

# Art in America



NOVEMBER 2006

**FOCUS:  
LOS  
ANGELES**

**JEAN-ETIENNE  
LIOTARD**

**PAUL CHAN**

**"EVIDENCE"  
REVISITED**

**BETTY  
WOODMAN**

\$5.00 USA  
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Chris Burden was there, Charley Ray had arrived in '81, but I did not take classes with him. I was taking new-genre classes; Mike Kelley was there for a semester or so; it may have been his first teaching job out of Cal Arts. I graduated in '84. I took eight years out of school and went back in '92 to UCLA graduate school. I had started working there in '89 for Paul McCarthy and Chris Burden as their lab assistant, as an employee of the state, which was kind of a great job: I liked the space and the facilities.

I knew a lot of the artists that were in "Helter Skelter." I had no idea that people would pay attention the way they did to that show, but a lot had to do with that choice of a title. Paul Schimmel, the show's curator, is a genius at generating excitement. What was important to me in the show was how hard the people I respected worked to do their art. When they're working, they're really single-minded about it. It's maybe a lunch-box work ethic, a blue collar ethic—"You gotta get this done." And the production of works was not necessarily just about that singular vision of the artist in the studio; rather it happened in a community way.

When I went back in '92 the faculty accepted me, but they said I couldn't do the performance work I had been doing with this group called the Shrimps, so that's when I started making objects. My performance work was movement-based, very few words, a high level of slapstick, comedy based on the fallibility of the body. I knew of the Kipper Kids; we shared an evening of performance once: where they went more scatological, we kept it more on the pathetic.

A lot of the people we were looking at in the '80s were in dance, like the Judson Church, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Rudy Perez, who's in L.A. I saw a lot of Mike Kelley's performances; they were amazing, more about poetry, not so much about activity. Our performances were like this mishmash of Manzoni—well, I never saw Manzoni—but it's this idea of Manzoni or Yves Klein mixed with Buster Keaton. We were working through this weird kind of filtration—of compiled, layered bits and pieces.

Doing the rounds in the schools here over the past decade and talking about my work in lectures, I talked a lot about performance and the performative object within my practice, but I had not done performance in a long time. So when I did a show at Galerie Vallois in Paris in 2005, "Orchestra for Idiots," on the opening night I conducted the orchestra, whose instruments were these objects I'd constructed, based on research about how sound effects for radio programs were made.

For my new show at Acme in L.A. [Mar. 18-Apr. 15, 2006], I began by building a throne, cannibalizing all this furniture and starting from a beat-up white chair, turning it into this really weird fucked-up throne, taller than the body. I was thinking about delusions, and ideas of power—how one tries to keep it, how one fantasizes about using it, how it has been enforced. So I am starting with this swag lamp, 2 feet wide, like a death star made of wire, then I'm making a Little Boy swag lamp, like the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. I am working with these five or six icons: the atomic bomb is historical, and the death star is fantasy, but all that research about Reagan's Star Wars program is still going on. The throne will sit in the room with these delu-

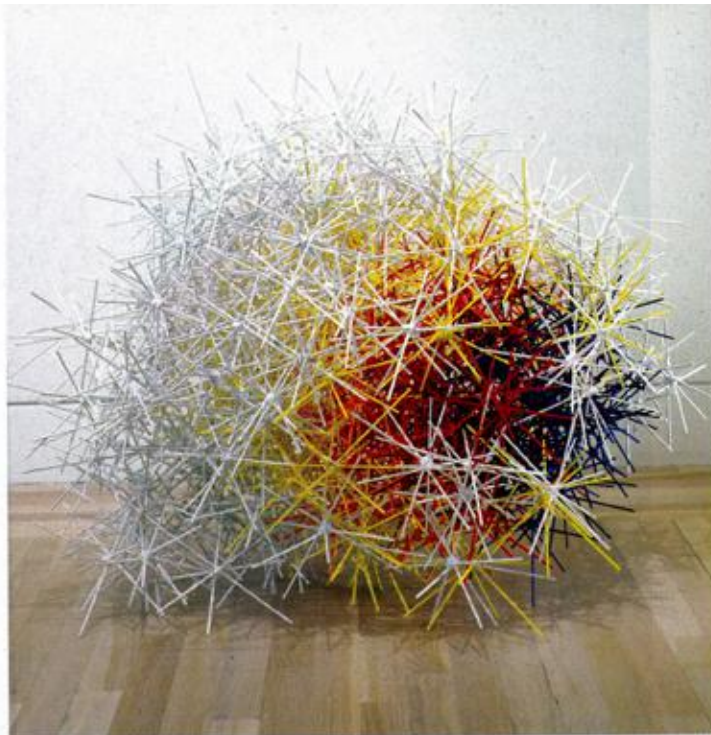
sions floating above it. The methodology is part tramp art, part delusion, part home fixture. I have no idea how it's going to go.

It seems that sculpture out here is more free-wheeling than back east. There is not just one single school of thought. But there are art schools. That's the difference: your affiliation in New York would be with your gallery and the circle that goes with it; here it has to do with the school you went to or teach at. Teaching is important to me for two reasons: I like to have a structure in my life, to have a certain anchor and place and commitment, but not for more than two or three days a week. And I really enjoy the energy the students have, and seeing some of their harebrained schemes come to fruition.

I don't know if this sums up L.A. sculpture, but the attitude is like, "I am just going to go ahead and do this, even though I know it won't get me anything but joy for myself and maybe some people thinking it's cool." People just go for it—they try these things, and the schools have workshops and tools, and you learn some tricks. And you can go to Paramount studios, the one that produced *The Godfather*, you can hire their props department, they'll fabricate things for you. You can go right to the heart of the fantasy factory to get something made, and that's kind of freaky, isn't it? There's a thin line between entertainment and art. The artist might have different motives, but his work is made in the same places as the work of people who may have more greedy, corporate motives.

Like any metropolis, L.A. offers its sculptors this wealth of resources. Artists who move here from other places don't understand L.A. for a year or so; they don't understand the car flow, but when they get the hang of that, it turns out to be a good place. Studios are fairly cheap. You can be in Eagle Rock, or Silver Lake or in the Valley, and once you say, "Well the car is now my new home and I can go and meet those people," I think it works.

L.A. sculpture may come from the performance and time-based activities of the '70s and '80s. Paul Schimmel's show "Out of Actions" [1998] captured a lot of what's shaping L.A. sculpture now. It's about rethinking the gallery space, which in the '70s was like a mausoleum. How you could bring it back to life was with those actions, remnants of actions, potentials for action, as in Charley Ray's pieces where he inserts himself into the sculptures. He photographed the pieces, but he also created these rooms with two doors, one for the audience and one for him. He had a guide that would bring you in and you'd see Charley with his arm hanging out of something, and you'd go out and wait in front of the next room and he'd go out of the back door and go



**Mindy Shapero:** Almost the exact feeling one has when staring at the blinded by the light for too long just after everything begins to happen, similar to the images that you see when you open your eyes after closing your eyes and pressing into your eyeballs (whiteness). 2004, wood and acrylic, approx. 36 by 40 by 38 inches. Courtesy Anna Helwing Gallery, Los Angeles.

into the next room and have the thing on his head. It happened in a warehouse on the west side that Charley rented in '82 or '83; it was his own thing.

Performance is definitely still part of my work, and in fact this last December, we reunited and revived the Shrimps; we did a concert for three nights. We built furniture that we'd wear, have holes cut out for our bodies. It's very physical work. We're all in our 40s at least; we don't bounce back as much as before.

I want people to laugh at what I do, but then to also cry. I want it all. Comedy is a hook in order to put viewers slightly off kilter, so then they can maybe question other aspects of the piece, or of the world, for that matter. The work also may be cruel-funny. Humor is enlivening, even if you're not sure you should be laughing—it raises an emotional bubble. I had this kind of emblematic success with a series of photos called "Tossing Friends." People really liked these photos. I thought, "Well, would I like to keep it up and make more of these, tossing this and tossing that?" Because of my size, I could just toss the world! It may not have been a smart decision business-wise, but I said, "Hell no. I did this once, but I want to do something else now."

## Mindy Shapero

I came here from New York City in 1999. I had just finished undergraduate school at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and I was trying to find a studio. I came out to L.A. just to visit a friend, and the energy seemed real. I just saw an apartment and took it.

I found a huge studio, and I paid next to nothing for it. For the first two-and-a-half years I lived here, it was hard to meet people. You'd go to openings and everyone knew everybody from school; they'd

**“Working on my fabric turkey piece, I thought: this is ridiculous. Then I said, ‘Hey, wait! I’m in fucking L.A.! I can do a turkey piece!’” —Lara Schnitger**

all have these intense relationships and dialogues with each other. I worked at Patrick Painter Gallery. I hated working there, but that’s where I met Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley. I quit and ended up working with those artists, on and off, before and while I went to grad school.

Those jobs were more than money jobs: I was learning how to be an artist. Also the way these artists make art is really good. For instance, Jim does not actually think about making a specific piece; it’s more like this slew of ideas, sort of larger-than-life stories and narratives coming into play to form his art. It’s really interesting to see how they end up coming out as drawing or painting or sculpture.

I went to grad school at USC because it was free. I studied with Jud Fine, David Bunn, Sharon Lockhart, Gary Simmons and a lot of visiting artists who were really great. It was good to have a quiet place to make work and not think about showing it. I graduated in 2003, had my thesis show, and then I was in a group show at Anna Helwing. Six or seven months later I had my first solo show there, consisting of the first body of work I made after school. Starting off so quickly was nerve-wracking and exciting at the same time, but it felt natural—not rushed or uncomfortable. My relationship with Anna just felt easy. I sensed that she got my work and that we could talk about it on an intellectual as well as esthetic level.

I am not teaching, since I can live from my work. It’s mostly the art fairs that are supporting me, which is sort of unfortunate, because I hate doing

work for art fairs. Your work is seen differently in that context. I make work, and it goes—which is sort of great, but I feel like it has to slow down. I think this year will be a lot slower.

Being in “Thing” changed my situation. It was a museum show, and people think that’s important. There were some decisions made about the show that I was not convinced of—inclusions and the overall installation—and I was not excited about the title of the show. I did not ask enough questions; if I had asked more, I might have turned it down. My work is not about thingness, it is not object-oriented; it’s narrative-based, and the works flow from piece to piece, including from drawing to sculpture. It’s fluid.

I’ve been working on this narrative for a couple of years now, and the pieces that were included in the “Thing” show were part of that narrative. It’s a series of works called “The Furry Eye Sack That Rolls Around Collecting Eyes.” It began with a drawing that I made a few years ago, before graduate school. I wrote about it, and then I started making drawings for a sculpture to be called *Blinded by the Light*—a protector, like a talisman to protect people from the furry eye sack. The viewer has access to the narrative through the titles. There’ll be one piece that’s called *Almost the exact feeling one has when one has been staring at blinded by the light for too long just before anything is about to happen, similar to the images that you see when closing your eyes and pressing into your eyeballs*.

What makes me work is internal, it does not have to

do with the art world beyond my own studio. It’s all my own challenges, like making a drawing and then thinking about the possibilities—how to make a sculpture from it. The narrative is the drive, too. I write. I have a zine that I made and continue to work on.

There is a lot of really interesting work, by people both over 30 and under, that is being made and not being shown. Whenever I have an opportunity, I push for these artists. It’s just what we do for each other in such a small community. A lot of people are going straight into grad school, and when they finish they go and get a job to make a living like we all have to do and then it’s over. They stop making art. I took three years off in between undergrad and grad schools, so I knew that art was what I wanted to do. For now, I would not think of moving east. I don’t want to be an exclusively L.A. artist—that’s a little provincial—but at the moment it’s working for me, and if I wasn’t here, I don’t know where my career would be!

## Thomas Houseago

I was born in Leeds, in the north of England, in an extreme kind of British northern culture; to be an artist I felt I had to get out of the north, which was extremely suspicious of art, yet very passionate and proud. It makes for a weird mix. When I was 19, I went to London and was very lucky to get into the St. Martin’s sculpture program. In terms of the art world, London in the early ‘90s was like the Reformation:

painting was dead, sculpture was dead. It was difficult to keep your spirit, but coming from where I had come from, it was not like they were physically killing me.

A lot depends on chance, and I heard about a program in Amsterdam, De Ateliers, that paid you to go there, which was an enormous draw for me. So I went in ‘94, not really knowing the caliber of people there. It was an unbelievable place. I met my wife, who’s American, there. But once you’ve left home, you keep searching for a new one. We were in New York for a while, then in Brussels, which was extremely cheap and drew a lot of people in the late ‘90s; it was both difficult and thrilling, but also an incredibly bizarre place. It was a fabulous period.

Then Matthew Monahan, who I knew well from De Ateliers, moved back to California, where he had been raised. It seemed as if he had fallen off the face of the earth by leaving the European center. I came out to visit Matt and his wife Lara Schnitger, and I fell in love with L.A. as I got off the plane. I can’t explain it. I was completely astonished by the city in 2002. I always think of John Lennon’s quote about feeling that he should have been born in New York’s Greenwich Village. I felt and still feel that way about L.A. Matt urged us to come, and he and Lara helped a great deal with the practicalities of getting us out here. We had tried in Europe

*Two views of Thomas Houseago's Untitled Pour, 2005, plaster, hemp, iron rebar, plastic bucket, 62 by 56 by 30 inches. Photo Joshua White, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.*

