

## The Lessons of LA ETHOS

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By Stephen Fife

When was the last time, dear viewer, that you walked into a modern art gallery and were overwhelmed by the audacity, the daring, the unpredictability, and the sheer *fecundity of invention* that greeted your gaze from the work on the walls?

I personally have experienced something like this at remarkable group exhibitions such as the 2006 Spanish Painting show at the New York Guggenheim or great career retrospectives like that of Max Beckman's in 2003 or the Courbet show currently at the Met Museum in NYC. I felt something approaching this exhilaration at Pharmaka's debut show at downtown LA's Bedlam Warehouse, when every inch of wall space seemed to be taken up by ambitious and challenging paintings. But even that exhibition didn't quite prepare me for what I felt upon entering the Pharmaka gallery and confronting the seven wall-size mural-like paintings that comprised *LA Ethos*.

It wasn't that the work was of a piece, or that it was all tremendously accomplished. (And, no, it didn't invite comparisons to Beckman's work.) By its very nature, *LA Ethos* was destined to have slack passages and some visually shallow ideas. But I was still transfixed by the great rhythm and flow in the gallery, the sense indeed of a radiating spirit or "ethos" that the show possessed for me as a whole.

(I am speaking now, dear viewer, as an individual with an art history background and a love of art, not as a partisan of Pharmaka. I'm proud to be the only non-painting, non-art world member of Pharmaka, but that doesn't make me a cheering section for all things Pharmakan. In the case of *LA Ethos*, I was so busy with my own hectic life that I was only peripherally aware of the project. It didn't sound like a very promising idea, opening up the gallery to any LA-based painter who wanted to take a whack. And then there was the big scandal that rocked Pharmaka in the project's early days, causing us to lose one of our most valued members... All of this predisposed me against *LA Ethos*. What I found instead was something miraculous, a true miracle, a 90-1 longshot that—against all odds—had sprinted to the head of the pack and crossed the finish line in grand fashion.)

Here is a list of the painters who contributed to the seven *LA Ethos* panels:

**LIST ALL PAINTERS --Shane or Laura, you know this better than me – Please fill in**

To truly appreciate them and the accomplishment of this exhibition—which, in my opinion, may come to be hailed someday as a landmark of its kind—we need to go back to the beginning and understand the context, the unlikely Happening, the Skinner Box of creative behavior that gave rise to these works (and to Laura Hipke's photographs, extensively chronicling their creation).

## I. The Back-Story

Shane Guffogg is the founding father, guiding force and fearless leader of Pharmaka. He credits fellow Pharmakan painter Christopher Monger with planting the seed of what became *LA Ethos* by suggesting a show in which one artist would be let loose to paint on the walls of the Pharmaka gallery, much in the way that Giotto (Monger's favorite artist) was given free reign in the Church of San Francesco in Assisi.

Here are Shane's words describing what came next. "At the end of 2006, I had one of those moments where all parts merged into one thought: if Los Angeles is the new center of the art world, then what is the LA school? Paris had the Paris school of painters and of course New York had the New York school of painters, primarily the abstract expressionist group. So what could be the defining style or school of thought for LA? The best approach to answering this question seemed obvious—let the artists answer in the form of making art." Shane subsequently envisioned "an open invitation to all LA-based artists to come to Pharmaka and have a visual dialogue through art. The walls of our gallery will be inclusive to all who wish to be included. A question will be asked, and the space will hopefully be used in a unique way."

Shane then brought this idea to a business meeting of 15 or so Pharmaka members, where it engendered a heated debate. Some members considered this an excitingly open-ended use of our space and liked the concept of inclusiveness. Others thought it was a massive waste of time which could go disastrously wrong—in fact, many felt it could not help but go wrong, rather like throwing open the doors of your home and yelling, "PAR-TEE!" Of course everyone you don't want to come will show up, and they'll make a big mess. A third faction was lukewarm about the idea and expressed the opinion that there needed to be strict guidelines to make certain that some decorum was observed and that this didn't devolve into a chaotic free-for-all.

(My self-appointed "job" in Pharmaka is to chronicle the group's activities, mostly through videotaping the meetings and exhibition openings. I do recall being present for this discussion and finding Shane's idea intriguing, but I basically came down on the side of those who felt that some rules were needed. It's a lot like my feelings about anarchy. It's great in theory, but in practice it usually means that other people eat the food I would have liked and feel free to hit on my girlfriend.)

As Shane has recounted, "This split wasn't resolved in that first meeting, but it was decided that we would hang a long piece of canvas, 7 feet tall and 30 feet wide." Eventually this morphed into 7 large wall hangings of equal size. [**what size, Shane?**] The discussion about guidelines continued in subsequent meetings and emails without any consensus emerging. A few members felt very strongly that a prohibition had to be declared against painting over another artist's work. The point was made very eloquently that no artist of any stature or self-worth would contribute their talent if their carefully-crafted images could be wiped out by any pipsqueak with a brush. Nevertheless Shane made the bold (though possibly foolhardy) decision not to issue any guidelines at all, but to let the artists themselves determine the outcome.

“If this means that “the best work” is painted over, then so be it,” Shane said. In fact he added, “If it means that someone comes in with a can of black paint and a roller on the final day and paints over everything, then that’s what it will be.”

Accordingly, Pharmaka sent out this press release at the end of 2006, announcing that *LA Ethos* would be taking place at the Pharmaka Gallery, beginning on January 5, 2007:

*“ETHOS—the fundamental character or spirit of a culture; the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a group or society; dominant assumptions of a people or period: in the Greek, ethos the individual was highly valued.*

“What is the “ethos” of Los Angeles art? What makes LA different from other cities in relation to art-making? Is there a pre-dominant style or approach for LA artists?

“The purpose of this exhibition is to offer an opportunity to enter into a visual dialogue and explore this subject. We hope this exhibition will help us understand the time we are living in and raise new questions.

“Artists will be coming in to Pharmaka Art daily until February 28 to create what we hope will be a fascinating story of who we are. The Public is encouraged to visit Pharmaka throughout the run of this exhibition to witness the visual evolution on the walls of Pharmaka Art.”

## II. The Pharmaka Group (who?)

Pharmaka is many things, but first and foremost it is a paradox, starting with the name itself. This comes from the ancient Greek, meaning both “poison” and “remedy.” It can also be translated as “to paint” and “painter’s colors,” which may be more to the point. The founders of Pharmaka were looking for a word that conveyed a return to the origins of painting, to the roots of the art form, as well as a rejection of the market-driven values of today’s hype-inflated art world.

Pharmaka is the brainchild of painters Shane Guffogg, John Scane, Vonn Sumner, and art dealer Adam Gross, who—along with a few other artist friends—found themselves having the same conversation over and over, about how many of the “wrong artists” were getting museum shows just because they knew how to “play the game.” At the time, Shane was designing the sets for a play about the Dadaists, and the group began talking about what kind of movement they would like to start. It soon became clear that the primary motivation for all was returning painting to its rightful place as “the grandest of all art forms” (to quote John Scane), resurrecting it from the debasement of the merely trendy. This was in the spring of 2003, and within the year their dialogue had grown to include 13 painters and four non-painting members, and a movement was born.

Soon all the painters were packing up their equipment and driving into the desert, in an attempt to explore the tradition of “plein air,” working from nature. (The purpose was

twofold: to paint in nature in real time, rather than in one's studio over a period of time; and to have these painters of various styles all depicting the same subject.) Shortly thereafter, the city of Los Angeles agreed to "give" Pharmaka a storefront on skid row to renovate, along with a small grant. It was up to the members of Pharmaka to create a workable space out of this blighted location, piled high as it was with the ruins of a fast-food Chinese restaurant, including years' worth of grease, garbage and neglect.

A few months later, the doors opened on Pharmaka member Christophe Kapeller's elegantly-designed art gallery with the exhibition of plein-air desert paintings by the Pharmaka painters.

### III. Pharmaka Art (why?)

Was Pharmaka the right venue to host this kind of two month "Happening"?

If Shane and other members of Pharmaka are right, and Los Angeles is the new international center of the art world (more on this later), then why didn't LACMA or the Hammer Museum or the upscale Gagosian gallery come up with this concept?

Fact is—as you've probably already concluded—only a small gallery would be bold enough to take on a truly experimental and unpredictable project like this one. It's too fraught with anxiety-provoking aspects to appeal to the institutions. And there's no clear profit incentive, so there goes Gagosian and its ilk.

While there may be other small-scale galleries that could take on a project like this, I doubt that any would, or that the idea itself would hold any interest for them. There's simply no other gallery (or none that I'm aware of) that has any stake in bringing the entire painting community of Los Angeles together—or, rather, to risk attempting to do so and possibly failing.

As I've already mentioned, Pharmaka was founded on the idea of inclusion—that so many excellent LA-based painters were being left out in the cold (so to speak) because they didn't fit neatly into any politically-correct or trendy category. This is not to say that Pharmaka eschews well-known artists or regards them as necessarily undeserving of their fame. Shane himself was once Ed Ruscha's studio assistant and still maintains a friendship with him and his brother Paul. (Recently Ed curated an exhibition of Wall Battered's paintings at Pharmaka, while Pharmaka hosted a well-attended showing of highlights from Paul Ruscha's personal collection.)

In addition, Pharmaka is devoted (almost religiously) to two artistic principles: *Dialogue* and *Process*. During the first three years of Pharmaka, the artists would meet every two weeks at a different member's studio to critique the new work and share war stories. That dialogue extended to the work itself, which was intended to initiate a visual conversation with the viewer.

This is also why the emphasis at Pharmaka is on the process of art-making, not the product. (Though of course nothing brightens any artist's day like making a sale.) In 2006 Pharmaka hosted an exhibition called "How It Is" (?) in which several Pharmaka painters recreated a portion of their studios in the gallery space, in order to provide an insight into their artistic influences and methodology. Again, the point was dialogue, to open up our community to the larger arts community and beyond that to the public.

So it only makes sense that Pharmaka would host such an event as *LA Ethos*, right? Which doesn't mean that everything proceeded smoothly...

#### IV. *LA Ethos*, the Reality Show

Shane had done away with all guidelines and restrictions in order to unshackle the artists and allow them to determine the destiny of this project themselves, free of supervision. His goal was to create a truly democratic space, in which the artist whose work was selling for \$50,000 a painting and the completely unknown artist were absolutely equal. Each could create whatever mark or image he or she wished to. Each could have his or her work amended or painted over by anyone else. In the end there was only the artist with paintbrush and paints, the blank canvas, and the idea of capturing the Ethos of LA.

(As you may imagine, very few high-priced artists took up the challenge. Reliable word has it that Ed Ruscha showed up toward the end of the project and liked what he saw. "Go on, dive right in," Shane had told him. Ruscha considered it, but when told that his image might not survive he shrugged and took a pass.)

There was something else going on here, though, something brilliant if largely unintended. By allowing artists to amend or paint over each other's work, Shane had created a dramatically-charged atmosphere ("will my image be there tomorrow?") that was also an excellent metaphor for the Darwinian art world, in which artists struggle mightily to be recognized and to survive (both artistically and materially). This provided the exhibition with a certain melodramatic undercurrent, in which the cooperative level of artists working together to create complimentary images existed alongside this competition for space and for primacy of expression. These two strands gave the evolutionary development of the paintings the sense of a performance art piece (eat your heart out, Chris Burden) in which some of the hostilities that flourished beneath the surface of civil discourse ended up being played out.

In the first few days of the project (after the Jan. 5<sup>th</sup> start-up), the only artists who showed up to paint were Pharmaka members. This wasn't surprising, I guess. This was their artistic home, and it takes a while for word of such an experiment to get around. As Laura Hipke's photos had already begun to chronicle, several Pharmaka painters took advantage of the empty gallery and the large swaths of blank space to begin making their images. As it happened, these were mostly male artists—Christopher Cousins, Vonn

Sumner, Stanley Dorfman, Tim Isham and John Scane. Doro Hoffman was the only female Pharmaka member who had begun exploring the space.

(John and Mike Rosenfeld were in charge of *LA Ethos* at the time, since Shane had been too busy to administrate. In fact it was John Scane who had come up with the show's title.)

At this juncture there were only four female painters in Pharmaka. Of these, Fumiko Amano was the most active. In fact, Fumiko was a one-woman whirlwind, doing public relations for Pharmaka while churning out abstract canvases, having a show at the Lawrence Asher gallery, screening experimental films to a Monday night group and sending out a listing of downtown arts activities to her huge list of email contacts.

I kiddingly called her “the doyenne of downtown,” because she had this impresario-like connection to so many activities and organizations, though I always found her to be quiet, polite, even unassuming, though very intense. She had always seemed deeply dedicated to Pharmaka, to the point even of neglecting her own work. So it surprised me to hear (via several high-pitched emails) that she had covered every inch of blank canvas in *LA Ethos* with her abstractions, in the process (of course) painting over the other painters' work. Apparently she had stayed up all night doing this. Various reports asserted that a certain amount of wine was consumed and curses were muttered regarding some of the male artists of Pharmaka.

According to Chris Monger, who witnessed Fumiko's handiwork, her paintings were of a “very open, flowing, Zen calligraphic-like style... She didn't completely obliterate anyone, but she did paint through several other images.” (Sadly, all this happened before Laura Hipke arrived that day with her camera.) But John Scane was not amused when he opened the gallery the next morning. He called Mike Rosenfield (who has a studio just up the block), and the two of them resolved that they could not let this stand. After notifying Fumiko (though not exactly softening the blow), they proceeded to white out almost all of Fumiko's work with gesso. When she in turn showed up and saw this, she was devastated. “I thought there were no rules, that I could do anything I wanted to do,” she reportedly said, feeling betrayed. John and Mike justified their actions by saying that her work had nothing to do with LA's Ethos and would have ruined the project. Fumiko fled from the gallery in tears and resigned from Pharmaka. Despite heartfelt coaxing from Shane and others, Fumiko refused to reconsider and has no current plans to rejoin.

I was personally sad to see Fumiko go, she is a lovely person and a terrifically-talented painter who will certainly make her mark on the world. But on reflection I had to admit that this skirmish—with its primal battle for picture space and its male-female conflict—was not inappropriate to Los Angeles, and had more than a little to do with its Ethos.

## V. *LA Ethos*, the Best of All Possible Shows?

I have heard Shane say that he worried more about this show—tossed and turned and had more sleepless nights—than he has about anything else having to do with Pharmaka or even about his own one-man exhibitions. “The thing was, I never knew what was going to happen,” he has said. “At the beginning, I didn’t know if anyone was going to show up. When they did, I didn’t know if anything good was going to happen, or if it was just going to be chaos. Then up to the last moment, I worried that someone was going to show up with that can of black paint and cover everything up.”

This is what made the evolution of *LA Ethos* exciting, of course, this element of chance, of not knowing. It’s also what gave the show it’s kinship with the performance pieces (from John Cage, Merce Cunningham and others) and the Happenings of the 1960s, where chance was such an integral part of the proceedings. (Woodstock, for instance, was a Happening in the sense that the weather was the X factor; Music + Crowds + Rain equaled a very different result than a sun-filled three days would have yielded.)

*LA Ethos*, however, took place over a seven week period, far longer than the duration of most “Happenings” in the ‘60s. This only increased the number of “chance” variables and the number of scenarios that could unfold. Many of these had a potentially catastrophic element, similar to what happened with Fumiko. (Hence Shane’s unease.) The most surprising aspect of all, then, was how relatively harmonious things turned out to be. Painters who did not know each other, and may indeed have not even liked each other’s work, nevertheless worked side-by-side in a collaborative spirit to create a work that does seem (to me at least) to have artistic integrity, even panache. That is, the ego of each artist was sublimated (maybe “integrated” is a better word) to produce a work that has a group “ethos” which is larger than the sum of its parts.

Now I’m not trying to be Pollyanna-ish here or to say that everything that happened was for the best, or that this was the best of all possible outcomes. I’m sure that Chris Monger or Mike Rosenfield (both persistent critics of this project) could do a very good job of trying to burst my balloon. But given the state of the art world (self-interest run rampant!), and the state of the world in general (ditto...!), I’d have to say that this was unexpected to the point of being mind-blowing.

## VI. *LA Ethos*, The (R)Evolution

For those who have the time and inclination, I highly recommend taking a look at Laura Hipke’s photo-chronicle of the event. (Laura produced over 2500 photographs, only a small portion of which can be reprinted here. Hopefully there will be a way to access the entire body of photos, possibly by publishing them on a website which can be linked to the Pharmaka website, [www.pharmaka-art.org](http://www.pharmaka-art.org). Anyway, one can hope.)

This was an ingenious idea on Shane’s behalf, and not only because it resulted in so many photographs that have artistic merit in their own right. (John Scane’s had wanted

to broadcast the proceedings by webcam, but this had fallen by the wayside.) By documenting *LA Ethos* in this way, Shane and Laura have succeeded in crafting a narrative from random and not necessarily related events, in creating a *story* with characters and themes and through-lines that add an emotional and empathetic level to the experience that wouldn't otherwise be there.

In addition, Laura has produced a historical document of some magnitude and distinction, tracing the development of the show itself and the evolution of the paintings. This works for me on both the artistic level—as we witness how these paintings take shape and acquire a communal aesthetic identity, quite apart from any individual painter—and on the archeological level. For me, it was a truly one-of-a-kind experience to see images appear and disappear and sometimes re-appear in a different form. Looked at reverse, these photographs genuinely give the sense of peeling away the layers to get to the starting point of an idea. There is a heartbreaking element to this, as we see time in action, as well as providing keen insights into the workings of the artistic temperament.

Also, it is simply fascinating to see which images and designs survive the 7 week process and which are painted over. While a case could be made for many of the lost items—personally I was a fan of the orgasmic woman out of whose crotch Mike Rosenfield's blimp appeared to be exploding—I think that in general these were sacrificed because they called too much attention to themselves and distracted from the aesthetic impression of the whole. (Then again, that's just my theory; feel free to devise your own. My larger point is the degree to which these photos enriched the *LA Ethos* experience and gave it even more of an afterlife, along with providing so many subjects for further reflection.)

This artist-driven editing happened on an unconscious level, of course. There was no arbiter of taste, no person who supervised what should stay and what should go. As far as I can tell, artists were motivated by a genuine desire to make their own contribution to this entity, while recognizing that their purpose here was to capture the ethos of their city—that is, to find their place in this venture, not to reinvent it in their own image.

## VII. Painting the Skinner Box

*LA Ethos* could easily be subtitled “An Experiment in Order and Anarchy and Creative Behavior,” and the gallery during those seven weeks could be seen as a kind of Skinner Box (referring to B.J. Skinner, behaviorist and author of *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*). We've seen that the Pharmaka artists, under these conditions, had an explosion of conflict that might otherwise have remained latent. Then again, this was their (our) artistic home, and we all know that people behave differently in their home than in a stranger's house. Conversely, contributing artists like Velma Gay, Manuel Compito, Tatiana Schulenberg, Susanna Schulten and VLM (who swooped in towards the end and painted the brothers out of Crenshaw on Wall #5) were just happy to have a new venue to ply their art and make sure that the experience of *their Los Angeles* was represented.



Really, it is the blend of these contributing artists working with Pharmakan stalwarts like Tim Isham, Doro Hoffman, Robert Rossoff and Stanley Dorfman—and yes, even with the devil’s advocate himself, Michael Rosenfield—that made *LA Ethos* such an intriguing fusion of the high and low, of the abstract and figurative, of the sublime and the ridiculous.

Does it make a case for Los Angeles being the new center of the art world? This has always seemed to me more a question about money than about talent (that is, in which direction is the capital flowing?), and perhaps a subject better discussed at cocktail parties than in essays. In the age of globalization, it may be that there are several art “centers” now. I mean, when a painting can be bought over the internet from anywhere in a matter of seconds, does it really matter where one is any more or what city the painting happens to be in?

Still, I seriously wonder if the painters of any other major city could produce a work that deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with this one. (Yes, New York, Chicago and London, that is a challenge! Are you up to it?) But maybe it has more to do with finding a visionary gambler and facilitator like Shane Guffogg than with where one happens to reside.

Because love it or hate it, I hope you feel as I do that this is a great experiment which gives us many reasons for hope, many reasons to feel enthusiastic about the prospects for the Los Angeles art scene, and maybe even for the prospect of people working together in the wider world. Yes, laugh at me if you want, but I’m looking for good news these days wherever I can find it. *LA Ethos* seems to me as good a place as any to start.