July 2001

ART

TRUE TO A SIGNIFICANT SCHOOL

Faculty and alumni have joined a show on freewheeling Chouinard's place in Los Angeles art history.

BY SUZANNE MUCHNIC

Chouinard Art Institute closed its doors 29 years ago, but it refuses to die. Even if the building on Grand View Street, just west of downtown Los Angeles, is now the home of the Korean American New Times Church and the school has long since evolved into CalArts, way out in Valencia, fond memories of the long defunct school pop up in nearly every panel discussion, symposium, lecture and article on L.A.'s art history.

Still, there has never been a Chouinard love fest like the exhibition of works by 137 former members of the school's faculty and student body scheduled to open Saturday and run through Aug. 26. Presented by the Chouinard Foundation—a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving and expanding the legacy of the school's founder, Nelbert Chouinard—and sponsored by the Oceanside Museum of Art, "Chouinard: A Living Legacy" is a three-part show. "The Early Years: 1921-1945" will be at Palomar College's Boehm Gallery in San Marcos; "The Middle Years: 1946-1955," at Mira Costa College's Kruglak Gallery in Oceanside; "The Last Years: 1956-1972," at the Oceanside Museum of Art.

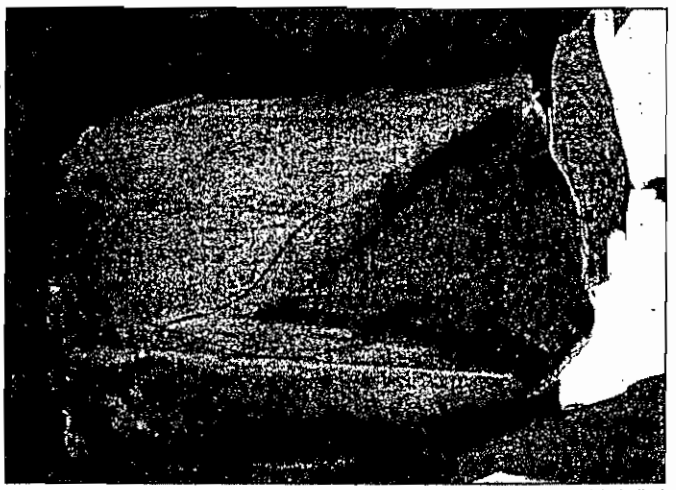
Chouinard's staying power is largely due to the stellar roster of artists affiliated with the school during its 51 years of operation, from 1921 to 1972, and its role in shaping Southern California Modernism—in all its eclectic manifestations.

Rather than being identified with a particular style, the school is remembered as a freewheeling environment that fostered creativity while training everyone from painters and sculptors

Please see Chouinard, Page 74

Beryl & René Photography

Chouinard in 1949. The school trained everyone from painters to animators.

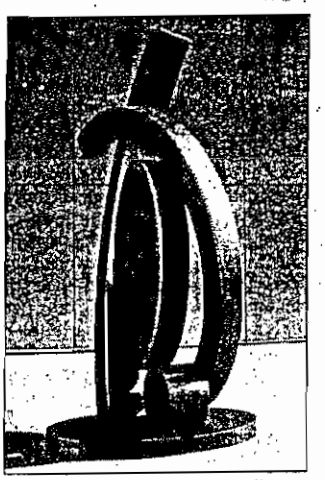


NANCY UEMURA

On display is "silent II" (1971) by Matsumi Kanemitsu, a Chouinard teacher.

ROBERT PERINE

Teacher Marc Davis' "Woman in Chair."



GUY DILL

"Lan" by former student Guy Dill.

Chouinard: Honoring the Legacy of L.A.'s Freewheeling Institution

Continued from Page 10

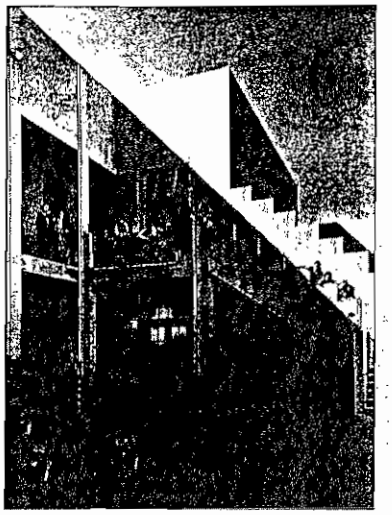
to animators and fashion designers. It also inspired fierce loyalty, evidenced by the large number of Chouinard students who returned to teach there.

Painters John Altoon, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Millard Sheets and Emerson Woelffer were among the faculty's leading lights, as were architects Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler, Disney animator Marc Davis, costume designer Edith Head and critic Jules Langsner. In addition to those who had lengthy gigs at Chouinard, Russian-born sculptor Alexander Archipenko, French painter Jean Charlot, Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros and other international art stars passed through as visiting professors.

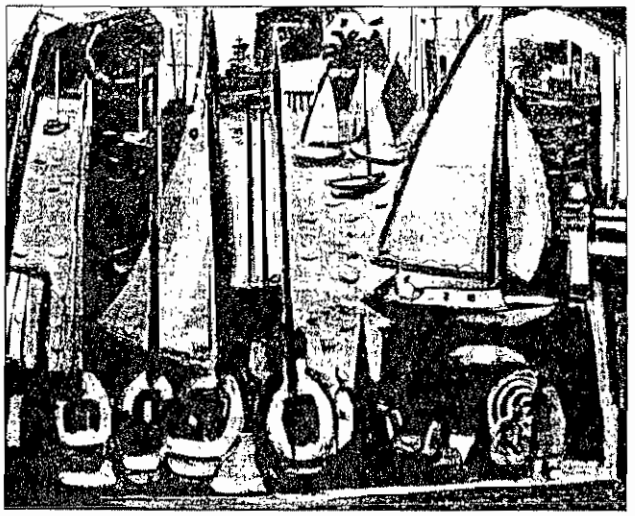
For many alumni, Chouinard (pronounced Shuh-NARD) was exactly the right place at the right time. Take Edward Ruscha, L.A.'s quintessential artist. He headed west in 1956, fresh out of high school in Oklahoma City and full of plans to become a sign painter. As he told the audience during an artists' panel discussion at the Getty Research Institute's recent "Media Pop" conference, he intended to enroll at Art Center School (now Art Center College of Design in Pasadena). He was crushed to discover that the school of his dreams had no room for him, but it turned out to be a good thing. "Art Center had a dress code—no facial hair, no sandals, no affectations of beatnik culture," Ruscha said, rolling his eyes. After asking around, he landed at the relatively casual Chouinard, which suited him much better.

Robert Perine, a painter and graphic designer who lives in Encinitas, Calif., was slogging through required courses at USC on the GI Bill in the late 1940s when he decided to transfer to Chouinard. "I was in heaven," he said. "Every day I could draw and paint." In 1978, 28 years after his graduation, Perine was still so infatuated with the school—and so distressed by its transformation into CalArts, with the help of Disney money—that he began conducting interviews and compiling information for a book. "Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed," his chatty, opinionated but ambitiously researched account of the school's history, was published in 1985.

The exhibition is intended to "put Chouinard in its proper context as the vital Los Angeles art institution it was" and to give "full credit to Nelbert Chouinard, a woman who was ahead of her time," said Perine, who curated "Chouinard: A Living Legacy" with artists James Aitchison and Ed Flynn. It's the first public project of the 2-year-old Chouinard Foundation, and the organizers hope it will inspire other curators to delve into the school's history.



In 1936, students congregate above the patio.



"Balboa Scene" (circa 1947) by Phil Dike, who taught at the Institute from 1931 to 1951.

Photos courtesy of ROBERT PERINE

As for the founder, Nelbert Morphy Chouinard was born in 1879 in Montevideo, Minn., and studied art at Pratt Institute in New York. She moved to California in 1909 to teach design and crafts at the Throop Polytechnic Institute (now Caltech). In 1916, she married Horace "Bert" Chouinard, an old friend from Minnesota who was serving as a U.S. Army chaplain, and they moved to Washington, D.C. He died of cancer about a year later and Nelbert returned to California.

She taught art history at Otis Art Institute for a couple of years and opened her own school in 1921. With $250 in cash, a World War I widow's pension of $75 a month and two other teachers, F. Tolles Chamberlin and Patti Patterson, she established Chouinard School of Art in a two-story house at 2606 W. 8th St. It was a modest operation that embodied the vision of a woman remembered for upholding high standards while treating her students like members of her family and insisting that "talent is more valuable than tuition."

Firm but nurturing, she was a formidable character with two faults, Perine said. "Focusing on art, she paid too little attention to finances and, where students were concerned, was generous to a fault. While awarding too many scholarships, she was failing to keep an eye on bookkeepers," he said, noting that two of them embezzled funds and put the school in debt on two occasions.

Money was always a problem at Chouinard, but Walt Disney discovered the school in 1929 and began sending his employees there to perfect their drawing skills. The following year, the school was flush enough to move into a new building on Grand View Street designed by the architectural firm Morgan, Walls and Clements. In 1935, the school was reincorporated as Chouinard Art Institute.

The building was financed by an investment company and leased to the school. It was an affordable arrangement at the time, but World War II decimated enrollment and the school was forced to move into a less expensive facility nearby. After the war, the GI Bill reversed Chouinard's fortunes. Overflowing with veterans who were financed by government funds for education, the school moved back to Grand View and bought the building in 1949.

Chouinard Foundation

The art school's founder, Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, in the 1940s.

Artist Ned Jacoby remembered Chouinard in the 1940s as "a place that had an almost magical sense of common spirit. There was virtually no discipline but everything you needed to learn was there to have if you wanted it. And we wanted it. Often we learned as much from the others in the class as from our teachers, who often seemed to be just trying to channel the energy, then standing back to let it happen."

Painter Walter Gabrielson, who studied at Chouinard in the 1950s, likened the school to "a boiling caldron . . . where every day teachers and fellow students were radically reassembling your head." Along with one teacher's "critiques from hell" and another's "convoluted problems," Gabrielson recounted the day when instructor Robert Chuey steamed into the painting classroom, "threw down a load of branches, twigs, beer cans and other junk and yelled, 'OK, suckers, see if you can paint that.'"

Chouinard was plagued by financial problems in the 1950s. Disney, who became more involved with the school after receiving an honorary degree from it in 1956, dispatched his accountants to sort out the mess and wrote a check to cover the deficit. His interest in the school grew as Nelbert Chouinard aged and relinquished control. He would ultimately choose a board of directors and architects for a new, multidisciplinary university of the arts that incorporated Chouinard and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music.

Inevitably, tensions developed as Disney's vision made it clear that the old faculty would be left behind in a school that would cease to exist. Chouinard devotees hoped that the new institution would at least bear the name of its predecessor, but it became California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, while Chouinard drifted into history.

Nelbert Chouinard, who retired in the early 1960s but maintained a presence at the school for several years, died in 1969. CalArts opened at its Valencia site late in 1971. The last graduation at the Chouinard building took place on April 16, 1972.

Chouinard and its founder might have received their final tribute in Perine's book were it not for a real estate deal in South Pasadena. Dave Tourjé, an artist and contractor, was looking for a home for his family when he came across a rundown, two-story house on Garfield Avenue. He kept going back to look at it and finally bought it in the summer of 1998.

While looking over the deed of his fixer-upper, Tourjé discovered that he had purchased the home of Nelbert Chouinard. He knew little about the school she had founded and nothing at all about the woman who had lived in the house for many years, but he decided to restore it as close to its original state as possible. While doing re-