

Exhibit travels back to the '50s when California helped create hip

by Robert L. Pincus

Modern used to mean contemporary. Still does, if we want to adhere to what dictionaries say. But somewhere along the arts timeline of the late 20th century, the term lost out to "post-modern" and "contemporary," never to recover its former use - at least not yet.

CLASSIC COOL - Julius Shulman's photographs, like 'Case Study House No. 22 (Pierre Koenig, Los Angeles, 1959-60),' capture something essential about the aura of mid-century modern architecture, and chairs by Charles and Ray Eames (left) have become icons of the era. CNS Photo courtesy of Orange County Museum of Art. So "modern" has become inextricably tied to experiments in 20th century art and design, while "mid-century modern" evokes the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. The architecture, chairs and other artistic artifacts of those years are, in fact, probably more popular in 2007 than they were in 1957.

In our turbulent times, there is a collective yearning for the exuberance of a Ray and Charles Eames chair, with its organic contours, or the airy, straight-line geometric spaces of houses by Los Angeles architects Pierre Koenig, John Lautner or Richard Neutra. Life wasn't less turbulent then - there was the Cold War, after all - but we like to imagine it was, which seems like one lure of this work. And the products of that period still look fresh, too, as Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., beautifully attests.

"I think that familiarity and a level of comfort with the work figures into it," says David Skelley, owner of Boomerang for Modern in San Diego, who has been showing and selling this kind of work for two decades. "It's part of our history in old photographs and it's crept into our subconscious in many different ways. It's also part of the recent past, unlike say Victorian culture, and the designs were so good that they still look valid today."

The Orange County, Calif., Museum of Art has put together an exhibition that celebrates that era in America, not just its furniture and its paintings, but also its jazz, its films, its cartoons and, more generally, its zeitgeist.

No region embodies the spirit of that time like California, asserts Elizabeth Armstrong, the show's curator and the museum's deputy director for programs. The nine knowledgeable contributors to the big, spiffy

companion book agree.

The exhibition is called "The Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury" - and it would be hard to think of a better title. Cool jazz was the musical counterpart to the new furniture with unprecedented shapes. Never mind that the 1956 record by that same title, which launched the style, was by New Yorker Miles Davis. It was West Coast musicians like Chet Baker and Art Pepper who embraced his mellow approach to composition and improvisation with greater zeal than those in the New York scene.

The exhibition tries, at least in portions, to make you feel as if you've traveled back to the era. Armstrong hired a team with a passion for this period to create an installation - artist Jim Isermann, architect Frederick Fisher and graphic designer Lorraine Wild - and the chemistry was right.

THE LOOK

The objects are excellent and their identity is enhanced by the groupings and period settings. One tableau includes a chair by designer Donald Knorr that uses sheet metal in a bent circle for seat and back and was first available about 1950. On the wall behind it is a characteristically stately 1956 painting by John McLaughlin, who lived for many years in Dana Point, Calif., with its tranquil balance between blue, black and white rectangles.

In their use of simple forms, Knorr's chair and McLaughlin's painting have a shared sensibility. Thomas Hine, author of an excellent book on this period called "Populuxe," writes in the companion book to the exhibition that cool implied detachment and a look of effortlessness. And these qualities aren't hard to spot in both examples.

In keeping with the Knorr chair, rounded forms dominate the ensemble that fills a nearby corkboard pedestal. These include the witty "ETR 'Surf Board' Coffee Table" (1951) by the Eameses, who were architects, graphic designers and filmmakers as well as furniture designers, and the "Lotus" chair (1960) by the Los Angeles-based Miller Fong, with its organic contour and tropical tone. But curves were only part of

the era's picture.

George Nelson, creator of classic objects like the "Platform Bench" (1947) and the "Marshmallow Sofa" (1956), identified at least three major mid-century modern "looks": the biomorphic, the machine-made and the handcrafted looks. Nelson's witty, rounded "Cigar" and "Saucer" pendant lamps, in the biomorphic mode, are part of the show's viewing and listening lounge, along with architect/designer Eero Saarinen's iconic "Tulip" side chairs.

All of this work had roots in earlier modernist developments, the Bauhaus in Germany, the De Stijl in Holland and the International Style in general. Most of the period's main figures created designs in multiple styles. The "Lotus" chair was biomorphic and at the same time had a handcrafted aura when done in rattan. The most famous Eames chairs crafted in plywood and then plastic featured curves borrowed from nature, but their Quadreflex speaker (1956) embraces the straight edge and boasts a high-tech look for its time.

The speaker sits on one compartment in a modular-style shelving system that takes you back to the 1950s. The museum even takes advantage of a sliding glass door to create an outdoor patio display on white stone of patio furniture that gained wide acclaim and use in the early '50s, by the Southern California design team of Hendrik Van Keppel and Taylor Green.

THE LINKS

What this show does that a showroom can't is to look at these iconic designs in the context of other culture - revealing the bonds between several fields.

The attention to geometry and color that pervades a lot of domestic designs is in the hard-edge painting of McLaughlin, Frederick Hammersley, Karl Benjamin and Lorser Feitelson as well as the houses of Pierre Koenig, the Eameses and others.

Graphic design had a great life in this period, be it on stylish covers of Arts and Architecture magazine by the likes of Saul Bass or Ray Eames or on a collage-style album cover for "Jazz Canto: An Anthology of Poetry and Jazz" by William Claxton.

Photographs of nearly all the leading jazz musicians of the day by Claxton helped to define the iconography of cool. They are the visual equivalent of the music. Julius Schulman's photographs of the great new mid-century modern houses did as much to give a visual identity to these houses with the broader public as the architecture itself.

Animation thrived, too. Getting a chance to watch Road Runner cartoons, "Gerald McBoing-Boing" and "Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom" (a relatively obscure Disney production) anew makes it clear how Chuck Jones, Bill Melendez, Bill Hurtz, Ward Kimball and others were redefining the style of cartoons in ways similar to what others were doing in furniture design, graphic design and art.

The period was tense politically; this was the first generation to live with the threat of nuclear destruction. But that reality coexisted with a buoyant artistic culture in California.

The exhibited works aren't big on overt displays of emotions. After all, that just wouldn't have been cool. The artists, architects, designers, musicians and filmmakers preferred, instead, to place their emphasis on formal innovations. The work in "The Birth of the Cool" may be historical, but mid-century modern is clearly attuned to contemporary taste.

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