

GERMANY
WEST

Members of Düsseldorf's Rather and Hof-feld ateliers, who will show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art this month.

THE NO-TREND TREND:
VITALITY AND IDIOSYNCRASY

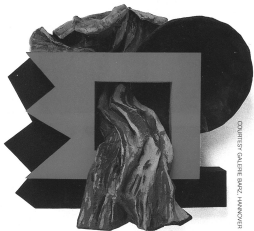
THE BOOM IS HERE to stay," predicts Düsseldorf dealer Hans Mayer. The sole problem, he insists, is finding enough first-class pictures to meet the increasing demand. Like his Cologne colleagues Rudolf Zwirner and Michael Werner, Mayer has profited from the high-stakes roulette being played with classic contemporaries from Joseph Beuys and Robert Rauschenberg to Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer. Art investing, sponsoring, and consulting, long regarded as symptoms of creeping philistinism, have become the order of the day, and corporate collecting is no longer syn-

onymous with squandering the stockholders' profits. Whether these fads attest to the health or to the goutish senility of the market is another matter.

Such phenomena are hardly unique to West Germany, but the nation's prosperity, its central location in Europe, and its cultural traditions lend the process a conspicuous profile. A generation of artists after Beuys has come of age, encompassing Minimalist Reinhard Mucha and satirist C. O. Paeffgen, and there is no denying that the diversity of the national scene makes this one of the most vital moments in the history of German art. Nor is there any denying that art has become a significant economic factor. Museums attract more visitors than the national sport of football, and some 700,000 West Germans hold positions in the cultural sector, contributing about \$13 billion to the gross national product.

Foreign visitors are regularly astonished that even smaller cities may boast their own theaters, opera houses, and symphony orchestras as well as their own museums. Behind the wide dispersion of culture rests a firm belief that the public sector has an obligation to fund such activities and that taxpayers have the right to expect them. (For this reason the concept of "sponsorship" smacked, until only recently, of both commercial manipulation and civic neglect.)

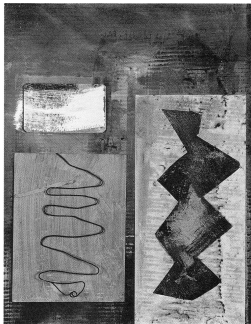
Because of the federalist structure of the West German government, the country lacks a true capital city—a single center of commerce, political power, journalistic authority, and artistic excellence—and this is both a blessing and a handicap. There is no cauldron in which creative ideas can be tested and distilled; there is, at best, a series of bubbling kettles. It is no surprise that Düsseldorf, as the capital of West Germany's largest, richest,



Berlin artist Ulla Lauer's *Untitled*, 1989. Lauer's constructions emanate joy in the act of creation.

COURTESY GALLERIE ERIC LAMOND/GBR

HERBERT TILBERG/ARND BRONKHORST



Newcomer Ali Seif Nasser shows a sure eye for color and a playful line in works like *Magos*, 1989.

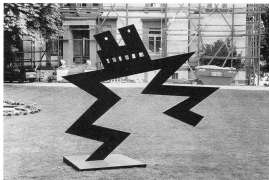
In works such as *Villa for a Tax Dodger*, Marjanow cheekily borrows from Bauhaus traditions to create fantasy structures of great technical precision that parody human foibles and institutions. Richter balances hard-edge Constructivist forms against playful, comielike figures of his own invention. Katharina Frisch, whose work was recently featured at the Kunstverein in Münster, favors accumulations of everyday objects—vases, plaster madonnas, dime-store figurines—that she composes into precise cubes, pyramids, and martially rigid rows.

Far more than in any other European country, keeping abreast of new trends means keeping on the move. The local Kunstvereine—"art societies" financed by membership fees—are often a good source of information about up-and-coming talents. Seasoned dealers like Cologne's Maenz, Munich's Six Friedrich, and Düsseldorf's Ulrike Schmela are also important sources. Often, however, the best discoveries can be made in less-established galleries—Darin Hartje, Klaus Werth, or the WaschSalon in Frankfurt; Zimmerman or Ungers in Cologne; the Gallery Zwingler in Berlin.

And sometimes the locations are less obvious. The city of Hannover, for example, rightly prides itself on the Sprengel Museum and the Kestner Gesellschaft, which regularly mounts shows of impeccable curatorial excellence. Since the Gallery Brusberg departed for Berlin, Hannover scarcely ranks as a mecca for collectors, but the city's Gallery Barz has one of the most imaginative and consistent programs in West Germany. Its varied roster includes 50-year-old Ulla Lauer, who came late to her career but now produces painted reliefs and constructions that radiate a spontaneous joy in the act of creation, and 27-year-old Wolfgang Kessler, a virtuoso painter who favors the diptych, in which he juxtaposes a traditional image from architecture, art history, or the annals of kitsch with a cool, technological symbol.

Those prepared to leave the beaten track should also visit Annelie Brusten's pavilion in Wuppertal. Perched on a hill like a miniature teahouse, the modest space does not discourage artists, who often contrive to fill it with a single monumental work constructed for the site. Recently the Gallery Brusten showed new paintings by Silke Leverkühne, whose recurrent subjects are people, landscapes, and urban spaces, seen from unconventional angles. Sometimes irrelevant details recorded by an amateur photographer are rendered in oil or pastels in her flat, angular style, and the newer works push even closer to abstraction, allowing the subjects to yield to the act of painting itself.

In the decade of megashows and megabucks, Annelie Brusten's motto might



Balancing Constructivism and comics: Düsseldorf sculptor Klaus Richter's playful *Monster*, 1987.