

Calendar

Mouse Destroys Art School

Chouinard: A Living Legacy

Robert Perine of Encinitas recalls his alma mater as "a funky, dirty place, filled with charcoal dust and the smell of turpentine. And it was clicking." This was the Chouinard Art Institute (pronounced Shu-NARD) in South Pasadena, where he studied on the G.I. Bill, graduating in 1950. The school's founder was Nelbert Chouinard, born Nellie Murphy in Minnesota in 1879. Art-trained at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, Chouinard moved to California in 1919 to teach after being widowed. Two years later, she started her namesake school.

"It was a freewheeling but strongly skill-oriented place," says Perine, who became a painter and graphic artist. "Mrs. Chouinard's whole approach was lots of drawing, lots of painting, lots of design."

Perine's description of Chouinard's own landscapes evokes a rural Los Angeles. "Her work was of the 'eucalyptus school.' She had a horse and

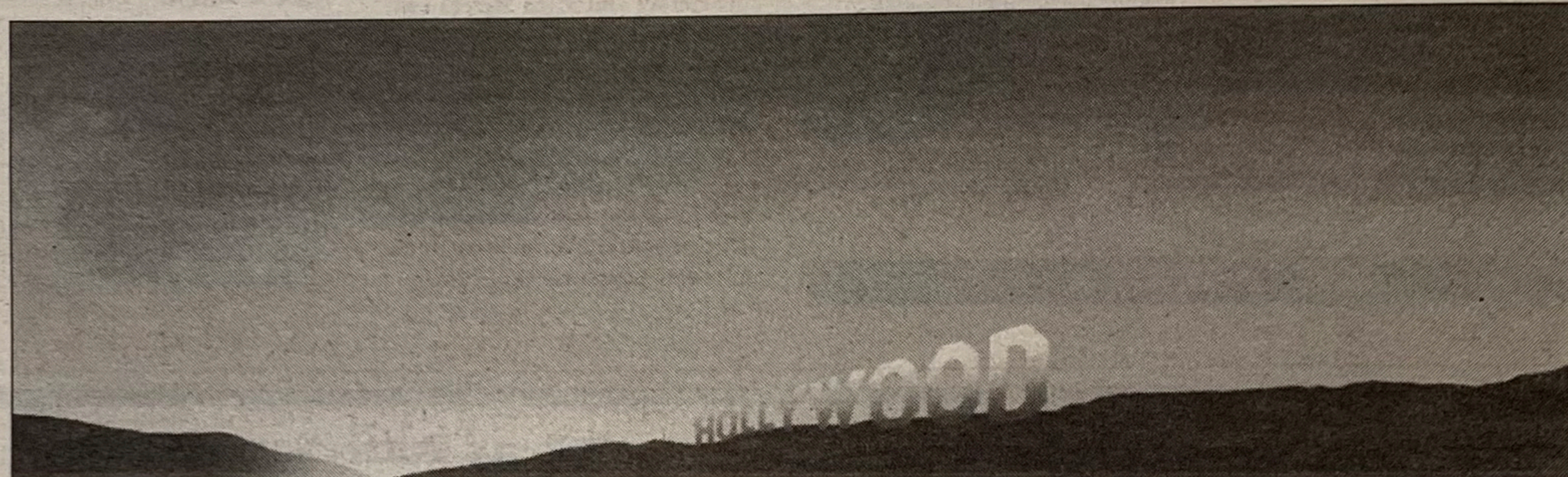
strapped her easel to its saddle and rode out into Arroyo Seco to paint trees and rocks. But she soon found teaching quite a drain, and stopped painting in favor of her students."

Famous names linked with Chouinard as either students, faculty, or both include Edward Ruscha, the L.A. artist known for incorporating words into his visual works; Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros; architect Rudolf Schindler; sculptor Alexandr [sic] Archipenko; and Hollywood fashion designers Bob Mackey and Edith Head.

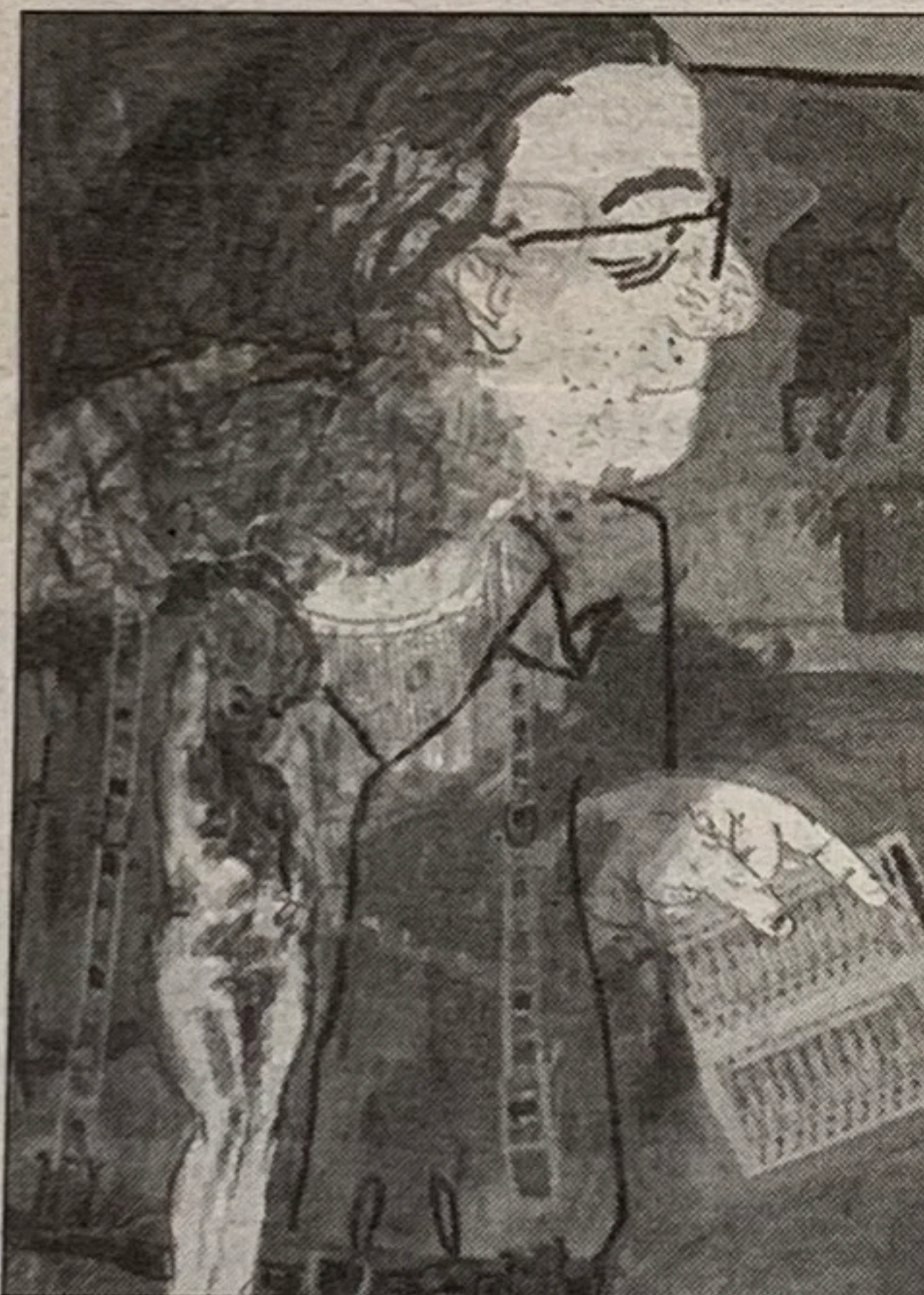
"People in the film industry regularly attended the Chouinard fashion shows," says Perine. "One year at the Chouinard ball Jayne Mansfield was crowned as its queen while wearing a gold lamé gown designed by Mackey. That made him famous even before he graduated."

Then, in 1956, something happened that would change the character of the school, says Perine. Mrs. Chouinard had financial troubles, and Walt Disney helped her out, just as previously she had helped him. "In 1929, when Walt came to California, he had no money, but he had a couple of animators whose drawing skills needed improving," Mrs. Chouinard enrolled them on credit. Decades later, when told of her financial woes, he endowed the school with \$10 million.

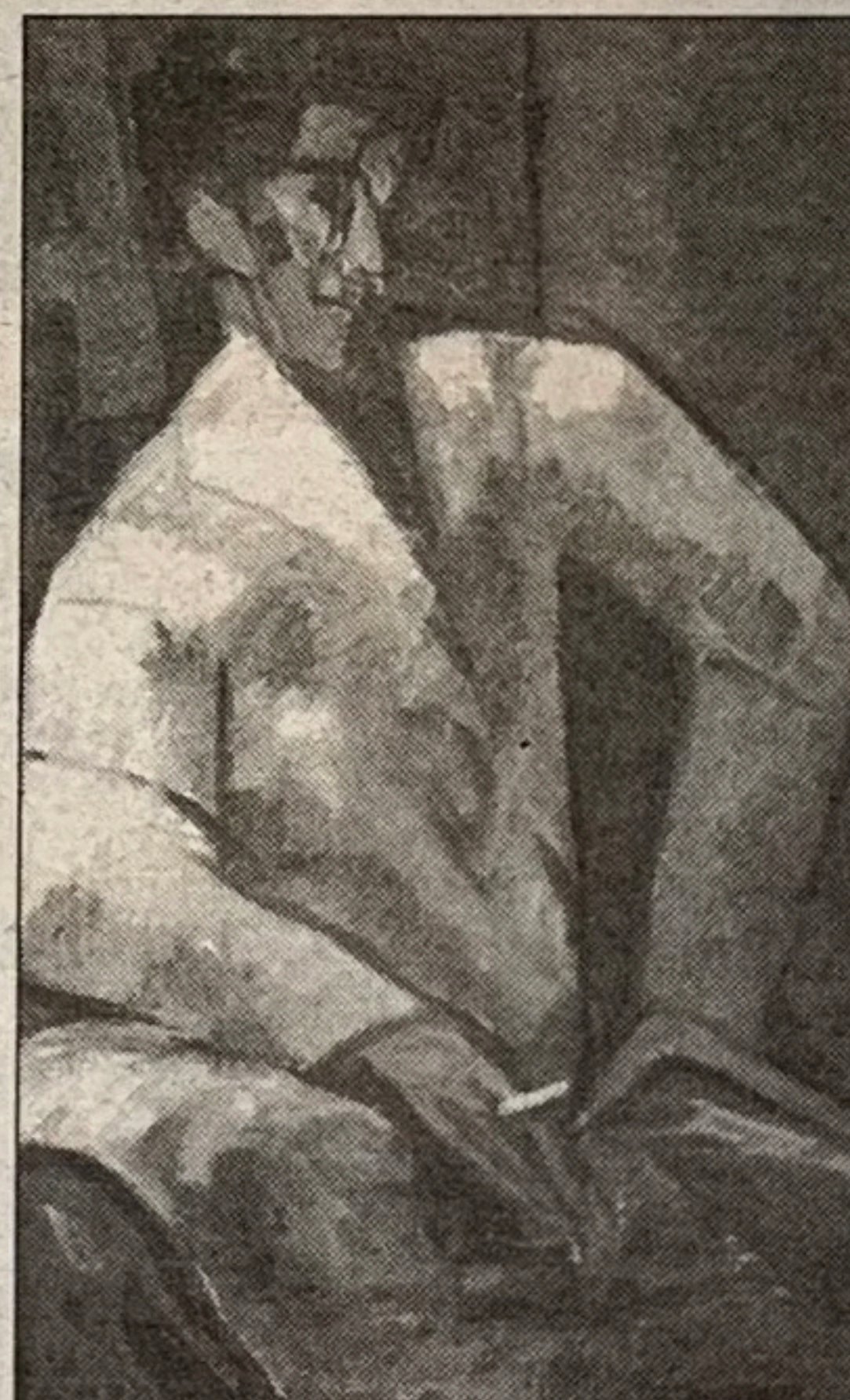
In return, Disney wanted to



Hollywood, Ed Ruscha



Bukowski's Nannie, James Aitchison



Portrait of Phil Paradise, Watson Cross



Eucalyptus School Painting, Nelbert Chouinard

impose his own vision on Chouinard, says Perine, and the school's aging founder welcomed it. "But Walt was an entertainer, not an artist. He didn't realize that what made Chouinard work was its smallness and concentrated activity."

Disney's plan was to combine Chouinard with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music to create a new institution — the California Institute of the Arts. What made Chouinard unique was destroyed by the merger, says Perine.

This week, Perine will give a slide lecture about Chouinard at the Boehm Gallery, one of three venues featuring work by 137 Chouinard artists that spans the school's history from 1921 to 1972, the year of its last graduation. James Aitchison, who studied at Chouinard in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is one of the show's curators.

Aitchison, a painter and designer who lives in Leucadia, got a summer scholarship to Chouinard when he was a sophomore at a Palm Springs high school. "I was 15, and looked 6, and was drawing naked women," Aitchison

recalls. "Watson Cross was my teacher. All these guys you read about in art magazines took drawing from him, if they were anywhere near Chouinard." Cross had polio. "So when he came to your drawing horse, he would put his crutches on the side and swing his leg over the horse and sit down. Well, he sat there looking at my drawing, and said, 'Jimmy Aitchison, I don't think you're old enough to be in this class.' To this day I don't know if he was kidding, but he put the fear of God in me. That was my first experience with Chouinard."

Aitchison remembers Mrs. Chouinard in her early 80s (she died at 90) as a "big, strong, powerful woman who never backed down." When another of his teachers, John Altoon, "grabbed the fanny of a model and shook it, because he was trying to get the students to realize that this was a human being made of flesh and blood," Mrs. Chouinard fired him.

Of the Disney takeover, Aitchison says, "They came in like gangbusters. Guys started running around in suits. The 'sergeant-at-arms' wanted

everybody to get hair cuts. Students were made to feel very uncomfortable." In protest he left without a diploma.

"CalArts doesn't even look like an art school," in Aitchison's opinion. "They spent I don't know how many millions on a monstrous building in Valencia that looks like an insurance company. They've been around, what? Forty years? They couldn't mount a show like we have. Everyone spouts about art education. This show is the culmination of it. Take a look at what the artists were doing at any period in history. That's how you find out what was happening mentally, socially, psychologically. Artists don't realize it when they're doing it, but it does play out 20, 30 years down the road. That's this exhibit's significance."

— Jeanne Schinto

Exhibit: "Chouinard: A Living Legacy"
Through Sunday, August 26

"The Early Years: 1921-1945"
Boehm Gallery
Palomar College

Local Events
page 61

Classical Music
page 74

Art Museums & Galleries
page 76

Theater
page 79

Pop Music
page 84

Restaurants
page 112

Movies
page 122