



Curator Steven L. Berens sets up photography exhibitions designed to "challenge the viewer."

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT OF PICTURES

By DINAH BERLAND

Stephen L. Berens, exhibition director of the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies for the last two years, leaves his post with the final in a series of three group shows, "L.A. as Content." The current exhibit, like the preceding ones, uses the city as a springboard for examining the nature of photography and photographic seeing.

"L.A. as Content," at the center's gallery through June 26, features the work of five Los Angeles artists: Stephen Axelrad, Lance Carlson, Stephen Danko, Gil De Montes and Suzanne Siegel. It follows last September's companion show, "L.A. as Subject Matter," and "L.A. Ways of Working," which initiated Berens' curatorial trilogy in January, 1982.

An artist as well as a curator, Berens always begins with questions: "What can you do? Given this space, given that title, what are all the possibilities?" He says, "You throw out the first 10, because generally the first ideas you think of have all been done, and then you go on."

Having come to Los Angeles from a small town in Florida, where he ran a gallery for the Florida School of the Arts, Berens was immediately enthralled by the easy access to artists that is possible in a big city. "In Florida, almost every artist I showed, except for faculty, was from out of town, across the country. It was really mail-order curating. When I came to Los Angeles, if I wanted to see somebody's work, I could call them on the telephone and go see it."

With so many photographers to see and to show in Los Angeles, he began to ask himself: "What can I do with these artists besides identifying trends or showing everything that anybody ever did in Los Angeles? What else could you do?"

His first answer was to examine the ways in which a few well-known contemporary photographers went about creating their images. "I purposefully picked people who, for the most part, had been shown quite a bit in this area. I wanted to do something that would add new insight and help people better understand what their work was about."

The result was "L.A. Ways of Working," in which

JoAnn Callis, Eileen Cowin, John Divola, Jerry McMullan and Marshall Meyer exhibited not only finished photographs but idea prints, notes and sketches.

His two subsequent exhibits, "L.A. as Subject Matter" and "L.A. as Content," were intended as a single, two-part concept with a catalogue available from the first exhibition to compare with the second. The idea was to separate the subject matter of photography (what the picture is of in a literal sense) from content issues (what the picture is about or what it means on a symbolic level).

"The subject matter is the object of the photograph," explained Berens. "If you take a photograph of a chair, the chair is the subject matter. But it could be that it was the chair in which your father died. So the content of the photograph would be your father and his death."

Although the artists in "L.A. as Subject Matter"—Jerry Uelsmann, Ned Evans, Ron Kelley, Michael Levine and Grant Mudford—all depicted the architecture, landscape and people of Los Angeles, none of them addressed the meaning of living or working here. Conversely, "L.A. as Content," though not necessarily using the recognizable visual vocabulary of the city, was designed to speak specifically to these autobiographical issues.

To illustrate the content of Los Angeles life, Berens selected work that he felt exemplified a variety of "living strategies." These range from De Montes' visceral response to growing up Latino in Los Angeles, to artist/attorney Axelrad's applications of legal logic to convoluted absurdities of modern life, with its tacky motels, nostalgic memories and multiple marriages.

Having organized his last show for a while, Berens looks forward to doing more of his own art work. "I think it's hard to do both," he admitted. "Still, I think the process of curating does coincide with being an artist. . . . My work as an artist doesn't have any answers. It doesn't define anything. It doesn't resolve anything. As a curator, I want to challenge the viewer, to set up exhibitions that can't be so easily verbalized." □