

Materials Magician



By **Bettina Korek**

I got to see the legendary [Jack Brogan](#) in person Wednesday night when he joined Los Angeles-based artists [Helen Pashgian](#), [Peter Alexander](#) and [DeWain Valentine](#), who had come together to tell stories and talk shop as part of the [Getty's Modern Art in Los Angeles](#) series. In the 1950s and '60s these artists blurred the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture, pioneering new processes and materials like plastic and resin. [Hastings Plastics](#) even marketed a special product developed in collaboration with Valentine.

I remember reading about this “materials magician” on [LACMA's blog](#) a year ago in a post about Jack Brogan's custom paint job of Michael Govan's 1989 BMW 325is. Govan, a big admirer of Brogan said:

Brogan-he's a legend in Los Angeles. He was one of the key collaborators of the Southern California artists, who some people called finish-fetish artists, or conceptualist artists. In particular, he worked since the early 1960s with artists like Robert Irwin and Larry Bell. He often restores artworks; in his studio now is a Calder from San Diego, and a Larry Bell, and a Craig Kauffman. Whenever anything has to be done that is super precise, or requires unusually refined surfaces, you call Jack; he's a genius at that.

Someone in the audience asked the artists how they felt about the labels often attached to their practices, such as “[finish fetish](#)” and their relationship to Minimalism, a dominant practice in New York at the time. Alexander explained that plastic was not considered an art material, but L.A. was exempt from the art world at the time, so “you were totally free.” It was about the pleasure of the moment. Pashgian remembered a reviewer writing in *The New York Times*, about a number shows of California artists in New York running simultaneously, that said “these are not artists, they are surfers.” This generation of L.A. artists were free, because they were neglected. Something their work had in common was that any flaw would become the focal point, taking away from the experience of the work. Enter Jack Brogan.

Brogan told the audience that he met [Robert Irwin](#) by chance, at a Mexican restaurant called Lucky You and that this encounter changed his life forever. His studio became a meeting place - a salon of sorts - for a group of artists pushing the boundaries of what materials could be used for art and coming together around a man with open ears and a pool of knowledge to draw from. He quickly became the “go to” guy for a generation of L.A. artists. A problem solving listener, Brogan gave artists the freedom to do things and experiment when they didn’t really know what they were doing.

One of the things that I love most about artists is their specialized knowledge. Getting to know artists often means getting to know about niches that you didn’t know existed.

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