# ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2025 INTERNATIONAL

DENZIL FORRESTER

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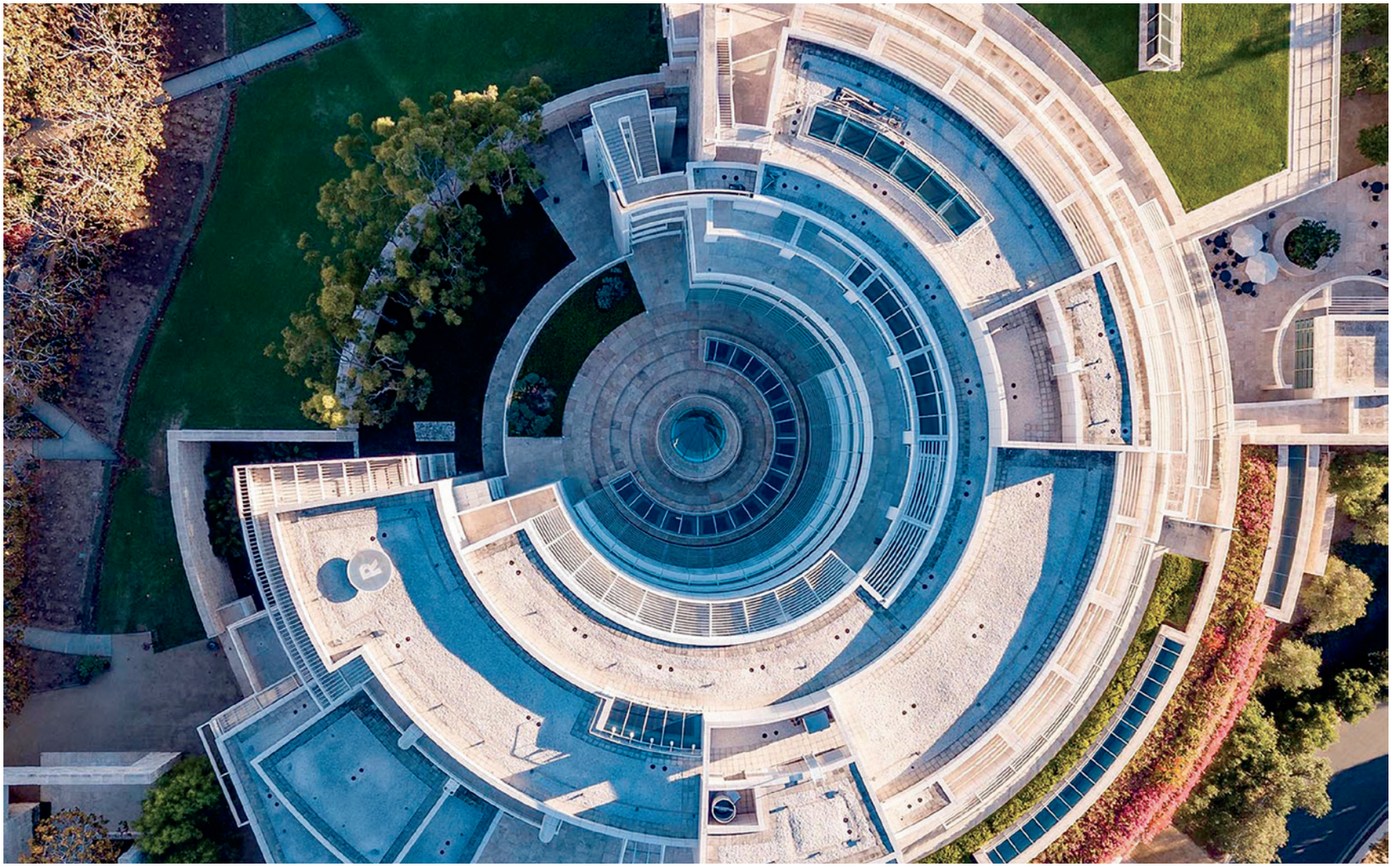
“THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF INDIA”

PST ART

**Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg**, ***Iron Works of Coalbrook Dale***, **1805**, aquatint, 11⅞ × 15¾". From "Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis," 2024–25, Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, Los Angeles.

# PST ART: "ART & SCIENCE COLLIDE"

**LAUNCHED IN 2011**, the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time initiative (now called PST ART) coordinates and supports the presentation of thematically linked exhibitions across Southern California. Its fourth iteration, focused on the topic "Art & Science Collide," opened last September and continues through February 16, with work by more than eight hundred artists on display at over seventy museums and galleries. To help make sense of this vast array of programming, *Artforum*'s West Coast Editor Bryan Barcena introduces us to the history and institutional politics of PST, while Michaëla de Lacaze Mohrmann tackles the framework of a collision between art and science and Red Cameron addresses the subset of exhibitions devoted to ecology. Reviewers Jan Tumlir, Andrea Gyordy, Suzanne Hudson, Annabel Osberg, and April Baca look closely at a sampling of what's on view, with more reviews to come in our next issues.



Above: **Aerial view of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, ca. 2018.** Opposite page, top: **Asco, *Termites y Guerrero*, 1975.** Performance view during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), East Los Angeles, 1975. Photo: Ricardo Valverde. From "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987," 2011, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Opposite page, bottom: **Ed Ruscha, *Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire*, 1965–68,** oil on canvas, 4' 5 ½" × 11' 3". From "Crosscurrents in LA: Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970," 2011–12, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

# RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

BRYAN BARCENA

**GETTY'S PACIFIC STANDARD TIME** initiative (now called PST ART) is unlike any other kind of exhibition-funding project in the world. It is unique not only for the significant sums of grant money it distributes, but for its regional and thematic focus, offering funds to institutions of all sizes and orientations across Southern California in five-year cycles. The resources that pour into these institutions—more than $20 million was spent on more than eighty-four exhibitions across more than seventy organizations for the third iteration, "Art & Science Collide," which opened in September 2024—enable them to embark on a kind of expansive, research-driven exhibition-making that is increasingly rare in an era of contracting museum budgets and a surging demand for topical immediacy. The funds and guidance provided by the Getty not only augment the resources available to the existing staff at these institutions but allow for the creation and expansion of large networks of experts who are brought to the region and who often choose to remain—from independent curators and research fellows to assistants and archivists, exhibition designers and mount makers, registrars and art handlers.

PST was not initially conceived as the public-facing behemoth that we know now. Its genesis was a much humbler project undertaken in 2001 by the Getty Research Institute to produce an oral history of the art of Southern California as told by its artists, gallerists, and other cultural luminaries. Shortly thereafter, the Getty Foundation earmarked funds for other local

institutions to catalogue their respective archives with the goal of making them available to the public. The project ultimately expanded into plans for a one-off, citywide celebration of this research in the form of simultaneous exhibitions that would open a decade later, in 2012. The foundation granted more than $7 million to cover associated research and exhibition planning for sixty-eight exhibitions, forty publications, 350 oral-history interviews, and a performance art festival. According to Andrew Perchuk, the Getty Research Institute's then–deputy director, it was a "bottom-up" project: Each institution was free to choose the topic for its contribution to this initial PST, as long as it related to the art history of Southern California.[1]

The result was "Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945–1980," which brought research that had previously only existed in Ph.D. dissertations, museum archives, and Getty study rooms into the galleries, and cemented the argument that the region was instrumental to the development of uniquely American forms of art from midcentury on. In terms of more quantifiable impact, the Getty estimates that this first PST generated $280.5 million in economic output, supported 2,490 jobs, and added $19.4 million in tax revenues for state and local governments.[2]


PST returned in 2018 with "LA/LA," focusing on the historical, cultural, and geographical closeness between Los Angeles and Latin America. As Getty director Joan Weinstein explained, a group of curators and academics who were inspired by exhibitions of Latinx artists in Los Angeles from the first PST, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's excellent retrospective "Asco: Elite of the Obscure," approached them with the idea to organize a second edition of PST, but to expand the focus and research outward to Latin America.[3] In this second iteration, PST funding not only allowed for costly art-historical and curatorial research, but also enabled the international transportation of scores of artists and artworks from Latin America to LA, all of which would have been prohibitively expensive for most smaller institutions.

My own career in Los Angeles was born of this initiative. In the winter of 2015, I arrived at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, as the Pacific Standard Time fellow, working as a researcher in Latin American art and as a curatorial assistant for the three Getty-supported exhibitions that would be presented across the museum's galleries in 2018: solo shows devoted to Anna Maria Maiolino and Adrian Villar Rojas and the group show "Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA." I was brought to MOCA for my knowledge of Latin American art but also in part because the museum needed a fluent speaker of Spanish and Portuguese within the curatorial department to communicate with the artists and their teams.[4]

At its best, PST is a transformative vehicle for research and scholarship across Los Angeles and beyond, funding groundbreaking exhibitions accompanied by publications and scholarly symposiums. For the Maiolino exhibition, for example, Getty funding allowed us to bring five scholars to

Above: **Anna Maria Maiolino, *84 Desenhos (Novas Marcas de Gota)* (84 Drawings [New Drop Marks]), 2003**, acrylic on cardboard, eighty-four parts, each 13¾ × 9⅝". From "Anna Maria Maiolino," 2017, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Left: **View of "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985," 2017**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

Opposite page, left: **"Vere Dignum" Monogram Christ in Majesty, ca. 1025–50**, tempera, gold, and ink on parchment, 10½ × 7½". From "Lumen: The Art and Science of Light," 2024, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Opposite page, right: **Mural fragment detail, Teotihuacan culture, Mexico, ca. 350–450**, lime plaster, pigment, 11¼ × 14⅞ × 3⅝". From "We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art," 2024–25, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

the artist's studio in São Paulo and hold a daylong conference at the Museu de Arte São Paulo to ensure that the curators and catalogue contributors had a wealth of primary source material to draw on. In spreading its funding across multiple institutions, PST allows those that are much smaller in scale and capacity than MOCA to also participate in these vital kinds of research, enabling curators to encounter the region's artists and artworks firsthand. In addition, its five-year funding cycle encourages a return to a kind of long-term research-based exhibition-making that was once common in the field but today seems a luxury. While the grants given to these organizations are substantial—anywhere between $55,000 and $490,000 for the last edition—these sums represent a small part of the overall budget required to fund large-scale exhibitions, as costs have ballooned and audiences' appetites for the spectacular have swelled. Thus PST's emphasis on producing new research and the topic and timeline it provides are now as important as, if not more so than, the money itself. Yet the current edition of PST revealed the pitfalls of an approach that asks such a motley group of institutions to align their attention and expertise around one theme, one specific moment.

**SINCE THE LAST PST**, in 2018, there has been a sea change in the institutional landscape. Not only have the historical responsibilities of cultural stewardship been pointedly called into question, especially evident in dialogues around repatriation, but an implicit debt has been levied by the public on institutions to correct past and continued injustices through programming that directly responds to societal ills, and to do so in a timely manner. Museum programming has had to adapt to the rhythm of the biennial, whose organizers are expected to respond through their choices of artworks and artists, to the historical, cultural, and artistic developments that define the handful of years preceding their openings.

The Getty itself is not exempt from similar calls for institutions to right myriad wrongs, and this fact is telegraphed in the mission statement for this edition of PST: The included exhibitions, it states, will "create opportunities for civic dialogue around some of the most urgent problems by exploring past and present connections between art and science in a series of exhibitions, public programs, and other resources," suggesting that the function of museum exhibitions is primarily social problem-solving rather than cultural enrichment. That climate science and ecology (the subject of at least fourteen exhibitions) loom so large in this iteration is unsurprising, given that it is an issue on which much of the museumgoing public can agree—allowing institutions to appear engaged with topical social and political concerns while sidestepping thornier ones like geopolitics, diversification, repatriation, decolonization, and divestment.

At a time when expectations of topical immediacy seem out of step with the methodology of museum research, this third iteration of PST surfaces the discrepancy between the past and the present in intriguing ways. As PST enters its adolescence, it seems to have positioned itself between two models that are at odds: Though it champions long-term, in-depth research as the basis for exhibition-making, it is also representative of the biennialization of the art world in its thematic structure and predetermined timeline, wherein exhibitions are expected to respond to historical, cultural, and artistic developments that have defined the handful of years since the previous edition. What has ultimately emerged is a high percentage of thinly conceived group shows that seem the product of curators traveling the world and returning with the newest crop of emerging artists.

The choice of "Art & Science" as a theme poses a particular challenge to the five-year planning structure of PST. In contrast to the regional and historical topics of the first two editions, science and technology are by definition rapidly evolving, and five years can represent an eon of development and change. I suspect that if they were being planned today, we would see a slew of exhibitions devoted to the inevitable and unassailable rise of AI. Yet five years ago, when institutions sought ways to engage the topic, AI did not figure prominently in the cultural lexicon, and as a result, few of the PST exhibitions have confronted it directly (a notable exception being REDCAT's "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," although it engages with AI only as a tool to be used by contemporary artists and fails to look under the hood to explore how the science or technology might actually work to produce images).

This is not to say that this version of PST is wholly without the kind of substantial, well-researched exhibitions that previously defined the initiative. There are thought-provoking and revealing shows, such as LACMA's essayistic exploration of the development of pigments and dyes ("We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art"), the J. Paul Getty Museum's astounding exhibition, which closed in December and traced the scientific and spiritual dimensions of light in the Middle Ages ("Lumen: The Art and Science of Light"), and the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens' refocusing of the narrative of humans' relationship with and understanding of the natural world around nineteenth-century discoveries ("Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis")—all of which provide a historical framework for science as a discipline that predates this century. The issue is that the bigger institutions mentioned above are the ones with large budgets that *should* already be engaging in this kind of exhibition-making even without PST funding, given the budgets,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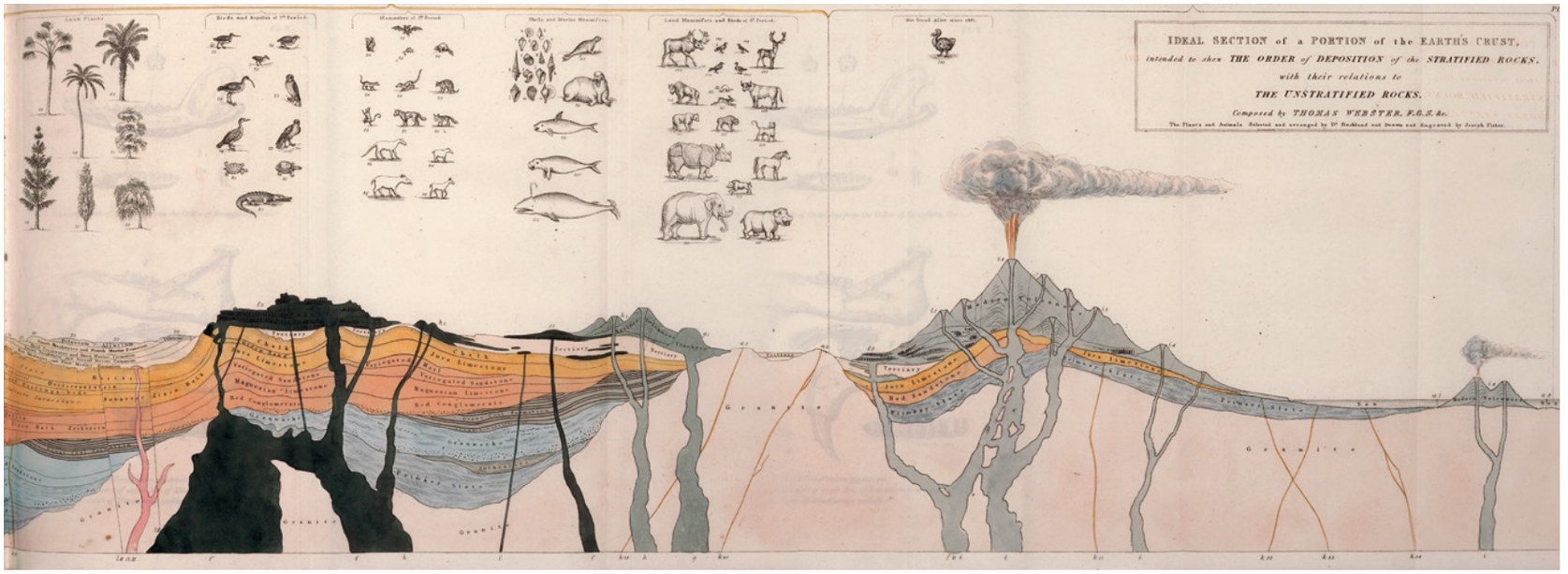



**William Buckland, *Ideal Section of a Portion of Earth's Crust* (detail), 1936,** foldout book illustration, 8½ × 46½". From "Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis," 2024–25, Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, Los Angeles.

**Too often here, the collaboration between art and science is interpreted as exhibiting artwork involving a screen, a motherboard, a battery, or a wire, rather than confronting the science behind artmaking itself, asking if we should see paint itself as a technology that required cross-disciplinary material experimentation to develop.**

expertise, and space regularly at their disposal. What PST spurred in these larger institutions it must also do for the smaller ones, which might not be able to engage with these resource-intensive ventures otherwise.

Instead, a whopping twenty-six of the exhibitions are thematic group shows of contemporary artists, and even the historical shows largely include a selection of contemporary works inserted to shore up the perceived necessity that exhibitions speak from, and directly to, the present. This model creates the false assumption that the only way to communicate contemporary values is through the work of contemporary artists, rather than through curatorial choices that reframe and reinterpret history to address the demands of the present. Too often here, the collaboration between art and science is interpreted as exhibiting artwork involving a screen, a motherboard, a battery, or a wire, rather than confronting the science behind artmaking itself, asking, as LACMA's "We Live in Painting" does, if we should see paint itself as a technology that required cross-disciplinary material experimentation to develop.

Considered individually, and outside the framework of "Art & Science Collide" and the overarching structure of PST, many of these shows would seem admirable. But when put into the context of what is possible given the funding, time, cohesion, and scale of PST—evident in the achievements of previous editions—it feels like a missed opportunity. Following the 2018 edition, the speculation among LA museum professionals was that, given the success of "LA/LA," the next PST would focus on Asia, bringing the same methodologies, capacities, and intention to bear on a region with deep diasporic ties to Southern California. Instead, according to Weinstein, this year's PST theme "emerged from a casual conversation with two leading LA museum directors. . . . We tossed around many ideas but thought the intersection of art and science could be both timely and impactful. We conducted research on the state of the field, talked with museum partners, and consulted with scientific institutions to gauge their interest in collaboration."[5] That a casual conversation with two museum directors determined the direction of a multiyear programming cycle for virtually every institution that serves a population of approximately twenty-four million people should give us pause. The first two iterations of PST have shown us how massive an impact these grants can have, not only on institutional budgets and talent pools, but on the direction of art history itself. The Getty has gifted Southern California with a mandate to engage with the hard to produce, difficult to quantify, and less market-driven art worlds. However, a more transparent, democratic, and egalitarian framework for choosing the topic for the next PST must be established, one that both empowers exhibition-makers to pursue their interests and incites them to produce the kind of work that transcends the needs of the present.

BRYAN BARCENA IS THE WEST COAST EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

NOTES

1. Jori Finkel and Reed Johnson, "Standard Time Makes a Bid for LA in Art History," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2011.

2. Christine Cooper, Shannon M. Sedgwick, Myasnik Poghosyan, *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980; Economic Impact Analysis* (Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, 2012), getty.edu/foundation/pdfs/pst_economic_impact.pdf.

3. Joan Weinstein, email message to author, October 16, 2024.

4. Prior to my arriving at MOCA, Alma Ruiz served as a curator who focused on Latin America and was planning a survey of abstraction from the region for "LA/LA." However, she left the institution during the planning stages, and it was never realized.

5. Joan Weinstein, email message to author, October 16, 2024.

# CALIFORNIA DREAMING

MICHAËLA DE LACAZE MOHRMANN

**THE THEME OF THIS YEAR'S** edition of PST ART: "Art & Science Collide," could not be more ambitious and pertinent. The country's largest art event spotlights pressing issues—from climate change and environmental justice to artificial intelligence—largely forgotten during an election season dominated by political discourse on women's rights, immigration, and foreign policy. Yet PST ART's theme is underpinned by assumptions that frustrate its easy approbation. One of these assumptions, which is reminiscent of C. P. Snow's 1959 lecture "The Two Cultures," is that art and science are distant and distinct areas of inquiry. The theme stages a dialectic between two disciplines, heightening the thrill, if not the stakes, of their encounter. The presumed opposition of these fields is so fundamental that only a powerful crash, with all its inherent risk of destruction, could possibly overtake it. "Boom!" says E. C. Krupp, director of the Griffith Observatory, in a PST ART trailer, his eyes widening with slightly mischievous glee. Ann Philbin, director of the Hammer Museum, adds breathlessly, "It's completely unknown. It's completely surprising," before others promise, "This is the first time that the best things in humanity are coming together."

It is difficult to dismiss these sound bites as mere marketing, especially when PST's theme is articulated to the public only through such vague promotional materials. These claims and, more significantly, the theme itself require audiences to indulge in collective amnesia because, of course, this is not the first time that art and science have come together. In the Western tradition, the messy overlap between art and science—indeed, their original conjoining—is detectable in the etymology of *technology*, derived from the Greek word *techne*, meaning art, craft, and skill. Before Aristotle, ancient Greek philosophers used *techne* interchangeably with *episteme*, the term for pure, theoretical knowledge. Art was not divorced from theoretical understanding—it was an expression of the material application of knowledge.

Any student of art history could also point to the Renaissance's polymaths, who mobilized artistic and scientific expertise in their pursuit of discovery. Galileo Galilei, for instance, used his artistic training at the Florentine Accademia delle Arti del Disegno to create drawings that helped him decipher his observations of Jupiter's moons and our own moon's topography. Similarly, Leonardo da Vinci applied his understanding of the physics of fluid dynamics to his drawings of the human body, uncovering the functioning of the vascular system while enhancing the verisimilitude of his art. One could also skip in time to the postwar period, when a "military-industrial avant-garde," to use a term coined by art historians John Beck and Ryan Bishop, developed, especially in Southern California, where the aerospace industry and defense contractors resided alongside new STEM-oriented institutions, such as the University of California, Irvine, and the California Institute of Technology. By the end of the 1960s, Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), originally based in New York, opened a branch in Los Angeles, while LACMA launched its "Art and Technology" program.

Below: **Leonardo da Vinci, studies of blood flow through the aortic valve (detail), ca. 1512–13**, black chalk, pen, and ink on paper, 12⅛ × 17¼".

Right: **Galileo Galilei, observations of the lunar phases, November–December 1609**, watercolor on paper, 13 × 9".

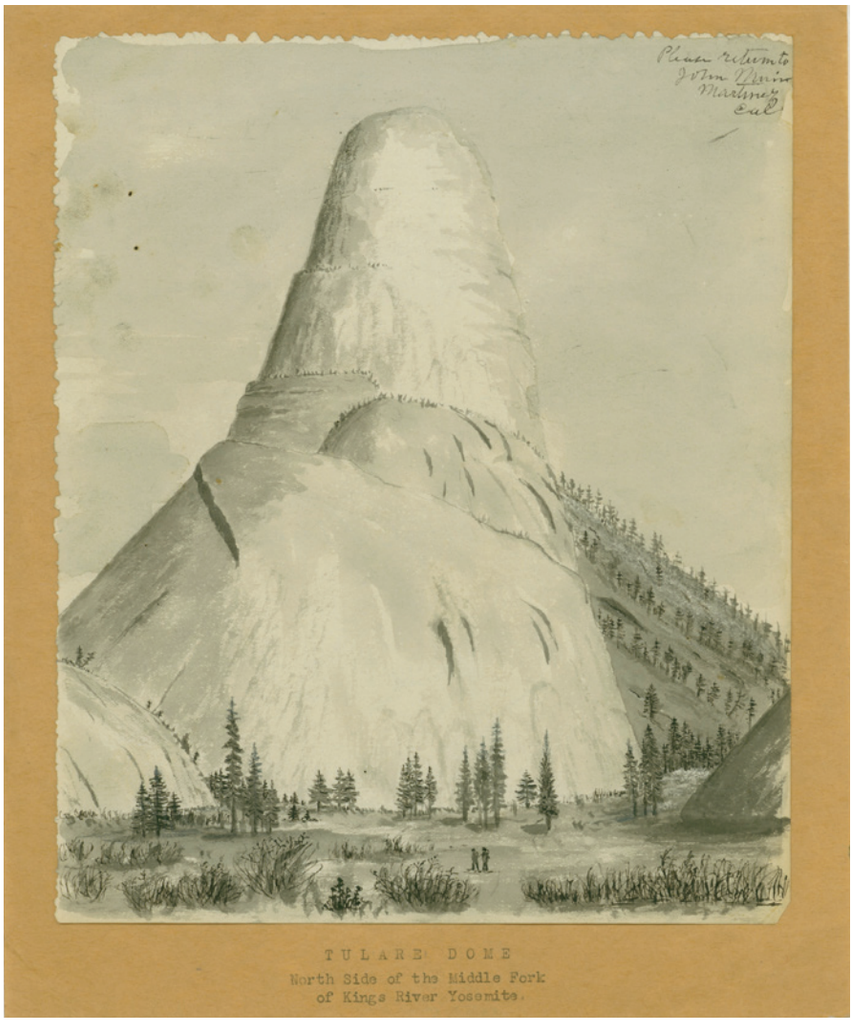
Above: **View of "We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art," 2024–25**, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Re-creation of elements found in Porfirio Gutierrez's studio, 2024. Opposite page, top: **John Muir, drawing of the Tulare Dome at Kings Canyon National Park, Yosemite, CA, ca. 1860–1914**, ink, pencil, and chalk or conte crayon on paper, 8¼ × 6⅞". Opposite page, bottom: **View of "Lumen: The Art and Science of Light," 2024–25**, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Foreground: Muhammad b. Abi Bakr, astrolabe with geared calendar, 1221–22. Background: Flemish tapestry of astrolabes, ca. 1400–50.

In short, the connection between art and science is ancient and enduring. It is one of mutual admiration, competition, collaboration, and appropriation, suffused with collegiality as much as with condescension—a history of perpetual contact and entanglement. Any new occasion for these disciplines to meet is less likely to be unpredictable and cataclysmic than mundane and familiar, like two old work acquaintances catching up on their latest accomplishments. Fortunately, the exhibitions presented under the aegis of PST ART, through their rigorous investigation into centuries of cross-pollination between art and science, reveal all that is elided by the ahistorical theme.

"Lumen: The Art and Science of Light" at the J. Paul Getty Museum delves into the Middle Ages, immediately stunning its visitors with a dazzling display of thirteenth-century astrolabes and celestial globes, objects that are as much ornate works of art as mathematically precise maps of the night sky. Through its array of astronomical equipment, books, and an exceptional fifteenth-century tapestry, among other objects, "Lumen" carefully traces the scientific insights and cultural impact of medieval natural philosophy, a discipline that studied the universe by combining ancient Greek philosophy with new empirical observations. These observations, however, are always subsumed within religious dogma, whether Christian, Islamic, or Judaic. In fact, some of the works in "Lumen," such as illuminated manuscripts of menorahs and paintings of the Virgin Mary, seem totally unmotivated by scientific questions, residing firmly within the sphere of religion as sacred, devotional objects. In "Lumen," religion as well as philosophy thus appear as third and fourth terms muddying the overly neat dichotomy drawn by PST ART's premise. The exhibition intimates that art and science are not immutable areas of study but culturally specific and ever-evolving concepts, their malleability belied by the monolithic nature of these terms as stated in PST ART's theme.

Exhibitions focused on Native American civilizations and other non-Western cultures raise this critique implicitly but compellingly. "We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and "Fire Kinship: Southern California Native Ecology and Art," which opens at UCLA's Fowler Museum this month, make a case for scientific understandings and practices that go beyond a narrow, Western definition of science as a process based in the scientific method and the specialized codification of knowledge through theories, laws, and peer-reviewed hypotheses. The chromatic symbolism and technical achievements of the Mesoamerican cultures in "We Live in Painting" were reached through guilds and workshops but without such formal methodologies. Nonetheless, they amount to deep insights into what are now called mineralogy, botany, and chemistry. Similarly, these exhibitions underline the fact that art, too, is a category that has been subject to revision. Historically confined to anthropological displays, objects such as the baskets, ollas, rabbit sticks, bark skirts, and canoes in "Fire Kinship" will be juxtaposed with contemporary art, to be appreciated for their aesthetic merits.

**DESPITE ITS INHERENT** reductiveness, the prompt of "Art & Science Collide" has proven capacious, perhaps overly so. It has accommodated a dizzying

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number of topics, from the delightfully specific, as in "Blue Gold: The Art and Science of Indigo" at the Mingei International Museum, to the daringly broad, as in "Wonders of Creation: Art, Science, and Innovation in the Islamic World" at the San Diego Museum of Art. Some exhibitions gesture to science in less persuasive ways, as is the case with "Paper and Light" at the Getty Center, which casts any artistic interest in light as inherently scientific, conflating artistic techniques such as the use of paper reserves with technological breakthroughs. The result is a cacophony of exhibitions, more than the intelligible "civic dialogue" promised by PST ART.

The effect is exacerbated by the fact that this iteration of PST ART is the first to eschew any overt reference to Los Angeles, opening itself more widely to other places and cultures than Pacific Standard Time: "LA/LA," the second edition of the event. Though there are merits to this approach, it also led to a missed opportunity: the chance to examine the exceptionally fruitful symbiosis of art and science in early California. The region obtained statehood in 1850, on the eve of the industrial revolution, and, unlike any other state, it shaped itself through that era's technological leaps and spirit of innovation, often embodied by tinkerers, amateurs, and autodidacts indifferent to the modern era's gradual specialization of the disciplines. Much of what can be considered core to California's identity—Hollywood, the counterculture, Disney, sci-fi literature, an athletic yet quasi-mystical appreciation of the great outdoors, etc.—stems from Californian innovators' intellectual ambidexterity with art and science.

Consider a few examples from the state's early history. The environmentalist John Muir read the art-historical writings of John Ruskin and commissioned sublime landscapes from acclaimed painters, notably Thomas Hill and William Keith, publishing these images alongside his essays advocating for the protection of unspoiled ecosystems. Environmental conservation as spearheaded by Muir was informed by artistic conventions, shaping for posterity what is left of California's mythical wilderness. At the same time, Eadweard Muybridge created aesthetically refined photographs of California's wildlands while pioneering chronophotography and the zoopraxiscope, innovations that contributed to the development of the film industry as a quintessentially Californian artistic and technological enterprise. Institutions founded during this period, such as the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden and the Huntington, integrated art and science through their mission statements and collections of art and plants. Likewise, San Francisco's highly impactful Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 celebrated the Panama Canal's feat of engineering by presenting a Palace of Machinery alongside a Palace of Fine Arts, signaling the parity between art and science to more than eighteen million visitors.

Considering the exceptional and formative effervescence between art and science during the *longue durée* of California's nineteenth century, it is striking that, of the eighty-four shows on view, only two—"Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis" at the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens and "Out of Site: Survey Science and

the Hidden West" at the Autry Museum of the American West—examine the period's intermingling of art and science in California and other western states specifically. Using photographic practices to place the output of nineteenth-century survey science in dialogue with contemporary art, "Out of Site" maps the expansion of federal power and its clandestine exploitation of people and places in the American West, whose secrecy artists repeatedly puncture by depicting forgotten and unseen sites. Inspired by the writings and drawings of Ruskin, "Storm Cloud," meanwhile, examines how nineteenth-century artists and scientists used their keen observational powers to recognize the interdependency of all life-forms and chart the exceptionally ravaging inception of our climate crisis. The remedial function of the local and long historical perspective provided by "Out of Site" and "Storm Cloud" cannot be overstated; for if so many can neither perceive nor mourn the unfolding environmental apocalypse, it is precisely because much of nature's bounty and vibrancy was extirpated in the nineteenth century, leaving people today with no frame of reference for the staggering yet still accruing loss subtending scientific progress.

**AT TIMES, PST ART'S** premise seems to conjure this dark side of science only to better repress it. "Art & Science Collide" is described as a "mind-blowing theme," re-detonating, through this image of an exploding brain, the "boom" intimated by the theme's action verb. *Collision* can suggest cutting-edge science—think, for instance, of colliding atoms in a particle accelerator such as the one at Stanford University—but, to the average person in a state known for its car culture, it can also evoke technology's capacity to cause harm, to maim bodies and strew the world with roadkill.

The bodies remain buried, though. Through its strident positivity, PST ART glorifies speed and risk-taking (not to say recklessness) in the service of progress and discovery. This is the mindset of Silicon Valley—an attitude best encapsulated by Facebook's internal motto until 2014, "Move fast and break things." It is the culture that Steve Jobs praised in his often (mis) quoted 1985 interview with *Playboy*: "At Apple, people are putting in 18-hour days. We attract a different type of person—a person who . . . really wants to get in a little over his head and make a little dent in the universe." Dent, break, boom, collide. Damage is naturalized as an acceptable and perhaps even necessary outcome of innovation. *Collision*, as used by PST ART, is tech-bro speak, a euphemism, like the buzzword *disruption*, that promises the creation of new, exciting opportunities while minimizing the severity of the moral quandaries and social ills—from SpaceX's destruction of bird habitats to a national mental health crisis among teens—caused by playing too fast and loose with science and tech within a capitalist system.

The theme's implicit insouciance becomes perplexing when accompanied by scientific studies and even a World Health Organization report touting the healing properties of art. "Art has scientifically demonstrated

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Opposite page: **Eadweard Muybridge, stereograph of Mammoth Tree Grove, Calaveras County, CA, 1868**, albumen print mounted on paper card, 3½ × 7".

Above: **James Luna, *AA Meeting/Art History*, 1990–91**, six Richard A. Lou photographs, television monitor, chairs, stool, ashtrays, cups, bottles, cigarettes, books, video (color, sound, 56 minutes 9 seconds). Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2024. Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann.

Left: **Tee A. Corinne, untitled, ca. 1980**, gelatin silver print, 11 × 8½". From "For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability," 2024, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

benefits for your mental and physical health," PST ART asserts on its website, adding, "Just thirty minutes spent in an art gallery decreases cortisol in the brain." "Art can even help with burnout," it notes. How do we make sense of the paradox harbored by this verbiage that wants brains figuratively blown to bits but also literally low on cortisol? And why is art so dependent on scientific validation, so in need of acquiring a utilitarian value as medicine? This is a technocratic view of art's purpose, one that reduces art to a type of soma for late capitalism's weary workers, Apple's dream employees on an eighteen-hour shift and counting. In a post-pandemic world, such attention to art's medicinal properties has broad relevance, but to foreground only this of art's many virtues, while couching this take in the language of tech entrepreneurs, should raise eyebrows if not alarm bells regarding its pure instrumentalization.

"Scientia Sexualis" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and "For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego provide a more nuanced vision of art's relationship to the body than what PST ART proposes through blanket statements such as "Art is medicine." For example, Candice Lin's olfactory work *The Smell of Abortion*, 2024, exposes ICA LA's visitors to a vapor infused with the essences of wild carrot, mugwort, rue, and other medicinal plants historically used to induce menstruation and miscarriages. Though Lin's work disseminates harmlessly low quantities of these plant extracts, it nevertheless raises the possibility that art can violate and injure the body, replicating, albeit to a much lesser degree, the violence and entrapment that women regularly endure when its come to their reproductive health. In "For Dear Life," many works eschew triumphalist narratives of disabled people overcoming their conditions, preferring to frankly acknowledge art's therapeutic limits. None does so more powerfully, more uncomfortably than *AA Meeting/Art History*, 1990–91, by James Luna, an artist of Luiseño, Puyukitchum, Ipai, and Mexican descent. Next to a circle of empty chairs reminiscent of the setup for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, a monitor displays footage of the artist discussing his alcohol dependency in relation to colonialism and art history. Through this mise-en-scène, viewers adopt the position of addicts and initiate a kind of twelve-step program toward recovery from their dependency on substances and perhaps even colonialist power dynamics. However, the "making of amends," a critical step in AA's program, remains elusive. The work is less a critique of AA's methods than a wry commentary on art and art history's inefficacy in remedying profound societal ills, especially those affecting Indigenous communities.

"For Dear Life," which spans the 1960s to the present, is one of the first exhibitions to place American art on disability and convalescence within a larger historical context. What emerges from this excavation is the vital role played by community bonds, activism, and support networks. The work of art is not a miraculously healing, autonomous object that finds its counterpoint in an awed and newly invigorated individual viewer. Rather, art is often a conduit for or a trace of the collective generosity, solidarity, and compassion that provide those in need with care, respite, and dignity. This can be seen in the works on view by Tee A. Corinne, Carolyn Lazard, Simone Leigh, Park McArthur, and Liz Young, among others. And these are perhaps the virtues that are most needed in a world where the powerful have the impunity to break things in the name of science, and where science can give us only an objective, ostensibly value-neutral view of reality. After all, techne was also once the territory of virtue, the application of theoretical knowledge to crafting one's life with decency and care.

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Above: **Luke Howard, *Cloud study of Cirrus in parallel receding lines*, ca. 1803–22**, blue and white wash, 4¾ × 9½". From "Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis," 2024–25, Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, Los Angeles.

Below: **John Constable, *Cloud Study*, ca. 1821–22**, oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 10⅞ × 12⅞". From "Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis," 2024–25, Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, Los Angeles.

Opposite page: **LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Moses West Holding a "Free Water" Sign on North Saginaw Street Between East Marengo Avenue and East Pulaski Avenue, Flint, Michigan*, 2019**, ink-jet print, 40 × 30". From "Breath(e): Toward Climate and Social Justice," 2024–25, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

# FORESTS AND TREES

RED CAMERON

**JUST AS THE REPRESSED** inevitably returns, so J. Paul Getty's fortune, so shrewdly extracted from the earth as oil, financed PST ART: "Art & Science Collide," an initiative significantly focused on the theme of climate change. The science on the topic, as is so often stated, is clear. Yet when art enters the picture, the matter gets murkier. How can art, a field with no universal method for establishing truth, approach something like science, which seeks to turn the universe into infinite bits of agreed-upon knowledge? Many of PST's exhibitions struggle with that question. And though the titles to some of these climate-themed shows ("In Defense of Nature," "Toward Climate and Social Justice," "Life on Earth," "World Without End") indicate a desire to speak sharply to the political moment, the ingrained histories of museums' normative functions and fidelity to traditional exhibition formats have hindered their ability to provide the aesthetic or emotional resonance sufficient to the scale of the emergency.

Of course, no exhibition or institution alone can solve the problem. Yet it would seem that art's role in a solution would begin with closing any distance between viewers and the world. Art, through its subjects, materials, and forms, is capable of meaningfully connecting people with the diverse lives that surround them—what botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has called the "more than human" beings with whom we share the environment. In any effort to facilitate such links, our institutions need to be honest about their own complicity in the crisis, and take the material work of reparative justice as seriously as the cultural work they perform. None of

this is easy, but it is necessary if the goal is to alter society's path of thoughtless death and extractive destruction.

The historical beginning of our environmental catastrophe is the subject of the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens' exhibition, "Storm Cloud: Picturing the Origins of Our Climate Crisis," its title modified from an 1884 lecture given by the Victorian writer John Ruskin. The exhibition begins with Ruskin's descriptions of what would come to be named *smog*—"that thin, scraggy, filthy, mangy, miserable cloud"—before proceeding through a history of "the long nineteenth century." This in effect contains two intertwined narratives: one made up of documents and ephemera pertaining to capital's increasing industrial domination of global resources, the other consisting of the aesthetic residue of humanity's evolving understanding of its own capacities in relation to nature. Most significant in this regard were the proliferating disciplines of science itself. These new forms of rational approach to the natural world created a surfeit of information often conveyed through equally new modes of visual address. Geology, meteorology, and ecology, among others, were novel nineteenth-century disciplines requiring novel graphic forms, and with the Huntington's abundance of primary material from the period, the exhibition's curators (Melinda McCurdy, curator of British art, and Karla Nielsen, curator of literary collections) were poised to present this turning point and have done so commendably well. They display botanical illustrations, maps, book foldouts with graphic information, and the occasional actual fossil, mineral specimen, or scientific instrument alongside paintings, drawings, photographs, textiles, and examples of high fashion (a ladies' plumed hat made of an entire bird is particularly captivating and grotesque) to contextualize art's role in disseminating new capacities and understandings, and in expressing the new interpretations and emotions accompanying such knowledge. The most poignant of these inclusions is the pairing of three cloud studies in oil on paper by John Constable from the early 1820s with four watercolor cloud studies by Luke Howard, a British chemist who in 1803 first proposed a Latinate classification for clouds, a system still in use today. Howard's paintings are more straightforwardly descriptive, as his compositional focus remained on singular types, in contrast to Constable's more general "scenes" of skies with multiple vaporous formations. Yet the two bodies of work share a common approach to rational observation, evincing a belief that close attention to nature's appearance can produce a form of knowledge conveyable through realism. While such distancing is useful, scientifically and aesthetically, visual fidelity to the surface of natural phenomena precludes the possibility of engendering a deeper, more reciprocal exchange with the natural world. Such rationality, moreover, is also a force driving the extractive economies that were and are responsible for changing the very air we breathe. The exhibition as a whole convincingly propounds the argument that the same modernity rapidly changing the material conditions of life was also swiftly changing the systems of representation and the very subjectivities through which any recognition and understanding of the world, and those changes, might be possible. Among such changes was the emerging distinction between art and science, a distinction reinforced at the Huntington through the fact that Constable's paintings are surrounded by ornate, gilded frames while Howard's are neatly matted and framed in elegant black wood. Our institutions are, after all, altered by the very same changes they help produce.


Though they are two very different institutions, both the Hammer Museum and the Lancaster Museum of Art and History (MOAH) opened shows that were surprisingly similar in their inadvertent intensification of a gap between viewers and nature. The wide remit referenced in the title of the Hammer's exhibition, "Breath(e): Toward Climate and Social Justice," certainly differs from the much narrower scope in MOAH's "Desert Forest: Life with Joshua Trees," yet both museums present large group shows that struggle to meaningfully connect theme and content. The Hammer's curators (Glenn Kaino and Mika Yoshitake) have brought together a global array of artists and collectives, some working explicitly as activists. Though the art on display often directly addresses the symptoms and struggles of the broader social effects of resource mismanagement, as in LaToya Ruby Frazier's photos documenting the arrival of an atmospheric water generator to deliver 2,200 gallons of daily clean water in Flint, Michigan, much of the display itself favors a sleek, screen- and technology-heavy format that, like Constable and Howard's realism, distances viewers from the very nature that many of the artists have sought to evoke. No individual artwork effectuated this alone; the effect came across in aggregate—say, after walking past the flat screens hung from the ceiling displaying Jin-Me Yoon's 2022 videos of dancers at Maplewood Flats in Vancouver; Bently Spang's 2017 steel armature shaped like a Plains-style war shirt and holding twenty-one monitors and six digital still photographs showing moments from Spang's journey up a tributary of the Yellowstone River; and Michael Joo's

**Our institutions are altered by the very same changes they help produce.**

2024 video interspersing AI-generated content with footage of underwater ecosystems, screen grabs from Discord channels, and physical components of 3D-printed coral reef structures. The prevailing sense is that nature is decidedly elsewhere. It's unfortunate that even the installation on the balcony outside, an edible garden by Ron Finley strewn with handmade political signage and folk craft, is quite literally overshadowed by the museum that surrounds it. Finley's broader project, helping communities grow their own food in underused urban spaces, should be lauded for its attempt to use art as a bridge linking people with the natural world around them. In the museum, such bridges seem difficult to cross.

MOAH's seemingly more straightforward mandate, in its presentation of a putative exhibition on the current state of *Yucca brevifolia* and the threats it faces as a species, resulted in an oddly similar sense of remove. The show (which closed in December) consisted mainly of a dense forest of representations, by more than fifty artists, of Joshua trees in every form possible. A brief list of the many media involved gives some sense of the variety: photograph on metallic paper, oil and pencil on polyester film, palladium paper negative, video, gems and sequins, collected and dyed sand on paper with varnish, ink and acrylic on laser-cut wood panel, cotton embroidery on unbleached muslin, encaustic photo transfer on tracing paper, mixed media, etc. While some of the works did provide urgent and scientific information about the status of the species—the sprawling installation/research station by the Department of Floristic Welfare, for instance—the majority lay somewhere between deadpan documentation of plants in situ and stylized aestheticization of their form. The nineteenth-century instances of close observation of the natural world on view at the Huntington here gave way

to a thoroughly twenty-first-century pluralism. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with a kaleidoscopic approach to a subject, the idiosyncratic mannerisms, difficult-to-parse symbolisms, and baroque decorative impulses on display at MOAH shifted attention away from human relationships with *Yucca brevifolia* and toward *Homo sapiens*' relationship with themselves.

At the Broad, curators Sarah Loyer and Andrea Gyorody have undertaken a somewhat different approach by choosing to focus on a single artist. For PST, the Broad has paired a collection exhibition, "Joseph Beuys: In Defense of Nature," with a Getty-funded public project, "Social Forest: Oaks of Tovaangar" (whose title incorporates the Tongva name for the Los Angeles Basin). Drawing from the 570 works by Beuys purchased as a single acquisition in 2006, the curators have arranged a thoughtful and comprehensive introduction to the artist's activism and oeuvre told largely through his work in multiples. Ordered thematically and chronologically, with historical ephemera accompanying artworks, the exhibition thoroughly articulates the narrative of a unique figure who nonetheless exemplified the aspirations and contradictions common to his time. Late in his career, Beuys's activism turned toward ecologically minded projects, and the exhibition ends with the grandest of those: *7000 Eichen* (7,000 Oaks), Beuys's contribution to Documenta 7 in 1982, which involved the planting of seven thousand oak trees throughout the city of Kassel. Beside each tree, Beuys erected a basalt stone pillar drawn from a pile placed in front of the Fridericianum, Kassel's main museum. A project of immense ambition, *7,000 Oaks* drastically changed the landscape of this city of two hundred thousand people. A local TV spot from the time, projected onto a gallery wall at the Broad, captured interviews with locals excited not only to have shade from the trees and a seat on the stones, but to meet their neighbors and work together on the project of planting. As one resident stated, "Art that relates to people where they are doesn't happen in a museum."

Inspired by *7,000 Oaks*, for the second half of the Broad's exhibition, "Social Forest: Oaks of Tovaangar," billed as a "major reforestation initiative" undertaken in partnership with nonprofit North East Trees, Tongva archaeologist Desireé Reneé Martinez and Tongva artist Lazaro Arvizu Jr. will place one hundred locally sourced boulders next to one hundred newly planted native trees, many of them oaks, in the city's Elysian Park; five additional oaks will be planted at Kuruvungna Village Springs in West LA. While the return of any native species, tree or otherwise, to the ecology of Los Angeles is cause for celebration, it is disingenuous to claim that a

Opposite page: **View of "Desert Forest: Life with Joshua Trees," 2024**, Lancaster Museum of Art and History, CA.

Below: **Joseph Beuys with basalt stones for his 1982 *7000 Eichen* (7,000 Oaks), Kassel, Germany, 1982.** From Documenta 7. Photo: akg-images/Niklaus Stauss.

Right: **Installation of Joseph Beuys's 1982 *7000 Eichen* (7,000 Oaks), Kassel, Germany, March 16, 1982.** From Documenta 7. Center, standing: Joseph Beuys. Photo: Dieter Schwerdtle.

project inspired by an artwork titled *7,000 Oaks* is somehow a major undertaking when it accomplishes one sixty-fourth the planting of the original project in a city nearly twenty times as large. It seems all the more so in light of the fact that the initiative unfolds under the auspices of a private museum operated by the Broads, who amassed a large part of their fortune by founding a company (currently known as KB Home) responsible for converting vast acreage of unceded native habitat into suburban housing. "Social Forest," in its emulation of Beuys's activism, is a start, and a good example of the ways in which art can connect people and communities to the soil on which they stand. Yet given the resources of PST's institutional stakeholders, its regionwide ambitions, and the unrelenting urgency of the crisis so clearly at issue for these museums, it is not difficult to imagine an outcome involving something more than a hundred trees lining a street in a city park. Perhaps the Broad could be working with MOAH to plant seven thousand Joshua trees, for instance, or with Finley to plant ten thousand toyons. As Beuys stated, in words reproduced in the exhibition's wall text, "Never stop planting."

Even within the museum, there are ways in which the distance between nature and people, art and life, might still be bridged. Arvizu's *Tongva (Gabrielino) Digging Stick*, 2024, for instance, the most uncomplicatedly beautiful object at the Broad, stands in silently useful contrast to the Beuys multiples throughout the rest of the show. Made of a smooth piece of wood placed through a perforated "doughnut" stone for weight, Arvizu's object is a tool used by the Tongva both historically and in the present day for planting seeds and harvesting bulbs, and in a way that is actively beneficial to the regenerative growth of nearly all native California plants. Arvizu's version stands on a white pedestal, while a historical example lies in an enclosed vitrine nearby. As the Huntington does via its framing of watercolors by Constable and Howard, the Broad enforces a distinction between art (contemporary) and science (anthropology), and inadvertently suggests an intriguing possibility. What would it mean for such classification to be abandoned altogether, and for Arvizu's work to be displayed not as an artwork available only for its visual properties alone but as an active piece of a reciprocal relationship between a culture and the lives that surround it? For this to happen, we might need to stop thinking in anthropocentric terms and begin the work of forging egoless and reparative relationships to the natural world, closing the distance wrought by our systems of representation, classification, and distinction. As Arvizu says in his catalogue text, "I am also interested in creating a different culture surrounding art, one that does not focus on the individual" (one might also say "human"). If an artist is capable of making this leap, of committing to an "art that is active, problem solving, manifests itself in the environment, and not commodified," perhaps our museums, in spite of their histories, can do so too. □

RED CAMERON IS A WRITER BASED IN LOS ANGELES.

Members of North East Trees planting a sapling in Elysian Park, Los Angeles, April 12, 2024. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.