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**CALIFORNIA:
THEN AND NOW**

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“California Dreaming”

An Interview with Louis Stern

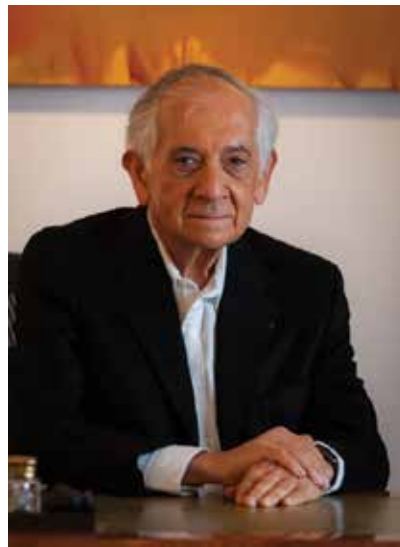
by Neil Goodman

*All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray
I've been for a walk on a Winters Day
I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA
California Dreamin' on such a winter's day
Mamas & the Papas*

I first met Louis Stern at his namesake gallery in West Hollywood more than a decade ago while looking for representation in Los Angeles. Although the work was not for him (the gallery specialized in twentieth century LA and southern California hard edged abstraction), I appreciated his suggestions for other venues, particularly in the context of a cold call. I was also added to his mailing list, and over the course of many years, I received hard bound periodicals of several of the artists he represented, including Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and Helen Lundeborg. Some artists, like John McLaughlin were nationally known, while others were more regionally based. Like the song “California Dreaming,” their aesthetic was anchored and inseparably linked to both their time and place.

Coincidentally, I was also teaching a course on pattern and abstraction at Indiana University Northwest, and the above-mentioned artists (along with the periodicals that Louis had sent me), were used pedagogically to explain concepts related to specific course assignments. As a result, my familiarity and interest with many of these artists developed sequentially, paralleling my teaching schedule. In this respect, I was both teacher and student.

Louis Stern has witnessed substantial growth and development in both the CA and international artworld. Through his thoughts and experiences, I found him to be a highly educated and committed dealer, who in the romantic sense, believed that quality and not commerce is our sustaining value. In an artworld that seems to have a very limited attention span, the core value of the artists and their estates that he represents have a long view of history and a sustaining belief in the value and power of art.



Gallerist Louis Stern. Photo by Eric Dahan.

As this was an extensive interview, many of the answers capture the spirit of our conversation as opposed to literal transcriptions, and hopefully shed some light on the California experience through the eyes of a veteran dealer:

Neil: In my earlier years, California evoked a place both imagined and real. The movie “Echo in the Canyon” by Andrew Slater portrayed the musical confluence of the early 1970’s. As a longtime Los Angeles dealer, do you see any equivalency in your California experience?

Louis: LA lacks a sense of a “hornet’s nest,” as there is not a strong center but rather a series of pockets, each geographically distant. Many of the leading artists in LA needed to establish themselves elsewhere before becoming recognized in LA, Ed Ruscha is a very good example of this. The Ferus Gallery was an important fixture in LA and perhaps eclipsed a certain amount of attention from other artists of that period.



Helen Lundeberg (1908-1999), *Untitled*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 30 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

Neil: More specifically, in Chicago, our identity was initially based on the “Monster Roster” and then later the “Hairy Who.” Are there important cornerstones that define a lineage of Southern California Art?

Louis: Perhaps the most well recognized lineage were Ruben Kaddish and Phillip Guston, who both studied with Lorser Feitelson. Unlike New York, the lack of international recognition, principally for Helen Lundeberg, Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and to a lesser extent John McLaughlin, did not establish an international presence. Although in many ways these artists developed in parallel worlds artistically from their NY contemporaries, they did so without the publicity and fame.

Neil: The Guggenheim Museum reshaped Bilbao both economically and culturally. Is there an equivalency in the LA museum world?

Louis: Not really, as many of the museums have a much longer lineage, and unlike Bilbao, they are well established cultural institutions. I am optimistic that the Lucas Museum will result in a more public presence, as it is a museum that the lay person can understand, and will feature work that will be visually accessible to almost everyone.

Neil: LA has developed into a major world center in the artworld. What impact has that had on you as a dealer?

Louis: Historically everything moves west. LA is a center for architecture (Charles and Ray Eames, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra), design, music, and writers. Also, the proximity of Mexico has been an important influence on LA. In this way, all of these factors have made us a destination.

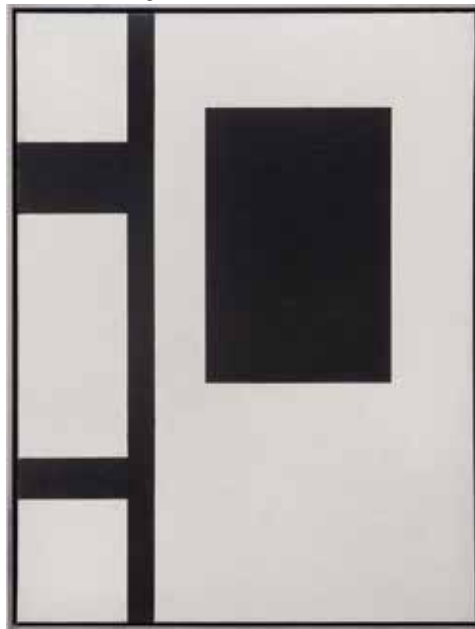
Neil: Is there something unique to the Southern California landscape that has influenced both style and form?

Louis: Openness, light, climate, contrast, and the ocean. I grew up in Casablanca with very similar climatic conditions, and Morocco was a destination for artists like Delacroix and Matisse. The Fauves went to the south of France for the same reason that many migrated to Southern California, looking for sunny skies.

Neil: In the Wikipedia biography, it mentions that you began the gallery with your father. How did you both get started?

Louis: I did not start working with my father when he first opened the gallery. I was a baby at the time and the gallery was in Casablanca. My father was in the French Foreign Legion and settled in Morocco before moving to the US. We first settled in New Orleans, then Los Angeles, and then Arizona and eventually moving back to LA. He began principally dealing in modern and impressionist work. I began working with him when I was sixteen. Presently my son Daniel is involved in the gallery and represents the third generation.

John McLaughlin (1898-1976), *Untitled Composition*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. ©Estate of John McLaughlin, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.





Karl Benjamin (1925-2012), *Elliptical Planes*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. ©Benjamin Living Trust, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

Neil: Likewise, your original interest included both impressionists and post impressionists. When did your interests shift towards hard edged twentieth century abstraction?

Louis: About twenty-five years ago. I saw hard-edged abstractionists as a group that had not gotten its due. Although quite different, I felt the same about the work of the Mexican Modernist Alfredo Ramos Martinez, whose estate the gallery still represents.

Neil: As I mentioned, I was introduced to many of the artists that you represent through your publications. As this is both expensive, time consuming, and somewhat unique to a mid-sized gallery, what is your reasoning?

Louis: The publications educate the collector about the artist and give them an opportunity to broaden their understanding of an artist's work as well as their background. In this way I am an "old school" dealer.

Neil: Many of the artists that you represent are, or were, connected to universities in Southern California and Los Angeles. Recognizing that teaching creates a lineage of shared thoughts and forms, what was the role of universities or art schools in developing a regional aesthetic?

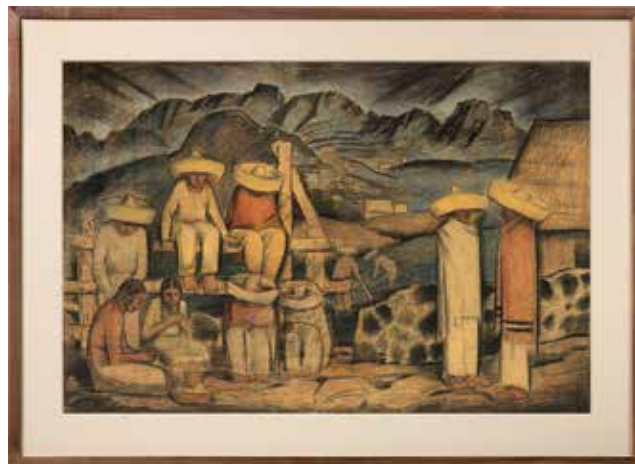
Louis: The cross pollination of ideas between students and teachers are at the center of the arts, and universities are catalysts.

Neil: Likewise, as the prevailing art schools in Southern California are now largely conceptually orientated, does the work in your gallery engage that generation?

Louis: Indeed it does, they see themselves connected to the artworld in a broader sense. As a vital part of the LA artistic community, we serve a certain need in providing context and history for current art trends.



Lorser Feitelson (1898-1978), *Space Forms*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 40 x 74 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



Alfredo Ramos Martinez (1871-1946), **(Left)** *La Procesion*. Tempera on paper, 11 x 17 inches. ©The Alfredo Ramos Martínez Research Project, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami. **(Right)** *Pueblo Scene*. Pastel and Conte crayon on paper, 24 x 35 1/2 inches. ©The Alfredo Ramos Martínez Research Project, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

Neil: I notice that you exhibit in several art fairs each year. Do you like art fairs and do you think the brick-and-mortar gallery is becoming an anachronism?

Louis: We are in a cycle, and it is important to do the fairs. Likewise, the estates that we represent need walls, as they give the collector credibility and confidence, as well as knowledge and reputation.

Helen Lundeberg (1908-1999), *Selma*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. ©The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.



Neil: Do you feel that the artists you represent have been adequately represented in museum collections and surveys?

Louis: They will be, because of an ongoing exhibition history as well as the commitment by the gallery to continued representation of their estates and works.

Neil: As your gallery has a more singular focus, has the renewed emphasis on content and subject been influential in any of your decision making?

Louis: In 1992 our work with the Mexican modernist Alfredo Ramos Martinez resulted in a major retrospective at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City. We also represented Samella Lewis for a number of years. In my view, merit and quality are determining factors for representation.

Neil: As the artworld becomes increasingly digitized and/or performance and video based, do you think tangible works of a moderate scale can compete with the same level of impact?

Louis: No idea, it is a brave new world!

Neil: As many of the artists in the generation that you have championed fades, do you think there will be a continued audience for the work?

Louis: Yes, cycles in the art world move in an out of fashion. There is more speculation in terms of economy now, but the cycle will change.

Neil: If you could look at the artworld when you started and compare the artworld to today's environment, what would be the defining difference?

Louis: Communication—cell phones and iPads! The internet is as important historically as the printing press was in the Middle Ages.

Neil: On a personal note, if you had a choice of one seminal work of art to own, what would it be?

Louis: Fernand Leger. Contrast of Forms from 1911, 1912 or 1913.

Neil: What advice would you give for a young artist hoping to make their way in the artworld?

Louis: Believe in what you are doing. You must also be lucky and enjoy the right circumstances and timing. You must have the personality for it, and good PR helps. It may take time, but quality will ultimately be recognized.

Neil: Finally, what do you feel is your most important accomplishment as a dealer?

Louis: Recognizing the artists that never got their due and bringing them to the forefront! ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the Los Angeles correspondent for the *New Art Examiner*.



Samella Lewis (b. 1924), *Modern Day Prophet*, 1968. Linoleum cut, 18 x 12 inches. ©Samella Lewis, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

Samella Lewis (b. 1924), *Man in Blue Shirt*, 1960. Ed. AP woodcut, 12 x 9 1/2 inches. ©Samella Lewis, courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts. Photo: Gene Ogami.

