OUT OF OKLAHOMA

"This exhibition does not necessarily propose answers but seeks to raise our consciousness."

Out of Oklahoma—the exhibition and its title—is meant to be understood on several levels, none pejorative. The simple fact of the matter is that while many of the artists included here have left the state, including some of the best known, some have returned or remained. Consequently, the title attempts to convey the idea of gestation and, indeed, journey. If there is any theme to the exhibition, it is that Oklahoma has stayed with each of these artists in some tangible or ideal way. Harold Stevenson, speaking from his home in Idabel said it best, "It's a profound influence on my life, the faces of Oklahoma," while Ed Ruscha admitted from his Los Angeles studio, "Oklahoma is a million miles away but it's right in my face."

Perhaps then, it is an idea of or a certain aesthetic concerning Oklahoma that is what links these artists, present and absent, today and yesterday. This exhibition does not necessarily propose answers but seeks to raise our consciousness. Significantly, this is the first museum exhibition organized on this subject. On the occasion of the state's centennial, the exhibition's intention is to make a progressive gesture in keeping with the pioneering spirit that founded the state and the populist attitude which informed its early years. Out of Oklahoma reveals a little known—and little suspected—aspect of later twentieth-century American art, and in so doing imparts to Oklahomans a renewed sense of pride in their innovative spirit.

A word on the exhibition itself: the time frame is bracketed by Ed Ruscha and Joe Andoe, roughly from 1960 until today, and includes 21 artists from nearly five decades with over half still living. All the artists represented in the show were born or resided in the state during their lifetime; many trained at state universities—Carolyn Brady, Harold Stevenson, and Joe Andoe (fig. 5) studied at the University of Oklahoma while Eugene Bavinger (fig. 2) taught painting there at the same time he commissioned a house from fellow faculty member Bruce Goff. Joe Brainard and Larry Clark (fig. 1, 8) grew up in Tulsa, while Kreg Kallenberger continues to work there. Of the famous West Coast contingent to come from Oklahoma—Lee Mullican, Ruscha, Joe Goode, and Jerry McMillan—the latter three still live and work in Southern California. The selection, while not scientific, primarily emphasizes artists who had made an impact on the national or international art scene and are represented in major public and private collections. Indeed, while the perception is that one would need to leave one's home in order to do so, many continue to live and work here and have succeeded admirably (Kallenberger, fig. 8; checklist no. 18, 19 or Otto Duecker, checklist no. 13), and some, most notably Andoe, have made their reputation due in no small part to the mystique of their Oklahoma association.

To better understand the place of Oklahoma in contemporary art, one should first look back to an historical prelude, the Oklahoma-California connection that began in the early twentieth century. California served as a "Promised Land" of sorts for artists, as echoed more generally in the migration of desperate "Okies" during the Dust Bowl, famously depicted in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel The Grapes of Wrath and its influential film of the following year. Artists followed suit, attracted not only by a new Eden, but by the growing urban centers. This artistic migration of Oklahomans to California culminated in the 1950s with Ruscha, Goode (checklist no. 15, 16) and McMillan (checklist no. 23) relocating to Southern California and, in effect, forming an ex-pat type of Oklahoma art colony within the Los Angeles area. Frequent road trips back home proved a source for Ruscha's Pop imagery. His very first exhibition anywhere was in 1960 at the Oklahoma City Art Center (now the Oklahoma City Museum of Art) titled Oklahoma Friends: Patrick Blackwell, Joe Goode, Jerry McMillan, Edward Ruscha. They exhibited again in Oklahoma City in 1970 in Three California Friends, leaving out Blackwell and McMillan and adding in Billy Al Bengston, and reprising the theme yet again in 1989 with Goode, McMillan and Ruscha. Thus, the transformation from Oklahoma to California was early acknowledged in their own home state.

Mullican's The Transparent (1950; checklist no. 24), while preceding the period covered by the exhibition, merits inclusion as a fine example of his work both in terms of his trademark style—printer's ink knife on canvas—as well as for its mystical title. Born in Chickasaw, Oklahoma, Mullican moved to California in 1947 where he eventually became an influential teacher at UCLA, and drew inspiration for his abstract style from sources as varied as Native American...
culture, Surrealism, and jazz music. Zen Buddhism played a role too, as in *Illumination Venice* (1966; front cover det., checklist no. 27) and *Fly Act* (1966; checklist no. 26) in which the artist attempted to exemplify mondo, a Zen thinking exercise. Mullican donated an impressive body of paintings to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at his alma mater, the University of Oklahoma, from which his work in this exhibition is largely drawn. The other Chickasaw native whose minimalist abstract compositions became critically acclaimed was Leon Polk Smith (fig. 7; checklist no. 32, 33), who worked in New York City for the majority of his career. These two represent the opposite ends of the spectrum of mid-20th-century American abstraction: Smith and his Ellsworth Kelly-like reductivist compositions exemplify the New York School; Mullican aligns with the West Coast’s more spiritual brand of Abstract Expressionism found in the works of the Northwest School’s Mark Tobey and Morris Graves and Mullican’s own Dynaton Group.4

The response to Abstract Expressionism came soon enough in the form of Pop Art and Neo-Realism. A champion of the latter, Harold Stevenson, is represented in this exhibition with his classicizing, politically-laden *Figure with Veiled Face* from the *Black Fates* series (1973; checklist no. 34). Its controversial elements of male nudity and Civil Rights era sentiment (Stevenson came to prominence with shocking full frontal, monumental male nudity in *The New Adam*, 1963) are counterbalanced with his insightful series *The Great Society*—101 portraits of the citizens of his hometown of Idabel, Oklahoma—which debuted in Paris in 1968 and serve as a foil to Andy Warhol’s “great” society portraits which were themselves controversial for their ingratiating nature.

*Symbol Duality* (2006; checklist no. 35) by Stevenson’s protégé, (Robert) Postcard Victory, represents a step beyond the Native American artistic traditions depicted in Allan House’s *Corn Grinder* (1982; checklist no. 17). These two works, particularly, are emblematic of the dichotomy existing in the contemporary Oklahoma art genre. Victory’s Native American themes are less apparent and more open to interpretation, supporting the premise of the present exhibition that Oklahoma’s contemporary artistic impulses were far more wide ranging that the “traditional.”

Portraits of a very different order, Larry Clark’s photographic series entitled *Tulsa* (1983; fig. 1, 8, checklist no. 10, 11 and 12), depicted his friends and associates with their guns and cars while having sex and using drugs. The photographs started the nation with revelations of discontent in ex-urban America, a theme to which Clark has returned in his feature film work (*Kids*, 1995; *Bully*, 2001). Clark’s photography has redefined the medium, shifting the emphasis from glamour to gritty reality and extending its influence into popular culture and fashion. Of Oklahoma’s influence, Clark says “Well, my Mother put a camera in my hands and my first work was called *Tulsa*.” Illustrating the obsession with surfaces and technical proficiency which define the Photorealism movement during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Charles Bell’s *Lullaby* (1983; checklist no. 6) appears harsh and confrontational in its Stephen King-like creepiness and its severity of form and contrast, while Carolyn Brady documented everyday life—dining tables, floral arrangements, and half-eaten meals—with equal precision. Her present example, *Plate ii* (1980; checklist no. 9) is compelling precisely for its nostalgic photographic-like sepia tones, rather than as a garish recreation of reality.

The artistic strands of the preceding decades of Pop, Conceptualism, and Minimalism come together in the work of Ed Ruscha, two examples from whom, *Black Hollywood* (1984; fig. 3; checklist no. 25) and *Europe* (1989; checklist no. 29) are included this exhibition. Ruscha, who after graduating high school in Oklahoma City in 1956 drove cross-country to California, quickly became known for his Pop sensibility and subject matter depicting the open road and its various signifiers, especially filling stations and roadside billboards. Decades later, this gravity toward text and image, including cinema, and notions of the surreal and conceptual takes its most obvious inspiration from the flattened letters that seem to float against the Hollywood Hills and from the minimal, indeed stark, tale implied by a trail of cigarette smoke.
David Salle, born in Norman, Oklahoma, along with Julian Schnabel and Jean Michel Basquiat came to define painting in New York City in the 1980s. Two major works, both from 1980, Jim was Jim (fig. 4; checklist no. 30) and Lara with Glass (checklist no. 31), demonstrate a continued romance with representation and its various permutations, despite the jarring juxtapositions of figurative interpolations Salle so skillfully incorporates. “I used to think of it as an existential landscape – it’s you and the road, not a lot of shelter around,” he recalled recently. Joe Brainard grew up in Tulsa in the 1950s (his gothic Mother and Two Children was done while he was still in high school; checklist no. 7) and moved to New York City where his career spanned twenty years before he stopped producing his famous collages (for example, checklist no. 8), many of which were paens to “gorgeousness,” the beauty of flowers or the male body.

It is appropriate to conclude this survey with the work of Joe Andoe, perhaps the most self-consciously Oklahoman of the artists included in Out of Oklahoma. Simultaneously naïve and suave, after studying at the University of Oklahoma he pursued his career in New York City. There he continues to depict in his romantic compositions Oklahoma’s stark plains, windblown trees, and bison and horses (fig. 5; checklist no. 2, 3). Despite his many years in New York and being represented in significant private and public collections, Andoe remains a man of his roots, down to the wood-burned portrait of Will Rogers which hangs on his studio wall. Given his earnestness, Andoe’s Oklahoma—his America—might seem to be about horses and landscape and the road, but then he admits he doesn’t ride. Andoe constantly alludes to the rough, “hillbilly” life he led growing up in Tulsa. Nothing is what it seems. “It [Oklahoma] is what defines me. I am constantly being reminded that I’m an ‘Okie’—that’s the irony.” The “portrait” of the bison or his elegiac landscape with low horizon, stylized oak leaves and the artist’s calligraphic signature (1990; checklist no. 1) represent a body of work that is beautifully painted, intensely focused, but slightly subversive below the surface.

Perhaps this is the “idea” of Oklahoma that unites these artists represented here. Life’s—and the state’s—contradictions: limitless space, limited opportunities; carnality and spirituality; horses roaming the plains; Indians on reservations; populism and conservatism; progressive versus traditional; realism and abstraction; in and out of Oklahoma.

Richard P. Townsend
Guest Curator

NOTES
1Interview with Harold Stevenson, 3 March 2007.
4Prague, Oklahoma, artist and designer Olinka Hrdy, after stints with Bruce Goff and Frank Lloyd Wright, moved to Hollywood in 1934 to pursue art and industrial design, much of which will be featured in the first monographic exhibition of her work in over forty years, Oklahoma Modern: The Art and Design of Olinka Hrdy, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, and Price Tower Arts Center, June 2007 - January 2008. A decade later, Goff himself experimented with novel prefabricated Quonset-style industrial architecture for California military bases, later echoed in Frank Gehry’s architecture, especially in his Venice, California, home (1978).
5Carol S. Eller, Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2005), 44-47.
6Interview with Larry Clark, 14 March 2007.
7Interview with David Salle, 5 March 2007.
8Interview with Joe Andoe, 23 February 2007.
9. CAROLYN BRADY (1937-2005)
Plate II, 1980
Watercolor on paper
21-1/4 x 15-1/2

10. LARRY CLARK (b.1943)
Untitled, Tulsa, 1962
Photograph, 5/25
14 x 11
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

11. LARRY CLARK
Untitled, Tulsa, 1963
Photograph, 7/25
14 x 11
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

12. LARRY CLARK
Untitled, Tulsa, 1963
Photograph, 11/25
14 x 11
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

13. OTTO DUECKER (b.1948)
Anthony, 1983
Oil on board
63 x 27-1/2 x 7/8

14. JOHN FINCHER (b.1941)
Outsider, 1995
Oil on canvas
78 x 48
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1998.001

15. JOE GOODE (b.1937)
Desdemona, 1990s
Oil on canvas
19 x 15
Collection of Sandy and Harold Price, Laguna Beach, CA

16. JOE GOODE
Cause and Effect, 1999
Oil on canvas
24 x 32
Collection of Sandy and Harold Price, Laguna Beach, CA

17. ALLAN CAPRON HOUSE
(1914-1994)
Corn Grinder, 1982
Bronze
23 x 19 x 25
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Purchase, Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, 1996.017.076

18. KREG KALLEMBERGER (b.1950)
Interlock Series, no. 257, 1986
Blown, cut, and polished glass
9 x 9 x 9
Collection of the artist, Tulsa, OK

19. KREG KALLEMBERGER
View of Redbird Lake, 2006
Glass and oil paint
8 x 24 x 5
Collection of the artist, Tulsa, OK

20. D. J. LAFON (b.1929)
50th Anniversary, 1981
Oil on canvas
46 x 46
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Fred Jones Memorial Fund Purchase, 1981.104

21. DANIEL S. LANG (b.1935)
Red Mountain Highway, 1965
Oil on canvas
36-1/4 x 26-1/4
Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa; Gift of the Estate of Dr. Joe P. McCloud, 1985.13.2

22. DELOSS McGRaw (b.1946)
Joseph Cornell in the Hotel de l'Etoile, 1949
Collage on canvas
78 x 48
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1998.001

23. JERRY McMillan (b.1936)
Ed Ruscha Covered with Twelve of his Books, 1970
Gelatin silver print
14 x 9-3/4
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Purchase, 2006.008

24. LEE MULICAN (1919-1998)
The Transparent, 1950
Oil on canvas
20 x 30
Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Wecker, 1961.3

25. LEE MULICAN
The Fountain, 1985
Oil on canvas
72 x 72
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1970.001

26. LEE MULICAN
Fly Act, 1966
Acrylic on paper
17-7/8 x 23-5/8
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1970.005

27. LEE MULICAN
Illumination, Venice, 1966
Acrylic, pastel, and oil on cardboard
30 x 20
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1970.014

28. EDWARD RUSCHA (b.1937)
Black Hollywood, 1964
Oil on canvas
23-1/4 x 39-1/2
Collection of Sandy and Harold Price, Laguna Beach, CA

29. EDWARD RUSCHA
Europe, 1989
Oil on canvas
26 x 48
Collection of Sandy and Harold Price, Laguna Beach, CA

30. DAVID SALLE (b.1952)
Jim was Jim, 1980
Oil on canvas
72 x 48
Price Tower Arts Center, Bartlesville, Gift of Barbara Jakobson, 2005.07

31. DAVID SALLE
Lara with Glass, 1980
Oil on canvas
60 x 30
Collection of Sandy and Harold Price, Laguna Beach, CA

32. LEON POLK SMITH (1906-1996)
Dusty Miller Leaf, n.d.
Watercolor on paper
17-3/4 x 14

33. LEON POLK SMITH
Red-Black, 1958
Oil on paper
25-1/2 x 21-1/2

34. HAROLD STEVENSON (b.1925)
Figure with Veiled Face, from the Black Fates series, 1973
Oil on canvas
70 x 49-1/2
Collection of the artist, Idabel, OK

35. POTEET VICTORY (b.1947)
Symbol Duality, 2006
Oil on canvas
48 x 48
Collection of the artist, Garvin, OK
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Out of Oklahoma: Contemporary Artists from Ruscha to Andoe launches the University of Oklahoma/Price Tower Arts Center Collaboration, an important initiative that has formalized the collegiality between the state's two leading art museums of modern and contemporary art programming. This exhibition will be immediately followed by a second collaboration between Price Tower Arts Center and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, another official centennial event entitled Oklahoma Moderne: The Art and Design of Olinka Hrady. The idea of joint ventures originated some four or five years ago when Eric M. Lee, former Director at Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, and I were discussing possible ways in which our collections, educational programming, and staff resources could be combined. Then, in 2005, Barbara Jakobson, a member of the Arts Center's National Advisory Council, made a singular gift of an important painting by David Salle, which served as the first building block for the present endeavor.

Accordingly, I am indebted to Eric M. Lee, and to Gail Kana Anderson, Curator and Interim Director; and Kim Moinette, Registrar, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum. Those living artists featured in the present exhibition have all been helpful through their recollections and thoughts on Oklahoma. We particularly thank Joe Andoe, Larry Clark, Ed Ruscha and Mary Dean, David Salle, Harold Stevenson and Kreg Kallenberger for providing insight into their work. Scott Andoe, RS Fine Art, Tulsa; Joy Reed Belt, JRB Art at the Elms, Oklahoma City; Hammer Galleries, New York City; Miles Laden; Gayle Maxon-Edgerton, Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe; Mary Dohne, Charles Cowles Gallery, New York City; and Rani Singh, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, also provided assistance with the exhibition.

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Richard P. Townsend
Guest Curator

The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of the artist, 1970.014 (checklist no. 27)

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