First Glimpse
Introducing The Buck Collection
at the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art
September 29, 2018 – January 5, 2019
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Co-curated by Kevin Appel, Stephen Barker, and Cécile Whiting
University Art Galleries, University of California, Irvine

*First Glimpse: Introducing The Buck Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art* is the inaugural exhibition of the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art held in the Contemporary Arts Center Gallery (CAC) and University Art Gallery (UAG) at UCI Claire Trevor School of the Arts.

Opposite: The University Art Gallery at the UCI Claire Trevor School of the Arts
Welcome to First Glimpse

How often is one fortunate enough to participate in the public debut of a great art collection?

Since it was first introduced to UCI in the fall of 2014, The Buck Collection has been a consistent source of pleasure and wonder, casting its spell over those of us who have worked with it over this period of time. The very idea that Gerald E. Buck, Newport Beach developer and businessman, fell so completely in love with the California art he began to collect in the 1980s as to amass well over three thousand works of art, is itself infectious. Although Buck was widely known as an active participant in the artworld, very few people were privileged to visit his collection. Over time, it became known as “the best collection of California Art no one has ever seen,” developing something of a magical air. We are delighted now to finally begin sharing this feeling of awe with the world, through this modest first presentation of The Buck Collection.

The title of this inaugural exhibition and the forthcoming expanded catalogue, First Glimpse, is precisely accurate. The fifty artworks in this exhibition, and the additional hundred joining them in the catalogue, represent a cross-section, a miniscule fraction, of the remarkable breadth and depth of the largely unseen collection of California art that Gerald Buck entrusted to the University of California, Irvine. Buck’s trust in UCI to realize his dream of sharing The Buck Collection with the world through premier exhibitions and scholarship is a great responsibility and an equally great opportunity. Over the coming years, through the foundation of the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art, we will be sharing more and more of this remarkable collection, highlighting its treasures and juxtaposing it with works from the wider art world as California art evolves and develops into the twenty-first century.

Welcome to the public debut of “the best collection of California Art no one has ever seen.” We hope these artworks are as mesmerizing to you as they were to Gerald Buck, and as they have been to us.

Stephen Barker, Ph.D.
Dean, Claire Trevor School of the Arts
Executive Director, UCI Institute and Museum for California Art
Gerald Buck left us with an exquisite puzzle: from the beginning to the end of his collecting life he did not theorize his collection, acknowledging no collecting strategy other than to gather an eclectic group of works together to have a conversation about the very nature of over a century of California art. His collecting strategy was spontaneous and personal based initially on his aesthetic experience of the artwork.

Buck was an indefatigable student of the works and artists he gathered around him. His tendency was to frame his instinctual choices in loose categories showing the history of traditional, modern, and contemporary California art, with its genres, broadly defined, providing a set of contexts in which to research and enjoy the works. Buck focused on four fields of concentration: the artworks’ powerful sensory impact; their manifestations of California culture; their roles in an art-historical narrative; and their social relevance. As he built his collection, he consistently expanded these rich veins of aesthetic, cultural, historical, and social force. The organization of this exhibition reflects the primacy for Buck of these foundational interests.

What is an “aesthetic experience”? It can be that first glimpse, that initial sensory moment, through which one confronts an artwork, before the brain rushes in with its need for explanations and stories. Aesthetic experience begins as a blast of sensation that secondarily, but almost instantly, evolves into a considered response. It’s that first glimpse that urges us to make subsequent returns to a work.

The works from The Buck Collection presented here are no more than a first glimpse of this extraordinary collection. Our selections, juxtaposing artworks drawn from California schools of Abstraction, Figuration, Assemblage, Light and Space, and others, are intended to act as a foretaste, a frame through which to think about—or better, to see—the art produced in California as it evolved and developed over the hundred years from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first.
The first stage of Gerald Buck’s collecting focused on California Impressionism and *plein air* artwork, attractive for their intriguing presentation of the beauty of the California environment through brilliant use of color and light and idealized, intimate compositions of natural grandeur, and the myriad ways in which they captured California’s artistic and cultural history. As Buck’s collecting interests broadened to include more strains of modern and contemporary art, the social, artistic, and sensory environment of California remained his focus, apparent in the selection presented here.

**Abstraction**

In the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, California nurtured a number of artists experimenting with abstraction. Inspired by European modernism, scientific advancement, and mysticism, these artists painted important nonobjective images that play with form, space, and light.

Lorser Feitelson’s *Magical Space Forms* (1952; CAC) is one of the great works of Abstract Classicism, later called Hard-edge abstraction. Its balance of linear curves and shards, all focused on the central core, an orange shape just above and left of center, is a masterpiece of composition. Hard-edge artists like Feitelson used flat, precisely defined forms and bold colors to develop spatial relations evoking movement, as seen in Karl Benjamin’s *Butterflies* (1955; CAC) and Frederick Hammersley’s *Growing thing & seed* (1954; UAG), or to create a harmonious balance of more muted colors, as in John McLaughlin’s *No. 12–1963* (1963; CAC).

Although Helen Lundeberg is also considered an Abstract Classicist artist, *The Wind That Blew the Sky Away* (1951; CAC) maintains more of a surrealist tone. The blue green sky of an eerie day ripples in the breeze to reveal darkest night advancing on a small windswept tree. Lundeberg’s work, exploring scientific and psychological themes, provides a nice companion to the spiritual abstraction of Agnes Pelton’s *Alchemy* (1937–39; CAC), with its glowing intimations of the folds of time and space, and Lee Mullican’s *Oblique of Agawam* (1950; CAC), with its suggestion of an expanding universe.

These hard-edged and spiritual abstractions co-existed in California with the more painterly canvases of Abstract Expressionism, such as Richard Diebenkorn’s *Albuquerque #9* (1952; CAC) and Emerson Woelffer’s *Yellow Poem #2* (1960; UAG). The monumental *Albuquerque #9*—which Buck considered the heart of his collection—although completely abstract, reads
like a map of Northern New Mexico, defined by stark black and red borders. Pink underpainting beneath the rich earth tones, breaking through along the left-hand border, softens and warms the image’s austerity, capturing the color scheme and mood of the desert.

**Figurative**

The innovations in abstraction in early 20th century California were followed by a surprising return of the figure in the later work of Richard Diebenkorn, and other artists who came to be known collectively as the Bay Area Figurative Movement.

Represented in this exhibition by David Park’s *Forest Trail* (ca. 1954–55; CAC), Joan Brown’s *People and Eye Trees in the Park in Madrid* (1961; CAC), Henry Villierme’s *Coming In* (1992; CAC), and Manuel Neri’s *Chanel* (ca. 1957–58; CAC), the Bay Area Figurative Movement maintained abstraction’s bold coloration and expressionistic brush strokes, while reintroducing the figure into their compositions. Through body language and gesture, the human form served as a vehicle for exploring psychological states and the experience of everyday life. Southern California artist Roger Kuntz’s work also displays this casual mode of figuration.

Kuntz is represented in this exhibition by *Goodyear on Target* (1970; CAC), a landscape from an aerial perspective. Like the figurative

Viola Frey, *Woman in Blue and Yellow II (May Lady)*, 1983. Ceramic and glazes. 104 x 26 1/2 x 17 in.
artists newly exploring human experience, Kuntz and other landscape artists utilizing alternative views were interested in the sensory and social experience of California’s cities, unlike any other at the time. *Goodyear on Target* points to the unmistakable presence of the growing number of corporate names and commercial advertisements on billboards, buildings, and even in the air. In *Goodyear on Target*, we look down on the blimp, rather than up from the ground, as it glides toward a target-like landing pad, its nose pointed to the bull’s eye like a bomb, lending the painting a threatening overtone that disrupts the otherwise pastoral landscape converted into a commercial docking field.

Peter Alexander’s *Thrasher* (1992; CAC) is a hilltop view of the greater Los Angeles area laid out geometrically beneath the overwhelming diagonal of the night sky. Alexander selects the perfect horizon line to ensure maximal balance between the dark, hazily lit land below and the towering, tapering sky, with its streaks of clouds emphasizing the rising line toward the painting’s upper right corner. Most dramatic of all is the brilliant orange of sunset (or is it wildfires?) lurking in the distant hills. The juxtaposition of civilized urbanity with soaring atmospherics produces dynamic energy in the eye and mind of the viewer. Through the contrast between the order
and structure of the cityscape and the turbulence above it and the echo of
the cloud line in several streetlights below, Alexander creates a powerful
tension between California nature and culture that is more complex than
it initially seems.

Assemblage

In the early 20th century, other dichotomies, in addition to abstraction/
figuration, came under interrogation, such as the blurring of the art/craft
distinction in Untitled Figures (Male—Female) by painter and sculptor Peter
Krasnow (ca. 1935; CAC). This blurring contributed to new styles called Pop
and Assemblage, seen in ceramics like Viola Frey’s cartoonlike,
monumental figure Woman in Blue and Yellow II (May Lady) (1983: CAC)
and in sculpture like Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz’s subversive
found-object assemblage The Fish Track (1985–86; UAG). Kienholz’s
remarkable piece resembles both a shrine and a junkpile, its drab
backdrop, a “canvas” for what seem to be randomly selected objects simply
stacked up for viewing. As a kind of anti-art, Kienholz’s piece is arresting,
powerful, and enigmatic and is representative of the 1950s arrival of the
“California Generation,” during which Los Angeles and the Bay Area
became innovative art-generators for the world.

Peter Alexander, Thrasher (detail), 1992. Oil on canvas. 48 x 84 in.
Works of chunky ceramics like Frey’s and Peter Voulkos’s *Mimbres* (2000; UAG) and assemblages like Kienholz’s and George Herms’s “ME” (1962; UAG) were joined by similarly animated paintings, like Jay DeFeo’s Beat-inspired *Mountain No. 1* (1955; UAG) and works of collage incorporating found imagery, like *One Way* (1955; UAG) by Jess and Wallace Berman’s *Untitled (C3—Cosmic Burst)* (1975; UAG).

Encompassing a completely different aesthetic, Pop art, like Assemblage and collage, incorporated everyday imagery into works of art. Wayne Thiebaud’s *Untitled Still Life with Cheese, Apple and Knife* (1972; CAC) is a seemingly shallow depiction of the everyday, lavishing attention on the mundane and oddly regular geometric forms of a wedge of cheese, an apple and its shadow, and a long knife cutting across the canvas. Thiebaud has carefully pulled the white paint of the ground around the edges of the objects, pointing to incongruencies in the shapes of the apple and its shadow and to the sinister curve of the knife blade. Thiebaud throws the objects’ ordinariness into question through a subtle complexity and wit that is also seen in Ed Ruscha’s *Wanze* (1967; UAG)—a painting of the German term of endearment for “lovebug” with a fly in a cup of coffee tucked in the lower right corner.

**Light and Space**

Like the abstraction from which it derives, Minimalism, an art style that took hold in the 1960s and ‘70s, reduces artwork to simple, arresting geometric shapes, as seen in Larry Bell’s glass box *Untitled* (1972; UAG). And like the abstract artists before them, the California minimalist artists of the 1960s were galvanized by the sprawling new cities and the surrounding natural environment, especially the state’s distinctive light and dramatic sunsets. Experimenting with new materials and fabrication techniques to explore how artwork interacts with light and occupies space, a group of California minimalist artists came to define a distinctly California genre, “Light and Space.”
New materials readily available in California that were adapted to artistic uses range from the plastics of the aerospace industry to the industrial paints applied to the surfaces of cars and surfboards. Various techniques also drawn from industry allowed the artists to transform these commercial materials into luminous artworks with varying levels of sheen, translucency, and color. The vacuum-forming and fiberglass molding process that created Craig Kauffman's *Untitled* (1966; UAG) results in a streamlined, gleaming surface, while the poured resin process of M. Helen Pashgian's *Blue Secret* (1994; UAG) and DeWain Valentine's *Circle Grey–Rose* (1970; UAG) generates translucent objects with subtle coloration that evoke the ambient light of California and the color palette of mid-century suburban homes to which critics compared Light and Space artworks.

Mary Corse's *Untitled (Beveled White Inner Band)* (2003; UAG) further demonstrates how the effects of light are central to Light and Space artworks. When light hits Corse's acrylic-painted canvases with applied glass microspheres, the artwork shimmers and even produces rainbows.

Comprised of a box containing a model and several photographs and topographical diagrams, James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (1986; UAG) refers to the 400,000-year-old dormant volcano at a site near Flagstaff, Arizona that Turrell began “converting” into an astronomical observatory with spaces designed for viewing celestial phenomena in the 1970s. Turrell insists that the project is “not about light—it is light,” taking the light and space theme to its most ambitious place. Although sited in Arizona, there is a way in which Turrell's *Roden Crater* is the quintessence of California art.

Influenced by the unique social, artistic, and sensory environment of California, the artists presented in *First Glimpse* demonstrate the spirit of innovation characteristic of California art. Manifested in the inventive engagement with awe-inspiring landscape, the exploration of form, and the manipulation of alternative materials, this sense of innovation produced numerous genres of art, wide ranging in both style and influence on the artistic movements of the United States and beyond.
Events and Programming

Exhibition Dates
September 29, 2018 – January 5, 2019
Co-curated by Kevin Appel, Stephen Barker, and Cécile Whiting

Opening Reception
September 29, 2018, 2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Docent-Led Tours

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Take a deeper look at selected highlights on a gallery tour led by an Art History graduate student docent.

Tours meet at the Contemporary Arts Center Gallery.

An Artist’s Glimpse Lecture Series

Learn about the artwork through an artist’s eyes at a series of public lectures by prominent California artists.

Peter Alexander & Chuck Arnoldi
Thursday, October 25, 2018
6:00 p.m. Talk

Billy Al Bengston
Tuesday, November 13, 2018
6:00 p.m. Talk

Helen Pashgian
Thursday, December 6, 2018
5:30 p.m. Talk

All events are free and open to the public with registration. Reserve your seat at imca.uci.edu/events. Lectures are held at Winifred Smith Hall on the Claire Trevor School of the Arts Campus. For directions, visit www.arts.uci.edu/directions.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday - Saturday | 12:00 – 6:00 p.m. | Thursdays until 8:00 p.m.
Free admission
Holiday Closures: November 12 & 22, December 25, January 1
Forthcoming:

**First Glimpse: Introducing The Buck Collection**  
By Kevin Appel, Stephen Barker, and Cécile Whiting

Hardcover  
December 2018, 260 pages  
$60.00  
Catalogue featuring essays by the exhibition curators and fully illustrated with the 50 artworks in the exhibition as well as 100 additional artworks, comprising an expanded first glimpse of The Buck Collection.

For more information and updates, please visit https://imca.uci.edu/firstglimpse/
About the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art

With the acquisition of the Irvine Museum Collection of California Impressionism and plein air art in 2016 and the arrival of The Buck Collection in 2017, UCI has become home to one of the world’s greatest collections of California art. First Glimpse is Phase One of a three-part development of UCI’s intent to become a global magnet for the exhibition and study of California art. Phase Two will be the opening of an on-campus Interim Museum in 2019. Phase Three will be the construction of UCI IMCA, the Institute and Museum for California Art, UCI’s new face to the world and the place for interdisciplinary projects engaging all of UCI’s academic units.

The UCI IMCA—realizing William Pereira’s original vision of an art museum adjacent to the Irvine Barclay Theatre—will be comprised of a museum housing a collection of California art in every genre and medium and a research institute engaged in collections research and interdisciplinary dialogue. Through a program of vanguard exhibitions and publications, conservation activities and research, seminars and conferences, artist residencies, lectures, tours, and educational outreach, the UCI IMCA will revolutionize the understanding of California art, its social and cultural framework, and its role as a vital engine in the creative evolution of society and aesthetics in the United States and worldwide.

The ever-growing UCI IMCA Collection offers a unique and exquisite California art experience. UCI IMCA will proudly build on and around these two remarkable collections to produce an ever richer experience of the very best of California art and the cultures of which it is a part. For UCI and the surrounding community, the creation of UCI IMCA will be a transformative once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the impact of which will reverberate for generations. We invite you to join us in this endeavor to rethink what an art museum is and what it can be.

Donations are always welcome at our website: imca.uci.edu/donate

Your gift of any amount is greatly appreciated and will help UCI IMCA meet strategic priorities such as the construction of its state-of-the-art museum and research institute on the UCI campus.
Acknowledgements

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This exhibition and the forthcoming catalogue, *First Glimpse: Introducing The Buck Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art*, would not have been possible without the generous support of UCI Chancellor Howard Gillman and Provost Enrique Lavernia.

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Cover image: David Park, *Forest Trail* (detail), ca. 1954—1955,
Oil on canvas, 25 x 50 1/8 in.