

# **Institute and Museum of California Art**

## **IMCA's Approach to "California Art" An Inaugural Point of View**



PATSSI VALDEZ  
*L.A.T.J.*, 1987  
Serigraph, edition 4/59  
26 x 20 in.  
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
and Museum of California Art  
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## introduction

In exploring the meaning of “California Art,” part of the role of UCI Institute and Museum of California Art (IMCA) is to define the category. With relatively little reflection, this is a straightforward task:

California Art includes works made in, about, or by artists responding to the California experience. It celebrates the objects and visual art expressions that emanate from the diverse and distinct social, cultural, economic, natural, and other milieus of California.

IMCA, however, has a greater purpose—the robust investigation of this category to reveal urgent, relevant, and diverse perspectives. Thus, defining California Art is an open-ended aspect of IMCA’s work. Efforts have already begun through initial conversations with dozens of scholars and practitioners in the field, including four virtual group meetings conducted during summer 2020. Insights gleaned from these convenings are the foundation of IMCA’s inaugural response, below.

The result of this early examination is a compelling and proactive guideline: **California Art is a provocation.** It is a question, rather than a conclusion, about the concepts and themes that give meaning to California and to California Art. Calling something California Art, therefore, is a starting point.

This provocation will steer IMCA’s distinct approach to museum and institute practice. IMCA will simultaneously appreciate and reconstitute traditional art histories and canons. It will embrace the inclusive consideration of art and artists both within and outside those traditional boundaries. Thus, art and artists previously overlooked or under-represented by the academy (e.g., for being religious or ceremonial, female, BIPOC, gender non-binary, differently abled, and many others) will receive long overdue consideration. In so doing, IMCA will blaze a fresh path for advancing the multiple and ever-evolving meanings of California’s art history and future.

## Beginning the Exploration of California Art

A critical endeavor for IMCA is to define what constitutes California Art. Or, more to the point, to describe why California Art, in being considered as an independent category, contributes to a better understanding of California and its creative past, present, and future.

These defining questions mark the start of IMCA's journey. The destination, however, is not the development of a dictionary-like set of criteria and characteristics. In large part, this is because "California" is both conceptual *and* geographic construct overlaying and crossing through pre-existing Indigenous populations and cultures. As such, it persists in a state of constant evolution, making and remaking itself. There is no innate unification of the inhabitants, pursuits, and outputs that propagate within its drawn borders. Those borders do not restrict the movement of people, ideas, and commerce, nor impede natural or human forces such as weather, immigration, and environmental pollution. The fallacy of containing California applies equally to defining California Art. Any codification would be both arbitrary and exclusionary. The criteria for determining who "counts" as a California artist or which art objects belong in this category would be as artificial and porous as the state it claims to represent.

And yet, there *is* something about California and California Art. This geographic construct has global influence and resonance. The state's GDP places it among the world's top economies. It has spawned behaviors, beliefs, and ideologies—beneficial, detrimental, and some blended place in between—that radiate far beyond the state line. The study of this region's art, therefore, can be an instrument for deliberating some of the ways in which humanity chooses to express itself. It can yield insights into the past and implications for the future.

## The First Step

The Buck and Irvine families, through their respective contributions of The Buck Collection and The Irvine Museum Collection, jumpstarted IMCA's existence with a founding art collection of over 4,500 works, the majority of which were made by artists who at some point lived or created work in the Golden State. These artworks represent important aspects of California's modern and contemporary art and are the generous and generative baseline for IMCA's work. As such, IMCA's starting definition of California Art is *works made in, about, or by artists responding to the California experience. It celebrates the objects and visual art expressions that emanate from the diverse and distinct social, cultural, economic, natural, and other milieus of California.* IMCA's emphasis, then, is on modern and contemporary art, as represented by the stories both held within and elided by IMCA's founding collection.

As noted above, IMCA's contribution comes not from staying within some fixed definition, but rather by engaging this art as called for in its vision and mission:

**Vision:** As the epicenter for California Art, IMCA serves as a compelling destination that is *locally engaged* as a cultural catalyst and *globally relevant* as the seminal investigator and presenter of California's influence and innovation through art. As an essential partner of a leading research university, IMCA brings together students, faculty, scholars, artists, and other publics to generate new knowledge and learning—and to foster transformative experiences inspired by art and its global contexts.

**Mission:** IMCA explores and celebrates artists and their capacity to develop new forms and ideas in response to the California experience. It collects, conserves, and generates scholarship for modern and contemporary art inspired by the state’s diverse societal, cultural, and natural environments. As an inclusive and dynamic artistic and research hub for the campus, region and beyond, IMCA offers exhibitions, research initiatives, publications, education programs, and community and cultural partnerships that foster meaningful encounters with art for audiences throughout California and globally.

### The Process for “Defining” California Art

As a *catalyst*, IMCA inspires the ongoing exploration of what constitutes the visual art of California and how to engage with it in informed, inclusive, and just ways. As a *partner*, IMCA engages a diverse community of expert voices and practitioners who have deeply considered this topic. Such a broad array of distinct inputs helps IMCA to forge resonant, current, and multi-faceted institutional perspective and priorities.

Over four Zoom gatherings during the summer of 2020 IMCA convened dozens of scholars in a series of conversations about California Art. The participants included art historians, curators, and artists, some working in academe and others not—each considered an expert in some aspect of California Art. As a follow-up to these convenings, IMCA will host in 2022, health protocols permitting, the first of an annual series of conferences that bring together academics, practitioners, community leaders, students and other participants to keep the examination of “California Art” relevant and evergreen.



JOHN GAMBLE  
*Calce de Oro (Poppy Field near Banning)*,  
circa 1939  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40 in.  
The Irvine Museum Collection at  
University of California, Irvine

## Two prompts provided a grounding for the initial conversations:

**1** In the context of an art museum and institute, what are some of the major framing elements for defining California Art? What helps convey the past, present, and future of this concept?

**2** What is the relevance or importance of placing all of California Art, however defined, into a single category? What are the implications of doing so?

### Ways of Framing California Art

IMCA's permanent collection is the invaluable foundation and point of departure for working with California Art. That important trove of artworks presents particular collecting histories and invites more expansive approaches. It highlights the value and urgency to probe beyond the previous popularly and academically recognized definitions for most visual art movements, California's included. Those definitions—from Modernism, to *Plein Air*, Art Deco, Abstract Expressionism, Mexican Muralism, Light and Space, Chicano Art, Minimalism, and so on—have tended to be determined by art world insiders such as artists, institutional scholars, and art critics. Each defined movement tends to be placed in relationship to previous movements and thereby perpetuates the gatekeeping inherent in dominant scholarship. More plainly stated, the sorts of art and artists who are in the canon remain in the canon, while those that have been excluded remain excluded.

A core IMCA ambition is to champion a holistic consideration of cultural narratives and the fresh perspectives that flow from an inclusive spectrum of creative visual production. Although for the past few decades the omissions of the prevailing canon have become more widely acknowledged and decried,

that construct continues to dominate most public art collections. It is the basis of the ecosystem that IMCA hopes to redress.

In doing so, IMCA will strive to reframe the existing hierarchy of art historical categorizations, yet not simply replace it with a singular, homogenous, uninflected embrace of anything that anyone might at any time consider to be California Art. Rather, IMCA intends to be a leader in surfacing new ideas and theses worthy of consideration in isolation as well as within the broader context of visual art. This nuanced approach will foster intriguing propositions for further investigation rather than issue authoritative conclusions. A mark of success will be an IMCA that generates as many questions as it attempts to answer.

### Embracing Divergent Perspectives

The questions about California Art posed to the convened groups of experts were not circumscribed by IMCA's core collection of modern and contemporary art. While the Museum and Institute's work will generally center within this timeframe, it will also give equal priority to works, genres, and artists that lie within and beyond the collection's current scope, as well as art from any era that can contribute to aspects of IMCA's work.

The insights gathered to date from over four dozen individuals who have devoted much of their professional lives to the critical understanding of art unanimously endorse this expansive view. In fact, they considered the seeming limits of the collection as integral to that broadened view. IMCA's collection, indeed any collection, is non-comprehensive. The *contents* and the *gaps*, therefore, become the inventory to be examined.

Furthermore, these experts are revealing a number of evocative constructs for California Art and art histories. The process has generated not only good fodder for considering California Art, but also guidance on how to undertake the entire process. One participant urged expansive thinking, saying that it's the "messiness of it that's the most interesting"<sup>1</sup> rather than some slick and facile clarity.

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<sup>1</sup> ShiPu Wang, The Coasts Endowed Chair in the Arts and Professor of Art History, University of California, Merced, 7/10/20 gathering.



BRUCE CONNER  
*Star Box*, 1960  
 Mixed media  
 10 x 6 x 4 in.  
 The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
 and Museum of California Art  
 © 2021 Conner Family Trust,  
 San Francisco / Artists Rights Society  
 (ARS), New York

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2 Cecile Whiting,  
 Chancellor's  
 Professor,  
 Department of Art  
 History, University of  
 California, Irvine,  
 7/10/20 gathering.

3 Josh Kun,  
 Professor and Chair  
 in Cross-Cultural  
 Communication,  
 University of  
 Southern California  
 Annenberg School.  
 7/10/20 gathering.

4 René de Guzman,  
 Director of  
 Exhibition Strategy  
 and Senior Curator of  
 Art, Oakland  
 Museum of  
 California, 8/3/20  
 gathering.

5 Ondine Chavoya,  
 Professor of Art and  
 Latina/o Studies,  
 Williams College,  
 7/5/20 written  
 response.

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6 Josh Kun, *ibid.*,  
 7/5/20 written  
 response.

7 Jill Dawsey,  
 Curator, Museum of  
 Contemporary Art  
 San Diego, 7/9/20  
 written response.

Participants repeatedly directed IMCA to embark on a differentiated and necessary path “that doesn’t [blindly] repeat traditional narratives.”<sup>2</sup> They cautioned that “California carries a burden of mythology that resonates with very specific sets of ideas, values, populations, etc. There are huge communities who have always felt excluded from that mythology.”<sup>3</sup> More to their point, no mythology is universal. “History is multi-faceted, and communities experience it differently.”<sup>4</sup> For example, some might experience California as a land of innovation helping humanity while others might see it as privileging innovation over human dignity. Some might view California as a rules-free place for self-discovery while others might perceive it as a rules-free place of anarchy. Participants cautioned IMCA to resist the “motivation [to over-simplify] and instead highlight the heterogeneity, multiplicity, diversity, and intersectionality of the arts in California.”<sup>5</sup>

In finding its defining path, IMCA must understand and reconsider both historic and overlooked histories in order to create fresh and inclusive ways to approach California Art. “If California Art can be defined as rhizomatic, multiple, and migratory; if it can be linked to imagining liberatory political and cultural futures; if it can be art that reckons openly with the past (all of its exclusions and deletions, but also all of its coalitions, struggles, and beauty), then it’s an artistic definition worth fighting for.”<sup>6</sup> Another participant said, “I would love to see a museum of California Art that is as heterogeneous, idiosyncratic, progressive, and innovative as California itself.”<sup>7</sup>

### But Is It “Art”?

Along with questioning the value of defining California, there were questions around the range of visual expression to include as “art” in the context of IMCA. A deficiency of previous academic definitions of art is that they have tended to exclude anything made for some purpose other than being “art.” From that academic perspective, it is the intention of the maker (as

interpreted by the academy) that determines whether or not the output is art. But what about visual expression with other intentions?

“Since IMCA aspires to be interconnected with cross-disciplinary approaches of study and academic departments at the university,” probed one participant, “wouldn’t it be more relevant to frame it within the broader context of ‘California Visual Culture?’”<sup>8</sup> Others noted that visual art is a sufficiently expansive scope for IMCA rather than fully embracing all cultural production. Yet, the line between “art | not art” blurs when it comes to particular sorts of visual culture, such as film, community celebrations, commercial graphics, or fashion, as well as with the visual outputs of fields such as data visualization, advertising, or mechanical design. While IMCA will privilege art at its core, exactly what that encompasses will be determined by the question being posed and the approaches to the answers (e.g., via exhibitions, research, programming, and so forth.)

### **An Emerging Framework: California Art, Question Mark?**

Perhaps the most intriguing (and frequent) response to “what is California Art?” was reflecting back the question into the answer. **California Art is a provocation; it is a question.** Calling something California Art doesn’t conclude anything—it demands further examination. Those examinations can help surface the concepts and themes that give meaning to California and California Art.

With this over-arching theme in place—California Art as a provocation—participants were able to identify an almost endless number of potential sub-categories, topics, and lines of inquiry (see below). But even for those ideas, participants acknowledged the subjectivity of placing any given artwork or artist into any given category. The rationale for that placement, therefore, only becomes meaningful if it advances the open investigation of an artwork, artist, and category. And by surfacing meanings, IMCA establishes its relevance.



VIOLA FREY  
*Woman in Blue and Yellow II*  
(*May Lady*), 1983  
Ceramic and glazes  
104 x 27 x 17 in.  
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
and Museum of California Art  
© Artists' Legacy Foundation /  
Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong, Curator, Writer, Museum Consultant, 7/29/20 written response.



FREDERICK HAMMERSLEY  
*Growing thing & seed*, 1954–1956  
Oil on linen  
30 x 24 in.  
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
and Museum of California Art  
© New Mexico Museum of Art

Relevance, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. Today, it is the audience, not the institution, that determines what is relevant. That does not mean that the audience dictates IMCA's content and programming, but rather that IMCA must take up topics that engage its audiences. And because IMCA has a wide range of audiences—for instance, from *Plein Air* scholars to undergraduates who have never before been to a museum—not every offering can or should try to engage every audience member equally or in the same way.

So far, IMCA's exploration of California Art has surfaced a number of evocative, though imperfect, ways to think about this art. These include meta-narratives (or metaphors) for IMCA and sub-themes based on aesthetics and concrete traits; makers and artists; and ideas and concepts. In each case, the theme works to investigate what is within that theme and, thereby, can also shed light on what is adjacent to or outside of the theme.

In the end, regardless of which definitions and themes IMCA chooses to employ, the Museum and Institute must be bold enough to ask questions and pursue answers, and humble enough to know that the pursuit of answers, will be ongoing and incomplete.

### **Emerging Metaphors and Themes in California Art**

The potential lines of inquiry into California Art are limitless. The list below starts to identify some of the interesting propositions raised through IMCA's initial conversations and research.

#### **Meta-Narratives (Metaphors) for IMCA**

**Interrogation:** Just as California Art can be more of a prod than a statement, so too IMCA promotes the questioning of past, present, and even future art histories. IMCA's role is both to settle and unsettle art history.



**R&D Laboratory:** IMCA can be a laboratory for research and development of new art and art histories. It can use art, methods, historical narratives, and more as its raw materials for experimentation and discovery.

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9 This is a name offered by Josh Kun, Professor and Chair in Cross-Cultural Communication at University of Southern California's Annenberg School, at the 7/10/20 gathering. This interpretation of his remark is influenced by the group's and others' reaction to it.

**California as a “Project”<sup>9</sup>:** As noted various ways above, California is a work in process, not a complete, concise, coherent entity. California Art reflects and refracts that dynamism and so, too, should IMCA. Thus, IMCA is part of the larger project that is California.

### Aesthetic and Concrete Trait-Based Sub-Themes

**Recontextualizing California Art Movements:** Establishing contemporary context and relevance to previously identified California Art movements. This could include updating the mainstream assessments from the past century to enable broader resonance with today's audiences. Some of those established movements to re-examine might include Light and Space, Chicano Art, California *Plein Air* nature photography, public murals, etc.

**Art and Object Making:** Developing new categories and references to the physical aspects of artworks from across the full spectrum of California Art. Unlike the previous work done to identify California Art movements, this new work would reference a much more inclusive universe of art objects and makers.



WILLIAM HENRY CLAPP  
*Country Road*, 1943  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 36 in.  
The Irvine Museum Collection at  
University of California, Irvine

Example categories might include:

*Medium-Based Divisions:* Investigating painting, multi-media performance, augmented reality, etc.

*Location-Based Divisions:* Exploring where the artist lives and makes community, where the artwork was made, where the artwork was initially shown (e.g., institutional exhibition histories), where the artist trained (e.g., by art school or mentor), etc.

**Historizing the Present:** Examining historic events with contemporary relevance. This could include pre-colonial influences that consider legacy and presence, Japanese American internment, immigrant “repatriation”, or the Black Panther Movement.

### Maker and Artist-Based

**Identity Making:** Examining the demographic and identity constructs of artists and makers. This can surface themes and how those themes interplay with the broader society (e.g., Queer, suburban, Latinx, Hmong, etc.)

**Vernacular and Youth Culture:** Revealing the influence of language and fads on branding and mainstream culture. This can be seen through surfer and lowrider lifestyles, graffiti and street art, Pachucajo culture, etc.

### Idea and Concept-Based

This is an open-ended category of society-based themes. A few examples might include:

**California Dream:** Utopia | dystopia; California mythologies of innovation, opportunity, self-realization, and ambition.

**Migration and the Movement of Peoples:** Integration, segregation, assimilation, subjugation, and community cultural pride.

**Making Maps and Crossing Borders:** Representations, chartings, immigration, colonialization, settlements, frontiers, boundaries, and intersections.



LLYN FOULKES  
*For Father W.B.*, 1974  
Mixed Media  
17 x 15 x 1 in.  
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
and Museum of California Art  
© Llyn Foukes. Courtesy Sprüth Magers

**Political Action:** Labor and farm labor movements, feminism and gender politics, social justice and racial equity, environmentalism and industrialization.

**Functional Art and Design:** Commercial design and architecture, data visualization, fashion and wearable design.

**Disruption and Re-Creation:** From colonial conquest to blasting train tunnels through granite to resettlement, gentrification, the technology revolution and much more, California has constant and multiple streams of disrupting or reworking the status quo in pursuit of the new.

### California Art Focus Groups and Other Contributors

In 2020, IMCA sought input about California Art from a diverse community of voices and practitioners who have thought deeply about this topic. Twenty-six people in four focus groups offered a broad array of distinct inputs that have helped IMCA to formulate these initial perspectives on California Art. Dozens of others contributed insights via individual, often informal, conversations. IMCA is grateful for everyone's liberal thinking and provocative ideas. Inclusion in the list below signifies that the person generously participated in the formal focus group process. Because the museum sought diverse and divergent opinions, inclusion on this list does not represent endorsement of the work above.

**Kevin Appel**  
Artist; Chair, Department of Art;  
Interim Associate Director,  
Institute and Museum of  
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University of California, Irvine

**Elizabeth Armstrong**  
Curator, Writer, Museum  
Consultant

**Susana Smith Bautista, PhD**  
Director and Chief Curator  
AltaMed Foundation Art  
Collection

**C. Ondine Chavoya, PhD**  
Professor of Art and Latina/o  
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Williams College

**Bridget R. Cooks, PhD**  
Associate Professor, Departments  
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**Jill Dawsey, PhD**  
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**Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, PhD**  
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**Russell Ferguson**  
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**Peter Frank**  
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*Fabrik Magazine*

**Todd Gray**  
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**Catherine Gudis, PhD**  
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Director, Public History  
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**René de Guzman**  
Director of Exhibition Strategy and  
Senior Curator of Art  
Oakland Museum of California

**Josh Kun, PhD**  
Professor and Chair in Cross-  
Cultural Communication  
Annenberg School for  
Communication and Journalism  
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**Nancy Marie Mithlo, PhD**  
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**Chon Noriega, PhD**

Distinguished Professor of  
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**Bruce Richards**

Artist and Educator

**Cara Romero**

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Cara Romero Photography |  
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**Tyler Stallings**

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**Rachel Teagle, PhD**

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**ShiPu Wang, PhD**

The Coasts Endowed Chair in the  
Arts and Professor of Art History  
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**Cécile Whiting, PhD**

Chancellor's Professor,  
Department of Art History  
University of California, Irvine



HELEN PASHGIAN  
*Blue Secret*, 1994  
Industrial epoxy resin in acrylic frame  
36 x 26 x 5 in.  
The Buck Collection at UCI Institute  
and Museum of California Art  
© M. Helen Pashgian Aug. 6, 2018

*Back Cover:*  
GUY ROSE  
*Lifting Fog*, 1916 (detail)  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 29 in.  
The Irvine Museum Collection at  
University of California, Irvine

