La-la Band

At this joky, almost aggressively mild, sneakily compelling little group show of tyro Los Angeles avant-gardists—not exactly "hot" young artists, more aptly "warm" or even "tepid-with-a-certain-something"—young artists—start with the smallest item, a video projection by Marina Rosenfeld. Set above on the floor, the projector beams into a darkened corner a small image of the shadow of a woman playing a guitar. The shadow flails with its head swinging to and fro in a room with red-docked yellow wallpaper. The shadow mysteriously generates and then sustains, like a slight headache, an impression of fragility, beauty and gritty aestheticism.

I never heard of Rosenfeld before. I'm told that she mounts more or less feminist performances, such as one that I missed at this show's opening—nine women with cheap portable record players doing synchronized scratching of Red Stewart LPs. Her video projection is titled The Lingerie Aftershow of Repetition Longing. I detect acontent of girl attitudes toward rock-'n-roll boy polish, but something tells me it's only the tip of Rosenfeld's iceberg. The rest is the secret of a dashingly self-possessed that she shares with her four peers in this show of California Institute of the Arts alumni, aged 24 to 32.

In New York, we haven't been hearing much from the legendary cutting-edge think tank of Cal Arts—or from its present director, former New York painter and editor of Real Life magazine Thomas Lawson, who curated this show. Coming to that, we haven't heard a lot from Los Angeles or, for heaven's sake, about young American artists anywhere in coherent groups marked by shared ambitions and special practices. These are strange days culturally, notoriously awash in "information" but without focus: no big ideas, no ruling styles, no novel controversies. Those who hated art-world hype in the 1980s may be happy now. Except (for some persistently obscure reason) at merrie olde England the late-1990s art world drifts in a cosmic hype vacuum.

The present art world feels like a typical afternoon in Los Angeles, maybe: endless and aimless, bright, vaguely troubled, not unpleasantly stupified. Lawson gives this show an ideally atmospheric non-theme by linking it to a 1937 Edward Weston photograph of a florist, battered sign in the Mojave Desert: a giant cup and saucer imprinted HOT COFFEE. Lawson writes of "the struggling, hopeless optimism" caught by the photograph—a "weirdly hypnotic combination of confidence and delusion" that feels pretty widely germane to present culture. These LA kids are steeped in that chronic spirit and in Conceptualist art vernacular as appropriately well-worn as a Valley Girl's look. Think of the vernacular as California.

Once associated with sensuous, feel-good formalism, Southern California art style is more lately famous for Mike Kelley-esque tones of sad-sack aberration, a self-consciousness of the lumpen that was dubbed "fast Fashion" by L.A. critic Ralph Rugoff. Those old and new qualities are, if not yet a stop-shopping by Kent Young, who arrays tragic fabrics—bits of what like faded bed blankets, exhausted washcloths, a profoundly soiled hospital napkin, and other less specific but likewise poignant swatches—in geometric murals as exquisitely considered in composition and color as the decor of a 1920s Dutch-modernist café.

Julie Becker, the youngest artist here, presents photographs of uconfectioner's sugar, a miniature file cabinet, a terry cloth microscope, and, well, other stuff. I confess to being at sea with Becker, which I surmise is exactly, for the moment, where she wants me.

I'm confused, too, by Laura Owens's big painting, but in ways that feel targeted. Owens tersely limits a fictive interior space in bewildering perspective with iconic passages of drawn line, puddled stain, and juicy impasto, as if to amplify her own and the viewer's self-consciousness to some verge of panic. She seems intent on making paintings that are uncomfortable to look at as possible. I look forward to figuring out why when, in April, Owens has her New York solo debut at Gwan Brown.

Andrea Bowers is in her solo. On two video monitors, she screens compilations of tapes she made at public events: baseball and basketball games, a crowd scene in Las Vegas before the Tyson-Holyfield fight, and last month's Rose Bowl parade. And she singles out certain faces for scrutiny in tiny colored pencil drawings on unused, empty grounds. Why do I find so simple an idea so exciting? Maybe because the condition of spectatorialship has lately struck me as the overwhelming fact of present cultural life, where the identity of audiences reglarly seems very much more powerful than whatever they attend. My heart sanctifies Bowers as a companion soul and possible guide in my own perplexity.

From what I'm told, Dave Muller is the main figure on the "Hot Coffee" scene, the current young L.A. artist's young L.A. artist. This helps me take on faith the cogency of works that display a high quotient of you-gotta-be-there arena. Muller's pieces here have handmade mock-ups, in materials ranging from drawing on folded paper to painting on aluminum, as found and fanciful gallery announcements and exhibition posters. Contemplating it, for me, is like listening to a bright, almost certainly delightful conversation in a foreign language. I feel myself standing around smiling dopily at jokes I don't get, half embarrassed but loath to tear myself away. These guys are just so cool.

Part of the considerable charm of "Hot Coffee" is the present rarity of its innocuous group dynamic in New York. The Darwinian brutalities of the local scene obviate such geministic synergy, treating postgraduate art-kid cohorts rather as a withered wiper treats rain. If this were a group manifestation of young New Yorkers, it would reek of the competitive, now-or-never, do-or-die aura of our hard town. So the dose of Cal-Artsy cavalier attitude proves refreshing, at least, for its reminder that art is long, and time to time to time has even been deemed fun.