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# Fine Art Flourishes in Tinseltown

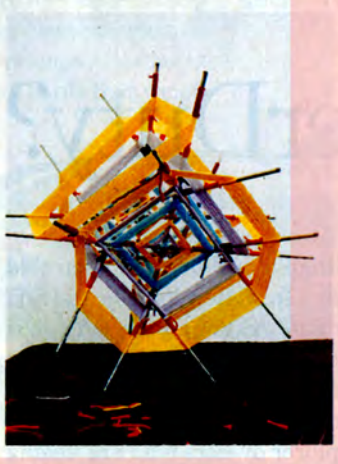
**L.A. may be known for starlets and freeways, but lately art collectors are flocking to the city's galleries.**

**BY JASON TANZ** LOS ANGELES

**SUNSET, CAPTURED:** Artist Douglas Busch (right) at home with his abstract ocean photographs

THE PHOTOGRAPHS LOOK ripped from the pages of *National Geographic*. I'm standing upstairs at Ace Gallery in Beverly Hills, staring at five-foot-tall images of sumptuous landscapes: a pier glowing in the moonlight; a golden desert, so lifelike that my mouth gets dry just gazing at it. I'm instantly drawn by the fine detail of the shots and relaxed by the silent scenery. Until I notice the bodies. A corpse dressed in a ball gown sprawls next to the Santa Monica pier. Near the desert sagebrush, two stiletto-heeled feet jut out of a barrel. Similarly grim figures inhabit the other images surrounding me.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE LAURIDSEN



home in Laguna Beach. "I could have done this without a consultant, but I don't think I'd want to," he says. "There's so much value added. I may see a piece of art that I like, but I don't know where it fits historically or how it's going to be looked upon ten, 20, 30 years from now. I like art, but this is still an investment."

ONE WAY TO ENsure that your investment pays off is to buy from an artist with a proven track record; it's likely to cost a bit more but is also more likely to appreciate. To that end, the first stop in our L.A. art tour takes us to the home and studio of Douglas Busch, who has been creating art for 40 years. Busch designed his light-infused modernist mansion, which rests atop the hills of Malibu, affording inspiring views of the ocean on one side and rolling foothills on the other. When we pull into his driveway, the 55-year-old is talking on his cellphone while a team of contractors mill around his swimming pool. If great art requires suffering, then it's hard to imagine that Busch is producing much great art these days.

But in fact, he is. Busch made his name in the 1980s and '90s with his strikingly detailed black-and-white photographs of landscapes and city buildings. But in 2003, while spending the summer in a small house on the beach, Busch pointed his camera toward the ocean and captured blurred images of waves, sand, and sky, washes of color that look more like Mark Rothko's paintings than Busch's earlier photographs. Today Busch is just about done with his ocean photographs—he's returning to producing smaller black-and-white landscapes—but he says the series has introduced him to an entirely new group of clients. Prices run from $450 for 36 square inches to $25,000 for six feet square.

Busch's Malibu home may inspire him, but younger—and less established—artists usually seek their muses in grimier climes. That helps explain why Culver City, an expanse that features low-slung warehouses, has become a hotbed of galleries. Susanne Vielmetter, 47, was one of the first to move into the area when she opened Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects (vielmetter.com) about three years ago, and today she is renowned for showing, in her words, "work that is a little more challenging, with a strong conceptual base, and that often has political implications."

Take, for example, Rodney McMillian, 38, whose paintings and sculptures often offer a sardonic take on art, race, and culture. Vielmetter showed me slides of a recent show of McMillian's, which included a 130-square-foot painting of a sky that he parceled off and sold for between $150 to $450 per square foot (the price was calculated based on the buyers' income levels); a

**SQUARE GUY:** Painter Patrick Wilson (above) with his recent work

## RESOURCES

### HOW TO SELECT AN ART ADVISOR

**CHECK CREDIBILITY:** Unlike for doctors or lawyers, there's no license required to act as an art advisor, so anyone can claim to be one. The International Association for Professional Art Advisors (iapaa.org) is an organization that can vouch for an advisor's credentials.

**ASK ABOUT DEGREES:** Your advisor should have an advanced degree in art history, and a business degree is also a plus. She should also be willing to share references.

**SEEK A SPECIALIST:** If you're interested in 19th-century landscapes, a postmodern specialist isn't going to work. But don't think too narrowly: An advisor should also educate and challenge you. Don't settle for someone who will show you only what you ask to see. —J.T.