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Embracing and refining Las Vegas gaudy By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

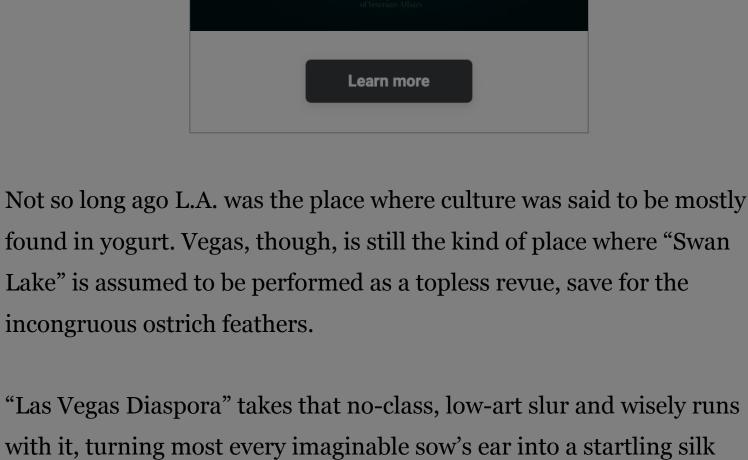
NOV. 20, 2007 | 12 AM TIMES STAFF WRITER LAS VEGAS — If it did nothing else, "Las Vegas Diaspora: The Emergence of Contemporary Art From the Neon Homeland" could

claim the best title of any art museum exhibition this year. The show chronicles the scattering of 26 artists who graduated from the gambling capital's University of Nevada campus after studying in the 1990s with prominent art critic Dave Hickey. Now, 15 of those artists work in eight other regions, especially on the coasts. The remainder decided to stay in town, where the show is on

view at the Las Vegas Art Museum through Dec. 30. They represent the vibrant kernel of a serious art scene in a city few would expect to have one. That's the other reason that "Diaspora" is not just a snappy name but also an apt term for this undertaking. As nomenclature, the word is usually applied to describe the fate of minorities reviled by the

dominant culture. That means it fits Las Vegas art to a T. This metropolis is a distinctly American city, where modern art ideas originally forged in a European crucible often have the fit of a delicate glass slipper jammed onto the ungainly foot of an ugly stepsister. In that regard, Las Vegas is the new Los Angeles.

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the museum's director), came to the forefront of American art criticism -- snagging a MacArthur prize in the process -- nearly 15 years ago, when he audaciously argued that, of all things, beauty would become the artissue of the 1990s. It did.

The topic assumes an unexpected tone of militancy in "Las Vegas

crushing woes, but as a sharp rebuke: Not that; this!

Diaspora." Beauty isn't offered as some timid escape from society's

Hickey, who was guest curator for the show (his wife, Libby Lumpkin, is

purse. The aesthetic refinement is downright extreme.

The works Thomas Burke's 16-foot-long panel of undulating geometric color, "The Hots," crosses Sol LeWitt with a Navajo blanket, then turns on the neon.

Jane Callister's "Cosmic Landslide" is a primordial ooze of sliding paint

resurrecting a winged Tyrannosaurus rex from the tar pits and sending

acrid yellow light. It's like a gorgeous Ellsworth Kelly abstraction that

It might have been the site for the Rev. Ethan Acres' "Miracle at La Brea," a digital photograph that shows the born-again preacher happily

it heavenward.

-- pigmented magma.

I surrender -- happily.

Shawn Hummel juxtaposes a panel enameled in cherry red automotive paint with big color photographs of a purple car hood and a late-night glimpse into an apartment building window, disturbingly illuminated by

morphs into a vaguely predatory image.

the best of them speak distinctive dialects.

with fat and painted in slick oils by Victoria Reynolds, seem right at home in their elaborate Rococo frames. No guts, no glory. Sleek, glamorous, sexy, sensational -- this art is also intellectually savvy. The artists are fluent in the complex language of contemporary art, and

Nearby, lovingly described slabs of raw meat and entrails, gaily marbled

imperceptibly engaging ambient light. Static Minimalist form careens into a speeding visual blur. Across the room, Gajin Fujita engineers a different yet related collision,

Bradley Corman's black, anodized aluminum wall relief starts with a

sober, Donald Judd-style Minimalism. But the striated horizontal

pushing urban street graffiti into Japanese screen painting. With a

tagger's skill he writes an angry "BURN" across the flight pattern of an

surface of the wide, rectangular relief is slightly bowed, almost

Seduction is also a prominent leitmotif, with the art regularly offering come-hither glances. Philip Argent does it in luscious yet apocalyptic paintings that merge crystalline shapes with liquid color, negative space with hard-edge undulations. His paintings record the big-bang-birth of

thus way

a tho

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read something like aestheticized consumer par-codes stretched / feet

Guirguis manages to transform the influence into something uniquely

her own, though, largely through an unexpected manipulation of

materials. What looks like a raised, linear drawing is in fact painted

Masonite. Sculpture, painting, drawing, relief and furniture tumble

Eames-like stacking chairs both recall Isermann's work.

together into one marvelously polymorphic species.

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The state of what's next.

wide, but the flourishes of paint echo Reed's work too strongly. McElhenny's hand-blown glass confections lurk in the background of Curtis Fairman's otherwise cheeky sculptures, assembled from discount-store candlesticks, bowls and vases and suggestive of glittery, potentially lethal erotic toys. Almond Zigmund's geometric decals on a gallery window-wall and Sherin Guirguis' jazzy, decorative wall-relief of

on-linen "Crack" paintings by Jason Tomme. Ethereal golden-brown panels turn the show's volume way down, their shadowy hues recalling fragments of ancient wall behind the foreground action in a Caravaggio, like "The Calling of St. Matthew" or "Boy With a Basket of Fruit." Art's action lies in the breach, escaping through unexpected fissures,

this canny work suggests, lurking in the illuminated void where

A large majority of the artists are painters, but many of them make

paintings with sculptural qualities. Among the most adept is David

Ryan, whose organic reliefs layer flat, irregularly shaped puddles of

Wayne Littlejohn heads in the other direction, his organic tower of

sculpted polystyrene spray-painted in lascivious hues, like the

passionate Venus flytrap in "Little Shop of Horrors."

vibrant color that miraculously carve out deep volumes of visual space.

flamboyant human dramas unfold.

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Among the show's strangest, most unexpected works are two large, oil-

Two other features of "Las Vegas Diaspora" are noteworthy. Both represent something you're unlikely to encounter in any American or European art museum east of the Mojave Desert. (The show travels to the Laguna Art Museum in March.)

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museums wouldn't dream of it. More's the pity -- especially as the other novel twist comes in the show's

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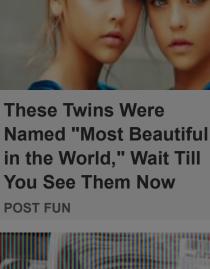
2020 Pulitzer Prize for criticism (he was a finalist for the prize in 1991,

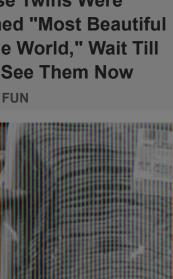
2001 and 2007). In 2020, he also received the Lifetime Achievement

Award in Art Journalism from the Rabkin Foundation.

Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the

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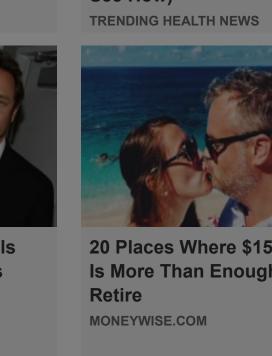
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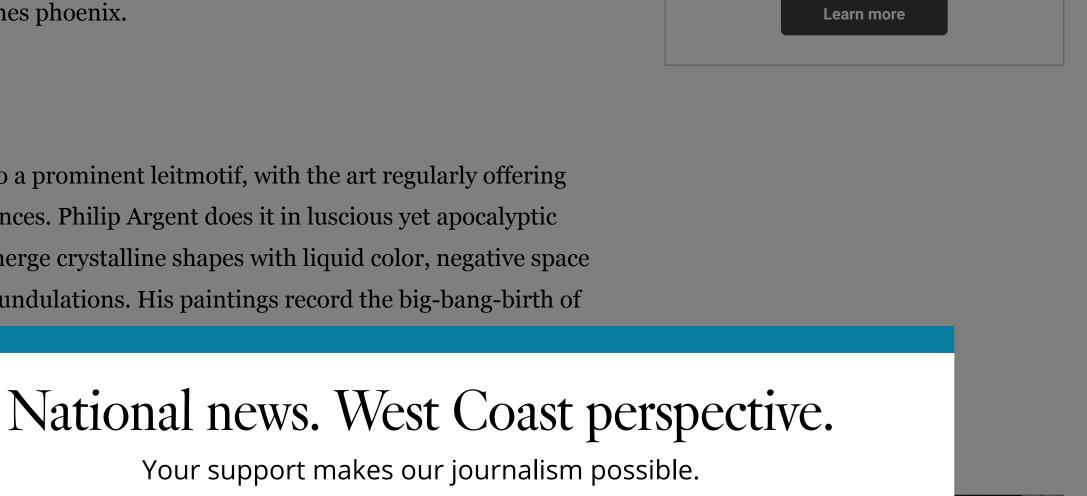
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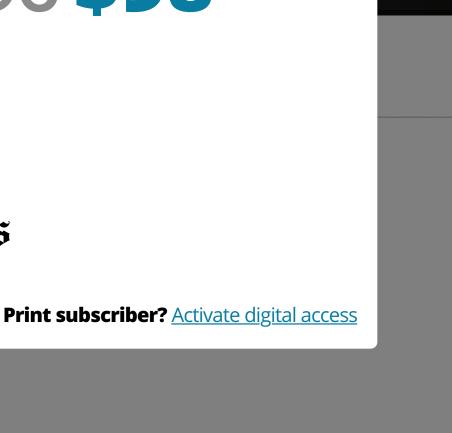
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James Gobel's knockout "painting" of Regency fops suggestively dining on tasty cherry pie, all made from cut-and-glued felt and yarn, hangs on a big entry wall painted bright tangerine. Tim Bavington's equally fine, similarly monumental stripe-painting, "Step (In) Out," hangs on a lime green wall. Two other art-adorned walls are suavely painted lemon yellow and aubergine. Think about all that Little Richard tutti-fruitiness the next time you're nodding off inside some tired white cube at MOCA, the

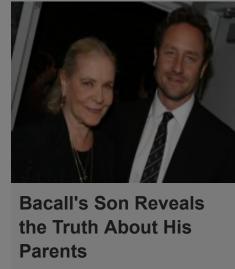
Hammer, the Whitney or the Walker. "Serious" contemporary art

catalog, right after Hickey's typically engaging essay on what makes a

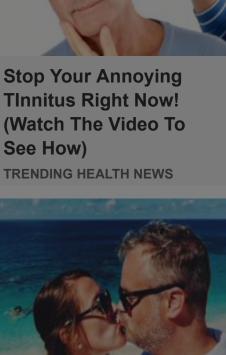
studio art program meaningful. Five pages of raucous party pictures are

worthy of Vanity Fair -- and not just the slick celebrity magazine, but the

Thackeray story satirizing 19th century British tastelessness and greed.







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