

'Head to Toe' Mixes Education, Fun

ART REVIEW

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

There may be no better outcome for a museum exhibition than being at once instructive and entertaining. One such is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 60-odd-work charmer "From Head to Toe: Concepts of the Body in Twentieth Century Art."

You get the idea from the very first grouping. It contrasts a classic work of high theoretical seriousness, Picasso's 1908 Cubist "Head of a Woman," with Alexandra Exter's 1928 "Evening Dress"—a male puppet who looks pretty tipsy.

Such juxtapositions of the transcendent and the absurd reveal that Modernist artists played down simple observation of the figure in favor of ideas. Our art has been achieved less as an exercise of sheer skill and more as an act of intelligence—both rational and intuitive. Using art to express concepts is one thing when the subject is, say, landscape or still life. It takes a more intimate twist when applied to the human body.

All of us, after all, have one. We're very attached. Thus, when artists mess around with the way we look, folks are liable to take it personally. That's probably why a group of adolescent students in the gallery during my tour repeatedly emitted large belly-laughs. They appeared to appreciate expressions of both the wonder and the weirdness of the corporeal container that never ceases to cause us so much anguish and delight.

The kids seemed to get a particular kick out of Jasper John's "High School Days." It's the visual embodiment of an old joke about the guy who glued a little mirror to the toe of his shoe so he could see up the girls' skirts.

They also seemed keen on Ed Kienholz's 1960 evocation of a shy hooker, "A Lady Named Zoa." Another bizarre installation that tickled us all was Rona Pondick's recent "Jacks." It's a kind of sand-



Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Alexander Archipenko's "Yellow and Black" is in the exhibition.

box full of aluminum-cast dentures that look like both succubae and crabs.

An edge of eroticism is inevitable in depictions of the figure. Robert Mapplethorpe's and George Platt Lynes' photographs are frankly homoerotic and inescapably beautiful. Edward Weston tried to universalize the libidinous drive by finding the same rhythms in nudes, sand dunes and bell peppers. Harry Callahan's diptych of his wife, Eleanor, is a rumination on the link between tenderness and arousal. The late L.A. Beat Generation photographer Edmund Teske nailed the pathos of flaming romanticism. An exhibition can do worse than remind us of the biological hard-wire that conjoins the creative and procreative.

An abstract purist might deride

all this as a cheap shot. Well, OK, if someone doesn't want to be human, that's his business. For the rest of us, the subject has endless pertinent variations. There are Henry Moore and Alexander Archipenko conjuring the Great Earth Mother through their sculpture. Yves Klein did it another way in "Anthropometry," a blue body print of a woman's upper torso that's a juicy absorption of Abstract Expressionism and precursor of performance art. There's John Coplans using his own naked, aging, hairy self in photos that are as anthropological as they are autobiographical. Pop master Tom Wesselman is affectionately socio-satirical in a 1965 nude that recalls an era when sex was as casually available as a triple-decker ice cream cone. A nearby mannequin displays Rudi Gernreich's 1964 topless bathing suit. Sigh.

Robert Heinecken is right on the mark culturally in an untitled photo-collage. It depicts a pair of

glossy-magazine-style woman's hands that also bear her facial features. Talking about a current tendency to confuse the media with reality, it looks like a computer work. Jim Shaw is frank about the electronic presence in "Computer-Degenerated Self-Portrait."

One of the great charms of the exhibition is its ecumenical embrace. Drawn from every pertinent museum department by LACMA curator Carol S. Eliel, it's not only a creative use of the permanent collection, it's a praiseworthy demonstration of art forms still too often dismissed as minor. A 1994 dress by Japanese designer Issey Miyake is rendered in pleated silver polyester. It's a pointedly apt expression of the fantasy of woman as the iron butterfly. Phyllis Green's "Odalisque" is a hilarious neo-Dada phallic fetish clad in red velvet supine on an ornate pillow. It came from the so-called decorative arts department.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., through April 27, closed Wednesday, (213) 857-6000.

February 28, 1998