

Excavating California

RENEGADE CURATOR TYLER STALLINGS IS BRINGING SHOWS ON SURFING, WHITENESS, AND BIG-EYED WAIFS TO A MUSEUM NEAR YOU

One foggy morning in May, Tyler Stallings, 34, trim and well-mannered, pauses on his drive up a winding road through the Malibu canyons. He stops his Ford pickup and gazes down a few hundred yards, past the brown and pale-green scraggle of vegetation to the rough surf that pummels the shore. At first, he's struck by the beauty and scale, but instead of slipping into a mellow, relaxed state, as most people would, he goes through an unusual kind of free association: He looks through the clouds at the few opulent houses that sit in the valley below and considers the labor it's taken to build them. He begins thinking about the idea of the sublime, a term for beauty and moral grandeur that has special meaning for artists. In due time, his sense of the splendor before him gives way to awe and terror.

"I got depressed, knowing I didn't know much about what I was looking at," he recalls, explaining that his feelings were like the guilt experienced by 19th-century landscape painters, men who stared out at land threatened by the Industrial Revolution: "So I felt I was spiraling downward." He got "nervous and anxious," realizing he could never survive by himself in the wild. He pictured the Cambodian countryside. He realized that Pol Pot would have killed him, since he would never be a farmer and he wears glasses, and the Khmer Rouge leader slaughtered all scholars.

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After his reverie, which leaves him inspired, he drives to the rustic studio of artist Russell Crotty to talk about surfing. Crotty, a rugged, masculine blond fellow who draws and paints for a living, will complain about the development of the Malibu shore and the way yuppies have taken over a rebel sport. "What used to be a subculture and an alternative lifestyle has become this mainstream thing," the artist says. "It's narcissistic! We're living in luxury — and what's funding the whole thing? This military nightmare." Stallings listens, dutifully takes notes. The two look at Crotty's surfing-inspired art — repetitive little ballpoint sketches and larger pieces, drawn on blueprint paper, that resemble political cartoons: In one, the phrase "The Fucking Condos The Fucking Condos" repeats over the stick figure of a surfer. The two men shake hands above the ocean as Stallings climbs back into his truck.

Stallings is more than just an alienated intellectual, though he's certainly that. As curator for the Laguna Art Museum, he's the most effective and visionary of a new breed of artists and theorists who are making the Southland's galleries and museums safe for pop culture. Not Pop Art, as in Andy Warhol's ironic paintings of soup cans or Jasper Johns' iconic dollar signs, but pop culture itself — the raw, vulgar, greasily commercialized stuff disdained by artistic traditionalists and modernists alike. While much of the art world of the '90s has reacted against the network of studios and museums, democratizing art by bringing it to freeway murals and forests and coastlines and public plazas, Stallings' goal has been to put pop into traditional art spaces. His specialty is not public art, not political or gender-driven art, not multicultural art — often, it's not even contemporary art — but pop culture and its "artifacts" as art.

Like a pith-helmeted explorer investigating the mating habits of Amazonian tribes, this transplanted Southerner, a descendant of American President John Tyler, has spent the past five years immersing himself in the symbolic life of the Golden State, bringing an art historian's rigor and an anthropologist's curiosity to UFO freaks, Deadheads, skateboarders, black-velvet painters, and hot rod customizers.

Stallings is both radical and central, and to understand him is to see how ideas filter from the fringe into the mainstream, where they come to seem naturally placed. As an artist and curator in California, he's a maverick in an art scene that has been defined by its mavericks, by painters and sculptors and curators who are unfazed by straying outside the boundaries of good taste as determined by years of art history made on the East Coast and in Europe. Stallings has become a celebrated and influential part of the Southland's art scene. He's spent the last four years in a small Orange County town that could have become a kind of gulag archipelago, but he has managed to generate plenty of attention in L.A.

"He's an extraordinary person," says David Wilson, director of L.A.'s idiosyncratic Museum of Jurassic Technology, who praises not only Stallings' "unique vision" but also his ability to bring it into the world. "He seems to be breaking down the boundaries of what art is."

Tom Patchett, owner of Track 16, the funky Santa Monica gallery that has shown exhibitions on the punk era, neon signs, and



Art, to Stallings, is serious, scholarly business, even if the art in question is old surfboards and Dick Dale record covers.

Winnie the Pooh, calls Stallings an heir to Marcel Duchamp, the notorious French artist who revolutionized the art world by bringing bicycle wheels and urinals into gallery spaces in the 1910s. Patchett points out that even those who revere Duchamp pay him little more than lip service. "He's wonderful to talk about — but Tyler Stallings is doing it," he says. "He's moving things forward."

Despite Stallings' gracious, apologetic, often bashful manner — he makes radio host Warren Olney look brash — he's got a

bold agenda: "to actually produce culture, not just exhibit it." "As a curator, you're not just arranging objects," he says. "You're producing culture because it's never been done before." He'd like to do shows on overlooked topics like whiteness, heterosexuality, extreme Christianity, and to give space to contemporary artists like Sandow Birk, who's completing a mock historical exhibit about an imaginary war between Northern and Southern California.

At the Huntington Beach Art Center, where he worked as director of programs

until this spring, Stallings took a new venue in an unlikely, unartsy town best known for surfers and racist skinheads and turned it into one of the hottest, boldest exhibition spaces on the West Coast. Scores of Silver Lake hipsters — the kind who rarely stray east of La Brea Boulevard — braved the freeways for Huntington Beach's show on cartoonist and "lowbrow" painter Robert Williams. Huntington Beach's exhibit of Edgar Leeteg's bare-breasted black-velvet paintings — *A Rascal in Paradise* — was surely the first black-velvet show to receive a favorable editorial in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Sheepish as he may seem, Stallings is well-connected and shrewdly political. When the arts czar in Huntington Beach grew uncomfortable with Stallings' experimental programming earlier this year, Stallings got himself a new position at the Laguna Art Museum, a bigger organization with far greater resources and a dedication to the art of California. (Michael Mudd, Huntington Beach's cultural services manager, said he had no comment on Stallings' tenure there.) The fit at Laguna was ideal: Laguna's director, Bolton Colburn, is, like Stallings, interested in funky shows about pop and its subcultures.

In fact, Colburn was at the early stages of planning a show on surf culture when he hooked up with Stallings. Interested in the way the West (driven by the Protestant work ethic and Manifest Destiny) collided with the Far East (the Polynesian culture that originated the sport), Colburn wanted to make cultural sense of surfing, not just offer a straight history with the boards of famous surfers hanging from the walls. He wanted to look at the way surfing had become a symbol for the good life, for the Internet, for California itself.

Colburn is a handsome, barrel-chested man who once toured the world as a competitive surfer. He and a few fellow curators had formulated the idea for the surfing show as a way to explore California culture of the first few decades after World War II, when a new set of values and lifestyles were coalescing on the West Coast. He knew Stallings was the right man for the job.

In some ways, though, Stallings was an unlikely choice. He may strive to capture the popular spirit, but he's nothing like a regular guy. Fair-skinned, bookish, politely distanced, dressed with an urbane's flair, he's the opposite of a surfer, almost an antisurfer. He is no art-world snob, but he's so steeped in academic training that he rarely completes a sentence without using a word like "demythologizing" or "dialectic" or veering his point over to art history. In an era when even New York's Guggenheim Museum has scheduled a show of paintings from the folksy illustrator Norman Rockwell, Stallings represents the kind of baffled affection intellectuals increasingly bring to pop culture. And listening to Stallings speak about culture, pop, and life, it is clear that art people, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said of the rich, are different from you and me.

Stallings designs his galleries so they completely envelop the viewer in a new environment — a process, he says, that's similar to the way an obsessive fan slips into a subculture. Upon entering *Grind*, a skateboarding show he created in Huntington Beach in 1995, the visitor was met with a huge, fragmented mural designed by Ed Templeton,

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 an internationally ranked skater from Orange County, then 22, who worked with Stallings as cocurator. Skateboards hung from the ceiling, all over the show, and objects were placed awkwardly low and unusually high as a way of besieging the viewer with unexpected information and iconography. Besides skateboard magazines and schematic drawings that displayed the evolution of skateboard design, there was a running video that showed how skaters used the city of Huntington Beach as a playground, creating their own sense of the city that countered the visions of the town fathers.

"It was very raw," Colburn recalls. "It wasn't hung in the normal way — it was just jam-packed with objects. It had a really low-tech catalog. The whole thing seemed open and fresh."

The show *Dead on the Walk: The Graphics and Culture of Deadheads*, organized the following year, was equally inventive: A pair of worn shoes, full of holes and with heels facing up, rested on a pedestal at the gallery's entrance, a symbol of the many miles traversed by the devoted. Behind the pedestal hung a psychedelic tapestry, tie-dyed and sewn with the names of Dead fans. Art by Deadheads papered the walls, from floor to ceiling, "salon style," as Stallings put it. Most of the art used familiar Dead iconography like dancing bears or skulls with lightning bolts. A section on bootleg tapes, complete with a microphone and nearly endless playlists, included a discussion of democracy. For the show's closing ceremony, there was a performance by a Grateful Dead cover band, after which the enormous crowd spilled out of the gallery, formed a drum circle, and created a clamor that brought the police out in cars and a helicopter.

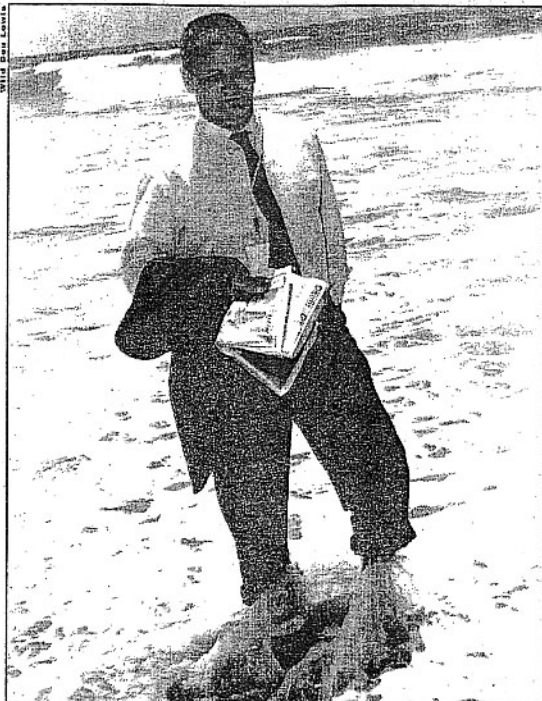
With the 1997 UFO show, *Are We Touched?: Identities from Outer Space*, Stallings took his fascination with pop culture to a new level. The exhibition included not only paintings, sculpture, and installations by contemporary artists, but also a photograph of a Heaven's Gate cult suicide and a painting by a man who claimed to have had "alien encounters, abductions, and sexual

contacts for many years with five different species of aliens," according to the catalog. Instead of keeping its distance from the world of getting and spending, the exhibit looked at commerce dead-on, with a photograph of the '60s-themed "Space-Age Lodge" at an Arizona Best Western and a set of postcards and tourist tchotchkes from Roswell, New Mexico, the town that transformed itself into UFO central after the "Roswell incident" of 1947.

The surfing show will continue this hierarchy-busting mix of fine artists, pop artifacts, and work by untrained "outsider" artists. This time, because of the new venue, the budget will be more than three times bigger, the gallery space will be twice as large, and the attendance will be far higher.

The surf show will build on a heralded Laguna show in 1993 called *Kustom Culture*, which looked at three generations of California car customizers, in particular the work of Von Dutch, "Big Daddy" Roth, and Robert Williams. Colburn says he and the other planners built *Kustom Culture* without any kind of model. "The things worth looking at are the things that haven't been looked at before," he says, echoing Stallings. "Who cares about a model?"

Stallings will make many trips similar to his emotionally fraught visit to Malibu — visits that combine the rugged and windswept with the intensely cerebral. He'll drop into Huntington Beach's tiny International Surfing Museum to check out old boards, Jan and Dean and Surfari records, and a 1960s photo of one of the city councilman as a tanned beachboy. He'll go to a bright-pink Woodland Hills bungalow to meet with Craig Stecyk, an artist, writer, and photographer for *Justapop*, the art magazine devoted to the "lowbrow" movement. Stallings will sit in Stecyk's kitchen, stocked with a 1951 Coke machine and a counter and booth from a '40s diner, discussing the origins of surfing in 3,000 B.C. and the East Coast's bias against California art. He'll visit the Redondo Beach home of Brian Taylor, a 24-year-old neoconceptualist who cultivates what he calls "the domestic sublime." As they talk, one of Taylor's installations — a videotape of the Manhattan Beach Surf with a song from N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* running in the



Former surfer Bolton Colburn is now Stallings' boss at the Laguna Art Museum.

and speaks about Chile being the next California. Like a folklorist sniffing out the blues in rural Mississippi, Stallings will listen intently and run a tape player — looking, he will say, for "oral histories."

Art, to Stallings, is serious, scholarly business, even if the art in question is old surf boards and Dick Dale record covers. For a guy who is drawn to the goofiest, most hedonistic icons of pop and consumer culture, he

"the parking lot experience." The push for connection reminded him of the Russian Constructivist artists who emerged from the rubble of World War I and worked to reconnect art with the life of the community. "I think it's pretty amazing that that kind of nonacademic collectivism exists in our society," he says. Stallings envies those who work in a more populist medium than he does. "I'd actually like to produce popular culture, if I could. You know, make a film. I'd love to be a cartoonist, if I could draw better."

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background — plays behind them on an enormous television. ("Compton is like 15 miles away from the surf," Taylor says. "What right do I have, as a white suburban male, to listen to this music?")

And one sunny afternoon in midsummer he'll return to Huntington Beach to check out the country's biggest surfing competition, the Gotcha Pro. While surfers ride waves in the background, he'll speak to a sunburned South African surfer who offers the apocalyptic pronouncements of Alvin Toffler

has an abbreviated sense of humor. He doesn't laugh much. Nor does he look down his nose. He doesn't have a campy or ironic attitude toward this stuff. He sees surfers, car customizers, and skateboard designers — all people who live in their own complicated, fringe subcultures — as heroes of self-determination. "What interests me is that all these groups are producing a new lifestyle," he says. "Questioning authority."

When he began to research his show about Deadheads, he realized he'd found a group that was going against the grain of modern America in all kinds of ways. Dead followers, who travel from city to city meeting up with fellow Dead fanatics, are building a new kind of reality, what Stallings calls

to be part of." He sometimes worries that he lives vicariously through other people's enthusiasms, that he doesn't have a direct enough connection with life itself and its communal experiences.

Yet his combination of closeness and distance is part of what gives his words and his shows an anthropological tone and makes them succeed. He sees Southern California's visual reality with the eyes of an outsider. Born in New Orleans, he grew up in Southern cities like Birmingham and Louisville, moving every couple of years as his father, an auto executive, was transferred. His early years were tumultuous. His parents divorced when he was 10, and three years

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From the show *Are We Touched?: Identities from Outer Space*

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later his father succumbed to liver disease brought on by heavy drinking. Only two years after his father's death, Stallings' mother died from uterine cancer, and he went to live with his grandparents in Kentucky, staying until he went off to college.

His childhood left him introverted. He kept himself sane, he says, by creating his own world to take along with him. From the age of 10 on, he collected comic books he didn't read and *Star Wars* action figures he didn't play with. He knew, preternaturally, how important it was to keep these artifacts in pristine condition. "I was such a little miser," he recalls. He also made Super-8 movies. "I would horder leftover stuff so I could use it in my films, like toilet paper tubes so I could make futuristic cities." Of his bedroom, he says: "It would look like a crazy person's if people didn't know what it was."

Like many smart kids, he planned to become a writer. But in college, at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, he met the conceptual artist Ronald Jones, who showed him that art could be just as good a medium for ideas as writing. He began painting, sculpting, and designing politically charged installations. He exhibited in galleries all over the South after graduation, moving to Atlanta and working at a gallery there while picking up a bachelor's of fine arts at the Atlanta College of Art.

Interested in the doses of theory for which California art schools were known and turned on by the art of Angelenos Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy, Stallings moved West to attend the California Institute of the Arts. CalArts, in Valencia, was founded by Walt Disney and has enjoyed a

reputation as a kind of West Coast Bauhaus. Associated with conceptual and, more recently, media art, CalArts has served as a launching pad for major careers, including New York painters Eric Fischl and David Salle and L.A. conceptualist Mike Kelley (best known for his soiled stuffed animals). It's also a place artistic conservatives love to heat up on when they're describing what's wrong with art today. (The contentious art critic Robert Hughes, for instance, once called the place "Walt Disney's Academy for the Briefly New.")

The basis of a CalArts degree is not years

Fischl, that welcomed Stallings and helped refine his sense of art's possibilities. Stallings also discovered something else: that the image, and imagemaking, is as central to Southern California as race and history were to the South. (He remembers the South as being nearly buried by its past: "The Civil War," he says, "is brought into almost every conversation.") Unlike bookish types who hate L.A., Stallings sees the dry hills and sunbaked valleys that roll out from Hollywood as the perfect place to explore the effect of the visual image.

As artist and student, Stallings was

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of figure drawing or sketching the human form in pencil or charcoal, exercises that formed the basis for art education for centuries, but skill with "crits"—critical discussions between student and teacher about what their art means: Here's how Fischl, whose paintings chronicle errant sexuality in the suburbs, recalled a life class in an interview: "Everybody was naked. Half the people were covered with paint...The two models were sitting in the corner absolutely still, bored to tears. Everyone else was throwing stuff around and had climbed up onto the roof and jumped into buckets of paint. It was an absolute zoo....They didn't teach technique at CalArts."

It was this environment, two decades after

inspired by the novels of William Burroughs and the films of David Cronenberg. He was fascinated with the relationship between the body, image, and technology. The work he created and exhibited throughout the Deep South and the Southland were mostly disturbing conceptual pieces with a prurient sense of humor. They're full of penises, astronaut suits, and spiders, and some of the work comes complete with fake newspaper articles in which he invents for himself an imaginary past.

While at Cal Arts, he began writing for art magazines. He also edited a book about gender and the body and took a couple of short-term jobs at galleries in Los Feliz and Santa Monica. The director of program-

ing position at Huntington Beach, which he began in December 1994, was his first full-time job. A year or two into it, he came to accept that his role in the art world was more likely to be as a scholar and curator than as an artist (though he has continued painting and designing installations). The turning point, he says, came in 1996, when one of his sculptures appeared in a William Burroughs show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Stallings calls this a personal high watermark but also the point at which he'd succeeded enough to move into another sphere.

Stallings' art career, as both artist and curator, is an attempt to reconcile disparate worlds. "I came to visual culture, like most people of my generation, through television and comics and movies," he says. "But when I went to school, none of that stuff was taught. So you have that tension between your school life—it's all about ideas and modernism—and then you go home and it's a whole other culture. And I guess, for myself, I'm trying to reconcile the two. I guess I'm trying to revisit some things without worrying about being ridiculed, without having to please my professors."

In tackling popular culture, Stallings is going against some of the bedrock assumptions of art history. One of the most important essays in 20th-century art was "Avant-garde and Kitsch," written by critic Clement Greenberg in 1939. To Greenberg and the artists and scholars who followed him—mostly abstract expressionists and minimalists—kitsch or popular culture was the enemy of genuine avant-garde art. Kitsch, Greenberg wrote, whether comic books or Tin Pan Alley songs or Norman Rockwell magazine covers, was a leech that degraded taste. "Kitsch is mechanical and

operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations....Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times." He also tied kitsch to Fascism, explaining that totalitarian regimes degraded taste as a way to reach the masses.

Stallings can quote this essay chapter and verse, and sometimes does. But as he sees it, kitsch and the avant-garde are united. What kitsch needs, what he can provide, is the theory and art-historical context that makes it more than just a piece of consumerism. If someone besides the object's maker is there to offer what he calls "the other side of the dialogue," a piece of kitsch can become as intellectually serious as a Jackson Pollock painting.

His expansiveness goes even further. He's excited—intellectually and otherwise—that the surfing show is sponsored by the Gotcha surfboard company. Instead of fearing or resenting the marketplace, as many intellectuals do, Stallings is fascinated by it. "One of the reasons I'm interested in popular culture is that it's where capitalism and art meet," he says.

When he's talking about money, Stallings slips into a strange, almost religious reverie. Money, he concedes, is "a secret desire" of his. "It's like, there's all this money out there, and how does one get access to it? How does one, you know, access it and then use it, with this whole information economy....The way I see the world, I see all this money out there, at least in the United States, and it really seems possible, and it just seems to be floating." When it's pointed out to him that almost any career he could have chosen would have earned him far more riches than he makes now—his salary at Laguna is around \$35,000, as it was in Huntington Beach—Stallings admits



Big-eyed art collectors Matthew and Lisa Sweet will lend some of their paintings to Stallings' Margaret Keane exhibition.

that it's not the money itself that really interests him. Only when money seems abstract and mysterious, like a Rothko painting, is it compelling.

What really seems to interest Stallings instead is the ability of pop to bind people together, to give them something to live for. He admires individuals who've been deeply shaped by a group identity or by sudden experiences like UFO abductions. His title for the UFO show—*Are We Touched? Identities from Outer Space*—gives a hint to his point of view: But despite his fascination

with these topics, he admits he has only surfed a few times, only been to a few Dead shows years ago, and never had a UFO experience. "I'm someone who's very interested," he says. "I'd love to have an UFO experience." UFO abductees tend to be non-conformist, like artists, "with sensitivities to the outer limits of consciousness," as he writes in the show's catalog, "on the fringe because of their trust in intuition."

Though he has been hailed in the art world for his accessible shows about popular phenomena, Stallings seems anxious—at

times nearly desperate—to find a medium with a broader reach. The work of a curator is only slightly and most superficially that of a showman: It's primarily a scholarly job devoted to furthering knowledge of an artist or a period, and curators tend to be behind-the-scenes art historians. Some become museum directors, where they devote themselves to fund-raising and public appearances, but most curators remain curators, moving to bigger and better institutions with each job. Stallings admits he's tempted by the wider exposure available to popular artists, like the skateboard painters he met while putting together *Grind*. For someone, in his early 30s, who is already a leader in his field and a regionally important figure, he's full of self-doubt. He wonders what the skaters and surfers and Deadheads he meets think of his interest in their lives. "Am I gonna be seen as an impostor who's trying to make a buck?"

Many of the artists Stallings deals with have spent years struggling against the mainstream art world. "Because I dare to do surfing as mainstream high art, I'm type-cast," Russell Crotty says from his windswept ranch above the Malibu canyons. "They think male. Blond. California. Muscle-bound idiot. Every cliché in the book is thrown at you before they've even met you."

Craig Stecyk knows this score, too. He experienced this sort of prejudice as a young Santa Monicaan adrift in the effete East. Talk about career suicide—the worst thing was

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 a California artist in New York in the '60s, he says pugnaciously. Steycyk, a thin man who speaks and moves in a blur of s and gestures, says his uncle told him he could never make it in New York if he ran. Only gradually did Steycyk see the in this.

se surfers aren't the only West Coast s waiting for the New York establish- to let them in the door. Along with the show, Stallings is putting together an it on the work of Margaret Keane, the rancisco artist best known for her '60s ngs of bathetic, big-eyed waifs who cry nose tears. As with *Surf Culture, Mar- Keane and Keanabilia*, scheduled for summer at the Laguna Art Museum, e the first major museum exhibit ed to the subject.

ool June evening Stallings travels up ent Heights, across Mulholland Drive, to Nichols Canyon to be home of rock fathew Sweet. Sweet, best known for racing and melodic album *Girlfriend*, 1991, and his wife Lisa, a fashion designer, ong the world's leading collectors of ed and cat-eyed art, and his Web page //members.tripod.com/~ozz_manoir/in tm) is considered the finest of its kind. Sweet's house is crammed with the s of Keane and Keane imitators: a big- waif at the ocean, holding a beach ball. an big-eyed waif, standing beneath the es of Japan. Red-hatted, scarf-wearing ed waifs Christmas caroling. A big-eyed olding an appropriately big-eyed cat. A e big-eyed waif, nude.

Sweets are gentle and good-natured ives. Stallings introduces himself, he three begin to speak about the — its vision, its catalog, its likelihood velling to other cities in America and n. They discuss Keane's paintings the more conventional collectors parse so, quibbling over dates and details, ising how a painting dated 1963 must been done in 1965, talking about the Margaret's midcareer divorce from r Walter Keane altered her work. "We o debate, 'Are they from the '50s? No, urdos are from the '60s.... That's the e ponder over," says Sweet.

Sweets follow the articles and essays uge whether it was Margaret or Wal- o really painted the waifs. "We're con- d that Margaret did all of it," says ew. "She was an accomplished portrait r before she met Walter." These days, s, they are looking into the copycats hat they call the big-eyed masters in wn right.

uch a Wild West of art to collect now," says Sweet, who first discov- igned art after wandering into a San isco gallery seven or eight years ago. ouple has scoured thrift shops and ales from Venice Beach to Runyon n, and they've visited the painter, who ves in San Francisco. "As we got to the art more and more, we got to be and more affected by it," says Sweet, e new album, *In Reverse*, features a : painting on its cover. "It got to be less culture cool, kitschy thing and more, this is really amazing art. For us it real inner-self vibe," he says, compar- Margaret's paintings to sad pop songs ll at the heartstrings.

weet beams over his collection and rly Kinks play on his stereo; Stallings ws his words as he asks the rocker if ight be interested in contributing an to the show's catalog. Sweet says he'd. py to. "Margaret wants to be remem-

bered, she wants to be accepted," he says. "And she really never has been. She's never been respected by the mainstream art world. It's so shortsighted!"

This past summer, Stallings drove to Vegas. He passed up the chance to play the slots and ogle seminude babes, instead dropping into a clown museum that turned out, despite its advertising, to be mostly a place where Latino laborers bang together clown figurines in rooms filled with noxious odors. "It's sort of the dark side of toys," Stallings says. Wherever he goes, he's trolling for what he calls visual culture. But that doesn't mean he's not sometimes disappointed.

On that same trip, he drove for an hour to a brothel museum, which he found to be too much like a movie image of a Wild West whorehouse come to life. "I had really high expectations, but when we peered in, it was just a bar with laminated newspaper articles on the wall." Even Tom Jones let him down. Venturing out to a show at the MGM Grand hotel — he calls himself a big Tom Jones fan — he's disappointed that the audience doesn't look more like the way he envisioned a Vegas crowd. (Too many people wearing flip-flops and T-shirts instead of being dressed like Dean Martin.) And while he enjoyed the Welsh sex symbol's performance, he doesn't think the pelvis shaking and hip swinging that Jones developed as a thin man in the 1960s really fit his "thicker body."

The place that impressed him was Exotic World, a museum on the California/Nevada border, just off Route 66, devoted to strippers and the lost world of burlesque. Run by a former stripper named Dixie Evans, now the museum's president and enthusiastic tour guide, Exotic World is built on an old goat farm and displays jewelry, costumes, G-strings, and other memorabilia, including Jayne Mansfield's heart-shaped ottoman and Gypsy Rose Lee's trunk. "It's one of those museums where, if your grandmother was a stripper and, say, she dies, and you find this trunk of stuff and you don't know what to do with it, you send it to this place," Stallings says. "I'm totally fascinated by people who create their own worlds for themselves, who go to the point of making a physical world around them, with objects."

Stallings' own life, in a way, is a conceptual art project. He explains that his interest in obsessives who reflect their inner world outwardly comes, in part, from his own sexuality. He's a straight guy who plans not to have children, so creating art and "producing culture" is his way of leaving a legacy. Stallings lives with his girlfriend in Huntington Beach — the down payment on their house came largely from money he made selling his still-untouched *Star Wars* action figures — but he says they're not interested in offspring. He's seen the way kids have changed his friends' priorities — for the worse.

"Maybe I'm fascinated with culture because I'm not going to have a family," he says. "I'm not connected to that kind of history. I'm really interested in how people create images of themselves."

Stallings is blossoming professionally at the right time. At this point in art history — almost a century after modernism, several decades into postmodernism — nearly everything that can be made with hands and minds has been criticized, even rejected, as patriarchal or commercial. The tone of art criticism is dismissive and often relentless. Pop culture, because it's rarely been seen as significant enough for serious assessment,

has not been critiqued with the same severity as painting — which was declared "dead" in the 1970s. In the 1910s, popular culture was supposed to be the salvation of art, but art history veered in other directions. It's finally catching up.

University literature departments, similarly, have challenged the reputations of many canonical writers, especially those of white men. Out of academe's confusion, the field of culture studies has developed; its purpose is to look at "mass culture" (as the discipline's British originators called it) from a left-wing perspective. Early Cult Studs saw pop culture as a way for capitalism to control hapless spenders, but the field has reoriented so that consumers who make "subversive" use of brand-name products — customizing cars, personalizing clothing — are the new heroes of the story.

It's no coincidence, then, that several recent major art shows have ventured into the world of pop — last year's Guggenheim exhibit on motorcycles and this summer's much maligned Museum of Modern Art show *Fame: After Photography*, which included artifacts as recent as news photographs of

doing is mirroring the forces of marketing." As Frank writes in the summer issue of *Art Forum*, the forthcoming Norman Rockwell show at the Guggenheim comes from the same spirit that motivates the right-populist politics of Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich — antagonism toward supposedly snobby elites — and corporations and advertising use the same pitch. This craze for faux populism, Frank laughs, "is not going away anytime soon."

Art professionals predict that the pop culture shows that Stallings and others have built an audience for will only continue to grow. Patchett, of Track 16, says museums increasingly present shows on pop culture, though often for the wrong reasons and without the depth that Stallings brings to them. "When they need to attract a large audience, some of the museum people choose their eyes and say, 'We're gonna get killed for this, but we need to be more inclusive, and we need to make some money.'"

Wilson, of Jurassic Tech, says that mainstream museums could benefit from putting on the kind of intellectually serious exhibits that Stallings prepares. "I think he's the kind

of person who could open those institutions up," Wilson says. "They're trying to move in that direction anyway." If the Museum of Contemporary Art or LACMA brought Stallings onboard, he says, it would be good for the institution and good for the local art scene. "But it would be sad, because that kind of thing usually takes the edge off a person's work. Those larger institutions have a great deal of inertia, and when they bend, they bend slowly. I think the people are more likely to bend than the institutions."

Some people in the art world expect Stallings to take the same path as Paul Schimmel, the current chief curator at MoCA, who came to California Plaza as a young man after making his name with groundbreaking exhibits at the museum in Newport Beach.

In the short term, Stallings' route seems clear: His Keane show opens next summer, his surfing show the summer after that, and a small exhibit this January — *Whiteness, or Coloring Authority Through the Permanent Collection* — will be the seed for a large-scale exploration of Caucasian culture for summer 2002. All three shows will be the first of their kind. If he plays his cards right, the capital he gets from these exhibits could take him to any museum in the world.

But another, less conventional, path for Stallings seems at least as likely. When discussing Exotic World, the Vegas burlesque museum, he grows animated and refers to himself as a latter-day Howard Finster — the Georgia folk painter whose baroque, kudu-shaggy style has made him the best-known among a large field of "outsider" artists. "It's the kind of thing I could almost imagine myself doing in my old age — becoming some weird outsider artist in the neighborhood. Discovering someday that I just have all this junk in my front yard. And suddenly all these people start coming." □



Stallings and some big-eyed waifs

Monica Lewinsky. In academe, the Barbie doll has become the most talked about, written about, contested, reclaimed, and maligned toy in history, with academic and culturally serious books looking at her role in "constructing femininity." (John Wayne and Elvis have also received much attention lately, and G.I. Joe, who celebrates his 35th birthday this year, could become a similarly trendy icon.) The art critic Dave Hickey, a former Nashville songwriter whose book *Air Guitar* explores female professional wrestlers, Fred Mason, and the Las Vegas Strip, has become one of the art scene's hottest voices.

The affinity for pop culture is more than just a profit-motivated fad in the museum world, says Thomas Frank, a critic of consumerism best known as the editor of *The Baffler* magazine and author of *The Conquest of Cool*. "Museums are part of the academic family, if a distant relative, and they're motivated by ideas," he says. "This tendency toward populism is something you could see all across the liberal arts — academics trying to get away from their old hierarchical pedagogy — and it leads to all kinds of mistaken assumptions. My biggest problem with all of this is that it tends to claim to be politically radical, but it isn't. All they're