

*Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2004

*David Pagel, Special to The Times*

**Push it to the edge;  
In Peter Plagens' work, the most fascinating visual incidents occur at  
the edges of the picture plane. USC displays 30 years of such pieces.**

In an age of impatience and immediate gratification, it's heartening to see 3 1/2 rooms filled with paintings, drawings and collages Peter Plagens has made over the last 30 years. At USC's Fisher Gallery, these 44 abstract pictures consistently serve up quiet excitement that's easy to miss because it's simultaneously sophisticated and inelegant.

Sophistication without elegance is rarely rewarded in today's art world, which is driven by naked one-upmanship and the juvenile need to be cooler than cool. Plagens' odd fusion of high-flying refinement and everyday awkwardness also flies in the face of the idea that the whole point of virtuosity (and connoisseurship) is to distinguish oneself from run-of-the-mill neighbors -- plebeians and philistines too dimwitted and vulgar to appreciate subtle talents.

But sophisticated inelegance is the unstable ground on which Plagens has stubbornly stood throughout his life as a painter. He was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1941 and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at USC in 1962. A master's degree from Syracuse University followed two years later. In 1965, Plagens took a job as assistant curator at the Long Beach Museum of Art, wrote \$5 exhibition reviews for *Artforum* magazine (which was then based in Los Angeles) and kept painting.

Over the years, his museum job gave way to university positions at Cal State Northridge, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and other institutions. His art reviewing led to several books of criticism, including the recently republished "Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970"; a novel, "Time for Robo"; and staff jobs at *Newsweek* (beginning in 1989), where he remains a contributing editor. Plagens' labors in the studio produced numerous bodies of work, which have been regularly exhibited across the country for nearly four decades.

Although Plagens is perceived as a critic who happens to paint, he thinks of himself as a painter who happens to write art criticism. The exhibition bears this out. Installed in loose chronological order by director and curator Selma Holo, its judiciously selected pieces complement one another, intensifying the coherence and clarifying the logic at play in all of Plagens' wide-ranging works. A remarkably consistent arc, with very little repetition, is traced.

The earliest canvases each contain a single circular shape that is locked into a sensuous field of flaming red-orange or creamy white. Some of these shapes are solid, like wheels

of Gouda cheese from which wedges have been cut. Others resemble the letter C, its width, position and size carefully calibrated to enliven the seemingly empty space.

The most fascinating visual incidents, however, occur at the edges of the picture plane. Here a painting's solid ground appears to disintegrate. Sometimes bands of soft gray, beige and off-white fit together erratically.

At other times, smears of paint in tints that do not quite match the color of the ground create quasi-atmospheric effects. Gaps of raw canvas occasionally appear, recalling skin glimpsed between articles of clothing. Ghostly lines, drawn with pencil and ruler, and splattered drips add to the impression that Plagens went to great lengths to free up the mostly blank space of his paintings' rigorously restrained surfaces.

None of this, however, is evident in the otherwise fine catalog. That's because nearly all of the reproductions have been inexplicably cropped (sometimes eliminating up to 8 inches from a painting's side). It looks as if an obsessive, order-loving designer has gone beyond the call of duty, tidying up Plagens' paintings by turning them into crisp graphic patterns. Without rough edges, their internal precision loses significant impact. The reproductions make the paintings look elegant, which they are not. The catalog should be reprinted.

A pivotal painting links Plagens' early pieces to his recent ones. "Wheels of Wonder" (1985), the first work visitors see upon entering the gallery, includes both the circular shapes that animate his works from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s and the wacky angular forms that cavort, jostle and jet across the increasingly diverse surfaces of his works since then.

Against a slate gray backdrop, two multicolored forms orbit along perfectly circular paths. Their topsy-turvy tipsiness recalls children's toys and early Gemini spacecraft, perhaps manned by astronauts. The way Plagens angles his eccentric polygons emphasizes instability and tentativeness.

In subsequent works, similar geometric configurations sometimes dominate the composition. In "The Truth, V," "My Father Worked in Advertising, II" and "Brotherhood of Artists, XLVIII," they fly through the neutral, institutional tints of Plagens' dappled backgrounds like aerodynamic wings, flashy UFOs or rocket-powered comets.

In "Wedge of Life," a bent orange triangle with a bite taken out of one side hovers above the void while emitting hopeful signals in opposite directions.

Throughout the 1990s, these neatly filled-in forms shrink in size. Their presence grows increasingly tenuous. Making cameo appearances, they often seem to be tiny tightrope walkers, outweighed by large swaths of drippy paint and furiously scribbled pencil lines. White, black and gray push color out of these pictures, causing the boldly tinted geometric fragments to appear to be colorblind chameleons, vulnerable creatures

desperate to disappear into the background but unable to get the colors right for their camouflage to be effective.

As the 20th century gives way to the 21st, complexity builds in Plagens' paintings. So too does the vigor, decisiveness and forthrightness.

Greater scale shifts, wilder mixes of materials and more extreme types of mark-making occur with increasing frequency.

Likewise, the palettes are kinkier, both more subtle and more outlandish than before. Large chunks of many works are painted out to make more effective use of the available space. As a painter, Plagens is a ruthless editor.

Despite the scrappy facility of his paintings, none seems formulaic, polished or even tasteful. The everyday ungainliness with which Plagens began still fuels his new works, many of which seem to be four or five paintings compressed into one.

To find another abstract artist whose work combines the intellectual savvy and disdain for snobbery that Plagens does, you'd have to go back to Willem de Kooning, who also used collage to get his abstract compositions started. But the more telling comparison is to Mark Twain: another multitalented multi-tasker whose whip-smart insights go hand-in-glove with the conviction that accessible experiences beat academic theorization any day and that popularity, for its own sake, means nothing.

Plagens' gregarious paintings are shamelessly social. They openly seek out viewers who might be attuned to their loopy rhythms and spunky spatial organizations. And the pleasures they generate are not diminished by being shared. That's because these wonderfully ad hoc compositions demand to be taken on their own terms, which are peculiar and rigorous, and may seem perverse to viewers who like their art simple.

For Plagens, complexity is never an end in itself, but it makes for paintings that sustain your interest for far longer than can be reasonably explained.