



THE ART WORLD ACCORDING TO TYLER

written by **Christopher Miles** photographed by **Marianno de Lopez**

Tyler Stallings likes his commute, a mellow cruise down California's Pacific Coast Highway that starts at his home and studio in Huntington Beach, where the artist/writer/curator and sometimes teacher at UC Irvine put down roots during his now legendary stint running the Huntington Beach Art Center from 1995 to 1999.

Fifteen miles to the south, the drive ends at his current roost: the Laguna Art Museum. Today's journey is more leisurely than usual—leisurely because I'm doubling as chauffeur in hopes of catching the curator extraordinaire during what's normally his private thinking time. Stallings gazes out the window at the passing surf and sand and talks about work, guiding principles, assorted projects, plans for the future, what it's like to wear so many hats, and his vision for a museum of his own.

"I suppose the trajectory really began, whether I knew it or not, when I was in Atlanta writing for *Art Papers* magazine," recalls the Big Easy-born Stallings, who studied at the Atlanta College of Art before heading west to attend graduate school at CalArts. "I continued writing for *Art Papers* as a West Coast correspondent, then I got a job at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery—as a guard—telling people not to touch the art. Eventually I began writing essays for exhibition catalogs, and got

into independent curating. At first it wasn't much more than an excuse to organize shows so my friends and I could be in them."

Before long, however, Stallings landed a job in Huntington Beach, where he quickly turned the town's sleepy art center into a quirky exhibition mecca with shows that championed provocative, emerging artists—some of whom have graduated to "artstar status" and often cross-referenced art, popular culture, and subculture. Among Stallings's more memorable exhibitions were those devoted to skateboard culture aesthetics and the overlaps between art and extraterrestrial enthusiasts. "Like it or not," he reflects, "the boundaries between pop culture, design, entertainment, and art are already blurred. The barrier keeping popular culture, not Pop Art but actual popular culture, out of museums has been collapsing for a while," he insists, "so it only makes sense for museums and museum professionals to be looking into what's happening and what it means."

Stallings's exhibition program turned the heads of high art folk who had written off Huntington Beach as the land of bad seascapes, but his conspicuous presence also raised the eyebrows of local bureaucrats and thought-police desirous of a more sedate art center. When they forced the issue by tightening the reigns and the pursestrings, Stallings walked. Unsure of his destination, he found Bolton Colburn, director of the Laguna Art Museum, holding an open door, not only

ready and willing to anoint him Curator of Exhibitions, but intent on letting Stallings mount canceled Huntington Beach exhibitions at Laguna and continue with his predilection for pop. "The Laguna Museum's mission is to address American art with an emphasis on California," says Stallings of the enviable position he stumbled into, "and it seems fitting that the museum should devote some energy to examining popular culture because California is such a pop culture production center, and so much recent California art is intertwined with popular culture.

"It's nice sometimes to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond," continues Stallings, who insists that the characterization of his current place of employment as small refers only to the size of the floorplan, not the caliber of the staff or the quality of the institution. "I like working in a place that isn't huge, overly bureaucratic, or hierarchical in its organization. And I have a lot of autonomy," he adds with a smile. And Stallings needs his autonomy. Under what other conditions might he feel as comfortable pursuing upcoming exhibitions with titles like *Cyborg Manifesto*, *Surf Culture*, and *Whiteness: Color and Authority?* And conventional wisdom suggests that the museum doesn't begrudge Stallings his autonomy either. *Whiteness*, a survey exhibition scheduled for 2003, will explore Caucasian identity politics and the infusion of whiteness into the art world, from "white cube" gallery spaces to pasty-faced flesh tones, and

recently earned a \$50,000 grant from the LA-based Fellows of Contemporary Art, making Laguna—among all the museums in California—the most recurring recipient of the coveted grant.

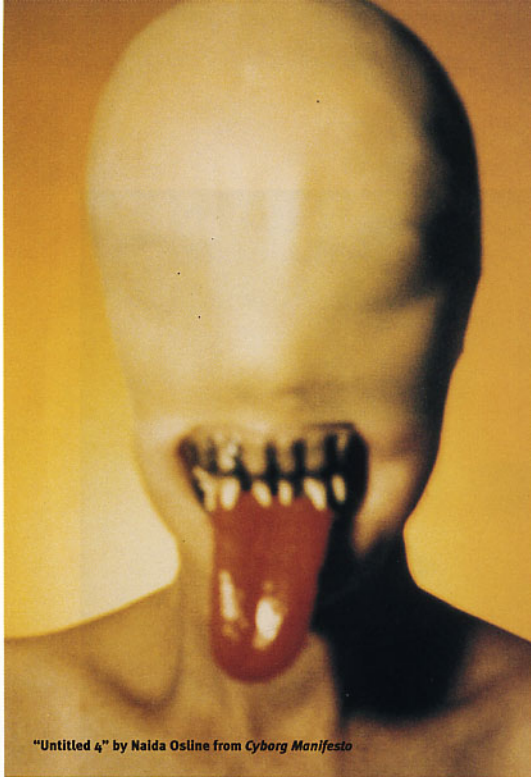
At the museum, Stallings beams as he strolls through the dim circular corridor created by Stephen Hendee, an Irvine-born, Newark-based installation artist who's enjoying his first museum exhibition at Laguna. "The kinds of artists who interest me are artists who seem very engaged in the world rather than just caught up in a process of making something," explains Stallings, referring to a number of artists he's promoted, including Hendee, who creates dully luminous spaces with faceted walls (part *Starship Enterprise*, part *Chartres Cathedral*) out of little more than foamcore board, paper, duct tape, and fluorescent shoplights. "I look for those artists as they're on their way up, when I can still get them for shows at a smaller institution, and when I can provide them with important early exhibitions in their careers."

Of course, it wasn't so long ago that Stallings imagined himself on the other end of the artist-curator relationship he describes, and when he was on the sort of fast track now enjoyed by the artists he has exhibited. "Last year I organized four shows at Laguna, and this year I probably will do four more," he remarks of a job he has no thought of abandoning anytime soon, but which allows limited time for work in his own



"In the Garden" by Margaret Keane from *Keanebillio*

KEANE 1963



"Untitled 4" by Naida Osline from *Cyborg Manifesto*



"Head Hunters" by Chris Finley from *Cyborg Manifesto*

studio. "It's terrific to be at a place where I can have such direct involvement in so many projects, and freedom in putting them together, but I'd also like to have more time to work on my own projects independently, and to make more of my own artwork."

Stallings usually has a few studio projects or bodies of work in progress at any given time, all in varying pursuits of an art that transcends mainstream culture without being watered down in the process. "As an artist, I'd love to be able to achieve something like the Pet Rock," he enthuses in a tone that reminds you that he is perhaps the only person on the planet who can discuss something like the Pet Rock with a straight face and get you to take it seriously too. "I know it's a gimmick," he continues, "but when you look at what happened with the Pet Rock it's amazing in a way. It's like a really sophisticated, well-packaged piece of conceptual art, a perfect combination of gesture, idea, and presentation, but it played itself out in the realm of popular culture, where a lot of conceptual art wouldn't hold up without the support of the museum or gallery context."

Though in its infant stages (which, in his case, means it will likely come to fruition sooner than most of us could plan a picnic), Stallings is honing a dream project that might afford him the option of wearing all his hats—conceptual artist, curator, writer, teacher—at once, instead of juggling them. "If I had the opportunity, I would create an organization called The Invisible Museum (TIM), which would be a museum without walls," he muses of his perfect vision. "Using the word museum lends an air of authority and the idea that it's invisible suggests that it could be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

It would be an organization that provides infrastructure for curators, artists, and culture-makers in general, to do projects at traditionally non-art sites. In the past there have been projects that take place at motels, the DMV, grocery stores, moving vans, etc. TIM hopefully would provide long-term programming and consistency to such approaches."

Among TIM's potential shows and events, Stallings imagines a mass performance involving swing dancers in a mosh pit at the Beverly Center shopping mall in Los Angeles, an exhibition tracing the history and beliefs of the Heaven's Gate group, to be held at the Rancho Mirage, California estate where believers committed suicide in preparation for extraterrestrial rapture, and an exhibition addressing the connection between art and money by examining TIM's planned funding source: an investment club managed by portfolio sculptors. Until TIM becomes a reality, Stallings is managing to keep things in balance, and in perspective. "To me, making art is more of a way of life or a way of thinking that governs my different activities," he affirms. "Whether I'm writing about objects, organizing exhibitions of objects, or making objects, it all involves putting forth a voice."

Tyler Stallings has cleared his throat.

Stephen Hende: *Presence Control continues through July 8*, and *Cyborg Manifesto*, or *The Joys of Artifice opens April 15 at the Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach, CA. (949) 494-8971 or www.lagunaartmuseum.org or www.cyborg-manifesto.com.*

*Artist/curator Tyler Stallings can be found today wherever
the rest of the art world will be looking for a pulse tomorrow.*

