

ART REVIEW

Diverse L.A. fellowship

Recipients of the city's COLA grants display a range of approaches in major mediums.

By HOLLY MYERS
Special to The Times

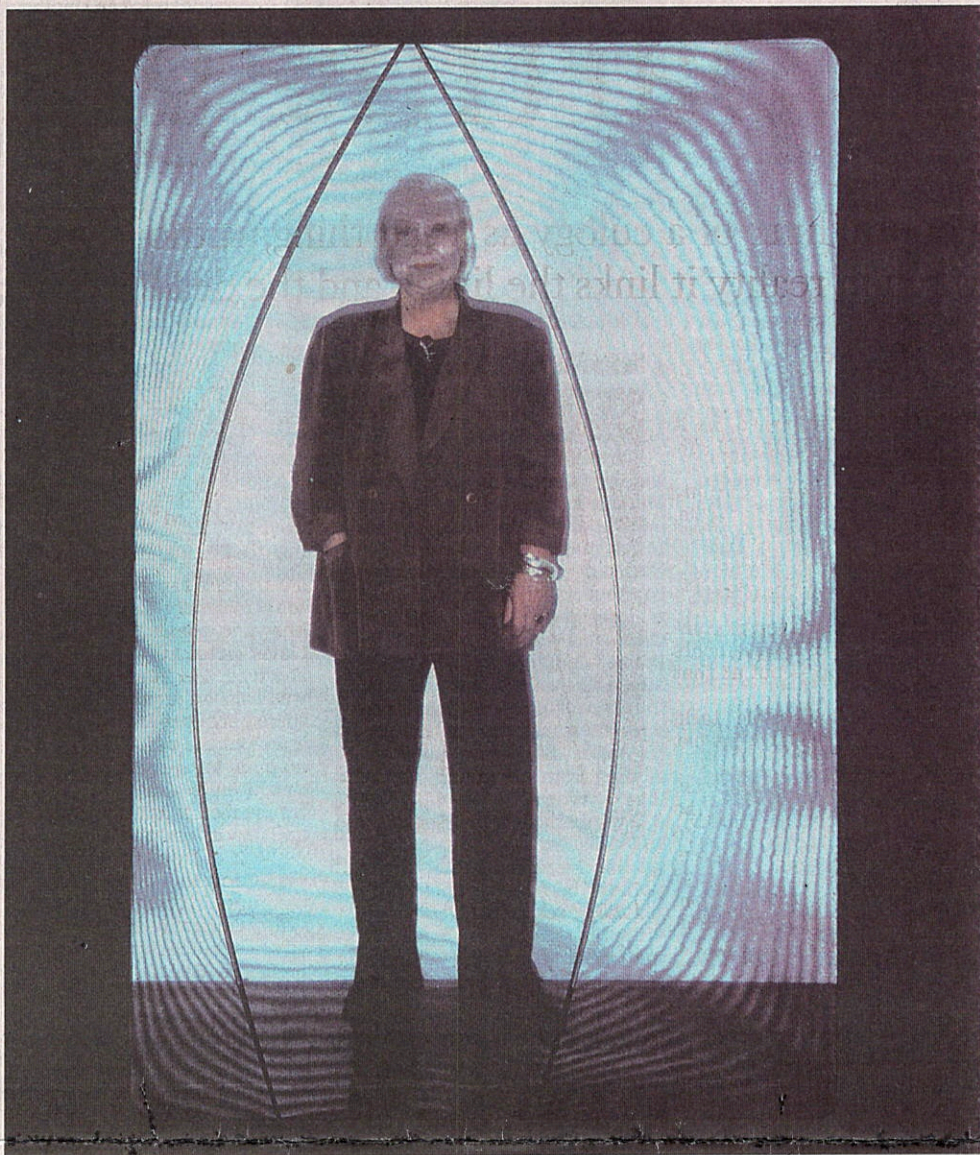
L.A.'s Cultural Affairs Department has had a rocky spring.

In March, word got out that the mayor's budget team had slated the department for possible extinction — a sacrifice on the altar of the city's \$300-million budget deficit. Public outcry ensued, and the mayor quickly recanted, pledging to preserve the department but calling for a change of direction, namely a greater emphasis on the promotion of cultural tourism. A 28-member Mayor's Council for the Arts was established to help facilitate the shift.

Meanwhile, the City Council softened the mayor's proposed cut for Cultural Affairs by \$1.7 million when it ratified the budget recently, but that still left the department nearly \$2 million short of last year's already slender \$11.8 million.

In this uncertain climate, the ninth annual COLA show takes on an added significance. A showcase for this year's recipients of the City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowships, the exhibition is one example of what we stand to lose should Cultural Affairs either dry up or sell its soul to the promise of cultural tourism: a civic venue for the assistance and, more important, recognition of artists.

The 14 represented here — 10 visual artists, three performing artists and one poet — aren't likely to inspire a spike in hotel occupancy or have any appreciable effect on sales tax revenues.



Courtesy of Habib Kheradyyar

ALMOST HOLOGRAPHIC: Detail of Habib Kheradyyar's image of Patricia Faure.

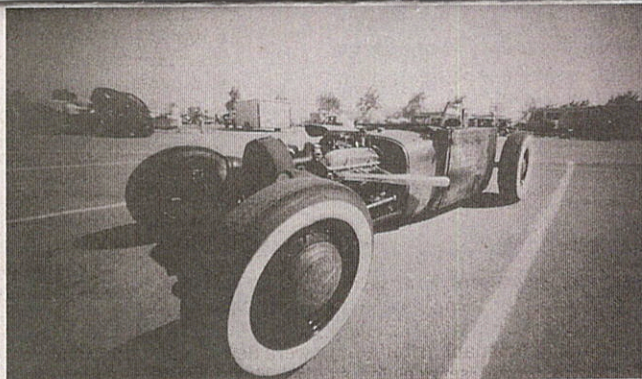
But they represent the very fabric of the city's creative life. L.A. has become the cultural destination it is today in good part because of its artists, and they remain inseparable from any discussion of its future.

The principal function of the COLA grant program is to give its recipients — primarily mid-career artists who've established a presence in galleries around town — \$10,000 of financial breathing room, preferably for the pursuit of a new project. However, the program also offers Angelenos the opportunity to acquaint themselves with these artists as members of their own community, outside the determining context of a commercial gallery or museum.

This year's roster of visual artists (the literary and performing artists are represented through separately scheduled events) is a stylistically diverse lot, encompassing a range of approaches and just about every major medium, from painting and sculpture to photography, sound and installations. There's no explicit theme to the selection, but the majority of works lean toward a concern with some aspect of the human condition.

For three of the 10 artists, this takes the form of straight portraiture. John Sonsini's contribution is a poignant series of paintings depicting day laborers recruited from a street corner downtown. In sensitive renderings in the thick, wet style that's become his trademark, Sonsini presents his subjects as complex individuals, revealing a balance of pride and vulnerability.

The nine etchings in Dan McCleary's "Masculine Feminine Suite" (2004), though dry and delicate by comparison, evoke a similar sense of humility. The subjects are mostly anonymous — the titles refer to a housewife, a chef, a bride and so



A FOND GAZE: A detail of Jack Butler's "Sammy's Roadster."

on — but the faces are vividly specific and brim with humanity.

Habib Kheradyyar blends portraiture and sculpture in a series called "L.A. Art Court," projecting life-size photographs of local female gallerists onto wall-mounted armatures wrapped in sheer fabric. The almost holographic presence of these stylish figures (Patricia Faure is especially striking) at the center of Kheradyyar's distinctive forms cleverly underscores the nature of the artist/dealer relationship — a relationship that Kheradyyar, who operates the gallery POST, himself embodies.

Jack Butler adopts a similarly socio-personal slant in a project that combines photographs of 1950s-era hot rod culture with his own images of contemporary hot rod events. Unfortunately, the latter are significantly less interesting than the former, which compromises the overall effect. The subject is clearly close to Butler's heart, but it feels as though he hasn't quite figured out what to do with it beyond gazing fondly in its direction.

Cindy Bernard explores another area of Americana in her strangely charming photographs of outdoor band shells

around the country. With titles that read like birth certificates — specifying the name, location, year and funding source of each structure — the images are portraits in their own right, rich in social character.

Ann Chamberlin's small, enchantingly folksy paintings, on the other hand, are filled with people — on sidewalks and front stoops, in cars, houses and apartment windows — but suggest deep pockets of loneliness within this web of social life.

Jody Zellen's "Disembodied Voices" (2004), an unnervingly hypnotic installation that combines dizzying projections of crowded public spaces with the audible, multilingual murmuring of one-sided cellphone conversations, also points to the alienation of contemporary life.

The final three artists lean more toward formal concerns than social ones but to equally compelling effect. Renée Petropoulos' contribution is a pair of 10-by-25-foot murals made from overlapping blocks of color. The conceptual basis is somewhat obscure — it has something to do with a list of famous paintings provided alongside the work — but the result is dazzling.

Tom Recchion's "Soundtracks to a Color — Gold/Black" (2004) is a two-room installation — one room is papered in gold, the other in black — filled with the strange, lulling sounds of the eponymous tracks.

Takako Yamaguchi's contribution consists of several dense and energetic paintings that combine elements of traditional Japanese iconography with Art Nouveau and hard-edge abstraction; suggestions of landscape with traces of decoration and design; and sophisticated tones of blue, orange and purple with copious quantities of gold leaf.

The plea for public support of the arts has unfortunately become something of a cliché, but it's one that remains urgently relevant. As *The Times* pointed out amid the recent Cultural Affairs drama, L.A. spends less than a quarter of what New York spends on the arts per capita and a measly ninth of what San Francisco spends. At that rate, it's a wonder we have any culture at all, much less enough to attract the coveted tourist.

This exhibition convincingly demonstrates that the individual members of L.A.'s art community are doing their part to raise the bar. It's time for the city to step up, not bow out.

COLA Artists

Where: Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Art Park, 4800 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles

When: Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; first Friday of the month, noon to 9 p.m.

Ends: June 27

Price: \$5; seniors and students, \$3; children under 12, free

Contact: (323) 644-6269