

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART

## The Legacy of Artists at LA's Otis College, Which Turns 100 This Year

In its early years, Otis's success rested on the intersectionality of its students who also came from a diversity of creative fields.



Lorissa Rinehart October 8, 2019



*Centennial: 100 Years of Otis College Alumni* at Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, installation view featuring works by L-R: Kim Fisher ('98), Lorenzo Hurtado Segovia ('07), Kour Pour ('10), Alison Saar ('81), Grow'd, Katy Cowan ('14), Rick Owens ('81) (all photos courtesy Ben Maltz Gallery unless otherwise noted)

LOS ANGELES — When the Otis Art Institute opened in 1918, Los Angeles was part metropolis, part backwater, and part frontier. Some 55,000 street cars carried inhabitants from one side of the city to the other while oil fields pumped out black gold by the barrel in Westlake and Long Beach. Meanwhile, Warner Brothers' Studios started making movies on Sunset Boulevard, cementing Hollywood as the global home of cinema. Los Angeles's previous incarnation as a Spanish-speaking city, combined with a post-Civil War influx of African Americans and the more recent arrival of Japanese immigrants, made it one of the most diverse urban centers in the United States. Chaos and creation churned in the streets.

Amid these rapid changes, Otis's inaugural students unpacked their brushes and pencils at the art school's first campus in the donated home of General Harrison Gray Otis, a Civil War veteran turned journalist who became the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*. Originally founded as a three-year program with a focus on drawing and painting, the college soon evolved into one of the country's most prestigious arts institutes that helped to shape Southern California's culture.

To a large degree, Otis's success rested on the intersectionality of its students who also came from a diversity of creative fields. In the 1930s, Dorothy Jeakins — who would go on to win an Oscar in costume design for her work on the 1948 film *Joan of Arc* — likely shared a classroom, if not a beer, with fellow alum and fine arts luminary Philip Guston. Three decades later, as the world turned on to the 1960s, the enigmatic and ever experimental Bas Jan Ader probably had a crit or two with the ukiyo-e inspired, highly political painter Masami Teraoka. The list of outstanding and varied alumni continues on through the decades including John Baldessari, Judithe Hernández, Kim Gordon, Alison Saar, and Khoi Vinh.

This spirit of cross pollination shines in *Centennial: 100 Years of Otis College Alumni*, the institute's current exhibition in its Ben Maltz Gallery. Like the school itself, now officially known as Otis College of Art and Design, the show runs the gamut of creative disciplines. In order to get to Tyrus Wong's indelibly delicate pre-production watercolors of the movie *Bambi*, one has to step around (or over) Liz Young's unsettling corpse-like sculpture "Ghost" (2014) that evokes the prostrate bodies of America's too many victims of gun violence. Lorenzo Hurtado Segovia's playful, yarn-wrapped totems juxtaposed with Masami Teraoka's Hieronymus Bosch-like triptych, "Hideous Ugliest Orange Toad's Last Bolero/Viagra Falls," to create a vibrant if deceptively sinister scene.

The exhibition was organized by the Ben Maltz Gallery in collaboration with Alumni Relations. According to Hazel Mandujano, the director of Alumni Relations, she and her fellow organizers Jinger Heffner, Kathy Macpherson, and Marco Rios, "wanted to cover different types of mediums, different eras, and different types of dialogue that started to happen between the artists in terms of influence."

This multigenerational exchange is particularly apparent on the gallery's far wall where "I Suppose So," a 2015 collaborative canvas by John Baldessari and Meg Cranston is positioned beside Noah Humes, "Alright, How Bout' Now?" Disguised beneath a white mask, one can nevertheless discern an incredulous look on the face of Humes's figure, an African American child whose frame is turned away from the viewer in a gesture of self-protection. His skepticism is reciprocated and more than answered by Baldessari and Cranston's noncommittal phrase, written in gold against a tangerine background. The flatness of both canvases refuses the viewer the opportunity to read too much into them beyond their mutual aloof distrustfulness.

The curators also wanted to present artists who were as culturally diverse as Los Angeles's inhabitants. This was a task easier said than done; as Mandujano noted, when the school initially became more expensive, it also became less diverse, a trend that's been reversed in recent years. Still, to a degree, Mandujano and her colleagues' efforts to present a more equitable show masks the reality of a less than equitable, less than representative history at Otis College. With tuition spikes at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), the Art Institute of Chicago, Parsons, and more, art schools become increasingly expensive and therefore the purview of the privileged few. (Currently, MFA and BFA students at Otis pay a tuition of \$22,600 per semester.)

While maybe a little *too* curated, *Centennial* ends up sending a message worth listening to: In order to thrive, creative disciplines require open exchanges across mediums and cultures, especially in a city as diverse as Los Angeles.

*Centennial: 100 Years of Otis College Alumni* continues at the Ben Maltz Gallery (9045 Lincoln Blvd, Westchester, Los Angeles) at the Otis College of Art and Design through December 7.