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Why the Orange County Museum of Art is resurrecting its longtime California Biennial



OCMA director Heidi Zuckerman, center, with artist Narsiso Martinez, left, museum chief curator Courtenay Finn, artist Alex Anderson, artist Laurie Steelink and biennial co-curator Essence Harden. Behind them is the new Orange County Museum of Art in Costa Mesa, which opens to the public Oct. 8. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

BY **DEBORAH VANKIN**

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Since taking the helm of the Orange County Museum of Art a year and a half ago, director [Heidi Zuckerman](#) has repeatedly said that her vision for the museum is “looking back to look forward.”

That vision will become a tangible reality Oct. 8 when the museum debuts its long-in-the-works [new building](#) at Costa Mesa’s Segerstrom Center for the Arts. As part of its inaugural suite of exhibitions, OCMA is resurrecting its long-running California Biennial, which dates back to 1984.

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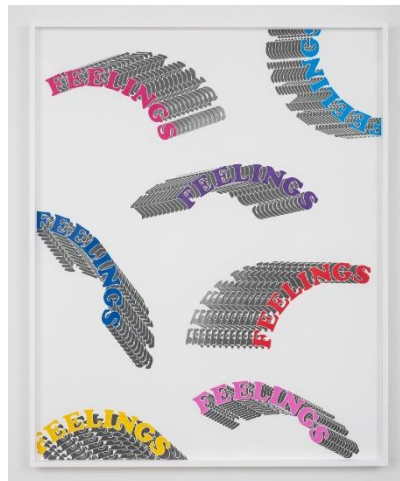
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“The biennial is in the DNA of OCMA,” Zuckerman says. “And we have to open with that acknowledgment of our past but also our commitment to the present and the future. The best exhibitions do that. They let you know where you are right now — as a person, as a creator, as an interpreter, as a responder, as a human.”

[The biennial](#) — originally called the Newport Biennial back when the institution was the Newport Harbor Art Museum — was conceived by then-curator of exhibitions [Paul Schimmel](#) as a way to shine a light on new work by artists encapsulating the spirit of California. Early versions had a thematic or geographic focus. The inaugural exhibition in '84 spotlighted the Los Angeles arts scene; the second, in '86, elevated Bay Area artists. The third, called “Mapping Histories,” opened in '91 focusing on intergenerational conversations between artists. The fourth went broader, opening in '93 and showcasing artists from around Southern California.

After a short-lived and [ill-fated merger](#) with the Laguna Art Museum in '96, the museum changed its name to the Orange County Museum of Art and the '97 biennial was renamed simply “the Biennial.” [In 2002](#) it took on its current moniker, coinciding with a broadening of vision geographically and artistically — that year’s biennial showcased artists from all over the Golden State.

In 2013 and 2017 the biennial was again reinvented, under then-chief curator Dan Cameron, as the [California-Pacific Triennial](#), focusing on connections between California and the Pacific Rim region. It hasn’t run since, largely because the museum relocated in 2018 to a temporary space, [OCMA Expand](#), while its \$93-million [new building](#) was being conceived and built.



Sadie Barnette’s “Feelings, feelings, feelings, feelings, feelings, feelings, feelings, feelings” (2022) will be part of the resurrected “California Biennial 2022.” (Eric Ruby)

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“California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold” will feature painting, drawing, sculpture, large-scale installation, textiles and ceramics, as well as digital and multimedia work, by 20 emerging, midcareer and under-recognized artists from around the state. Going broad was key, not only from an interdisciplinary standpoint but also intergenerationally — participants range in age from 32 to 84. And the three exhibition curators are of different generations, informing the exhibition with a cross-section of points of view.

Biennial co-curator [Elizabeth Armstrong](#), who served as OCMA’s deputy director and chief curator from 2000 to 2008 and most recently steered the Palm Springs Art Museum from 2014 to 2018, is the resident baby boomer, bringing institutional knowledge of the long-running exhibition. [Gilbert Vicario](#), now curator of modern and contemporary art at the Phoenix Art Museum and with over 20 years of museum curatorial experience elsewhere, fills the Gen X spot. [Essence Harden](#), visual arts curator at the California African American Museum who has also organized exhibitions at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and the Museum of the African Diaspora, brings a millennial perspective.

Distinguishing the biennial from the Hammer Museum’s popular [“Made in L.A.”](#) biennial, which showcases emerging and under-recognized artists largely from the L.A. area, was a consideration, says Armstrong, who during her tenure at OCMA co-curated the 2002, ’04 and ’06 California Biennials.

“I’d always been interested in getting outside of L.A. and getting out into all those different parts of California where artists are working,” Armstrong says, “and it seemed natural to do that again.”

In that way, the curators’ distinct geographic backgrounds factored in as well. “Essence spent a lot of her career and life in Berkeley and Oakland and now lives in L.A. Gilbert grew up in San Diego [near] the border, so they both have perspectives outside of the cultural center of Los Angeles,” Armstrong says. “I grew up on the East Coast and spent phases of my career in California, including the high desert, and I’ve been really intrigued by artists working there. We really tried to make time to get into studios in slightly hard-to-reach places.”

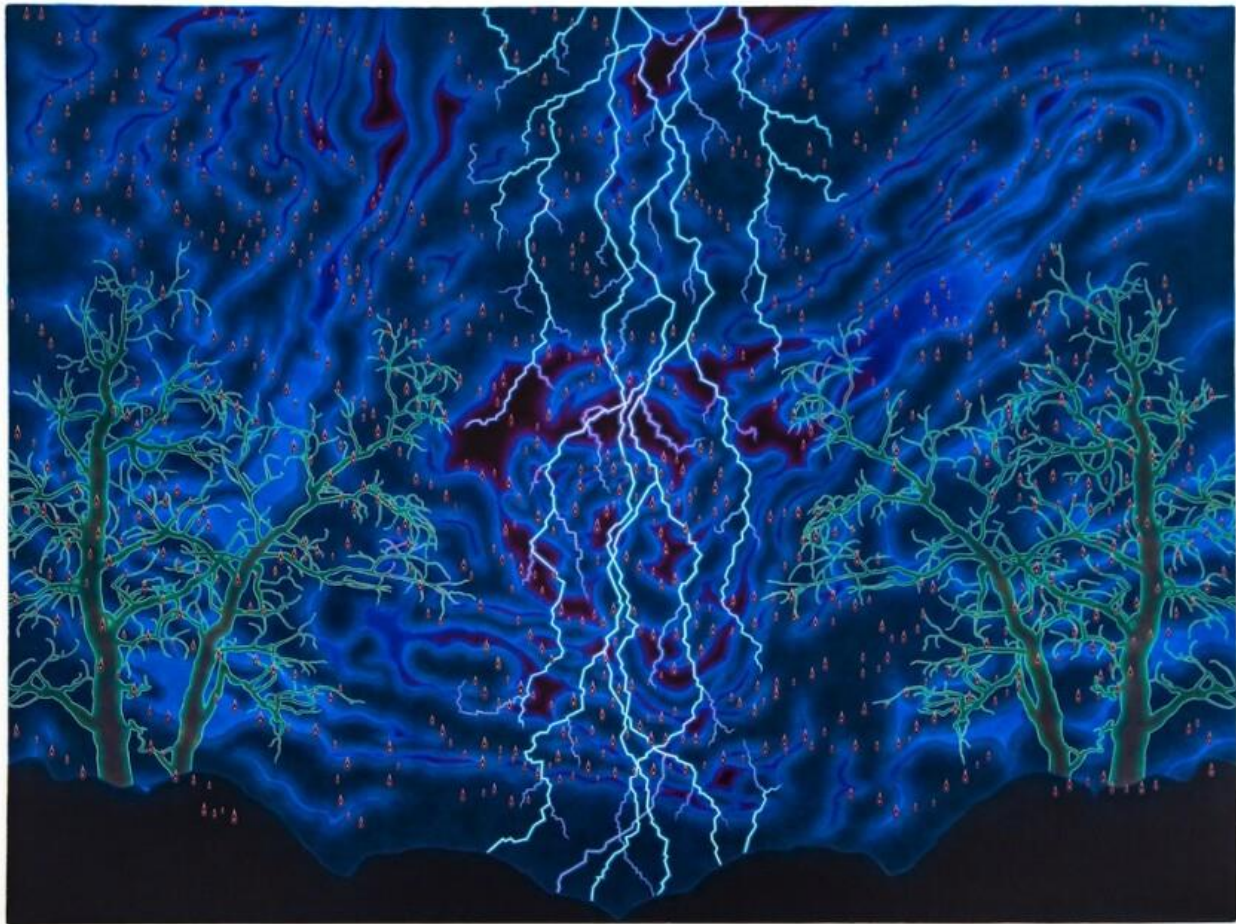
After sorting through hundreds of artists’ work, Armstrong, Harden and Vicario visited about 150 studios in person or via Zoom throughout 2021. They traveled north, traversing the Sonoma and Napa regions as well as Oakland and its perimeters; and south, to National City on the border of Mexico. They spent time in remote studios in the high desert, including in Joshua Tree and Flamingo Heights in Yucca Valley, as well as in bustling cities including San Francisco, San Diego and L.A.

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“We really wanted to get a feel for the pulse of what was going on, no matter what part of California,” Armstrong says.

What emerged was particularly of-the-moment work, at a critical time given the pandemic, much of it infused with a visceral materiality and multisensory feel. There’s no overriding theme to the resulting biennial beyond “just what inspired artists during the pandemic,” Armstrong says.



Sharon Ellis' "Night Storm" (2012-19) will be featured in the upcoming biennial. (Kohn Gallery)

Still, throughlines in the work emerged. The weight of history — including artists’ personal histories, California’s history and the impulse to revisit, reimagine and revise history — was one of them. Spirituality and healing was another, both works that looked or felt optimistic and materials addressing the idea of healing. A speculative focus on the future was another.

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“And some of these artists embody all of these things,” Armstrong says.

The curators also saw a binding spirit of resilience and optimism. “People just really persevered,” Armstrong says. “It’s about not giving up and just being so inspired by what you’re making and the times you’re living through.”

That’s particularly true of some of the older artists in the exhibition, she points out. National City-based [Raul Guerrero](#), 76, and Yucca Valley-based [Sharon Ellis](#), 66, are both artists who have been making increasingly powerful work for decades, and doing so somewhat under the radar, Armstrong says. For the biennial, Guerrero will show a group of large-scale, narrative paintings from an ongoing series called “An Abbreviated History of the Americas”; Ellis is showing seven tiny, vibrantly colored “ecstatic landscapes,” as Armstrong calls them. Their work is extremely different — one historical in nature, the other more cosmic-feeling — but both artists’ work display a spirit of regeneration.

Oakland-based [Sadie Barnette’s](#) work in the biennial — seven large-scale, powdered graphite drawings that incorporate text — addresses her own history in a particularly poignant way, Harden says. Barnette made the works in 2021 during a period of isolation. Her practice touches on the history of her father, a former Black Panther, who also opened the first Black-owned gay bar in San Francisco from 1990 to 1993, the Eagle Creek Saloon.

“They all contain that element of family and her interpersonal history,” Harden says of Barnette’s work, “and these declarations of a more liberated equitable future. They’re of history and they are glimmers or desires for belonging or hope. They’re bold statements.”

Simphiwe Ndzube is an artist from Cape Town, South Africa, who’s now based in L.A. He made a new sculpture for the biennial informed by South African folklore. It’s a 6-foot-tall, 20-foot-long creature, a chimera, made of clay and featuring fake eyelashes and dentures, which speaks to both healing and the future.

“It’s a form that’s both of the earth and points to something unearthly,” Harden says. “It’s a type of magical realism existing in a time of nonlinearity. A body and a creature ushering in care, with a saddle on its back, to attend to humanity.”

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Lily Stockman's "Canyon Fire" (2022) reflects on a rugged desert road.
(Charles Moffett)

Joshua Tree- and L.A.-based Lily Stockman's work in the exhibition feels meditative. It's a series of three oil-based, abstract paintings reflecting on a stretch of road, Burns Canyon, in the Mojave Desert and referencing trips the artist has taken there.

"The road is a rugged expanse but it's a reflective space she keeps coming back to," Harden says. "They feel like spirit work to me because they're portal-like — they really hold you and there's a calmness in her use of color and line work. They take you on a journey."

Of all the works in the show, Vicario says, a large, multipanel painting by 84-year-old L.A.-based [Ben Sakoguchi](#) moved him the most. The piece is called "Comparative Religions." A central panel depicts Albert Einstein in running shorts atop a rock in the Grand Canyon. Fourteen smaller panel paintings surround it depicting different aspects of world religions.

"I find it powerful," Vicario says, "because he's an artist who has been at this for about 40 years who has a visual literacy and ability to illustrate his particular view of the world through this format. It's very satirical — in a way it reminds me of part Mad magazine and part political cartoons. You get an immediate visceral reaction. It's completely present and of-the-moment and unlike anything we saw."

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Visiting so many artists in such a condensed period of time — at such an urgent-feeling time in history — turned out to be unexpectedly encouraging, Harden says.

“Everyone was out of work or not in great economic shape, especially artists, and I kept seeing everyone’s love for each other and their effort to find their way back to each other,” she says. “Sharing resources, trying to find ways to hire people in their studios — it was very much a part of our conversations with artists. It was palpable.”

The biennial promises to be a cross-disciplinary record of that time.

“It’s an explosion of emotions and thoughts coming out of a lockdown,” Armstrong says. “I’ve been using the metaphor of a snake shedding its skin. It’s a really interesting time to be doing a biennial. It’s the energy of a new skin — this energy of what could be.”

'California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold'

Where: Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa

When: Oct. 8–Jan. 2

Information: ocma.art

Featuring: Tanya Aguiñiga, Alex Anderson, Sadie Barnette, Kenturah Davis, Sharon Ellis, James Gobel, Raul Guerrero, Candice Lin, Maria Maea, Narsiso Martinez, Hector Dionisio Mendoza, Alicia McCarthy, Simphiwe Ndzube, Rashaad Newsome, Alicia Piller, Clare Rojas, Ben Sakoguchi, Svetlana Shigroff, Laurie Steelink, Lily Stockman