—dependent on weather patterns and tides—led Birk to develop a new approach: updating the compositions of old master paintings he had seen in European museums with twentieth-century scenes. He began painting witty versions of such works as Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, replacing the historical figures with surfers in the throes of both a past and present history. By recasting recognizable historical paintings, Birk provokes viewers to question the forces that determine the course of history. By replacing the

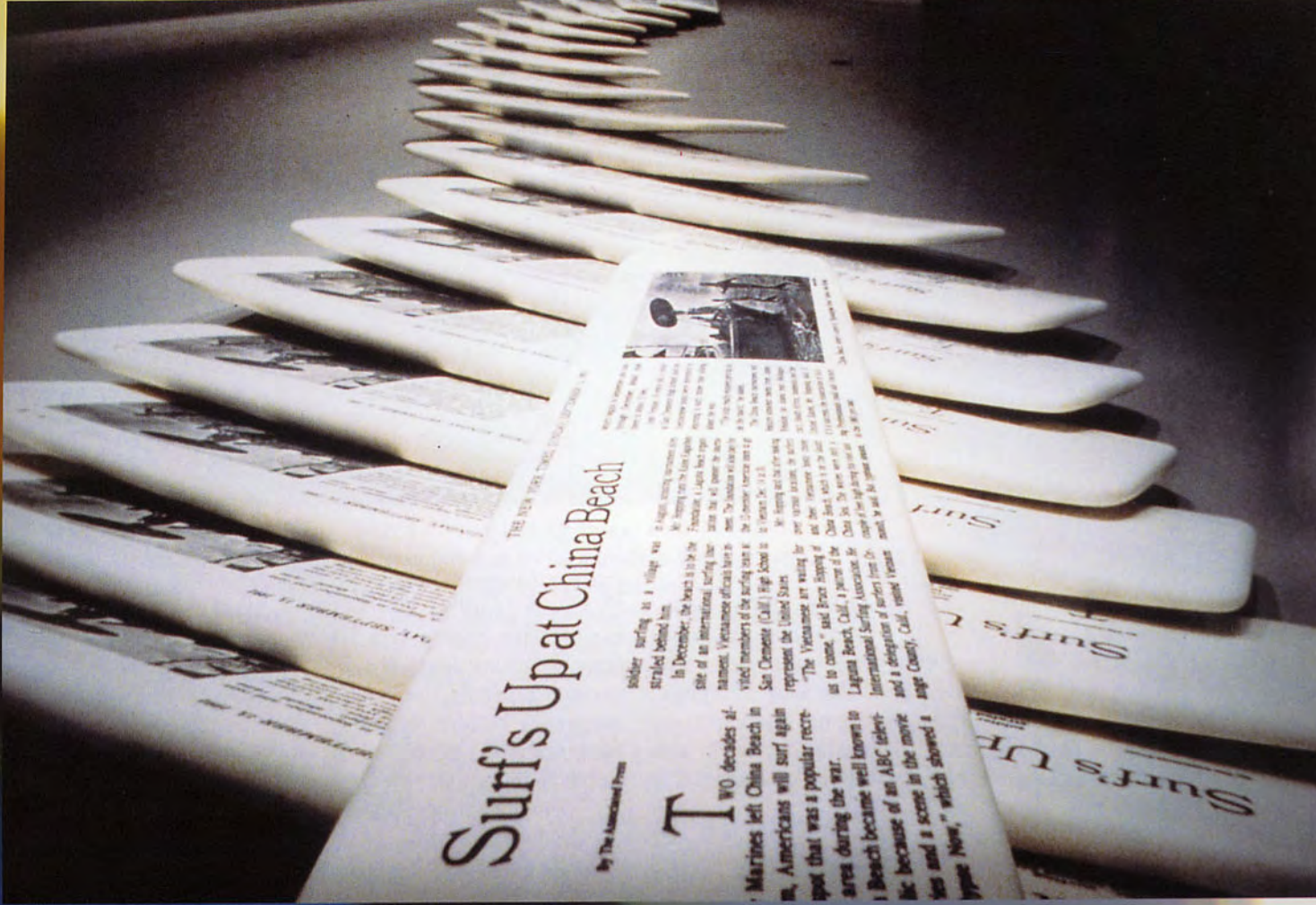
heroes of the past with everyday surfers from the present, he points to shifting attitudes about what it takes to be a hero and whom we trust to depict heroism.
LYNN COLEMAN'S TRUE

CONFESSIONS of a Native Son depicts a montage of memories of a Malibu draftee in Vietnam. In vivid, neon-like watercolors—a cross between Rick Griffin's psychedelic patterns and Disney cartoons—birds morph into attack helicopters that hover over a bar populated by unconcerned Vietnamese bar girls in bikinis. The tension between the terror of war and Asia's alluring “otherness,” and between the surfer's cosmic connection with a wave and the soldier's bitter awareness of fighting for a lost



JOHN CEDERQUIST HYDRAPLAN

JAPAN WITH THE STANLEY BROTHERS, 2002, MAPLE, ALASKAN EPOXY RESIN INLAY, METAL, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



Surf's Up at China Beach

By The Associated Press

TWO decades after Marines left China Beach in Vietnam, Americans will surf again at that spot that was a popular recreation area during the war. China Beach became well known to the public because of an ABC television scene in the movie "Apocalypse Now," which showed a

soldier surfing in a village was strafed behind him.

In December, the beach is to be the site of an international surfing tournament. Vietnamese officials have invited members of the surfing community from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and other countries to compete.

"The Vietnamese are waiting for us to come," said Bruce Hoping of Laguna Beach, Calif., a member of the International Surfing Association and a delegation of surfers from Orange County, Calif., visited recently.



The surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

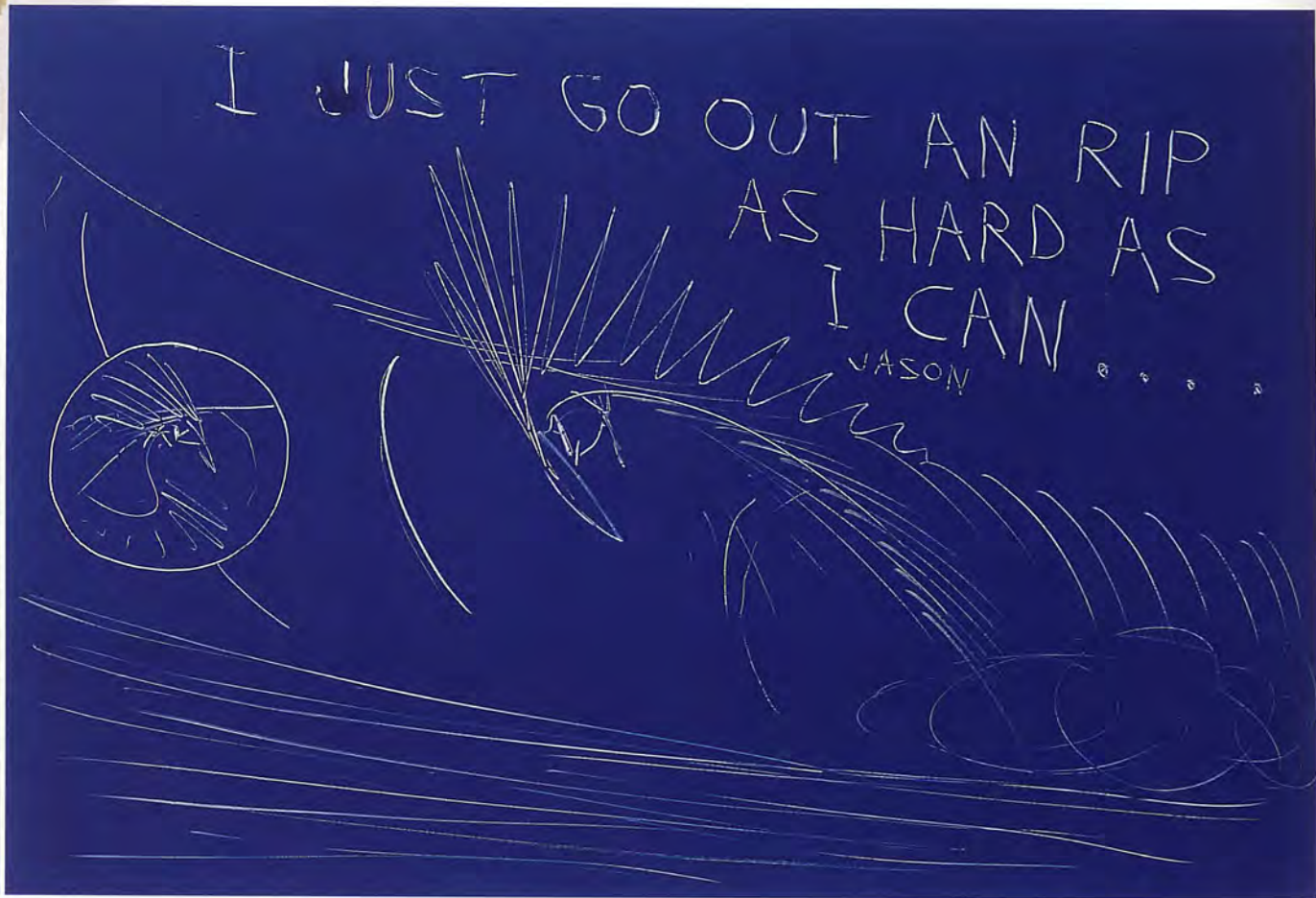
...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.

...the surfers are waiting for the Vietnamese to come to the beach.



cause gives the work its resonance.

JEFFREY VALLANCE uses humor to deal with the complexities and contradictions of colliding cultures. In 1985, equipped with letters of introduction from Los Angeles officials, he arranged an audience with the King of Tonga. Following the example of artists who accompanied explorers such as Captain Cook, Vallance documented his work with notes and paintings. The resulting exhibition consisted of a provocative and humorous Polynesian Pavilion that included the King of Tonga's Throne Room, replete with objects appropriate to a South Pacific potentate: a massive carved and painted throne, a grand scepter, a royal crown and ring, even the king's noble surfboard and the royal swim fins. The faux-Polynesian style Vallance grew up with in the San Fernando Valley—pool luaus, tikis, mumuus, *pupu* platters, and Don Ho records—overlays the British-influenced Pacific tribal artifacts of mod-

ern-day Tongan culture.

IN HIS SCULPTURAL INSTALLATION *Aloha Oe*, **KEVIN ANCELL** explores the history of Yankee imperialism and its aftereffects, which include land ownership struggles, toxic dumping, nuclear arsenals, increased poverty, and the erosion of indigenous culture. Ancell has made a series of life-size, hyperrealistic, motorized polystyrene "hula girls" who clutch M-16 assault rifles and grenades as they sway to the lulling strains of Hawaiian guitar music. At a distance, they look like a group of giant dashboard ornaments, a Jeff Koons-style commentary on the hip-swinging women welcoming mainlanders disembarking from a plane in Technicolor movies from the '60s. But closer inspection reveals bruises around the eyes, and gang tattoos and needle track marks on the arms.

THE MYRIAD FACTORS that influence history are also the subject of **SIMON LEUNG'S** installation *Surf Vietnam*. Working with a high school surfing team, American veterans of the Vietnam War, and Vietnamese immigrants, Leung explored the legacy of combat and displacement that continues to haunt—and to connect—Americans and Southeast Asians.



JEFFREY VALLANCE, IN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING OF TONGA, 1985, COLLECTION OF THE LAGUNA ART MUSEUM/ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, ART COLLECTION TRUST, GIFT OF THE ARTIST. PHOTO: ROBERT WEDEMEYER.



The installation is based on a 1992 newspaper account of a surfing tournament on China Beach in Vietnam, incongruously illustrated with a still from the film *Apocalypse Now*: soldiers surfing while warplanes strafe the village behind them. Leung created his own version of a surfboard with an enlargement of the newspaper article incorporated into the resin surface, suggesting that even the detached world of surfing has a political dimension. Leung's installation engages with the complexities of U.S.-Vietnam relations, not by passing judgment, but by presenting the individual viewpoints of his collaborators and allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions.

JOHN CEDERQUIST is a surfer who makes work that transcends the divisions between furniture, sculpture, and painting. His latest work, *Hydroplaning in Japan With the Stanley Brothers*, is a chest of drawers painted with an illusionistic image of stacked, opened crates that attempt to contain a cresting wave borrowed from the Japanese artist Hokusai's famous *Great Wave at Kanagawa* (from the woodblock print series *Thirty-six Views of Fuji*). Mickey Mouse-like cartoon hands are shown planing the wood surface with a Stanley-brand tool which creates curls of wood that become the curls of the wave.

THE "PLANING" OF WOOD AND WAVE recall Cederquist's surfing days, when a simple plank of wood (or foam and fiberglass) permitted a blissful, hydroplaning ride across the peak of a wave. Continuing the wordplay, "hydroplaning" also evokes the sense of skimming back and forth between two cultures, East and West. Cederquist blends the Eastern emphasis on line and surface and the Western tradition of illusionistic perspective. He uses the image of crating water—an impossible act—as a way of suggesting the folly of trying to capture by other means a transcendent experience such as surfing, or maintaining solid divisions between cultures, or separating the definitions of furniture and sculpture.

A LO H A

More than forty years after entering the popular consciousness, the image of the surfer has undergone major changes. Clean-cut Gidget in 1959 gave way to pot-smoking Spicoli in the 1982 film *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*. Today, some surfers are environmental activists while others project the commodified rebelliousness that sells surfwear. Yet the newest revolution in surfing is not a radical board design or the increasing popularity of wave-making machines, but a heightened awareness of the way the sport has been shaped by historical and economic forces. Looking to surfing as a metaphor for cultural transformation, surfer-artists have increased our awareness of the interconnectedness of the world. While the core experience of surfing as a communion with nature remains unchanged, the artists are inspiring continued questioning of what surfing was, is, and can be.



Most every school morning Spicoli awoke before dawn, smoked three bowls of marijuana from a small steel bong, put on his wetsuit, and surfed before school."

—Cameron Crowe, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High: A True Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981)

^^ASHLEY BICKERTON, TORMENTED SELF-PORTRAIT (SU AT ARLES) No. 2, 1988, MIXED MEDIA, 90 x 89-1/2 x 2 INCHES, DES MOINES ART CENTER PERMANENT COLLECTIONS; PURCHASED WITH FUNDS FROM THE EDMOUNDSON ART FOUNDATION, INC. PHOTO: MICHAEL TROPEA, CHICAGO.

JAN STUSSY, SHOT OF STANTON MACDONALD-WRIGHT AND JAN STUSSY IN MACDONALD-WRIGHT'S ZEN ROCK GARDEN, C.1972. COLLECTION OF JAN STUSSY FOUNDATION.