

beautiful to look at.

First and foremost, Osline recruited Tyler Stallings.

Stallings had come from the California Institute of the Arts—the Walt Disney-founded Valencia school that no longer gives a damn if you can draw a mouse as long as you can back up your Not-a-Mouse with important-sounding, theoretical bullshit. It was Stallings' first full-time job.

In the pretty little building on HB's Main Street, the two began putting together exhibits that were knocking people silly. They ran it as a community art center: there were the annual op-art exhibits, a chance for anyone who wanted to show his or her work to hang it on the walls in layers 12 deep; there were works by local artists in most of their important shows; and it was never overtly offensive—even by crotchety, old-person standards. Few shows were explicit, with the notable exception of a necessarily shocking exhibit by Kara Walker, whose cutout silhouettes were obscene renditions of slavery in hideous scenes of semen-drenched fucking, molestation and murder.

Among many great shows, that one was especially magnificent, and a hell of a coup for the new center: the 27-year-old Walker had just been awarded a MacArthur Genius grant.

In retrospect, it was also typical of the Huntington Beach Art Center (HBAC).

The gallery—a community art center, for Christ's sake!—began getting notice in *Art In America*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Warm notice. Cathy Curtis, then a *Times Orange County* art critic who was famously stingy with her praise, went crazy and called Stallings "promising." Hundreds of well-kempt and wealthy art lovers turned up for openings, as did young punk kids who patiently waited in line to check in with the nice old ladies staffing the reservation table. Camera crews arrived from around the country. OC-born NEA Four member Tim Miller showered his naked self in orange juice on the center's stage. National Public Radio arrived to sanctify the trashy Polynesian beauties on velvet by Edgar Lecteg (that show was curated by the brilliant Greg Escalante under Stallings' watch). People were driving down from Hollywood and Beverly Hills, and

nobody ever sneered that the HBAC was behind the Orange Curtain.

BUT EVERY STORY NEEDS A VILLAIN, AND this one has Mike Mudd.

Mudd was director of cultural services for Surf City and therefore Osline's boss. He looked at the crowds, the notoriety and the warm raves in the national press, and in 1998, he decided with a deafness of tone still mesmerizing years later to clean house at the HBAC. Why? A few old people were apparently offended: their tax-subsidized center didn't reflect community standards. Many have hypothesized from their armchairs that Mudd, a straight-as-they-come gay man, was simply an Aunt Tom. Others have wondered why Mudd would bother staging a bloody coup when he was only a couple of years from retirement anyway. Whatever his reasoning, Mudd assured the city in bland press releases that the HBAC would henceforth be better attuned with "community values." There would be none of those offensive works—like those belonging to MacArthur genius Walker. Nope. *Definitely* no more geniuses.

Out went Osline and Stallings—by now a couple—and pretty much everyone else. Osline was, in City Hall vernacular, transferred "laterally," a move that put her in charge of entertainment for the city's pier. She now books bands whose primary purpose is to keep people buying seagull art while they stroll up to Ruby's Diner for a burger. Randy Pesqueira, the exquisitely well-connected director of operations, went with her.

The HBAC began putting on horrors of shows filled with offensively inoffensive abstract grids in remaindered shades of pea and lime-duct gray.

And Stallings? Lauded by every local paper as SoCal's hottest curator, Stallings was set adrift.

WHO IS TYLER STALLINGS? I'VE HEARD HIS name dropped—as the timeless Randy Newman song grows—from the South Bay to the Valley. Hipsters with expensive eyeglass frames and really shiny haircuts smoking cigarettes outside Beverly Hills galleries; photographers clad in ill-matching black and living in pristine lofts whose rooftop parking lots are filled with their neighbors' foreign sports cars amid the human effluvia of downtown;

industry types who went to CalArts with him and now sun themselves on the sands of Hermosa; the young and poor with knobby skin who go to gallery openings for the free box wine—I've heard the words "Tyler" and "Stallings" on all their lips. One friend actually moved to Orange County because—though she'd never met him personally—she figured if Stallings was here, OC must not be so bad.

Nobody doesn't know Tyler Stallings. But nobody really knows him either. I've orbited him for five years and interviewed him extensively—he answering my questions in a frank and warm manner—and I can't say I actually *know* him more than glancingly. I wonder if anyone does, with the possible exception of Osline, who lives with him.

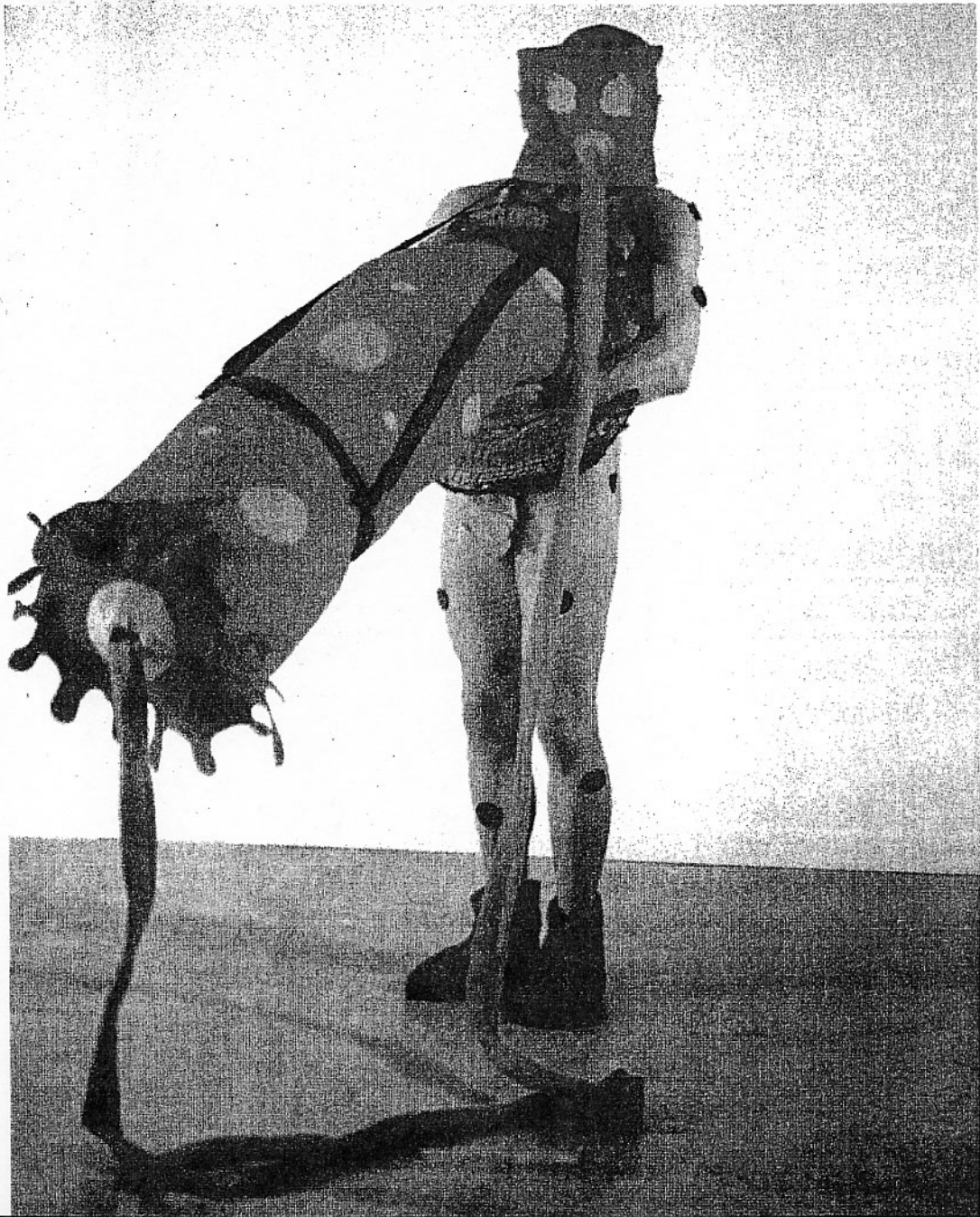
I don't know if he even knows himself. Let's say everyone knows his name.

It's curious, to put it mildly, for a curator to have such Q ratings. Curating is not a sexy job. It involves things like *insurance*, writing *wall labels* and, um, *insurance*. A curator is like the narrator in a novel, pulling together art that might seem unrelated, creating a relationship between the various works and their creators, and inviting the public to come >

NOBODY DOESN'T KNOW TYLER STALLINGS

But nobody really knows him, either

BY REBECCA SCHOENKOPF



CUSTOMIZED ASTRONAUT SUIT (SELF PORTRAIT), 1995
BY TYLER STALLINGS

NOBODY DOESN'T KNOW TYLER STALLINGS

sec. Sure, there's a sense of stewardship, of caring for things created by others. Its main perceived attribute is starched efficiency, and efficiency isn't sexy. If it were, Al Gore would be in the White House, the midnight rides of the Supreme Court notwithstanding.

I can tell you what Stallings looks like: he looks as square as any 1950s corporate dad. He is not darkly dangerous or gay (though for years I assumed he was) or elegantly debauched. Is he pretty? No, he is not. Where he used to be slight and sandy, love has fattened him up nicely. He's less angular, better rounded. He still looks like an awkward young boy but one who happens to be 35 years old. He bears a sweet resemblance to a chipmunk or a squirrel or one of those other rodents that people really like even though there are constant warnings that someone in the Angeles National Forest was bitten by one and contracted rabies.

I can tell you how he talks. He stammers shyly, with loads of *ums*, so even when he's being open, I feel as though

With Stallings, it's tempting to play Doctor Freud. So let's. First and most obviously, his dad was a mean drunk who died of alcoholism when Stallings was 15. While it might be overstating the case to say Stallings is glad his father is dead, it would be entirely accurate to state that Stallings doesn't want to turn out like him.

When he was 22, his mother died of cancer.

In his art, you might detect rudderlessness; a lack of history can be inferred if you're trying to piece together the man from what he makes. One memorable piece features a group portrait of a bunch of schoolboys in ties. Over their innocent faces, corroding them like acid, a brown blotch seems to spread.

And in his own art, there's an arrested boy's fascination with goopy sex and oversized phalluses. Sculptural reliefs that showed at the Giardina Annex in Santa Ana looked like nothing so much as placentas and big clots of bloody, liposuctioned fat. And a bizarre spaceman suit in orange—like a costume a small child would sew from remnant cloth—included



IN A ROW, HIGH SCHOOL BOYS, 1986
BY TYLER STALLINGS

I'm prying. And he uses big words like "contextual," and he uses them correctly. He is neither glib nor schmoozy.

He seems almost desperately shy. Only once, at a Santa Ana opening, have I seen him unself-conscious. A projector was on but no film was running. The people milling about began making shadow puppets. Stallings waggled his finger between his thighs, making a little shadow penis. I was stunned.

But maybe that's who Stallings is: a smart guy obsessed with the stuff that makes up our lives, like shadow puppets, surfboards and . . . well, look at this story in our sister paper, *LA Weekly*, about a man obsessed like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* with Ferragamo labels, python skin, and Dolce and Gabbana coats who turns his fetish for little tiny purses into a Freudian obsession with a disco dolly's womb. Who? *Tyler?*

STALLINGS IS AN ARTIST WHOSE WORK IS justly famed, but he established himself as a curator whose most interesting exhibitions deal with identity, a matter of infinite concern in an age in which we do most of our interfacing over e-mail or Instant Messaging.

what must be a 10-foot dick sticking out of the chest. I doubt it's the kind of thing Stallings would talk about in public, but then, I've never asked him. As interested as he is in identity, Stallings is somewhat unknowable because, you know, he's shy.

His colleague at the HBAC, Randy Pesqueira, laughed when asked if it's possible to know Stallings. What does Pesqueira know? "He's probably carried a notebook in his back pocket since he was in high school, if not younger. He used to love to hear stories about crazy family stuff, and he would take notes," Pesqueira said.

And there's this, Pesqueira said: "He takes care of his grandmother, who's in a nursing home in the South. He's the only one left, so he oversees everything. And he really cares that artists are treated well, that they get a good catalog out of their show and things like that. But I guess that's it. Oh! There was the time he introduced me to his penis. . . ."

His penis?
"Yeah, it was this big spider-venom sculpture. It was *hysterical*."

HERE IS WHAT BECAME OF HB'S BOY genius, of the young man who looks like an IBM exec but wears an astronaut suit >

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in burnt orange with a man's, um, organ springing redwoodlike from its chest—here is what happened to that man after he was cut loose from the HBAC by the man whose name shall evermore be Mudd:

Bolton Colburn, the well-tanned director of the Laguna Art Museum (LAM), jumped all over that shit, hiring Stallings before Stallings could so much as sneeze. The disastrous and short-lived merger with the Orange County Museum of Art behind them, LAM was searching for someone to curate. Under Colburn, the museum had already put on one of the seminal pop-culture shows in the Southland, "Kustom Kulture," which was about hot rods and boobs. Stallings had made his name at the HBAC with "pop-culture" shows (misnamed in my mind; I say they were about our cultural identity) on everything from skateboard artists to UFO abductees.

You still can't do that kind of thing anywhere but here: it gets folks on the East Coast into a rash of shit when they try to do it at their big, fancy, stodgy institutions. The Guggenheim is still getting bashed for its "Art of the Motorcycle" show—and that was in 1998. Some said commercial gear simply isn't art; more reasonable observers figured "Art of the Motorcycle" was a cry for help as desperate as any bulimic teenager's, evidence the bluish museum was trying to be Left Coast.

New Yorkers are always finding new and exciting ways to trash us, specifically our sun- and surf-addled art world. Even when we come up with a bona fide movement—like the 1960s' Light & Space—they can only see us as bimboes. My personal favorite slur came courtesy of Joseph Maschek, snarling in *Art Forum* in 1971: "[T]he prospect of hip, young dropout types hanging out in Venice, California, making fancy baubles for the rich, amuses us."

But Stallings is a quintessential—i.e., a *real*—Californian: a pale, kind of twerpy, definitely bookish, from-Kentucky Californian. He lets us take pleasure in our trash—both our trash culture and the scraps we throw out from the kitchen. Consider his one-man rescue of the big-eyed waifs of Margaret Keane. Schlock? Kitsch? Not in Stallings' hands. Instead, it was a respectful exploration of passion and sentiment—not sentimentality—that demanded one treat Keane not as purveyor of 1970s crap but as a misunderstood and underestimated force.

Such shows aren't forced, as they might feel in New York. But they are smart. Consider his curatorial explorations of such subcultures as traveling Deadheads, folks who believe in aliens (illegal and extraterrestrial), and (coming in 2003 with the help of a \$50,000 grant from the prestigious Fellows of Contemporary Art) the meaning of whiteness.

The heaviest high-art charge levied against Stallings and others like him is that pop-culture shows are anti-intellectual. But Stallings' catalog essays are almost unreadably brilliant, and unlike similar exhibits designed with mass tastes in mind—I'm thinking of the crappy "Made in California" show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—his are intelligently put together. He doesn't justify them by being clever in his essays; he justifies them by letting their obvious merits—their inherent contemplativeness

and the exquisite quality of the works—speak for themselves. For instance, one of his earliest HBAC shows, 1995's "Grind," was an exhibit of skateboarder art. It would have been easy to dismiss the boards as the work of HB boneheads who'd landed from one too many almost-360s headfirst. But the show subtly spoke about issues like sexism in the skate world (guess what: there's a lot) and young male anger while also provid-

ing a surprising look into skaters' quick minds. It was fascinating.

Because of such shows, an *LA New Times* writer called Stallings "the most effective and visionary of a new breed of artists and theorists."

IN STALLINGS' SMALL LAGUNA BEACH office, perched grimly over his desk are a few pieces from the museum's permanent collection. Sandow Birk's surfers look into an oncoming set as soberly as General Washington crossing the Delaware. A Raymond Pettibon is fancifully small. And John Baldessari, in a monotonal scrawl, writes again and again, "I

will not make any more boring art." It's a mantra other curators would do well to steal.

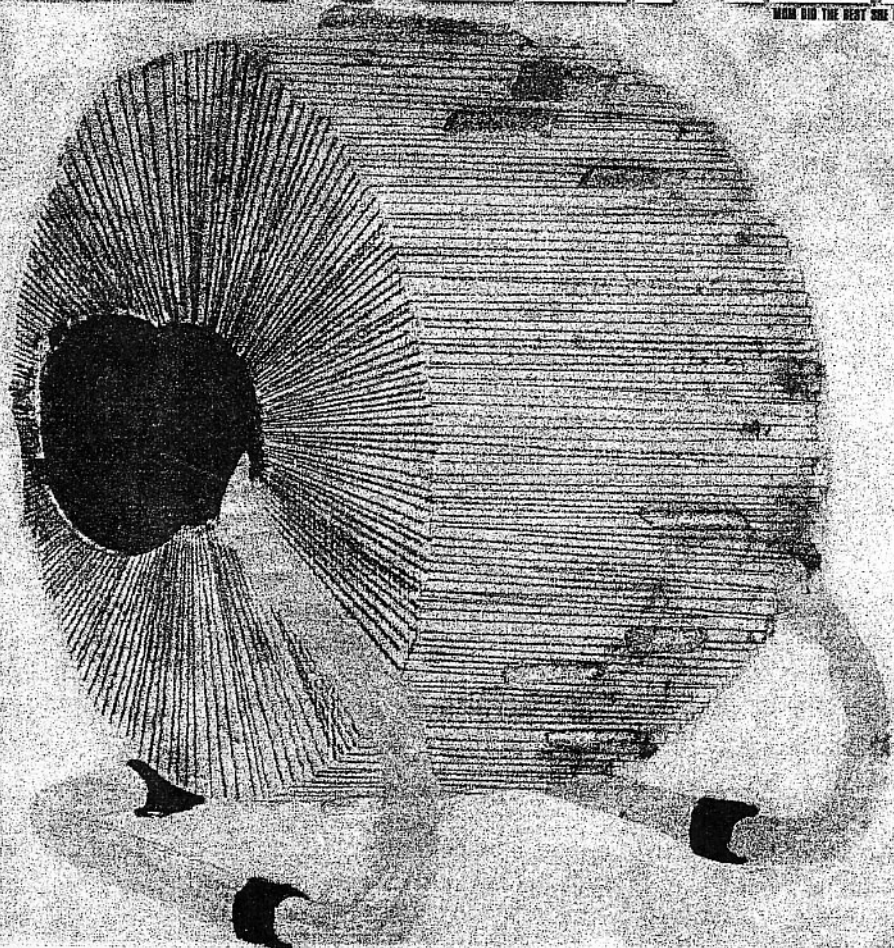
Hell, Stallings doesn't even really want to be a curator. He wants to go off and write some brilliant book or some more short stories about vaginas disguised as women's purses. But at a reported \$40,000 per year, Stallings probably can't save enough to leave his job. He is our captive. And LAM's Colburn is no Mudd; he's more than happy to have him chained there, keeping people happy. Whatever you do, Colburn, don't give him a raise. His flat wages are our gain. **DE**

TENDER SPAM (35) JAZZ PORN (26) REV. LOU ON HOT GAY SEX (12)

OC WEEKLY

FREE

WHY DID THE BEST ONE GO AWAY



ANGRY SQUIRREL? GENIUS? REBECCA SCHOENKOPF
ON UNKNOWABLE TYLER STALLINGS