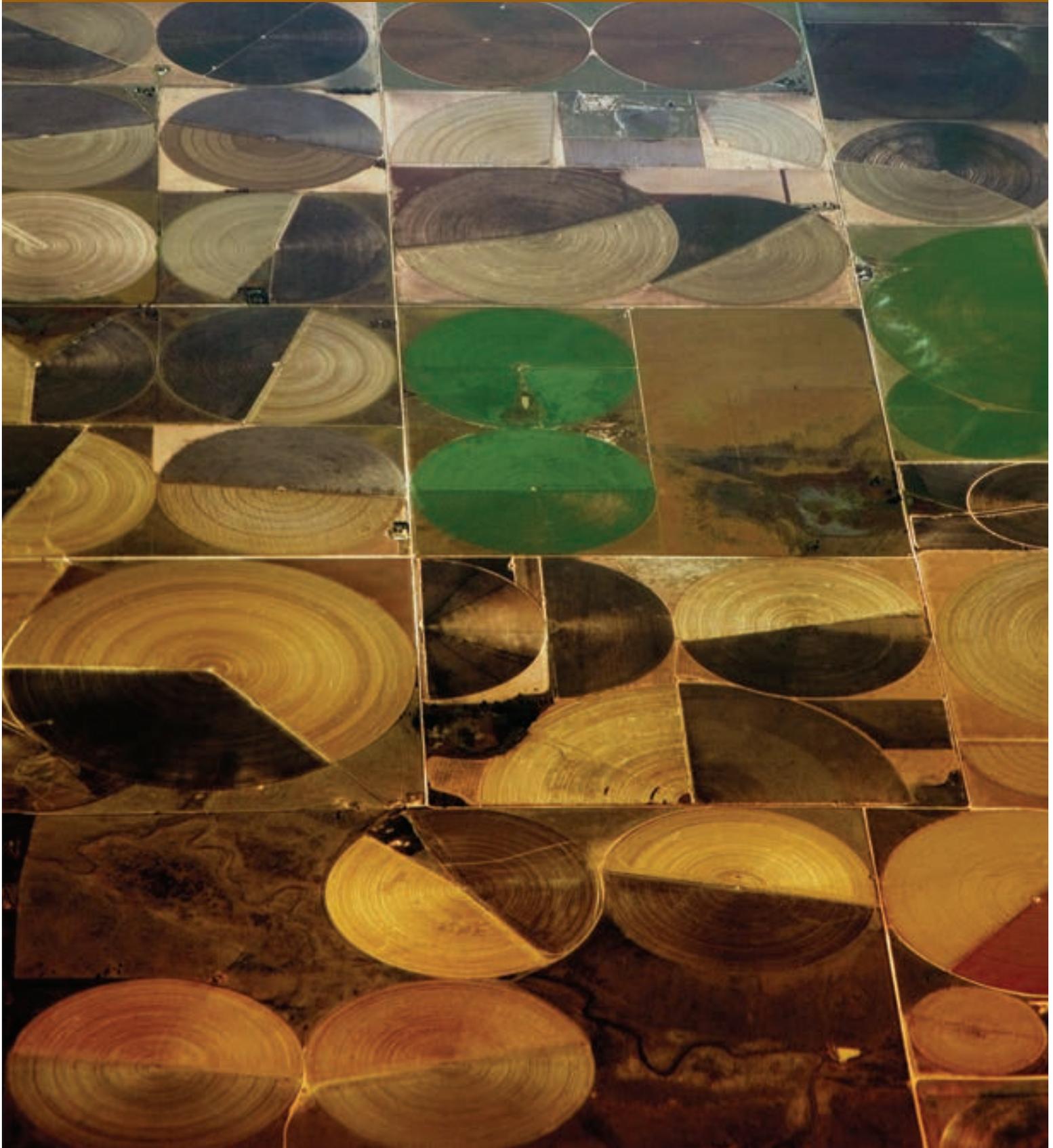


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REVIEWS

Edited by James J. Rawls

STATE OF MIND: NEW CALIFORNIA ART CIRCA 1970

By Constance M. Lewallen and Karen Moss, with essays by Julia Bryan-Wilson and Anne Rorimer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 296 pp., \$39.95 cloth)

PHENOMENAL: CALIFORNIA LIGHT, SPACE, AND SURFACE

Edited by Robin Clark with essays by Michael Auping, Robin Clark, Stephanie Hanor, Adrian Kohn, and Dawna Schuld (Berkeley: University of California Press with the assistance of the Getty Foundation, 2012, 240 pp., \$39.95 cloth)

REVIEWED BY PAUL J. KARLSTROM, FORMER WEST COAST REGIONAL DIRECTOR, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, AND AUTHOR OF *PETER SELZ: SKETCHES OF A LIFE IN ART*

THESE TWO BOOKS ACCOMPANIED art exhibitions now long gone. The first purpose of such publications is to throw further light on specific displays of art and to serve as a document when the actual exhibition is history. This, however, is a limited goal. These books present two important California “movements”—Conceptual Art and the more specific southern California versions of minimalism grouped under the sobriquet Light and Space—that could be viewed as dominant during a particularly fertile creative period in the second half of the twentieth cen-



ture. The success and significance of the books is the degree to which they enlighten readers about the collective work and, even more important, the ways in which it can be seen as resulting from and contributing to not just California history but an expanded way of looking at art itself.

The books are considered here together for several reasons. First, they come from the same publisher at the same time, the occasion of the hugely ambitious multiveneue exhibition “Pacific Standard Time,” sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Museum, on the subject of California art in and around 1970. This historic event recognized and celebrated the critical coming of age of California as a major participant in late-modernist art.

Perhaps the most important exhibitions were those under consideration here. And that status carries a considerable burden of responsibility. The greatest challenge falls to the curators of *State of Mind*. In the introduction to her essay “A Larger Stage,” Constance Lewallen states the authors’ approach to an almost unmanageable subject: “I believe that a thematic approach will afford a fresh look at this seminal period [circa 1970] in California



Conceptual Art and demonstrate that it foreshadowed much of the work being created by young artists today.” Contemporary art of the early years of the twentieth century is unimaginable without the rich history that goes back to Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and his best-known historic beneficiary, Andy Warhol (1928–1987). The single basis for the Conceptual “movement,” if one agrees to that unified description, is Duchamp’s oft-quoted dictum that the idea and process involved in art making is the art act itself, not the object that may or may not result. Also, Duchamp held that the artwork is unfinished, incomplete, without the viewer (or audience). These ideas inform virtually all avant-garde art of the twentieth century.

Throughout this extraordinarily dense, layered, and detailed account—an effort to bring together in a meaningful way a plethora of disparate forms, content, and expressions—the four authors bring impressively informed and intelligent commentary to a subject that really cannot be forced into a single clarifying definition. The term *Conceptualism*, in this respect, is more a “branding” than a movement. This book is a noble effort that, through no

fault of the authors, cannot entirely succeed. But they have managed, through impressive detail about artists and art projects, to provide guideposts for an exciting and intellectually rewarding roller-coaster ride.

The truth is that the problem we confront in thinking about Conceptualism is the concept itself. If, as some of us ironically point out, Conceptualism can be anything at all as long as an artist declares it is art, then the term is all-embracing and possibly worthless. If everything is art, then why talk or write about it? What impresses about the treatment of that difficulty by Lewallen and her colleague Karen Moss is that they understand that the phenomenon needs somehow to be communicated, not just through definitions but in the experience of its great variety and serious goals. Definitions begin with Lewallen's big statement that the "movement" emerged in the 1960s among groups of young artists, in this country and abroad, who rejected "traditional modes of art making in the context of enormous cultural and social changes in the society at large." There we have one definition. Moss tells us that through new ideas of place and site, Conceptualism "redefined the idea of an art object and the notion of representation." In her essay, Ann Rorimer proposes that California Conceptualists "belong together . . . not solely by virtue of their geographical place of residence at the outset of their careers, but even more so by their shared pursuit of a wide range of aesthetic strategies devoted to reinvigorating worn-out practices of art making." She goes on to remind us that these artists extended

the innovations of minimal and pop art by turning away from "medium-specific" painting and sculpture.

This guiding notion is put even more succinctly by artist Tom Marioni, quoted by Moss, when he described his project as "idea oriented situations not directed at the production of static objects." Less familiar than some of the other leading California figures associated with the movement—for example, Eleanor Antin, Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, Allan Kaprow (Happenings), and Ed Ruscha—Marioni's name nonetheless appears throughout these essays as a significant force—as curator at the Richmond Museum and founder of his own Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA) in San Francisco—in creating a vital Conceptualist community in San Francisco. His provocative performances (e.g., "Piss Piece" of 1970, in which he stood on a ladder and urinated in a galvanized laundry tub) partake of the body art branch of the movement, in which the artist literally becomes the work of art. In 1973, he was handcuffed for seventy-two hours to Linda Mary Montano for one of her famous performances (ephemeral except for photo documentation). Marioni and Montano saw art as a social experience, as did the influential European Joseph Beuys.

This iteration of Conceptualism had the potential to be the most unsettling, as carried to extremes by artists such as Burden and Barbara T. Smith. Burden was notorious for *Shoot* (1973), a radical piece in which he had himself shot in the arm by a young artist friend in front of a small group of witnesses.

The threat of danger and injury was reified. Burden later told curator Tom Garver that he wanted to create an "instant and evanescent sculpture." Smith was resolute in her determination to remove any distinction between public and private acts, including sexual intercourse. In *Feed Me* (performed at Marioni's MOCA in 1973), she invited "visitors" one at a time to enter a small room where she sat, naked and vulnerable, a tape repeating, "Feed me, feed me." With mostly male participants, some of the potential consequences for her were foreseeable. The meaning of this openly transgressive performance, and its status as art, inevitably would be debated, especially among feminists. Apparently Smith saw her role as passive, with the audience being responsible for what happened. According to Garver, who saw the 1973 performance, there was a small peephole through which observers (voyeurs, of which there was a long line) could observe Smith and whomever she was with. This served to "protect" her in her passivity, making her "visitor" subject to social and psychological consequences. This idea of discovery through social interaction (artist and viewer/participant) goes to the heart of much conceptual activity. And always in the background lies the key question: what are the limits of art? The cover of this richly illustrated volume (64 color and 123 black and white) was an inspired choice in terms of an introduction to the subject and the book's contents. Robert Kinmont is depicted doing a handstand on the very edge of a sheer cliff. This is one photo from a series entitled *8 Natural Handstands* (1969/2009) in which the artist

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is literally at the center of the artwork, his individual human presence dominating nature. In a sense, it subverts the long tradition of landscape art, but, more important, it introduces the element of personal risk, imminent danger of bodily injury, and even death—real world, real time. The image tells us that such ideas are among the contents of Conceptual Art's deep and varied bag of tricks and surprises.

There are seventy artists listed as participating in the exhibition, with many others brought into the essays to provide history, context, and clarification of relationships between ideas and individuals. Admittedly, it is not always easy for the nonspecialist to follow the various lines of the developing theme or even the cast of characters. Given this formidable task, the authors have produced mutually reinforcing accounts that build upon one another while offering a mass of detail that inevitably challenges even art-informed readers. Nonetheless, thoughtful and attentive study opens a window with a clear view of a complex but nonetheless fascinating multifaceted art/cultural landscape.

The second book in this closely connected pair, *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface*, discusses far fewer artists and a more cohesive enterprise. The thirteen artists in the exhibition are Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Ron Cooper, Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, Bruce Nauman, Eric Orr, Helen Pashgian, James Turrell, De Wain Valentine, and Doug Wheeler—all well-known and respected veterans

of Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, and several are art superstars. Though the scope is smaller and the focus much tighter, the approach is similar to that of *State of Mind*, with a team of five highly qualified contributors examining different aspects of a southern California art movement that now stands on its own as a worthy counterpart to the heretofore more famous and celebrated New York version of minimalist sculpture.

In his introduction, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego director Hugh M. Davies acknowledges that the American art scene until recently has been, in his term, New York-centric, and serious artists, including those in California, felt required to relocate there. That pattern has changed. Davies points out what has become obvious: the creative center of the art world has moved perceptively westward over the past twenty-five years, and with that has come a historical self-confidence among those who write about past as well as contemporary art in California. The contributors to the present volumes show none of the former defensive, even apologetic, insecurity. Quite the opposite, they recognize and take for granted the stature and influence of their subject, not just regionally but internationally.

Even a few New York critics, chief among them Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* and Peter Schjeldahl writing for the *New Yorker*, acknowledge the importance of the California art scene—especially in Los Angeles—as a worthy rival to New York. Of the more than thirty exhibitions for which the present books serve as partial records

and many of which Smith saw in an exhausting five-day visit, she wrote with almost giddy admiration, "*Pacific Standard Time* has been touted as rewriting history. It seems equally plausible to say that it simply explodes it, revealing the immensity of art before the narrowing and ordering of the historicizing process." Even more dramatic a reversal of New York's familiar critical dismissal is her surprising statement in another favorable review in which she actually suggests that New York "long ago accepted it [Los Angeles] as an equal in the production of art, and that New Yorkers may even suspect that on a per-capita basis, Los Angeles harbors more good artists than New York does." In the past, these would be fighting words, or just plain rubbish, in the acknowledged art capital of the world. And the artists discussed here, whether associated with Conceptualism or Light and Space, are given credit for this new paradigm, as Davies calls it. They have done nothing less than contribute to a new art order. Schjeldahl, in a 2010 review of a California show in New York, similarly compares the Los Angeles version of minimalism to that of New York as entirely distinctive in forms and ideas, "as if the movement had been reborn to more indulgent parents. . . . In the 1960s, puritanical New Yorkers (me included) liked to deplore the air of lotus-eating chic" that California minimalists shared. But following his "epiphany," Schjeldahl described both the sculpture and Light and Space installations as "increasingly ethereal," exhibiting a "sensuousness that couldn't have been more remote from New York's principled asperity. In point of fact, they [the artists] advanced

a philosophical argument about the role of art in life which has aged well.”

In some ways, it seems that *Light and Space*, narrowly defined as a movement in comparison to open-ended Conceptualism, is easier for the essayists to describe and convey. The rigor they bring to the subjects is informed by knowledge and insight, and careful looking, enhanced by the historical perspective provided by almost half a century. The curators and writers bring in the essential figures regardless of whether they are included in the exhibition, thereby making clear their ambitions for historical comprehensiveness, a further “coming of age.” Two crucial artists, the late Michael Asher and Maria Nordman, are featured in the book with lengthy discussions. Asher is described by exhibition curator Robin Clark in her useful introduction as the Reluctant Phenomenologist and in his *Los Angeles Times* obituary as a “dean of the Conceptual Art movement.” Although associated with *Light and Space*, especially in the 1960s, he preferred the term *situation aesthetics* to describe his practice. Nordman, who declined to participate because she did not want to have her work shown in a group context, is described by Michael Auping in his marvelous chapter devoted to light redefining space, as the creator of “mind bending” interplay between walls and light. She denies being part of the movement, insisting that her work is about people and “situations.” Auping is not having it, arguing that if Nordman is “not part of the *Light and Space* Movement, then one could argue that there is no *Light and Space*

Movement.” He goes on to write that her “small but intense body of work is the epitome of what could be called a choreography of light and space.” His description of three visits to her Pico Boulevard storefront studio is evocative and almost poetic, as is definitely her art and that of her loosely associated southern California colleagues.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that several of the *Light and Space* people, Bruce Nauman in addition to Nordman and Asher, make critical and lengthy crossover appearances in *State of Mind*. Nauman, with his extraordinary free-ranging creative imagination, is among those whose work defines the thrust of Conceptualism internationally. In fact, these are among the most inventive and, especially in the case of Asher, cerebral artists. With the goal of altering space and dematerializing if not eliminating the object, their art is Conceptual at base. One absolutely critical point, and one fully explicated in these books, is that California art was as serious as any art elsewhere. However, it wore different clothing and presented itself in a variety of guises, from irony and deadpan humor to outrageousness and calculated shock. Roberta Smith, once again, came to the defense of California minimalism as equal to that of New York, and in its way more courageous in moving beyond more formalist painting and sculpture to explore new territory. She was refreshed by the lightness and transparency, the color and sensuality, of the L.A. sculpture-based work that had been liberated to pursue new horizons with light as the medium. Robert Irwin and Donald Judd, in their thinking and work, define this contrast at the highest

level. Among the chief offenses of the Californian minimalists was that their work was seen as superficial and seductive, lacking gravitas. But as Smith and many others wonder, what’s wrong with sensuality and beauty?

The reaction to the work of Irwin, James Turrell, Nordman, and others was, as Douglas Wheeler described his own work, “sensate.” It was, without apology or excuses, an effort through perception and the medium of light to alter our understanding of the environment—natural and man-made—and even more our inherited ideas about the very nature of art. Architect Frank Gehry has said, “Light is something that every architect talks about but seldom deals with well. Artists in L.A. gave us a lesson in that.” A friend of artists, Gehry recognized that this was a very big project indeed, in which even those who retained the art object (albeit transformed by refined surface treatment, vibrant colors, reflection, translucence, and transparency) were full participants—among them De Wain Valentine, Peter Alexander, Craig Kauffman, Helen Pashgian, and above all Larry Bell. The goals are shared and the overlapping means used in the service of ideas constitutes the new art. The art becomes the individual experience of the work, leading to heightened awareness of a reality altered by and viewed freshly through art. The key point to remember is that for all the attention to new materials and process (plastic, cast resin, vacuum-formed) of the well-known L.A. Finish Fetish reflecting custom car and surfing culture (for years a critical means to marginalize the work), and given the amazing

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technical resources needed to cast large-scale disks and cubes, the craft was directed to the same ends: sculptural forms that subvert the traditional qualities of solidity and permanence expected of them.

In one way or another, the works brought together in these complementary books are idea-based (conceptual) and devoted to positioning the viewer in relationship to his/her environment. The traditional object displayed in art gallery or museum space is rejected or at least seriously and thoughtfully modified. For a period of phenomenally fruitful artistic endeavor, these concerns became the project of California art.

Like *State of Mind*, *Phenomenal* boasts illustrations (100 color and 75 black and white) that not only document the exhibition but also allow the words to carry specific meaning in relationship to the art. The color plates are especially beautiful, given the gleaming sensual aesthetic involved in most of the works. In the final chapter, Adrian Kohn offers a brief but provocative look at writing about art and the inadequacy of words to the task of conveying the essence of what is visual. She argues that the risk in experiencing art through language “may allow words and *their* logic to supplant the work and *its*.” This is an unavoidable problem, one that has been of considerable interest to Robert Irwin, who warns historians and critics of the serious loss or forfeiture when transposing phenomena into language. Kohn’s concluding observation seems somehow perfect for both these books dealing with unfamiliar, challenging artworks that demand

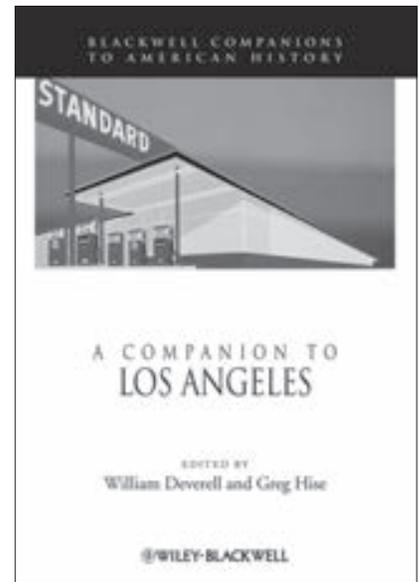
much from the viewer in an unstated contract between the artists and those who experience their art: “In one’s own engagement, picking words and testing them helps you to look harder and see more. While words may obscure art’s strangeness at first, their failings—if noticed—restore it.” These exemplary studies deserve close reading, looking, and thinking to help us to “look harder” and “see more.” Both books should be considered definitive and authoritative, and that was the clear goal: interpretive studies that are not limited to the objects or artists in either exhibition. In some respects, they could be a boxed set.

A COMPANION TO LOS ANGELES

Edited by William Deverell and Greg Hise (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 536 pp., \$228.95 cloth)

REVIEWED BY VOLKER JANSSEN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, AND EDITOR OF *WHERE MINDS AND MATTERS MEET: TECHNOLOGY IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST*

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH Blackwell Companions knows why they come at such a high price: They are expansive essay collections, meant as a resource and reference rather than as volumes to be read from beginning to end. And anyone familiar with William Deverell’s work as mentor and steward to new scholarship at the Huntington-USC Institute for California and the West and his work on Blackwell Companions to American History—*A Companion to the American West* and *A Companion to California History*—knows there is



no one better to team up with one of the region’s most prolific urban and architectural historians, Greg Hise, to assemble this magnificent collection.

Long gone are the days when the southern California metropolis was simply a case study in suburban history. Over the last fifteen years or so, historians of all fields and specialties have discovered Los Angeles as a place that raises new questions and provides some unexpected answers. The multidisciplinary appeal of Los Angeles is apparent in the list of contributors. Urban, cultural, film, public, and legal historians have joined political scientists, scholars of race and ethnicity, photographers, artists, and novelists in this project, and the contributions are accordingly diverse. Case studies and rich historiographies stand side by side with Matt Gainer’s intriguing urban photography, Robbert Flick’s photo assembly on the San Gabriel River, and “contemporary voices” on Los Angeles that pull many of the historical questions and debates of this companion into the present.