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First Come the Dealers, and Then the Diplomas

— By JORI FINKEL

LOS ANGELES

ELLIOTT HUNDLEY has a decision to make. Although he just completed his Master of Fine Arts at the University of California, Los Angeles, in June, he is already something of an art-market sensation. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles has bought one of his large collages, a profusion of cut-up photos, plastic petals and other found objects pinned to corkboard. The Greek tycoon Dakis Joannou has bought another. Dean Valentine, a Los Angeles collector known for supporting artists like John Currin before they hit it big, has bought three.

So, Mr. Hundley has a market; now he just has to choose a gallery.

"Hundley is the one everyone wants," says Philip Martin, director of Mark Moore Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif. "But he seems to be taking his time deciding."

In the meantime, "this is the most anticipated solo show in Los Angeles," said the dealer Javier Peres, of Peres Projects in Los Angeles, who compares Mr. Hundley's work to "Joseph Cornell on acid." When Mr. Peres met the artist at U.C.L.A. a couple of years ago, he offered him a solo show on the spot but has since had to content himself with including his work in group shows. So has the New York dealer Daniel Reich, who is including Mr. Hundley in "Desire Constellations," opening at his gallery on Thursday. Meanwhile, as Mr. Hundley mulls his options, the New York powerhouse Andrea Rosen has flown out for a studio visit as well.

The buzz about Mr. Hundley says something about the size of his talent. But it is also a sign of just how much attention the M.F.A. graduates in Los Angeles are drawing on both coasts. Not so long ago, most dealers and collectors looked in their own backyards for the next big thing. On the East Coast, the feeding frenzy focused mainly on the programs at Yale, Columbia and Hunter; on the West Coast, the locals gathered at CalArts, Art Center and U.C.L.A. But in the last few years, more New York dealers are turning up on the California campuses as well.

One is Elizabeth Dee, who recently visited U.C.L.A. and Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles proper, as well as the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, in nearby Valencia and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She made the rounds while preparing for her current show, "Sugartown," named after the moody movie about Los Angeles's music scene. Split

between her Chelsea gallery and the Lower East Side nonprofit space Participant Inc., the exhibition features 21 young artists who work in the greater Los Angeles area. Most are recent graduates.

"I've been flying to L.A. more and more over the last two years," said Ms. Dee, who opened a gallery there in May in partnership with a Dallas dealer, David Quadrini. "In large part, it's to see what's happening among the next generation of artists. L.A. has the greatest concentration of art schools in one metropolitan area, so it's the first place outside of New York you would look for new artists."

The rise of the California art schools has been several decades in the making. Ever since Ed Ruscha drove a black Ford from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles in 1956 to attend Chouinard (now CalArts), the schools have drawn major talent. But it wasn't until the late 1980's, when the artists Chris Burden, Nancy Rubins, Charles Ray and Paul McCarthy had all joined the faculty at U.C.L.A., that the city's leading programs began to ignite national interest.

Today, it's hard to imagine the local art scene without the schools. "Most every gallery in L.A. has some recent M.F.A. grads," said Mr. Martin, the Santa Monica dealer. "And then there are the Chinatown galleries that really feed on the schools: Black Dragon is run by Roger Herman, who's on faculty at U.C.L.A., so it's a direct pipeline to U.C.L.A. students. David Kordansky went to CalArts, and his gallery shows it. China Art Objects is Art Center."

Even blue-chip galleries like L.A. Louver, which represents David Hockney, have been getting in on the action: it just opened "Rogue Wave," a survey of emerging and midcareer Los Angeles artists that runs through Sept. 3. Of the 19 artists in the show, 14 earned M.F.A. degrees at local schools, including the installation artist Karl Haendel (U.C.L.A.), the sculptor Mindy Shapero (University of Southern California) and the painters Tomory Dodge and Violet Hopkins (both CalArts). "There's no concept behind the show except enthusiasm and curiosity," said Peter Gould, the gallery's director.

For her July show in Chelsea, Ms. Dee chose more-recent M.F.A. graduates, like U.C.L.A. alumni Rob Thom and Skylar Haskard. Mr. Thom, who exhibits an allegorical bent, has two collages in the show that re-envision creation and redemption. Mr. Haskard has contributed a video featuring a 20-foot plywood tower that he built in a parking lot on campus. Apart from Mr. Thom, who already exhibits in Chelsea with Zach Feuer Gallery, Ms. Dee said she mainly focused on "young artists who are becoming part of the conversation in New York but for one reason or another haven't had a solo show here yet."

So is there anything that distinguishes this generation of Los Angeles artists from their New York

counterparts? Some point to an affinity for installation art - especially the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink variety. "There's just more space in Los Angeles to make large-scale sculpture," Ms. Dee said. "Have you ever seen the size of the studios at Columbia?"

Pascal Spengemann of the Taxter & Spengemann Gallery in Chelsea, which represents five recent U.C.L.A. graduates, said he was drawn to a new breed of humble, hand-crafted sculpture, an aesthetic celebrated in "Thing," a recent survey at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. The poster boy for the show was the Taxter & Spengemann artist Matt Johnson - whose "Breadface," a plastic cast of a slice of bread with eyes carved into it, was reproduced on T-shirts for the exhibition.

"We're really attracted to approachable work, recognizable objects that are transformed in mysterious and poetic ways," Mr. Spengemann said. "And we see a lot of that coming out of Los Angeles."

And when they see something they like, New York dealers today move on it. In some cases, they are moving so quickly that Los Angeles artists are getting their big break in Manhattan before landing solo shows back home. Take the case of Tomory Dodge, known for painting quietly surreal landscapes with broad brush strokes. Before graduating from CalArts in 2004, he had already had a New York solo show with Taxter & Spengemann which sold work to Richard Desroche of New York's CRG Gallery, who directed him to ACME gallery in Los Angeles. ACME proceeded to sell out his thesis show as if CalArts were a branch of the gallery. By the time Ms. Dee started planning "Sugartown," she said, she didn't even consider Mr. Dodge; she felt "he was too far along in his career."

Many dealers chalk all this up to the dizzying acceleration of the contemporary art market. "It's a big change from the way artists' careers used to develop out here," says Randy Sommer, Mr. Dodge's dealer at ACME in Los Angeles, who in the mid 1990's helped nurture the careers of the painters Laura Owens and Monique Prieto (both CalArts grads). "Just a few years ago, it was a different world. We might have shown an artist for three or four years before a New York gallery took notice - even Laura and Monique took a couple years. But now some of the Chelsea galleries know about L.A. artists before we do."

Mr. Sommer said he worried about how the adulation would affect an artist's willingness to take creative risks. "We don't tell Tomory how many people are interested in his work," he said.

One fear is that a new artist, like so many child actors, will be stunted by success. Although Mr. Valentine, the Los Angeles collector, owns work by Mr. Dodge and Mr. Johnson, as well as Mr. Hundley, he suggests that collectors think twice before buying artists straight from school. "Artists

need time to find their voice - painters especially need time to develop their hands," he says. "We're all doing a disservice to artists when we buy their work too young."

Another danger is that success might evaporate as fast as it came. "I've seen premature arrogance, and I've seen premature disillusionment," said Thomas Lawson, dean of the School of Art at CalArts. "Students may get instant gratification from having early gallery shows, but the art market is a very cruel and impersonal thing. It's very easy to find yourself dropped by that market. If you're dropped before the age of 25, it can be devastating."

And today's artists know it. While M.F.A. students as a species have become more careerist over the last decade, several graduates mentioned here expressed suspicion or fear of the rather efficient machinery of the art market.

Mr. Dodge, 30, recalled being signed up last year by ACME in Los Angeles and CRG in New York, which lured him away from Taxter & Spengemann. "The timing was great in one way," he said. "My studio was so full of paintings back then that I didn't have enough room to work. Then ACME took 10 paintings." At the same time, he said, the attention was overwhelming: "It was crazy. Everything happened at once, and I was still going to classes."

Matt Johnson, 26, who will have his second show this fall with Taxter & Spengemann in New York (his first solo show in Los Angeles, at Blum & Poe, is not scheduled until next year), described the first as fraught with anxiety. "There is definitely the most pressure on the first show," he said. "If that bombs, it's a really tough place to climb out of."

Perhaps that's one reason why Mr. Hundley, 30, is taking his time committing to a gallery. "When I was at school, I didn't want to be distracted by the question," he said in an interview in late June. "And I just graduated last week, so I don't feel any urgency to make the decision right now."

Those closest to Mr. Hundley say that he is not playing hard to get, that acting deliberately and thoughtfully is simply his style. But you can also see his decision not to decide for now as a subtle form of protest: a Bartleby-like act of resistance in an increasingly frantic marketplace.