



# THE RADAR ART

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN PINES

## O.C.'S ART-ISTOCRACY! *Fifteen years ago the O.C. art scene was beyond banal—plein air seascapes, anyone?—then came Peter Blake*

On the first Thursday of each month there's a run on real estate in downtown Laguna Beach and on North Pacific Coast Highway—for parking and walking room on the seaside sidewalks, that is. Crowds tightly mingle in and in front of art galleries, taken in by the huge variety of their wares and the possibility of linking up with like-minded art lovers—or just lovers. The work on display is a far cry from the mostly tourist-oriented fare that once dominated the gallery scene in Laguna and throughout Orange County.

While the Laguna First Thursday Art Walk just celebrated its 10th birthday, Laguna Beach's contemporary art scene first started five years earlier when Peter Blake, then a young, upwardly mobile restaurateur, switched ambitions and opened a contemporary art gallery dedicated, at first, to local emerging artists.

Now, 15 years later, Blake is the go-to guy when it comes to acquiring first-rate work by emerging and mid-career artists along with that of luminaries who have made headlines in art publications since the early '60s. During those years, he developed a large group of diverse and superbly talented artists, devoted clients and hordes of friends, many of whom refer to him, not altogether jokingly, as the godfather of the O.C. art scene. That sobriquet is based on Blake's credo of loyalty and integrity and his reputation as someone who will accept nothing less in return.

As this short span of history has shown, Blake's example encouraged other young and adventurous gallerists to specialize in more or less

cutting-edge contemporary art and made it possible for some to actually make a living from it. In fact, one might say that without Blake's outreach, the Artists Village in Santa Ana and other burgeoning visual art scenes (think Costa Mesa) might not have gotten off the ground as successfully.

Peter Blake has been an art dealer since 1993, when a stroke of sudden inspiration caused him to open a contemporary art gallery. Much has been said and written about his gallery and him since and, being the new kid on a yet sparsely populated block, he garnered a lot of media attention but, he says, his cash flow was a mere trickle. "I had no idea at first how to run a fine art gallery; I had no focus and was really all over the map," he recalls.

Things began to pick up once Blake moved to North Laguna, across from the Laguna Art Museum, where he remodeled the space that is now one of the most elegant ones on the block. Its interior consists of several exhibition rooms remodeled by Blake, who is also a talented amateur designer of interiors. "Peter is gifted when it comes to dividing spaces and hanging art," says Chris Gwaltney, a Laguna Beach painter whom Blake represented since the early days.

For the first five years, he exhibited Laguna and Southern California artists and established a growing roster through his idiosyncratic but scrupulous way of conducting business. "We did everything on a handshake—there was never any paper," recalls Gwaltney. "We have done well by each other and still have a great relationship."