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sifting through the madness

IT'S BEEN 10 YEARS, AND MERRY KARNOWSKY OF **MK GALLERY** IS STILL AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE LOS ANGELES ART SCENE. PHILIP OLTERMANN WISHES HER A HAPPY ANNIVERSARY.

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The customers at MK Gallery, an exhibition space specializing in pop Surrealism on South La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles, are suitably disparate. Former Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra is a regular, Michael Parker, president of Nike, frequently drops by, and other long-standing supporters include Leonardo Di Caprio, David Arquette, and Courtney Cox. Two years ago Michael Stipe called because he wanted to buy an artwork by MK artist Camille Rose Garcia for the sleeve of a R.E.M. album.

It can't be easy driving a hard sell when the potential buyer is a former teenage crush of yours. Lucky then that owner Merry Karnowsky—a 37-year-old West Coaster whose father is Polish-German and mother is Japanese—who stumbled into the art world by accident rather than intention, seems to possess a calm and calculating business logic, as well as a healthy taste for the strange and bizarre.

This June, the gallery is celebrating a big anniversary: For 10 years, Karnowsky has been fighting against the common perception of Los Angeles as a good place to make money, but a bad place to make art—a lazy prejudice, she reckons,

because unlike in London and New York, counterculture is still thriving in L.A. "We are witnessing a very fascinating art movement here, which the larger art world still can't quite manage to grasp," she says.

The founding fathers of the West Coast art scene, Karnowsky says, were the psychedelic pop artists of the '60s, and in particular one man: art maverick Robert Williams. Most famous perhaps for the censored cover artwork for *Appetite for Destruction* that got Guns N' Roses banned from MTV, Williams was also the first to drop the term

'lowbrow art' and founded the counterculture magazine *Juxtapoz*, to which Karnowsky still turns when looking for up-and-coming talent. She says: "Williams pushed a whole generation of illustrators, cartoonists, and tattooists into the art world. It was a real 'put your seatbelts on' approach to art."

Williams's spirit is kept alive in the work of many of Karnowsky's clients, such as the Hieronymus-Bosch-meets-Tex-Avery dreams-capes of former cartoonist Todd Schorr; Richard Colman's sketch-like Oedipal drama; or Rosie Garcia's climate-change fairytales. Many of these artists come from an art school background but had to rely on

commercial work before the MK Gallery took them under their wings.

"I grew up reading Manga cartoons next to serious newspapers, so my sense of what is shocking and what is acceptable is perhaps quite different to most people's. But then my tastes don't really matter that much: I just give my artists a platform," says Karnowsky. "They have what it takes to shock and charm the world."

'Decade', Merry Karnowsky Gallery's 10th anniversary exhibition, opens on June 30th. 170 S. La Brea Avenue. For more information, see mkgallery.com.