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Michael Fallon, *Creating the Future: Art and Los Angeles in the 1970s*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014. 405pp.

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Michael Fallon begins his sprawling account of Los Angeles and the complex, multifarious art scene that existed there during the 1970s by invoking, through visual short hand, the city's attendant cinematic mythology. Paradisiac azure skies are contrasted with neon, chrome, and gleaming, molten asphalt, to create, or more appropriately reinscribe, a vision of L.A. as the ultimate in consumer living - as American as apple pie – yet, as Fallon describes it, simultaneously "far sexier" than the national norm - a subversive undercurrent palpable beneath its ostensive surface-gloss (2).

This quality of all-Americanism with an edge, alluded to in Fallon's initial scene setting, is one that has frequently been associated with the Ferus Group, a loose collective of artists linked by their namesake, a gallery formally located on L.A.'s La Cienega Boulevard. A dominating presence on the West Coast, the Ferus Gallery exhibited an array of work during its lifespan of the 1950s to mid-1960s. This included what has often been seen as California's take on Minimalism, dubbed "Finish Fetish" due to its characteristic polished, high-shine materiality, Assemblage or "junk art" tableaux, and installations that incorporated found elements of the city's everyday debris and detritus. The commonalty uniting the Ferus artists was, however, arguably less to do with a shared aesthetic and more with attitude, as is perhaps made evident in one well-known publicity shot. Assembled beneath the gallery's signage, the image notably features Billy Al Bengston lying nonchalantly across his motorcycle, cigarette in hand.

Despite being a formidable art-world force, the allure of "The Cool School" (to use its alternative nickname) began to lose its potency, and while many of the individual artists continued to practice, the gallery itself closed for financial reasons in 1966. It is this moment, often portrayed as Los Angeles' symbolic surrender to the East Coast's artistic sovereignty (with New York firmly established as the nation's creative capital), which Fallon takes as his starting point. In this regard, *Creating the Future* begins at the point where Hunter Drohojowska-Philp's highly successful *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* comes to a close,

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and adopts a similar approach of combining a broader, social history of the city with biographical detail, focusing in on a number of key figures.[1]

For Fallon, the fall of the Ferus group can be linked to a more general souring of the Californian dream, a product of the growing civil unrest that had begun to peak in the late 1960s. However, it is against this backdrop, Fallon asserts, that a new era of creative vitality emerged, as the vacuum created by the decline of this all-male, all-white group came to be filled with a proliferation of new, previously unheard voices. Indeed, for Fallon, the resulting diversity in artistic practice that developed and co-existed in the decade that followed was of huge, but largely unrecognised, art historical significance – his central contention being that this period of Californian pluralism initiated American art's transition into the Post-Modern – a phenomenon, again, commonly thought to have occurred in New York.[2]

In an attempt to establish the breadth of L.A.'s creative output at this time, Fallon devotes each chapter of *Creating the Future* to a different sub-scene, or group of artists. After beginning with a necessary nod to the previous powers of the Ferus group, he goes on to detail the rise of the women's art movement, focusing in particular on Judy Chicago, who, motivated by a growing sense of alienation from the macho, mainstream art scene, decided to found American's first feminist art program at the California Institute of the Arts. This same institution also appears in a further chapter on the development of the West Coast's own brand of performance art and conceptualism. Again, Fallon centres his discussion on a number of key players, exploring in detail the conceptual philosophies of John Baldessari, as disseminated through his ground-breaking post-studio art class. Highlighting the subtle nuances of Baldessari's move away from object-bound art in relation to that of his contemporaries, Fallon also examines the contrasting teaching style and approach of his colleague, Allan Kaprow, a Fluxus artist who advocated communal art actions or "happenings," as a means of erasing the boundaries between art and life. Within this context, the work of a then-student at the University of California, Irvine, also features. These are the acts of extreme self-endangerment performed by Chris Burden, an artist who, to this day, remains notorious for *Shoot Piece* (1971), in which, under his instruction, a friend shot him in the arm with a 22 long rifle. In a separate and extended section, Fallon singles out Burden (along with Baldessari and another former Irvine student, the light and

[1] Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011).

[2] In pursuing this argument Fallon appears to expand on ideas originally put forward by Peter Frank and Paul Schimmel. See: Paul Frank, "Plural Isms: California Art and Artists of the Mid- to Late 1970s" in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Prestel, 2011), 22-26; Paul Schimmel, "California Pluralism and the Birth of the Postmodern Era" in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Prestel, 2011), 16-21.

space artist James Turrell), as one of the renegade forces of the early 1970s. Claiming that these individuals reshaped the landscape of Californian art production via their commitment to a unique, singular vision, Fallon somewhat over-dramatically states that it was the very uncertainty of the era which pushed these artists, taking them to a point that was, creatively, "beyond fear" (71-72).

Creating the Future is not, however, simply another history of L.A.'s art schools. Fallon also accounts for the rise of Chicano art, including and beyond that of the mural movement. Other public art also features, as does a discussion of what is broadly labelled the "underground art scene." This includes car customisation and its significance within aspects of both high and low-brow culture, the city's underground comic scene, psychedelic art, fanzines, and finally, the intersection between punk and skateboarding, which, by the early 1980s, had spawned its own aesthetic style. Whilst Fallon's attempt to produce a comprehensive account is admirable, the narrative, at times, feels somewhat breathless. His strong emphasis on providing the reader with biographical colour occasionally also results in a tone that feels overly gossipy. In fairness, this is probably reflective of the intended audience, as light, descriptive books on Californian art appear to have become a popular sub-genre. This is unfortunate because it does little to dispel the myth of L.A. as less cerebral, and therefore less culturally valid, than New York – a notion the author is clearly invested in. However, in his careful mapping of artistic developments as they occurred simultaneously, within the same city, Fallon improves on prior art historical accounts, which have tended to view particular artists and practices in isolation, not only from each other, but also from their wider, socio-political context.[3] In doing this, *Creating the Future* provides an informative insight into a period of creative cross-fertilisation, whilst adding a further dimension to the rich histories of this city.

[3] A notable exception to this is the aforementioned exhibition catalogue: Mark and Schimmel, *Under the Big Black Sun.*