

A FEW MINUTES WITH



TYLER STALLINGS *The Laguna Art Museum curator on cyborgs, art galleries and the best shark taco in town*

BY KEDRIC FRANCIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY STUART BYER

As head curator at Laguna Art Museum, Tyler Stallings has organized many acclaimed and influential shows, including *Kustom Kulture*; Sandow Birk's *In Smog and Thunder: Historical Works from the Great War of California*; *Cyborg Manifesto*; *Surf Culture* and *Whiteness, A Wayward Construction*. He's also a critically-acclaimed artist, painting works seemingly familiar—homes under construction, fashionable people—but with the same explorations into popular culture and a sense of "otherness" that mark his best exhibitions.

What exhibitions are you working on now? *The OsCene in Contemporary Art and Culture*, a survey of artists, designers, etc. based in Orange County. There hasn't been a show like it since 1988. Since I've been in Orange County since '95 there's so much that's gone on—the Santa Ana Artist's Village, a lot of galleries opening up. In general Orange County as a whole has gotten a lot of recognition. A lot of artists are staying here, instead of a sort of brain drain we've had in the past.

Are there any overall themes to your exhibits? Most of the shows are high-concept shows. I've rarely done a show that's just giving an artist a retrospective for the sake of it. To me the running theme is the exploration of identity. With the *War of the Californias* it was about looking at the history of painting and the politics of California. *Cyborg Manifesto* was looking at how you define yourself as a human being. The idea is if there really was a cyborg where man and machine came together, would that entity have the same rights as a human? It makes you question your relationships to everything, and who has what rights.

What inspires you? I studied philosophy, so the kind of shows I do reflect my interest in ideas. A lot of this comes out of my interest in speculative fiction, also known as science fiction. It's a genre dealing with boundaries, and how you define things. It's just set in the future to look at the present time. Directors like David Lynch and David Cronenberg, I admire their aesthetics. Cronenberg's melding of man and machine and Lynch's sense of infusing everything with a sense of the uncanny, even horror.

Who are your favorite authors in the genre? The classic Orange County one is Philip K. Dick, who died in the '80s in Santa Ana. His work is about 'are you an android, or are you a human?' And I like *Darwin's Radio* and *Darwin's Children* by Greg Bear.

What do you like most about Orange County? Sometimes when I think I'd like to live in smaller town I realize I am sort of living in one. From an arts community point of view, it's easy to know everybody, work together and get things done. There's a community here, and then if I need to go up to Los Angeles for other things, that's there also.

Any favorite restaurants? When I take people to lunch we go to 230 Forest in Laguna Beach—my favorite dish is the shark soft tacos. It's really, really tasty. In Huntington Beach where I live we go to Red Pearl.

Which local art galleries do you find interesting? I've guest curated a show at The Office: An Art Space in Huntington Beach. The owner takes a lot of risks, shows a lot of experimental and younger artists, especially from UC Irvine. Scribble Theory Gallery in Santa Ana is an interesting new gallery in Santa Ana. The university galleries in Orange County have done some great things: Chapman, Cal State Fullerton's Grand Central Arts Center in Santa Ana, and the Beall Center for Art+Technology at UCI—they do some amazing stuff there. And there are more commercial galleries opening. They're important because they actually provide income for local artists, and it keeps them here. ■