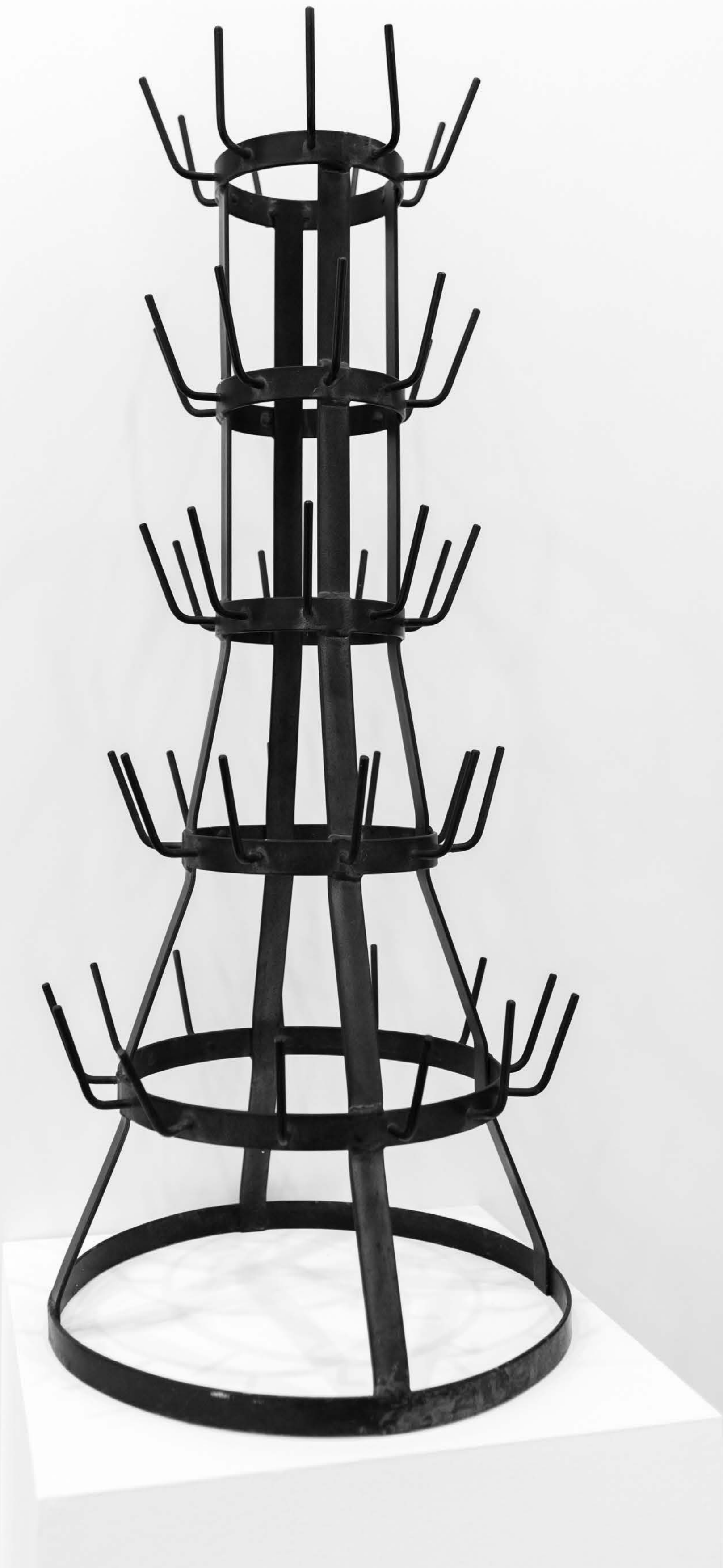


# Art Los Angeles Reader

IN THE DIRECT PATH OF LOS ANGELES' GROWTH  
TOWARDS THE OCEAN | N° 2 | JANUARY 2016



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**FRONT COVER:** Noah Davis, Imitation of Marcel Duchamp, 2014, iron bottle rack, 39 x 17 x 17 in., collection of Carlos Garcia and James Harris, Seattle, photo by Gina Clyne

**BACK COVER:** Venice Oil Field, ca. 1937, photo by Herman Schultheis, courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library

*From the Editor*

“LA is like nowhere,” the greasy, maudlin hero of Gregg Araki’s 1997 *Nowhere* rasps in the film’s opening line. *Nowhere*’s campy death-by-aliens, raucous kink, and wry malaise might support the character’s sentiment (his name is Dark), but its locations and totalizing chic might prove the opposite: sunny Los Angeles is like nowhere, that is, like nowhere else.

On the corner of Ventura and Newcastle, Time to Buy Liquor’s neon glows chroma key green; the sign is larger than the store itself, serving as an omen of the city’s will to swallow the characters whole. Blond, scraggly Bart faces a heroin comedown atop the Beaux Arts converted lofts on 5th and Main, hanging from the 1920s Hotel Rosslyn sign, which advertizes the then-ludicrous sum, a “million dollar hotel.” Perhaps it makes sense that in an America bent West, our coast would face its ruin first—this is the last installment in Araki’s teen apocalypse trilogy, after all, and a (morally) bankrupt west coast makes a snappy analog for wasted youth (children are our future, indeed). But it isn’t all so bleak in Araki’s world. Besides some sumptuous neologisms and plenty of bodies for self-shattering sex, LA offers everyone enough room to make total installations out of any interior space: giant murals, dripping plaid or polka dots, flower-encrusted walls. Place and people act in symbiosis, even if it’s the symbiosis of a parasite.

In the pages that follow, the architectures of Los Angeles feature as a character. And like the most fascinating characters, they don’t always follow orders. Sometimes, LA conspires with, and sometimes it antagonizes the artists, writers, and thinkers collected here. Certainly, it never agrees to a role as a set, an extra, or even purely a muse. Jonathan Griffin’s contribution deals with some artist’s cocky approach to concrete sprawl: spray paint. To Kate Wolf, the history of LA River might as well be art history; artists, she reveals, have shaped its future, as much as the river has shaped LA. For both Catherine Wagley and Travis Diehl, LA’s downtown real estate boosterism serves as compelling metaphor (or is it metonym?) for the future of painting. Forest Nash highlights Gaylen Gerber’s contribution to a Chinatown show as a pivotal moment in the artist’s practice. Perhaps here, Gerber makes an LA move: from ground to figure.

Maybe the dazzle camouflage of LA’s oil industry, a history uncovered in Sasha Archibald’s piece, inspired the real phonies of LA’s more famous industry, Hollywood. Maybe Hollywood has produced ethnic identities beyond authenticity, as Amy Yao suggests in her interview with Evan Moffitt. Besides features on artists, movements, and LA’s cultural inheritance more broadly, this publication includes two artist contributions made specifically for these pages, works by LA artists Math Bass and Lauren Davis Fisher, and an augmented reality platform by the Echo Park gallery Smart Objects. I’m also especially proud to present words by Karon Davis and Helen Molesworth on the late Noah Davis’ *Imitation of Wealth*, a work that insists the architectures of art in Los Angeles are inseparable from the social conditions that produce them.

This publication makes no claim for a comprehensive view. Rather, the pieces collected here reveal some colors in the kaleidoscope of what it (art?) looks like through the prism of Los Angeles. Sometimes LA is just the space to ignore everything that isn’t you. Sometimes it’s the fabric that links you with everyone else. In editing the second issue of this publication, it’s certainly been the latter. I’d like to thank all of the contributors, the artists whose work is featured, and Los Angeles, which has proven a worthy adversary, and an even better ally. LA is nowhere, if not ours.

—Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal

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# NIGHT PAPERS

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7



WINTER 2016





# Spray

*In Southern California, the use of spray paint to create flawless color gradients reflects a tension between the sky and the ground, the sacred and the profane.* by Jonathan Griffin



Ultimately, it's about God, or at least a whiff of the divine. And also about not getting shit on your hands.

The human body is a frail and unreliable instrument, and when put in charge of applying marks to a pictorial surface—the hand holding a paintbrush, for instance—flaws and inconsistencies are bound to arise. Ever since Western art uncoupled itself from the sacred, artists have come to embrace those flaws; for many, in fact, they constitute the fundamental essence of their style.

In 1913 Marcel Duchamp delivered a rejoinder to what he saw as centuries of sentimental subjectivism when he dropped three-meter-long pieces of string onto a canvas, and fixed them where they fell. *3 Standard Stoppages* is, in one sense, a joke about precision, but it also achieves its own kind of perfection through the removal of the artist's hand. Duchamp traced the same threads onto other works, including his last painting on canvas, *Tu m'* (1918). Nearly a century later, Cory Arcangel updated Duchamp's perfect joke in his series of "Photoshop Gradient Demonstrations," in which he generated immaculate color-field prints from Photoshop and incorporated the instructions for replicating them in the title.

The artist who most famously followed Duchamp by dropping lines onto a canvas was Jackson Pollock. But between Duchamp and Pollock there exist tangled lines of influence, predominated by the Surrealist allegiance with chance as a generative tool, especially through techniques of automatic drawing. Pollock also studied the sacred sand drawings of the Navajo, who would cast colored sand onto the ground in ritual designs. Most significantly of all, in 1936 he attended David Alfaro Siqueiros' Experimental Workshop in New York. Siqueiros, one of "los tres grandes" Mexican muralists, encouraged his students to experiment with poured paint and commercial airbrush techniques. In *Cosmos and Disaster* (1936) Siqueiros' painting methods embody the dichotomy of the work's title: splinters and sand embedded in the paint describe the abstracted disaster in the lower part of the image; above, the cosmos is conjured with airbrushed and dripped paint.

In Los Angeles, thanks to airborne vapor and particulate matter, a perfect gradient backdrop exists as an almost constant contrast to the crude impasto daubs of the streets and sidewalks, and to the stucco exteriors of many buildings. *Cosmos and disaster* have often provided philosophical antipodes for the city's self-image: it

looks out onto the ocean and up at the sky, inclined to the metaphysical and astrological; or, it's an unsustainable settlement, shadowed by imminent catastrophe, in inexorable, abject decline. Using sprayed paint, many Los Angeles artists have adopted the visual signifiers of these thematic poles.

The spray can, the airbrush, and the spatter gun offered artists an alternative to the inadequacy of their own physiognomies by removing the hand from the process of picture-making. Paint could be applied to a surface with inhuman evenness, allowing one color to transition to the next with infinitesimally smooth gradation. Harking back to the Duchampian readymade, Light and Space artist De Wain Valentine once said of his dyed resin sculptures that "all the work is about the sea and the sky. I would like to have some way, a magic saw, to cut out large chunks of ocean or sky and say 'here it is.'" (1) James Turrell did exactly that, with his series of "Skyspaces," which he began in the 1970s. In many of his gallery installations using artificial colored light, he strives to replicate the perfect gradients of the sky at dawn or dusk.

The Light and Space movement, dominated by sculptors and installation artists, laid down something of a gauntlet for painters who were hard pressed to match their marvelous effects with formless color. Aerosols and airbrushes allowed them to get close; transformed into a beam of atomized and radiating color, sprayed paint is akin to light itself.

Two pioneering Californian ceramists, Ken Price and Ron Nagle, also used paint to approximate the spectral colors of the luminous firmament in their work, often contrasting it against the earthbound, gastrointestinal corpus. (Clay is, after all, ultimately nothing more than dirt.) Akin to light works by Turrell or Robert Irwin, both ceramicists used sprayed paint to manufacture in-between colors that are more feelings than tones. A late work by Nagle, *Walking with Sadie* (1998), is based on the shape of a dog turd, mounted on a sliver of glossy red and dusted with contrasting blue and orange mists of paint. Form is utterly vanquished by color; it has become a sublime and ascendant object.

The other reason to spray paint onto any surface is to avoid touching that surface in the first place. If you want to apply a mark not to a canvas or a product but directly onto the world itself—onto the grimy concrete, brick, and metal of the built environment—the aerosol can is ideal. It overlays almost any texture. You don't get

dirt from the wall or sidewalk on your pen or your brush, a one-way imposition that taggers and street artists appreciate.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was largely commercial artists who adopted spray techniques—to paint a sunset onto the tank of a Harley or an out-of-focus background for a photo shoot. In the 1960s, all kinds of low-rent artistry suggested themselves to a generation of artists who were trying to shape their own version of high-brow culture. Billy Al Bengston, who had worked in a motorcycle shop, and Judy Chicago, his student, both sprayed their paint over sharply masked shapes on aluminum, Masonite, and car hoods. These were paintings that were built to weather the abrasion of the streets, even if they would never really need to. They moved smoothly along the interface between terra firma and the air.

Ed Ruscha, who claims to find many of the appropriated words that feature in his images from his automotive *dérives* around the city, often sets them against sprayed backgrounds or situates them beneath airbrushed skies. In the painting *Me* (1999), the two capitalized letters of the title are masked against a light mist of sprayed red paint, tucked against the right edge of the canvas. A monumental snow-covered mountain dominates the center, making the word—and the meaning pegged to it—feel as insubstantial as air.

Splatter, by contrast, is what happens when spray falls short of vapor and becomes diarrhea. Paul McCarthy and Richard Jackson have flung paint through various mechanisms as a critique, in part, of Pollock's brand of airborne Abstract Expressionism. Jackson is especially fond of creating sculptures of animals such as dogs or deer that fire paint out of their assholes.

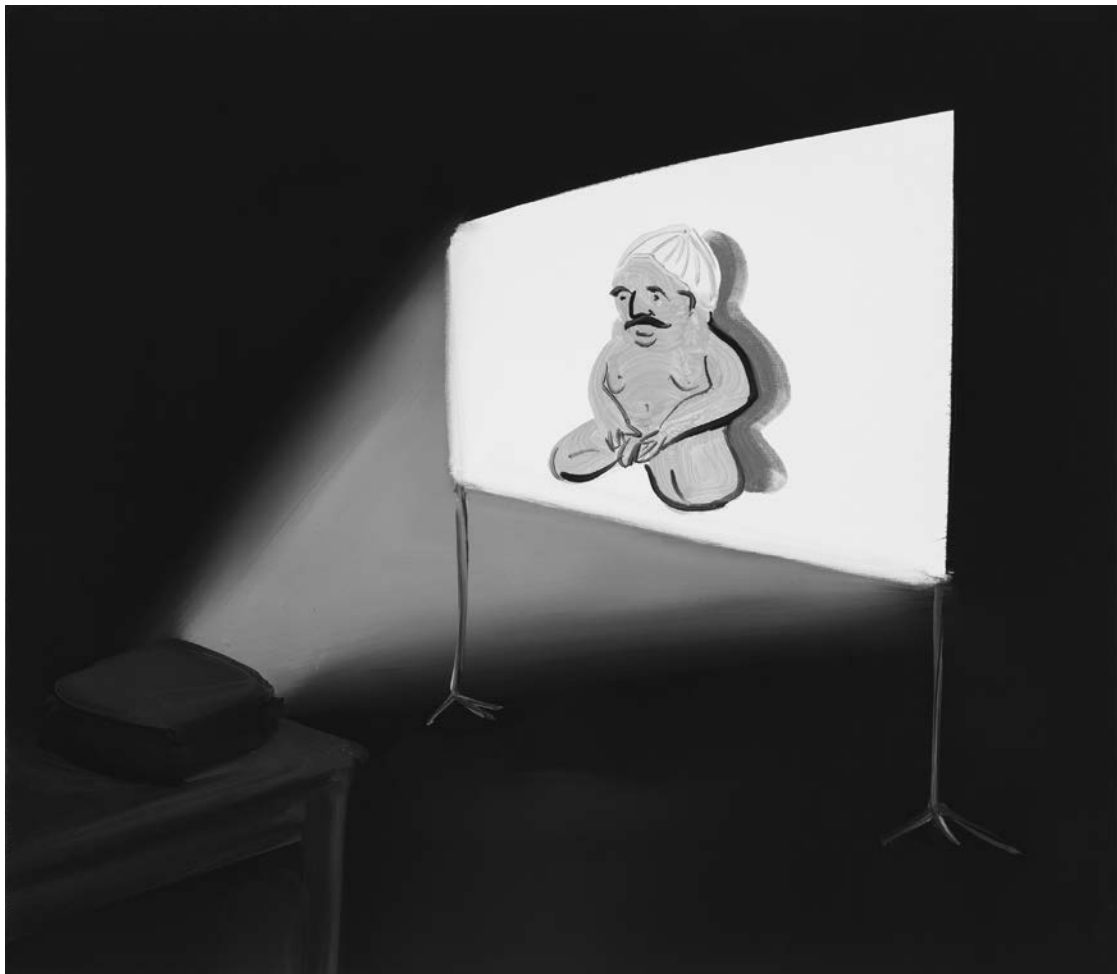
Many contemporary practitioners draw on spray paint's dual associations with transcendence and abjection. In recent paintings by Los Angeles-based Tala Madani, glowing light sources and sprayed gradient backgrounds are contrasted with the wet forms of loosely rendered, pathetic protagonists. In *Smiley Clean* (2015), a layer of goopiness—and the insinuation of decay—arrives in the form of tricolor toothpaste dispensed by a toddler into three men's mouths. In *O* (2015), a man blissfully hugs his own enormous, serpentine, and gushing cock.

In 2005, John Knuth began experimenting with using houseflies as aerial couriers to deliver color to the surface of the canvas. By feeding captive flies sugar water mixed

ABOVE\_ Ed Ruscha, *Me*, 1999, © Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist and Gagolian Gallery

1. *A Good Time to Be West: 12 California Sculptors*, directed by Robin Lough (1984; Los Angeles: California/International Arts Foundation, 2010), DVD.

**IF YOU WANT TO APPLY A MARK NOT TO A CANVAS OR A PRODUCT BUT DIRECTLY ONTO THE WORLD ITSELF—ONTO THE GRIMY CONCRETE, BRICK, AND METAL OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT—THE AEROSOL CAN IS IDEAL.**



**ABOVE\_** Tala Madani, *Projection*, 2013, oil on canvas, 14 x 16 in. (35.56 x 40.64 cm), courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery

with paint, he created gaseous color fields that recalled the spray paintings of Jules Olitski from the 1960s, except that any beauty in Knuth's paintings was cut with the queasy knowledge that each tiny mark was not spray but a tiny speck of vomit. Another Los Angeles-based artist, Alex Israel, makes paintings that also hark back to Olitski's early work, except that Israel employs not flies but scenic artists from the Warner Bros. studios to spray graduated pastel tones on his shaped canvases. Both artists find novel ways not to get their hands dirty. Indeed, the untouched quality of their work is essential to its sinister romance.

In his superhuman aspiration to capture nature, Valentine's "here it is" touches on another function of artists' use of atmospheric color shifts: to commodify the ethereal. In 2014, the New York artist Rob Pruitt, who titled a recent series of airbrushed gradient canvases "The Suicide Paintings," set up a spray booth in the Beverly Hills branch of Barney's and supervised the custom dyeing of J Brand white jeans. When Pae White was invited to create a project at the 2004 Frieze Art Fair, she had the fleet of VIP cars individually sprayed with acid-hued gradient paintjobs. For both projects, the instant overlay of a multi-hued color gradient

transforms something banal and mass-produced into something uniquely authored and visually spectacular.

Is it a coincidence that several Los Angeles-based artists who employ spray techniques all studied around the same time at Art Center, a college known for its successful commercial and automotive design departments? Sterling Ruby, Aaron Curry, Joshua Nathanson, and Nathan Hylden all graduated from the MFA program in 2005 or 2006. More revealing than the association with industrial processes is each artist's use of misted color as a foil for the gestural, the handmade or the debased in their work.

Hylden lays bands of translucent sprayed paint across wetly brushed marks that almost parody gestural abstraction. For Nathanson, the airbrushed line is a cipher for expediency, for a speed of application that recalls the brush tool in Photoshop, led shakily by a mouse. (Or the hurried application of a tag along a freeway before the cops arrive.)

In Curry's recent paintings, spray provides a supernatural or celestial glow that often emanates from the crude lines of his brushwork—a crudeness that is carefully manufactured. In neon tones against black backgrounds, paintings such as

*Cosmicgasmatical* (2015) also reproduce the cheap tricks of Aerosolgrafia pavement artists and heavy metal T-shirts. In renderings of the infinite, the gutter is never far away. All of these artists manage to fuse the exacting craftsmanship of Finish Fetish with gestural Ab-Ex painting—two movements that, in the 1960s, could not be further apart. Spray is painting at both a physical and conceptual remove, a technique which allows marks to be made with critical detachment but which also, crucially, leaves the door open to visual seduction.

The invention of spray paint, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowed us to have something unavailable to artists for centuries—a flawless surface—instantly and effortlessly. Yet the discourse around spray in contemporary art is one of paradox and ambivalence, especially in Southern California. The kind of perfection that an aerosol or airbrush nozzle dispenses seems always to require its antithesis to appear as well, perhaps to temper the anxiety of having precisely what we thought we wanted, much too easily. ■

**JONATHAN GRIFFIN** is a freelance critic based in Los Angeles and a contributing editor for *Frieze* magazine.

# Bernhardt Over Los Angeles

*Katherine Bernhardt's mural teases out tensions between the art establishment, market agendas and a changing Downtown Los Angeles.* by Catherine Wagley



When Venus Over Manhattan, the Upper East Side gallery run by financier Adam Lindemann, opened its Los Angeles satellite, it painted its new Downtown LA building Pepto-Bismol pink. Since the gallery's New York building was gray and right next to the uptown space of blue chip giant, Gagosian Gallery, Venus Over Los Angeles, located in an industrial district new to the art world right beneath a condemned bridge, felt very much like the art establishment's attempt at pioneering. Their building was a target for graffiti and tagging early on, according to artists who worked on the same street, called Anderson St. It became less of a target after July 2015, however, when the gallery commissioned painter Katherine Bernhardt to paint the mural *Fruit Salad* on the building's north face. It includes blunt, ham-fisted cigarettes that swim amid toucans and tropical fruit—bananas and cut-open papayas. Pink and purple figure prominently. It would be attractively impudent in smoother locations, but in a rough stretch of a rapidly changing downtown, where residents already fear that traces of a long industrial history will be erased, it's harder to read the mood. Is its intentional "dumbness"—Bernhardt has used "dumb" in exhibition titles before—feeding into the stereotype of LA as flimsy La La Land? Or is it refusing to bow to stiff notions of art's import?

In September 2015, Jerry Saltz wrote an article in *New York* magazine decrying the marginalization of Bernhardt and other "bad boy female artists" (he did not call them "bad girls"). Less than a month later, Bernhardt's whole show at Carl Freedman Gallery in London sold out. Paintings ranged in price from \$8,000 to

\$50,000. But, as Saltz notes, though she has been painting and showing for over 15 years, she hasn't been included in any major institutional exhibitions. She wasn't in Documenta. She wasn't in MoMA's "The Forever Now" survey of 21<sup>st</sup>-century painting (on Instagram, she posted a photo of herself holding up her middle finger in front of that exhibition's introductory wall text, joining a chorus of artists who took issue with the show). In Bernhardt's case, the establishment and the market seem to be at odds.

Maybe the textures and idiosyncrasies of Bernhardt's work butt up against "norms" of contemporary practice. Maybe her attitude—a devil-may-care offhandedness combined with respect for pattern—keeps her from being seen as "serious," even as it appeals to buyers. New York-based Bernhardt, who wore heart-shaped sunglasses and used clipped sentences when interviewed by *W Magazine* in 2008, spent the first decade of her career painting garish portraits of fashion models. Kate Moss would have dark, thick, dripping mascara; Natalia Vodianova might have damp-looking eyes, purple lips, and impossibly skinny arms. Then, about three years ago, Bernhardt abruptly shifted gears, making flatter, tapestry-like paintings of consumer goods. Doritos and Coke cans, hamburgers, cigarettes, and socks coexisted, hovering on canvas against sloppily colored-in backgrounds. There was no depth at all, no hint of shadow.

Early on in this new phase, Bernhardt and her husband, Youssef Jdia, collaborated on a show called "Holiday Services" at the Hole in New York. Jdia had been in the studio, watching his wife and their son,



when he started pinning or pasting different objects onto her in-progress paintings. The paintings started looking a lot like the rugs he sold and traded for a living. So they included Berber rugs in the exhibition too, staking them on the floor. Sometimes, Bernhardt and Jdia would sit on the rug piles, their son and other children playing nearby. Photos of the exhibition have a clubby casualness, as does the press release, which describes the Moroccan Jdia as someone who “does not consider himself an ‘artist’... but says: ‘I felt happy making the collages and that it was a good experience.’” It also references the reggae, reggaeton, soca, and gospel music that plays outside Bernhardt’s Flatbush studio, before describing her as a “celebrated contemporary artist.” Her status as an artist seemed secondary to the social mood.

The weekend the mural at Venus Over Los Angeles debuted, in late July 2015, the gallery introduced it with a barbecue. Or, rather, a taco party, where guests drank Tecate and horchata and sat at picnic tables. That weekend, I accidentally showed up a day early, on Saturday, to find the alley behind Venus Over Los Angeles mostly empty and completely empty of art people. The mural was there, but looking out of place on its own. Sunday afternoon, I was back, eating tacos and talking with artists about criminally low-paying arts non-profits and the art industry’s role in gentrification. All the while, a small crowd congregated outside the barbecue, non-invited passersby at least as intrigued by the vibe of the event as the artwork. The mural looked much more itself this way, surrounded by activity, and coolly tinged by that insider-outsider dynamic. Bernhardt’s painted cigarettes were key that day; their ash-covered ends all face west, toward the country’s outermost edge, more pessimistic than aspirational. They contrast the fruit and birds around them, putting a damper on the festive mood.

In the weeks after the mural debuted, some critics took Venus Over Los Angeles to task for its PR. The gallery’s press release called *Fruit Salad* Bernhardt’s “first foray” into mural creation and a “prelude” to her New York show. It also said that the open industrial environment of Downtown Los Angeles was clearly ideal for Bernhardt’s “bold style.” Downtown LA became the empty canvas and the place to test out an artist new to a big Manhattan gallery. In a lengthy Facebook thread initiated by art writer Carol Cheh, artists and writers wondered if the mural was an attempt to regulate public space, to control downtown’s unruliness using art as a tool. In one artist’s words, was the mural “a wrapping paper used to cover up the complexities of a community”? Certainly, it would have seemed more honest had the gallery framed *Fruit Salad* as a way of staking claim to a changing environment neither the gallerists nor artist understood quite yet. But businesses, art businesses included, tend not to be self-aware in such ways, and the desired promotional narratives commonly obfuscate the more provocative realities.

Before Bernhardt transitioned to compositions of foodstuff and commodities, I would have associated her with Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik, artists who take a watery, stylized approach to celebrity and frequently approximate its glossy mag aesthetic. It can be hard to tell whether they’re guiltily deifying mainstream ideas

of glamour or whether they’re criticizing by cannibalizing—that blurriness is part of their appeal.

After her approach shifted, Bernhardt aligned with a different kind of girl’s club, a group of well-educated women who don’t seem that interested in appearing art-smart (though they are). Laura Owens, Mari Eastman, Rebecca Morris, Allison Miller, Mary Weatherford, and sometimes Dana Schutz might belong to this group. They aren’t “bad boy female artists” because bad boys of the past (Pollock, Chamberlain, and, later, Schnabel or Baselitz) and present (Sterling Ruby, Dan Colen, Nate Lowman, etc.) express confidence in a more entitled way—Colen’s brazen gum paintings or Schnabel’s smashed plate assemblages, for example. Yet, like those boys, they paint in a way that suggests they don’t need permission. They can be loosely abstract, and borrow easily from craft, pop, and expressionism. They can also be sentimental and sweet, if they so choose. Or even bullheaded. “There’s no limit as to what the work is referencing,” Laura Owens said in a 2003 interview, then went on to talk about how she had no shame in being grandiose or ridiculous, and about how commingling disturbs purists who prefer clear transitions and historical lineages.

Bernhardt refused to justify the pronounced change in her work during a January 2015 interview with Ashley Garrett for Whitehot Magazine. Instead she cited the quirky 2002 film *Adaptation*, in which the orchid-obsessed Susan Orlean character, played by Meryl Streep, questions the orchid thief John Laroche about the various interests he’s thrown himself into over the years.

For a long time, Laroche collected turtles. Then he stopped. Asks Orlean, “If you really loved something, wouldn’t a little bit of it linger...?”

Laroche replies, “Look I’ll tell you a story, ‘right. I once fell deeply, you know, profoundly in love with tropical fish. Had sixty god-damn fish tanks in my house. I skin-dived to find just the right ones. Anasiltriumus virginicus, paulcanfaciliers, traiderdon capostratus, you name it, then one day I say, fuck fish. I renounce fish. I vow never to set foot in that ocean again, that’s how much fuck fish.”

“But why?” Orlean asks.

“Done with fish,” Laroche replies.

Bernhardt goes on to describe seeing some graffiti one day near Union Square that included a popsicle, a watermelon, and a dollar sign and wanting to do something like that, combine a graffiti aesthetic and

foodstuff, and maybe also tropes from the Moroccan rugs her husband had been selling.

She had her first solo show of work in this vein at Canada Gallery in March 2014, “Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous, Funny Patterns,” in which hamburgers and basketballs featured in one painting. Computer screens, laptops, and pizza slices featured in another. She titled each after what it contained. *Smoke* depicts stacks of cigarettes. The items are intentionally spaced. Bernhardt has clear control over her canvas, and so messiness of the marks reads as strategic affectation—“stupid” becomes a skill. She’s involved in a balancing act, conveying the unhealthy danger of the objects she paints, while still owning her version of crudeness.

The loosely abstract girls’ club has growing prominence in downtown Los Angeles. With the support of Gavin Brown, painter Laura Owens runs a space near Venus Over Los Angeles, 356 Mission, where a show of Rebecca Morris’ work recently came down. Bernhardt’s mural will be up indefinitely, a silent witness while rents downtown rise exponentially as developers jump on what they perceive as an art-scene bandwagon, while a cleaned-up version of the industrial aesthetic gradually takes hold. It’s frustrating to think of Bernhardt’s *Fruit Salad* as part of the cleaning up, though certainly it exists because big galleries began to find Downtown Los Angeles appealing. It’s more useful if the commingling of sensibilities—the crudeness and flatness of Bernhardt’s aesthetic, and the defacing that will likely occur as the mural remains—could be part of a story about the mess that inevitably ensues when a culture industry inserts itself into an area with a different history. This story runs parallel to the story of Bernhardt’s success: her quick shifts, mixed references, and on-purpose dumbness, both a boon for the business of art and a respite from art’s self-aggrandizing seriousness. ■

CATHERINE WAGLEY writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

**IT CAN BE HARD TO TELL WHETHER BERNHARDT GUILTILY DEIFIES MAINSTREAM IDEAS OF GLAMOUR OR WHETHER SHE’S CRITICIZING BY CANNIBALIZING— THAT BLURRINESS IS PART OF HER APPEAL.**

OPPOSITE BELOW\_ Pool painting by Katherine Bernhardt for *Artsy Projects: Nautilus*, photo by Silvia Ros for Artsy

ABOVE\_ Katherine Bernhardt, *Fruit Salad*, 2015, photo by Josh White

BELOW\_ Chris Cooper in *Adaptation*, 2002



# Crude Disguise

*The hidden history of oil in Los Angeles* by Sasha Archibald



**ABOVE\_** Aerial view of THUMS-operated, man-made Island White in Long Beach Harbor, California, 1986, photo by Thomas Kelsey/*Los Angeles Times*, courtesy of UCLA Special Collections

**BELOW\_** Graves and oil wells at Sunnyside Cemetery in Long Beach, ca. 1937, photo by Herman Schultheis, courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library

1\_ This simile is furnished by Upton Sinclair in *Oil!* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 62.

2\_ California State Mining Bureau, *Thirteenth Report of the State Mineralogist* (Sacramento, 1896), 579-581. Cited in Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 124.

3\_ "Urban Crude: The Oil Fields of the Los Angeles Basin." The Center for Land Use Interpretation. n.d. <<http://clui.org/ondisplay/urbanocrude/online/regions.html>>.

4\_ Frank Ruchala, "Crude City," in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, Ed. Kozys Varnelis (Barcelona: Actar, 2008), 54-67.

5\_ Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York: Verso, 2008), 235.

THE CAMOUFLAGE OF THE INDUSTRY SUSTAINS THE PALATABLE ILLUSION THAT OIL IS SOMEHOW IMMATERIAL RATHER THAN THICK, STICKY, AND PUNGENT.

Buttressing the eastern edge of Culver City is the Inglewood Oil Field: a thousand acres of rolling hills dotted with kinetic hulks of rusted iron. The rigs seesaw slowly and rhythmically, like dinosaur automatons pecking for grain. The land is blanketed with a thicket of power lines and dusty dirt roads. The airport is not far; jets pass low on this horizon. Upon first encounter, or second, or tenth, the landscape is unplaceable and alien. On either side of the fields are the familiar signposts of the city: strip malls, single-story stucco, acreage of parking lots, and oddities such as the headquarters of See's Candies, quaintly adorned with plate-glass windows that showcase chocolates to passersby who never seem to pass by. The Inglewood Oil Field is brashly incongruent with such urban banality. When artist Josephine Meckseper installed oil rigs in a vacant lot in New York City, she fabricated spurious machines, bobbing up and down only for show. The LA oil fields seem equally nonsensical and "conceptual," and yet they are the opposite: real rigs that yield real oil.

In ways both explicit and subterranean, oil determined the shape and feel of Los Angeles. Just as the nomadic tribes of upstate New York settled their winter quarters around that year's moose kill, the city fed on oil.<sup>(1)</sup> Oil was first struck in 1892 on Colton Street, at the current site of Echo Park's municipal swimming pool parking lot. (There is no plaque.) Seven years later there were some 1,100 rigs, set "as thick as holes in a pepper box" on a narrow ribbon of land that stretched from downtown to Vermont Avenue.<sup>(2)</sup> By the 1920s, Los Angeles was supplying a quarter of the world's oil, roughly equivalent to how much Saudi Arabia supplies today.<sup>(3)</sup>

Pumping oil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century required building derricks, tall triangular scaffolds that sat atop the well. Derricks were made of lumber before they were made of steel; Los Angeles' demand for timber provoked the first stripping of Oregon old-growth forests—forests that were felled, planed, shipped south, and immediately rendered into what were commonly described as "forests." One of the densest of these reassembled forests was Signal Hill, so covered in spiny protuberances it was nicknamed "Porcupine Hill." (Oilmen were called "wildcatters.") Oil derricks were the first vertical element of the nascent city. Before there were skyscrapers, the best views of Los Angeles were to be had by scaling an oil derrick. An intrepid climber could see all the way the ocean.

When the Santa Fe Railway, which carted crates of citrus fruit east and throngs of Middle Americans west, entered the Los Angeles basin, the train engines switched from coal to oil, a practical measure that indicated the invisible threshold of an economy specific to Los Angeles. As urban planner Frank Ruchala describes, Los Angeles was first fueled by coal, the cost of which, imported at great distance, imposed a natural limit on the city's size. (4) The discovery of oil made Los Angeles' big-city dreams possible, just as it created the conditions for Los Angeles' infamous spread. Within twenty years of the first oil strike, Pacific Electric ran on oil; Southern California's ports were transporting oil and oil-related products; and metal and chemical manufacturers, lured by cheap fuel, made Los Angeles their home base. Los Angeles' streetlights were the first in the nation to be electrified, casting a

Bible-worthy symbol of technological advancement and social good. Signal Hill was and remains an oil industry town, and Beverly Hills was first an oil dream gone bad—a plot of land purchased for oil speculation that failed to yield. (There is oil in Beverly Hills, but at a depth beyond the reach of that era's drills.) Desperate to recoup his costs, oilman Burton Green brought in a city planner who laid out 90210 in one sweep, with a uniformity of concept that specified not only the size of the lots and the width of the sidewalks, but the types of trees lining the sidewalks and the distance between each tree. In its early years, the main attraction of Beverly Hills was the Speedway, a wooden board track where enormous crowds gathered to watch automobile races. The absence of oil birthed Beverly Hills and the spectacle of its consumption made it desirable.

The indelible impact of the oil industry is most felt in the city's orbit around the automobile. Cheap asphalt paved the roads of Los Angeles long before other cities found miles of pavement practical. At the same time, Los Angeles gas prices were unbelievably thrifty—half the national average. Car ownership soared. One in forty-three Americans owned a car in 1915, as compared to one in eight Angelenos. Nudged by oil, Los Angeles tumbled out across hundreds of miles of empty, arid land. By 1940, it had already earned its dubious distinction as America's most decentralized city, with the vast majority of the population living in single-family homes strung together by cheap asphalt.

Roads became not only the arteries of Los Angeles, but the city's very heartbeat. As Norman Klein relates in an anecdote included in *The History of Forgetting*, Jean-Paul Sartre already noticed the "atrophy of the sidewalk" when he visited the city in 1945. Walter Benjamin later read Sartre's essay on Los Angeles and clipped this quotation, scrawling a handwritten rejoinder. A city is always "a blind courier," Benjamin wrote, meaning that Los Angeles was not a different breed of city but the essence of city itself—a city distilled to its sparest means of conveyance.<sup>(5)</sup> It is fitting that the stretch of La Cienega from which the Inglewood oil fields are most visible was designed as a freeway and still drives like one: a three-minute interlude of no traffic lights, no storefronts, no strip malls, and no sidewalks. Drivers use it to make up lost time. Oil is the invisible architect of this accelerated dash, a madcap speedway produced by the same landscape it splices in two.

In 1969, filmmaker Jacques Demy directed a love poem to Los Angeles, *Model Shop*, in which the rigs have a prominence rivaling that of Demy's characters. Having landed in Los Angeles from Paris and discovered the city to be more charming than its reputation suggested, Demy treats the rigs as a delectable gift of incongruence. The narrative of *Model Shop* concerns an ambivalent young man who lives ambivalently with his girlfriend next door to an oil rig. In the opening scene, she serves breakfast on an outdoor patio in a bikini, shouting to be heard over the towering rig a few feet away.

*Model Shop* captures a visual experience of Los Angeles that no longer exists. As is well documented by the Center for Land Use Interpretation, as well as various historians and city enthusiasts, the majority of Los Angeles' oil rigs have been muffled and disguised. Some are casually plunked to the side of a chain store parking lot, as if to suggest that an oil rig is worth no more attention than the dumpsters. Others are nestled between houses in new suburban developments where their oddity is nullified by routine. And still others are obfuscated by featureless architecture designed to never catch the eye. At Pico and S. Doheny, for instance, a blocky twelve-story tower that houses forty active wells is painted two tones of beige and vaguely resembles a synagogue. "Oil is deliberately hidden in the city," writes Ruchala. (6) The city permits the construction of new wells, only on condition that they are fully enclosed, landscaped, and encased in soundproofing material. Holding tanks and oil pipelines are opaque, hermetically sealed, and buried, and the methane gas released during the pumping process





is expelled in steel straws disguised as lampposts. The camouflage of the industry sustains the palatable illusion that oil is somehow immaterial rather than thick, sticky, and pungent.

Los Angeles' most ambitious strategies of oil industry concealment rely on the peacock-like principle of what is known as "dazzle camouflage." The Venoco Flower Tower at Beverly Hills High School, for instance, shaped like an oversized chimney and sitting awkwardly beside the school track, is decorated with childish flowers. A more aspiring example is the four man-made islands off San Pedro Bay, just a short distance from shore. Built of dredge and imported rock to accommodate a massive oil operation, each island is replete with palm trees, artificial waterfalls, extensive landscaping, and strategically angled walls designed to deflect sound and limit visibility. The islands were designed by Joseph Linesch in 1965, a landscape architect known for his work on Disneyland. Like the coloring of a red-breasted robin or a fire-bellied toad, Linesch's camouflage is tailored to one specific perspective. In this case, the viewer who needs to be fooled is the sunbather on shore, and the camouflage is successful in that ocean tourists are happy to pretend that the manicured landscape and the magenta and teal floodlights indicate a tropical resort or an exclusive community. Linesch's aesthetic mitigation is a *coup de grace* of metamorphosis; an industry associated with war and toxicity is transformed into the suggestion of pleasure.

A hundred years ago, there was no demand that the apparatus of the oil industry disguise itself. For a time, the city oozed oil; it was part of the atmospheric experience of the city, as endemic as the winter sunshine and the Santa Ana winds. Oil fires were frequent and destructive, children fell in oil pits, workers died when machinery collapsed or they asphyxiated on fumes, and tar seeped up, as it still does, dampening front lawns and downtown sidewalks. Oil companies routinely paid the laundry bills of those who lived near wells, acknowledging that a shift in wind

could speckle a linen suit or ruin a clean batch of towels hanging on the line to dry. Oil was ineffectively stored in tanks made of redwood planks, from which it dripped and pooled on city streets. Accidental leaks left Echo Park so full of oil that in 1907 it caught fire and burned for three days. Finally, refinery soot swirled in eddies on the wind, drifting like pollen and settling in a not-so-fine dust on fireplace mantles and windowsills. Raymond Chandler, who was an oil executive before he was a writer, opens *The Big Sleep* with a description of oil burner soot "rolling across the top of the desk like tumbleweed drifting across a vacant lot."<sup>(7)</sup>

In the early days of the industry, an enterprising oil hunter could locate the site of a productive well with nothing more than his eyes and nose. A 1900 publication advises would-be oilmen to sniff the ground, stir the colored scrim on pools of water, and touch brackish seepages to the tongue, in hopes of tasting the "burning sweet" flavor of oil.<sup>(8)</sup> Once a fecund site was identified, the drilling process required even more intimate acquaintance with oil's distinctive tactility.

Just as the rigs have a starring role in Demy's film, oil itself is on display in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 *There Will Be Blood*. The central attraction of *There Will Be Blood*, based on the novel *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair, is not the misanthropic demise of a great Los Angeles oil baron, but oil's pungent materiality. The film indulges a certain grisly, and nostalgic, pleasure in geysers of blackness—immense volumes of blacker-than-black goop that spray upward with startling velocity. It is a horror film where the site of rupture is not the body, but the earth. More than once the central character, played by Daniel Day Lewis, is coated in a fetish suit of oil, a spectacle as morbidly fascinating as photographs of an oil spill.

Besides its smell and soot and potent viscosity, the sound of oil also permeated Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1895 that the wells made an enormous roar, "churning and creaking" twenty-four hours a day.<sup>(9)</sup> There was the groaning of

wooden beams, hissing of steam from the furnaces, and the labored roll of the machinery belt. Even in *Model Shop*, filmed in 1968, the sound of the rigs is overbearing. Demy, who was particularly attuned to sound (he directed several musicals) lets the rigs groan like the inside of a factory.

Blessed silence from the oil-rig din finally comes when the protagonist, George Matthews, steps into his car. The car rides in *Model Shop* are ecstatic interludes. Once enclosed in an automobile, George enjoys Los Angeles at its best: a hodgepodge of signage, curious people, and the cadence of passing through environs besides one's own. Joan Didion proved herself Demy's kindred spirit when she wrote that driving is the closest thing Angelenos have to religion. Didion's "rapture-of-the-freeway" also relies on the muffling of an aural landscape, a spiritual calm that requires a quiet enclosure to descend.<sup>(10)</sup> As Demy and Didion recognized, the car is the antidote to the unpleasant cacophony of capitalist industry—albeit the dangerous kind of antidote that requires more of the problem. ■

ABOVE\_ Signal Hill, California, 1941, photo by B. Anthony Stewart/ National Geographic Creative

BELOW\_ Gary Lockwood in *Model Shop*, 1969



SASHA ARCHIBALD is a writer and curator in Los Angeles.

6\_ Ruchala, "Crude City," 62.

7\_ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*; *Farewell My Lovely*; *The High Window* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 109.

8\_ Lionel V. Redpath, *Petroleum in California: A Concise and Reliable History of the Oil Industry of the State* (Los Angeles: Lionel V. Redpath, 1900). "Burning sweet" from Margaret Leslie Davis, *Dark Side of Fortune: Triumph and Scandal in the Life of Oil Tycoon Edward L. Doheny* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 36.

9\_ Cited in Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 124.

10\_ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 83.





# Fading into View

*A second look at the evolution of Gaylen Gerber through the archives of Contemporary Art Group* by Forrest Nash

By now, *Contemporary Art Daily* has published documentation of approximately 4,000 projects over the course of seven years. Our newest project, *Contemporary Art Quarterly*, has published hundreds more. This body of exhibitions, performances, biennials and fairs already constitutes a substantial archive of contemporary art, but we have plans to do more with our archives and to grow them. We have already begun pursuing documentation from a handful of closed galleries. To me, the task is urgent: the more time passes, the harder it is to save material from a gallery run by one or two people who have long since moved on. Eventually, we would like to build a new website, to allow the general public to use everything we collect—both for research about specific subjects, and as a means to discover artists, spaces, and connections between them. Here, I hope to make a small step in demonstrating this archive’s potential, using material we’ve collected from two galleries that have since closed, to reveal a defining moment in the practice of Gaylen Gerber.

Gaylen Gerber’s work is generally described in terms of the structure of art—it reflects astutely on the relationship between artists, their expressions, and the context that surrounds those expressions. Gerber situates his own paintings behind, around, or on top of the work of other artists, thereby revealing or distorting the subtle ways in which ground and expression interact. This way of seeing Gerber’s work, a sort of next step in a long line of sensitive thinking about the fundamental structure of art, is certainly important. But Gerber’s work also has a more personal aspect which is, for me, equally important. The two exhibitions pictured here represent a leap in Gerber’s development. For much of his history, you can feel him insist on remaining

invisible and inaudible, on deferring to the voices of other artists. Lately, there has been an increasing assertiveness in his work, a willingness to challenge those who have accepted his work until now to follow it to its logical conclusions. The two exhibitions pictured here represent a key moment in that leap. More, they demonstrate how negotiations between Gerber’s art and the art of those he involves in his practice reflect the human relationships between artists that give rise to them.

The narrative of these exhibitions begins with a three-person exhibition called “Support Group” at Cottage Home in Los Angeles, organized by Michael Ned Holte with Thomas Solomon Gallery. As I understand it, the show’s title refers in part to the idea of grouping three artists whose work often serves a curatorial function, artists used to “supporting” the work of others. As he often does, Gerber proposed an overall exhibition scheme. The work of the other two artists, Kathryn Andrews and Mateo Tannatt, would exist within a perimeter of quiet interventions and works by Gerber: a few flat, monochromatic works painted directly on the walls, plus overriding grey or amber lighting that rendered those works nearly invisible. Characteristically, Gerber would remain at once quiet and surrounding—ignored by the casual viewer but, upon reflection and careful study, omnipresent. Of course, this can be seen as a very aggressive gesture toward the other artists in the show. Whatever Andrews and Tannatt put forward would be inevitably transformed by Gerber’s light, arguably becoming props within his demonstration of the power that the ground can have over expression. Andrews opted to reflect that aggression right back onto Gerber, and in doing so destroyed Gaylen’s ability to remain in the background.

Andrews created a large-scale, outdoor billboard work, right by the entrance to the gallery, that read “it’s all about... gaylen gerber!” Invoking Gerber’s name, Andrews made Gerber’s involvement starkly visible. I can feel both warm affection and frustrated indictment in this gesture. Andrews is playing with Gerber’s structure, using it as the basis for making new art, but she is also hinting at the potential hypocrisy of his deference. This seems to have fascinated Gerber—he acquired the work from Andrews after the exhibition. The following year, Andrews’ billboard reappeared as the center of Gerber’s exhibition at Renwick Gallery, paired with other works that in some way contradict the introverted posture of his practice. Kay Rosen wryly seconded Andrews’ insinuation, calling Gerber “The Man Who Would Be Art King.” Indeed, the press release published by Renwick goes so far as to suggest that his focus on other artists pointing back at him is either “humor, healthy narcissism or something more megalomaniacal.” Before these two exhibitions, Gerber consistently sought the background, to provide a support on which other artists could be seen. Since then, he has widely exhibited controversial works in which he paints directly onto the surfaces of artworks made by other artists, with or without their permission. The Renwick exhibition marked a trajectory that saw him more and more visibly acknowledging what was true all along, that in framing other expressions he is also surrounding them, claiming them, challenging their autonomy. ■

Forrest Nash is the founder and director of Contemporary Art Group, the small non-profit organization that produces *Contemporary Art Daily* and *Contemporary Art Quarterly*.

**OPPOSITE ABOVE.** *Support Group*, Cottage Home Gallery, Los Angeles, 2010

**OPPOSITE MIDDLE.** Hans-Peter Feldmann and B. Wurtz with work by Kathryn Andrews at Renwick Gallery, New York, 2011

**OPPOSITE BELOW.** Installation view of *Support Group*

**ABOVE.** Installation view of *Gaylen Gerber*, Renwick Gallery, New York, 2011

**BELOW.** Installation view of *Support Group*

All photos courtesy of Gaylen Gerber

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Catherine Opie, *Kara*, 2013. Pigment print, 50 x 38½ in. (127 x 97.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles. ©Catherine Opie, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York & Hong Kong.



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Catherine Opie, *Jewelry Boxes #6* from the *700 Nimes Road* portfolio (detail), 2010-11, pigment print, 22 x 16½ in.,  
courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



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# Imitation Suite

*Helen Molesworth and Karon Davis reckon with Noah Davis' Imitation of Wealth.*



The On Kawara is slightly too big, and unlike the mostly mystifying dates commemorated in his “Today” series, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1957 has an intimate referent: the artist’s father’s birthday. Of course, the author of this On Kawara painting isn’t On Kawara, but Noah Davis.

Davis’ remake is half homage, half defiance. He planned to open a space, the Underground Museum, to bring “museum-quality art” to LA’s Arlington Heights. (Tellingly, Davis would often put quotes around the phrase.) When no museum would loan him works from their collections, Davis forged his own. Besides the On Kawara, he made a Jeff Koons vacuum-cum-vitrine, a Duchamp bottle rack, a Smithson from sand and mirrors, and a Dan Flavin from purple halogens. He called the 2013 exhibition *Imitation of Wealth*. It was the Underground Museum’s inaugural show.

Imitating guarded contemporary masterworks, Davis’ *Imitation of Wealth* is a simple gesture and a potent send-up of privilege and access, of the racist allegiance between art and finance. Referencing

Douglas Sirk’s 1959 melodrama, *Imitation of Life*, Davis has inflected his forgeries with that melancholic narrative of racial passing, and with the black body’s commodification in slavery. Remaking readymades, Davis calls out the strategy of appropriation, now hypocritically canonized: the proprietary cult of the object assigns an aura even to those works that called for aura’s ruin. Of course, Davis was attuned to the social function of art as well its history. *Imitation of Wealth* established the Underground Museum as a vibrant community space.

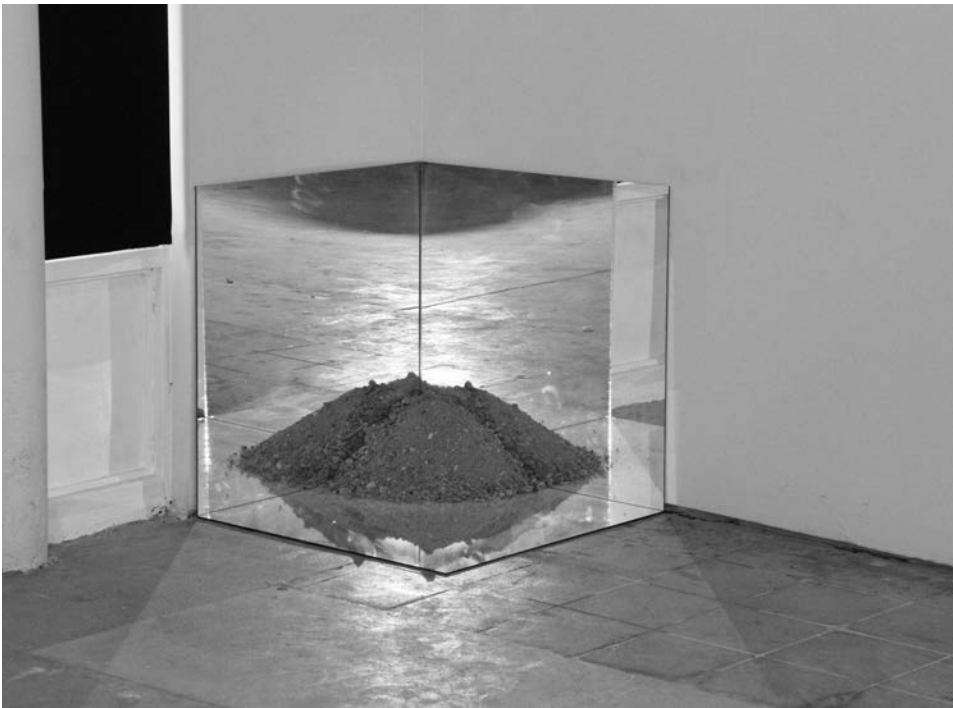
The meanings go on. As does Davis’s legacy. The artist died on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the same day *Imitation of Wealth* reopened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. And Davis lived to see MOCA loan works to the Underground; the first in a series of exhibitions he curated from MOCA’s collection featured works by South African artist William Kentridge. Surely, *Imitation of Wealth* frames MOCA’s continued lending: the restaging thwarts a read of the relationship as experimental beneficence or charity. It puts quotes

around “museum-quality art.” Similarly, as the first exhibition at MOCA’s Storefront, *Imitation of Wealth* might call into question MOCA’s imitation of cash-strapped, artist-run spaces, and its ironic positioning of *Imitation of Wealth* as an authentic product—an authentic product, perhaps, of wealth’s absence. The work resists institutionalization and easy interpretation. Instead, its meanings double. Forge means to make and to fake.

I’ve asked both Helen Molesworth, MOCA’s chief curator and a champion of Davis’ legacy, and Karon Davis, co-founder of the Underground Museum and the artist’s wife, to reckon with *Imitation of Wealth*. They’ve outlined how it began, shaped the Underground, marked a painter’s expanding vision for his community, named systemic injustice with unparalleled humor, and, even, how it might help us remember the artist and the person. For Noah Davis, a small gesture of synecdoche. ■

—Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP\_ Susan Kohner and Juanita Moore in *Imitation of Life*, 1959; Noah Davis, *Imitation of On Kawara*, 2014, painting on canvas, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm), courtesy of the artist; installation views of *Imitation of Wealth*, 2013, photo by Karon Davis, courtesy of the Underground Museum (bottom and left)





# Karon Davis

THE UNDERGROUND MUSEUM WAS TO BE A PLACE OF REFUGE, EDUCATION, SHARING, RELAXATION AND PEACE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD. ART CAN BE A CATALYST FOR THEM ALL.

Christmas 2011 Noah's father, Keven Davis, passed away of cancer. Keven was a prominent sports and entertainment attorney with a deep passion for uplifting his community. The Davis family is one of artists, educators, and philanthropists. Before Keven transitioned, the family promised him that we would finish what he started, but on a larger scale. Noah took the lead by investing all the money Keven left to him into the Underground Museum. He began by gutting four storefronts, creating a space where we could begin our work and continue Keven's vision. He molded this ugly space into a work of art, threw his heart and soul into it. I believe it was part of his healing process. Then soon after Keven's battle with cancer, Noah was diagnosed as well. The UM then took on a bigger mission. It became a love letter to the community and his family.

The Underground Museum was to be a place of refuge, education, sharing, relaxation, and peace in the neighborhood. Art can be a catalyst for them all. So Noah decided to bring museum-quality work to this neighborhood, which at the time was an art desert. It was important to him that work shown at the UM was of certain caliber and that all had access to it regardless their socioeconomic background.

*Imitation of Wealth* developed out of necessity. We had no money to put on a show, and no museum or galleries would lend us work. The Dan Flavin lights were the first. He saw these ugly fluorescent lights hanging in our space. At the time we were actually living there and building it out at the same time. He said, "what if we just use what we have—like these ugly ass lights." A light bulb literally went off in his head: "We can take these lights down and make our own Dan Flavin. We can show people you do not need to be a millionaire to enjoy these works, or even better, that you can create them yourself."

Noah was keen on working with the community and involving the working class there in his ideas. Two doors down, there is a vacuum repair shop, and he saw that they had vintage vacuums in there. He kept asking for the particular model used in the Jeff Koons piece. They couldn't find one. So I looked on Craigslist and found the exact one in the Valley for fifty bucks. The rest is history.

The people in the neighborhood would come in and see the vacuum cleaner and say, "I don't get it." On the other hand, he was able to fool the most astute collectors and gallerists, who believed the work to be real. In some ways, Noah was channeling the African trickster Anansi. You see what you want to see. The most mundane object can transform into something extraordinary. The ugly buzzing fluorescents became art with a new orientation and gels that made them illuminate with an enchanting purple light. He really wanted the community to see beauty in everyday objects and appreciate the beauty of nature at the same time. Which is how the UM's garden was imagined as well.

We would let the community in regardless of our hours. In the spirit of speakeasies of the prohibition era, you could knock on the door, and be let in. It was refreshing for Noah to have conversations with people about the work that had a raw perspective, that was not tainted by art history and theories. He wanted to know how it made them feel. How being in a room flooded with calming purple light made them feel. He wanted to share how you can take the ordinary and make it magnificent. But not all the conversations were about art. He really enjoyed connecting with young people and giving them a place to vent and hide when life was just too much.

Many that enter the space confess that they have never been to MOCA or any other museum or gallery in LA. Some have never traveled outside the neighborhood. Museums can be intimidating and inconvenient. Neighbors are lured into the UM and are curious. The experience sparks curiosity and interest in other art spaces. That is the rewarding part, the exchange that happens in this space. On any given night at the museum the crowd looks like a pot of gumbo. The young, old, black, white, Asian, rich, poor, and everything in between. Many a night Noah and I would sit under the stars in the garden and watch everyone enjoy themselves. His smile could light up a room. It brought him so much joy.

The exhibit at MOCA is a beautiful tribute to my husband, his father and their legacy. Noah's work was ironic and often ahead of its time. I feel MOCA is honoring Noah and his work. It is a special place—truly the artist's museum. I don't know what's more impressive, its collection or its heart. The nature of a storefront is to be accessible and inviting. The show is free and can be seen

24/7. MOCA has given it legs. After its time on Bunker Hill, the UM plans on placing the exhibition in artist-run spaces throughout the country in similar neighborhoods. Eventually it will find its way back home and live permanently at the UM as our storefront.

*Imitation of Wealth* and the UM are both testimonies to the dreamers and entrepreneurs. Noah left his Los Angeles gallery and became an independent artist. When many didn't believe in his ideas he forged his own way. The UM became a place where he could demolish the box they put him in. Here he expressed himself as a curator and artist without limitations. Here artists and guest curators could take a chance and explore their artistic desires.

Noah was a painter's painter, but he was much more than that. His river runs deep and the world will see over time the magnitude of his genius. He was a curator, installation artist, sculptor, filmmaker, philanthropist. He resented the box of "African American figurative painter" because he was so much more. Most artists are. The Underground Museum is Noah's magnum opus. It is a project that continues to grow and evolve. It is living. This spring the body will be complete when the Keven Davis Garden opens. The garden is Noah's exploration and study of the color purple. Visitors can escape the city in the UM, grab a book, enjoy a show, then relax in the garden. Noah believed that everyone was entitled to beauty. Just providing a space of beauty can make a difference in someone's day or life. This project transcends his canvas by transforming space and lives. ■

— As told to Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal

KARON DAVIS is an artist and co-founder of the Underground Museum, Los Angeles.



ABOVE\_ Installation view of *Imitation of Wealth*, 2013, photo by Karon Davis, courtesy of the Underground Museum

RIGHT\_ Installation view of *storefront: Imitation of Wealth*, August 29, 2015–February 22, 2016 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Fredrik Nilssen

# Helen Molesworth



When Noah asked museums if they would lend to the Underground and they said no, he decided “fuck it, I’ll make it myself.” I’m reticent in Noah’s absence to speak for him, but I think what he’s doing in that work is exposing the problem of value. The vacuum cleaner at Lowe’s Hardware is one value; at the Broad it’s another value; at the Underground Museum, another. I think by making the work himself, engaging in those forgeries, he’s asking, does the value reside in the object or the idea, and what is it about a black and Latino working class neighborhood that is imagined to be incapable of supporting the values of an elite white culture? To call it *Imitation of Wealth*, to summon that Douglas Sirk film, *Imitation of Life*, is to suggest that an African American who passes as white is performing that same sort of transvaluation that happens through the readymade. *Imitation of Wealth* demonstrates an understanding—in the deep Duchampian sense—that, though most people think value is inherent to the object, value is completely based on context.

My office is directly opposite MOCA’s Storefront. I often found myself staring at it, trying to figure out what I could do with it. Partly, I knew that I could leave the lights on all night. I knew it could feel like a shop window. It’s right across the street from the shop, and that, in the context of the show, would be charged, but also playful. I knew that people would want to go in, and I knew the doors would always be locked. I was interested in creating this kind of desire that couldn’t be met, and in fact, one of the ways you could think about Noah’s first iteration of *Imitation of Wealth*, was that Noah had a desire that was rejected. I wanted to engage in a little bit of that rejection: you can’t come in. This is the classic structure of desire: you can see it, but you can’t have it. I wanted to reiterate that. I wanted to somehow remember that there are people who experience the world profoundly as a set of things they cannot have. Of course, one of the things that Noah did so well was engage contradictions, often with a very simple gesture. The flip side of the doors being locked is that *Imitation of Wealth* is always on view, and it’s always free—while the museum is often closed and costs money to get into.

When we started to loan works to the Underground Museum, it was important to me to not have this partnership reside in the space of a kind of feel-goodism on our part. To acknowledge on our side the original refusal of the idea, instead of just saying “aren’t we so great, this big, fancy, affluent, white institution, being so generous.” That’s not how I see it, and that’s not how I wanted it to be framed. Throughout, I let the Underground take the lead. Always. We can’t museum-ify or over-professionalize someone else’s vision, someone else’s desire. We’re just doing what we said we always said we would do, which is be the artist’s museum.

Noah’s request to get artworks for the Underground fits into a bigger history of imminent critique, in which you ask an institution to abide by its highest stated value. “We believe that all men are created equal.” That’s the genius. Holding you to it. The Underground Museum, through its nomenclature and its geographical location, is partaking in the long arc of movement toward civil rights and social justice. Noah has allowed us to fulfill a part of our mission. They give *us* the gift, not the other way around. They have enabled us to earn our 501(c)3, to earn the right to say that we are a museum that holds a collection in the public trust for the public good.

Part of the critique of the *Imitation of Wealth* is a critique of museums, but also the art world in general. It’s a critique of the fetishization of the avant-garde’s impulse to broker a deal between art and life. Instead of brokering that deal on the side of life, we

brokered that deal on the side of art. We created a condition of scarcity, where there isn’t one. You can go to the hardware store, buy sand and buy mirrors, and make a Robert Smithson. We have created the condition of scarcity around that object, meaning that the art world writ large or the museum writ large has defaulted on the avant-garde’s original arrangement, which was way more on the side of life and the everyday, than it was on the side of art. For me, that’s part of the extraordinariness of Noah’s gesture.

I could imagine having a big laugh with Noah about whether or not he considered *Imitation of Wealth* an art show. One of the things Noah said about it was that it was a really good joke. He didn’t even keep the works—except the On Kawara painting, which is slightly larger than an On Kawara and includes the date of his recently deceased father’s birthday. That’s a very charged object, particularly because Noah was a painter. We went and bought new fans and new mirrors for the Smithson at Storefront. It’s not like Noah boxed that up, signed it and labeled it. To him, he was fucking around. That’s what’s so great about Noah. Noah was engaging in some serious mind play with that show. And if you think about the movie, *Imitation of Life*, the young woman goes off into the white world, but no one in the movie accepts her as white. Everyone is like, “that’s gonna be a long and hard road. She’s always going to be sad, she’s always going to have abandoned this other thing, which is her blackness.” It’s not like making those objects, and showing them in an art context makes them whatever you say they are. If you make a Jeff Koons, and you display it as a homemade Jeff Koons, does it become a Jeff Koons? It always retains that other status, just like if you’re passing as white, you’re always also black. You can’t actually make that transformation completely.

For me, it’s really interesting to see the readymade continue to provide artists with an incredible philosophical platform. It’s almost a hundred-year idea, and it’s still vital. One of the things that gives me a kind of hopefulness in general is the kind of dialogue that artists have with each other, or with each other’s work, that seems to be able to occur across vast geographical distances and vast amounts of time. For me, oddly enough, when I see *Imitation of Wealth*, I’m really aware of what I think museums are about. What museums do is make those intergenerational, transatlantic, transcontinental, transhistorical conversations possible. There’s something about the incredible, what I would call sophisticated simplicity in Davis’ gestures, in his use of language, that gets you back to basics. It may seem corny, but it’s just been an honor to be near the work. ■

—As told to Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal

HELEN MOLESWORTH is Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

**UNDERGROUND GIVES US THE GIFT, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND. THEY ENABLE US TO EARN THE RIGHT TO SAY THAT WE ARE A MUSEUM THAT HOLDS A COLLECTION IN THE PUBLIC TRUST FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD.**

ABOVE\_ Installation view of *Imitation of Wealth*, 2013, photo by Karon Davis, courtesy of the Underground Museum

BELOW\_ Installation view of storefront: *Imitation of Wealth*, August 29, 2015–February 22, 2016 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Fredrik Nilssen





# I, Meme, Mine

*Amy Yao discusses punk, the flexible economy, and Chinatowns.* by Evan Moffitt

Amy Yao makes curiously unsettling objects. Her paintings and sculptures feature byte-sized phrases that read like resurfaced text messages, Craigslist ads, or LiveJournal posts, floating beneath layers of high-gloss resin—as if locked behind a screen or trapped in millennial malaise. Teenage confessions ripped from memes (“All I do is surfing the Internet”) seem to comment on our contemporary moment of social networking, digital buzzwords, and their attendant sense of alienation. But the more oblique of Yao’s works extend this alienation beyond the laptop, to the challenge of self-identification in a dizzyingly pluralistic society. With the plucky indeterminacy of human beings, some works refuse straightforward interpretation. They seem to mock our inability to make sense of it all—either the art before our eyes, or the world beyond our periphery. Yao has encouraged this ambiguity by speaking little about her work, so I was keen to ask her questions about her practice that had long been on my mind. We both grew up in Los Angeles, and Yao’s involvement in the early-2000s Chinatown art and punk scenes seemed like the natural place to start.

**Evan Moffitt: You grew up in Los Angeles, and were involved in the punk and art scenes in Chinatown. How did those relate at the time?**

Amy Yao: I was born and raised here, mostly in the San Fernando Valley, although I spent a year in Orange County. I went to Art Center in the 90s, first to the Saturday high school program and then got my BFA there. It was a fun time to be in LA. I had a chance to work with Sharon Lockhart, Andrea Zittel, Diana Thater, Chris



**ABOVE\_** Amy Yao, *Untitled*, 2014, polyester resin, wax, pigment, fiberglass, synthetic rice paper, and canvas, 20 x 16 in.

**BELOW\_** Amy Yao, *Skeleton, no. 2 (Basic needs and the right to the pursuit of a good life)* (detail), 2013, fiberglass, polyester resin and aluminum, 67.5 x 22 x 43 in.

Williams, Mayo Thompson, Stephen Prina. I was also part of the music scene at the time, going to punk shows at Jabberjaw. My sister Wendy and I had a band with our friend Emily Ryan. There was a nice intersection between people interested in music and people interested in art. The scenes had mutual interests, and in a way that’s how I got my introduction to both. I started China Art Objects with Steve Hanson, who was working at the Art Center Library and very knowledgeable about early LA punk. I stopped doing the gallery after being involved for a year. I was really young at the time. They went on to become a serious commercial gallery, but when I was involved it was more of a project space, something loose. We had music events, a Mike Kelley poetry reading, a record release party for Steve Prina’s record, informal exhibitions, and parties. All of us went to Art Center at the time, or were working at the library, so that scene really influenced our programming. Working with people and projects that give agency to the unformed or minority voices, who deal with confusion or fantasy, continues to be important.

**EM: How did your experience of the city influence your practice?**

There’s a lot of space in Los Angeles, which I think allows for a lot of fluidity. I think that’s informed my practice—fluidity between different forms of working, whether that means programming film screenings or making objects. When I was in school, there was an openness to the way one could work; I wasn’t confined to one medium. The medium could be determined by what you were trying to say, based on the place the idea comes from. That continues to be the way I do things now. With the project I did with the ladders, three years ago, I was thinking about Los Angeles art history, and Finish Fetish more specifically—thinking about persona and character in relationship to object making. A lot of Finish Fetish artists were surfers or hot rod custom culture enthusiasts. So I was thinking about that, and about my identity as an Angeleno, having recently moved back to Los Angeles from New York.

**EM: The ladders are such a commonplace item in galleries, since every preparator uses them. Even so, they feel very bodily. Some of the ladders have anthropomorphic elements, like bows and strings of pearls.**

AY: I often think about the body in relationship to architecture and how architecture dictates how a body moves and feels through space. These sculptures have a totemic quality, so they can also resemble bodies. As a tool, ladders are related to construction. In Los Angeles there’s always so much construction here, so much tearing down and rebuilding of buildings. I’m interested in the idea of things becoming, or being in-between, rather than being clearly defined and static. In terms of an idea or way of relating to things in the world, I am interested in that indeterminacy.

**EM: Like being a “Valley girl” and a Chinatown punk?**

AY: (laughs) Yeah, I guess so. With identity especially, the world we live in demands clarity. I’m interested in being unclear. That could be a punk position—though a statement that has its own kind of clarity, I guess. But being in a state of transition has always been interesting to me. It feels radical in some ways.

**EM: You’ve also worked repeatedly with fans, a cliché, Orientalist fetish in the West. Are they meant as a critique of racist stereotypes?**

AY: At the time I started making the fan pieces, I started working on this film—I’m still working on it, actually—it’s a series of short films shot in China, starting in Shanghai. During this time, I had a studio in Chinatown, New York on Canal and Mott. From my window, you could see all the business transactions and tourism happening on the corner. I thought about myself and how people project a certain cultural identity onto me. I’m Chinese American, and there are souvenir shops throughout Chinatown that sell cheap tchotchkes to tourists, the kind that refers to an idea of China. The people who sell them, the shopowners are Chinese. But if you went to the shopkeepers’ homes they probably don’t have those trinkets. It seemed almost culturally subversive, selling your identity according to other people’s projections of you, making money off someone’s semi-benign racism. I wanted to mess with that.

**EM: Is the punk aesthetic in your work a projection too? I’m thinking here of your fonts. One of them feels particularly punk, in an almost spooky way—like the font of a pulp horror film poster or a Misfits album cover. But applied to words that might have come from Craigslist or Airbnb postings, floating in those semi-translucent skeins, that aesthetic doesn’t feel edgy so much as anachronistic. It feels intentionally out of place, more a ghost of punk than the real thing.**

AY: Maybe spooky like the Cramps bubbling up. Something disembodied, put in a different context, has to be read in a different way. Context changes meaning. Think about “Occupy”—an easy example—which can mean so many different things in different situations. When I started using that in my work it was a buzzword in daily life and Internet culture, because of the Occupy movement. “Sublet” and “Live/Work” sound very different in a Craigslist ad, because you think about those words in terms of their utility. I was interested in that displacement of meaning that comes with a shift in context. Like, “Do you want to sublet my life?” (laughs). That free-floatedness of meaning also has a lot to do with how quickly we consume images online. The high speed of the Internet makes image culture and text culture meaningful and not meaningful at the same time.

**EM: There’s a line that appears in a number of your works that seems to capture that fraught relationship to meaning in our networked culture: “All I do is surfing the internet. All day, I**



**talk to the internet.” It sounds ironic, like someone who either doesn’t know how to use the Internet, or uses it so much they’ve forgotten how to speak.**

AY: That statement was a quote from a Korean movie I found in a subtitled still that someone posted online, and I took it. I put the quote next to a list of artists who have spicy blogs and or have practices relating to internet use and recontextualized it. I felt like the voice was supposed to belong to some sad, lonely girl. (laughs) A lot of the text I use, eighty to ninety percent, I didn’t come up with. But many words and phrases are so common that it may seem pointless to think about where they come from.

It’s so far gone that it feels nearly impossible to be critical of network culture at this point... It’s just changed the way people think; it’s probably changed the way our brains are configured. Before the Internet, if you were different, it was harder to find people like you. Subcultural people had to find each other through different visual codes. But now it’s so easy to find someone who relates to you; they can even live far away. Since everything is accessible, where can you disappear to? When I was young, my interests and tastes came out of boredom and a feeling of alienation. Now it seems to work in a different way.

**EM: The more obvious forms of millennial alienation—being constantly glued to cellphone screens, our romantic lives reduced to Tinder swipes—seem to go hand-in-hand with a kind of Marxist alienation. Terms like “Live/work” and “sublet” are part of the vocabulary of alienated labor in the era of big tech.**

AY: I definitely was thinking about the neoliberal situation we find ourselves in now, where Airbnb and Uber, for example, are supposed to improve working conditions via flexibility, but they really don’t change the balance of power. It’s a mirage.

**EM: The utopian myth of the sharing economy.**

AY: Flexibilizing is a kind of fake freedom. I understand the usefulness of those businesses, but I’m critical of the way they meld together life and work.

**EM: Isn’t that what being an artist is about? Like the title of an essay by Nina Power, “The artworld is not the world.” I have to remind myself that sometimes. I don’t blame you for living in Long Beach! (laughs) What are you working on there?**

AY: I live in Long Beach and my studio’s in Commerce, between two train tracks, the Union Pacific and BNSF. I’m working on a show at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles, which speaks to this. My commute mirrors truck routes between the Port of Los Angeles and industrial warehouses in Commerce. I was thinking of the pollution and industrial waste along that route, and the neighborhoods that surround it, and the economic condition of individuals in those areas subjected to toxic materials. The further you get away from that the less of it you see, and the more you consume, perhaps, because you make more money and you shop more. A lot of products that we purchase enter through the port and travel along this route, and there’s something very bleak about that.

**EM: The mime—the word, if not the figure—appears frequently in your work. The mime is an interesting tragicomic symbol to use, maybe the most alienating of performers. What does the word, or the character, represent to you?**

AY: I was thinking about learning through images and copying them, or acting through empty gestures, like a mime might do—like opening a door that doesn’t exist. I was thinking about that somewhat critically: we see an image of someone buying something with their credit card, and it enters our subconscious and we want to do the same thing. So I was thinking about that effect of images, and what the actions they produce might mean. Mimetic gestures seem even emptier than imitation. ■

**EVAN MOFFITT** is a Los Angeles native recently relocated to New York, where he is the Assistant Editor of [Frieze](#). His writing has appeared in [Art in America](#), [Flash Art](#), and [PARIS, LA](#).

**AMY YAO** is an artist based in Los Angeles. An exhibition of new work opens at Various Small Fires in January 2016.

ABOVE\_ Amy Yao, [Silent Sneeze II, no. 3 \(baby\)](#), 2014

All images courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles

**IN LOS ANGELES THERE’S ALWAYS SO MUCH CONSTRUCTION, SO MUCH TEARING DOWN AND REBUILDING. I’M INTERESTED IN THE IDEA OF THINGS BECOMING, OR BEING IN-BETWEEN.**

# New Bodies for Old Walls

*Painting’s fresh new faces might help a city overcome its own irony.* by Travis Diehl

*“My grandparents refused to live in bleak empty rooms and decorated everything.”*

—Robert Rahway Zakanitch (1)

At the Los Angeles art school where I taught last fall, a patch of astroturf near the grad studios was suddenly torn up, braced with rebar, and paved with Quikrete—all in an afternoon. When I returned to campus the next morning I was surprised to find a pristine, nearly dry surface. Had not one of the forty MFAs succumbed to the temptation to make their mark? Was mark-making that passé? In fact, a vigilant Facilities had already resurfaced the initials and diagrammatic genitals. By the time most of the students woke up, the second coat was already too hard to scratch.

The problem of quick-drying concrete is something like what these young artists face. What if, in 2015, you find yourself a painter, confronting a blank canvas? How to make your mark before the palimpsest of styles and movements hardens forever? Put another way, how to make it new? The pressure is such that few can come up with more than penises and monograms, brushstrokes and drips: the clichés of the genre. “Make it new,” said Ezra Pound. But Pound was a modernist, and this dictum also seems passé. The Brooklyn-based painter Jaya Howey says in an interview that his previous paintings batted around the conventions of abstraction. He describes a series “made in the tradition of slow, torturous, painterly improvisation. I would start a painting with no set plan, make a move, step back, stare at it for hours, and then make another move in response to the first.” (2) If you’re a painter, not painting isn’t

an option. Each “move” provokes the next one; these accumulated gestures all defy that intolerable initial blankness; and each finished painting provokes the next painting. And as the discourse hardens, as the chance for expression passes, the grounds crew of the zeitgeist tears up the scarred old pavement and pours fresh. For a while the only paint Howey used was Torrit Grey, an oil paint mixed using pigments gathered from a paint company’s filtration system and given away as a promotion. (3) This move evokes the scrap or institutional gray used in cities to overpaint graffiti.

When a city wants to freshen up, a coat of paint is a start. But urban blanknesses are as intolerable as bare gesso. In Los Angeles these days, the default solutions to downtown’s industrial emptiness are galleries or, if your building has good bones and several stories, artist lofts. 356 Mission Rd., the first, if not the original, of the reclaimed industrial spaces anchoring LA’s latest boom, opened with “12 Paintings by Laura Owens.” On refinished white walls hung canvases patterned with grids, blown-up newspapers, and oversize blobs of paint with drop shadow—seemingly scaled up in the Adobe suite before output in oil, acrylic, and Flashe—a painterliness at warehouse size. Three years later, a show by Rebecca Morris revised painting yet again, with big, quilted compositions of spray paint and oils—largely abstract, except insofar as they depict, in patches, interior décor or paint. In a talk at the gallery the curator and writer Hamza Walker framed Morris’ work in terms of the Pattern and Decoration movement, or P&D, whose practitioners in the 70s and 80s pursued both Western and Eastern idioms of

repetition, color, and design—sidestepping, rather than confronting, the modernist drive for self-expression. According to Walker, “The sources from which these artists drew their inspiration, even modernist sources, were revered. P&D, no matter how anti-modern, was *never ironic*.” P&D’s sincerity went against the pervading irony of postmodernism, which borrowed freely and derisively from the styles and moves of terminal modernism. “Under the aegis of postmodernism,” said Walker, “painting’s history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation.” If modernism prized feats of heroic expression over depiction, postmodernism promoted a knowing use of the old art’s naïve self-regard. Today, new canvases are as blank as ever, but no new gesture seems possible. Painting, said Walker, no longer features “a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration” but, representing only itself, the tension lies between painting and its own irony. “Abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself.” (4) Hence Morris, by way of P&D. Against irony is set an informed, decorative pleasure that might supersede a more cynical discourse.

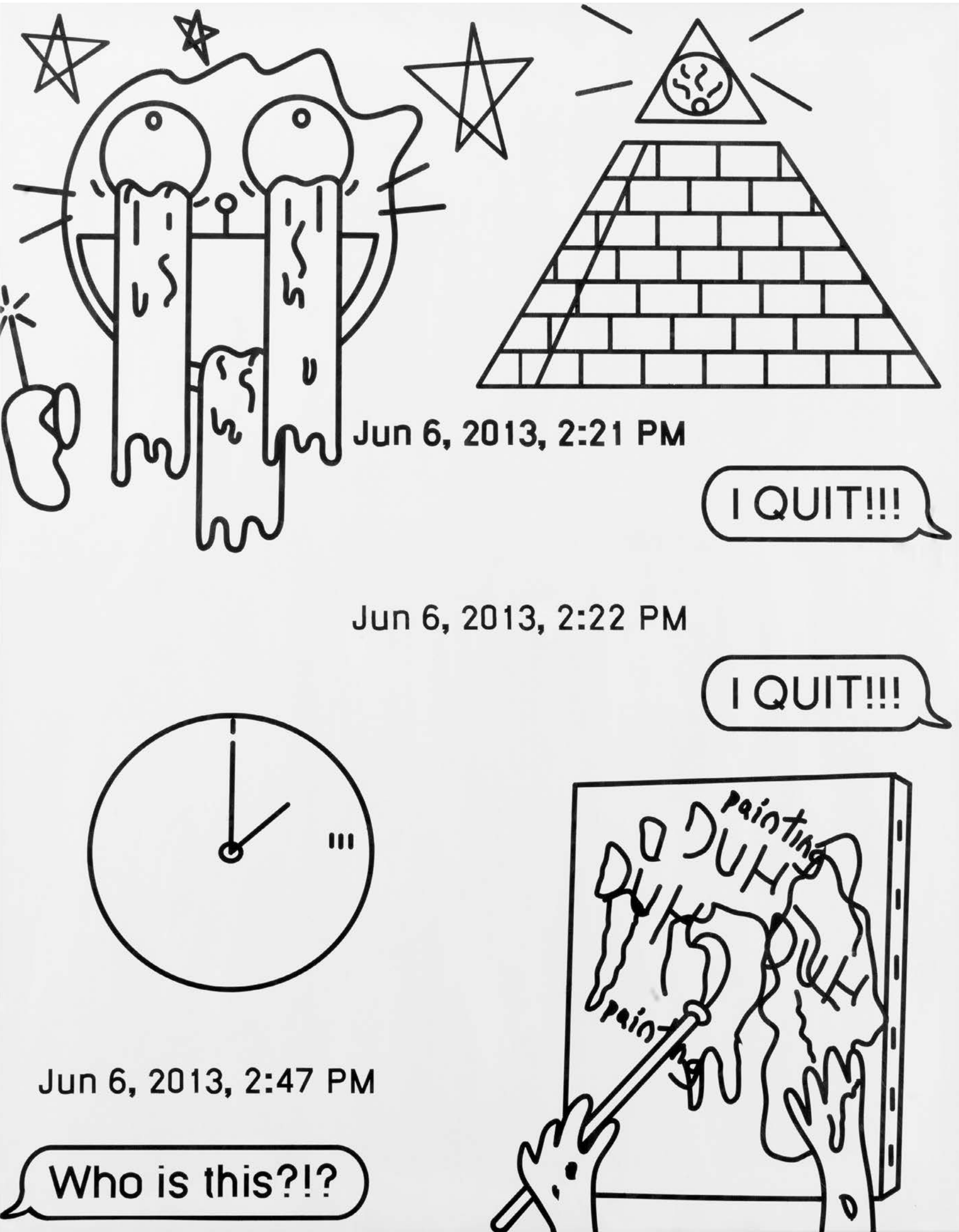
A period of “conscious unproduction” followed Howey’s experiments in Torrit Grey. Staring at a blank canvas, Howey suddenly began making circles with a compass; these soon became faces and other symbols, and led to a new series of diagrammatic or cartoonish line paintings. Howey drew in Adobe Illustrator, then output vinyl stencils; but filled in the lines with a brush. These “screened” paintings, sometimes in blue but mostly black, have the quality of ballpoint pen doodles made on a screen. Themes

1\_ Robert Rahway Zakanitch, interviewed with Charles Sabba. Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, “Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement,” in [Ideal Vision](#), Ed. Anne Swartz (Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 8.

2\_ Jaya Howey, “Jaya Howey + Greg Parma Smith,” == #2 (New York: Capricious Publishing, 2015). See <<http://www.bureau-inc.com/mainSite/News/JH.2015.Capricious.html>>.

3\_ See <<http://www.gamblincolors.com/torrit.grey>>.

4\_ Hamza Walker, “Rebecca Morris and the Revenge of P&D,” 356 Mission, 15 October 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB-w2-rtWKo>>.



ABOVE\_ Jaya Howey, *Painting Narrative*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 ¼ x 35 ½ (115 x 90 cm), courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

PAINTING HAS WORKED ITSELF FROM PROGRESS TO PASTICHE, BUT ITS MARK-MAKING COMPULSIONS REMAIN. EACH BLANKNESS, EACH VACATED STYLE, MUST BE CONFRONTED AND MADE NEW.

5\_ Bruce Hainley, “The Hounds of Love,” *Under the Sign of [sic]* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), 160.

of work and time are common: clocks, sweating but grinning emojis, an hourglass (always running out), a water level, and what looks like a fortune-cookie fortune but is an invite for an afterparty—presumably, we missed it. Several works feature a fretted-over canvas in the lower right corner: in one, two cartoon hands render in drippy slashes the text “PAINTING / DUH / DUH DUH / PAINTING” falling down the painting-in-painting. iMessage bubbles read, “I quit.” Faced with defacing an invincible surface, who can blame the painter who quits? Paint can be painted over, vinyl peeled, even concrete buffed and poured again. But it’s not the medium itself that has been calcified, but the discourse, which may as well serve as pavement or bricks. So Howey stacks up styles and canvases; he labors against himself. When he quits, he says it to painting, but he says it in paint. Painting has worked itself from progress to pastiche, but its mark-making compulsions remain. Each blankness, each vacated style, must be confronted and made new; and if history bears itself out, new painters will rise to the task. In the course of quitting and unproduction Howey works himself back into a job.

The un-ironic proposition of Walker is a justification and a means to move—if not forward, then somewhere—a permission to dance. What’s useful in the un-irony of P&D is what drives it: a visual and procedural pleasure: if not the progressive pleasure of successions of “movements,” then the pleasure of painting moving in place. It’s no accident that Bruce Hainley’s 2014 monograph on Sturtevant is not only definitive and genre-bending but also an overtly sexy act of art history. The chapter on Sturtevant’s *Felix Gonzales-Torres Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, a three-act play set poolside at the old Hollywood Chateau Marmont, has a young hustler sum it up: she’s looking for the New Image.<sup>(5)</sup> So what if the Sturtevant painting looks just like the Johns. The Sturtevant is new; the Sturtevant rekindles lust. The chapter ends with a sequence of “stagings” that result, at each point, in a new image: the go-go dancer of the Gonzales-Torres original, the

dancer in Sturtevant’s redux, and then, in Hainley’s book, a third played by the model Rick Genest in full zombie tats dancing forever on a candlelit table. Hainley reiterates the need of fresh new bodies to perform the image. Painting, un-ironically, craves the sexiness of the young and the new. The desire to paint and repaint, to rework old styles as new ones, figures a desire for new painters—new bodies to dance in place.

In 2014 four paintings from Howey’s breakthrough series debuted in a booth at Art Basel Miami Beach. The wall they hung on was not quite white; instead it had been prepared with a blue vinyl pattern of graphic waves and drops of water. These strokes were fat and sign-like, legible at great distance—unlike the paintings, filigree in contrast. A few months later Howey tried something similar for his solo presentation at Frieze London. This time a curling, slashing motif, which could be rain from clouds, decorated one interior booth; two paintings hung there, while the rest occupied white walls. Again there were clocks; the relentless progress of a train down flattened tracks; sweat and knives and cartoons laughing themselves to death. But the painting jokes were gone—perhaps subsumed by process—or else the fretted-over paintings-in-paintings had outgrown the corner to reach 1:1 scale. At any rate, nobody had quit; and in fact at Frieze was a single all-black abstract composition of rounded, jaunty rectangles and lines—as if, having passed through irony, Howey returned to form.

Fielding a question after Walker’s talk on her work, Morris admitted to resisting irony. “I felt like the early work wasn’t ironic,” she said, “but I understood that it was read that way. So I remember really having to rethink how I wanted to go forward... And I think that moment actually coincided with moving to LA.” It’s no accident that Morris chose this town to make it new. From its origins as a sunblasted fantasy, Los Angeles grew into pastiche—first denigrated, later championed for its haphazard heterogeneity. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the city began to enjoy the irony of its reputation. No longer imperfectly modern, Los Angeles

was perfectly postmodern. The 80s and 90s brought the boom that gave LA the skyline of a world-class city. The current struggle, indeed, is the post-ironic embrace of one’s own ironic history. When LA’s boosters speak of the current boom, in the twin idioms of real estate and art, they speak of its Renaissance. Like painting, Los Angeles is attempting to fashion a new, sincere image from a century of successive, calcified styles. Perhaps this navel-gazing city might take a cue from what Walker un-ironically proclaims is painting for painting’s sake. With straight faces, Downtown’s freshly reno’d Artist Lofts promote themselves as “close to DTLA’s Art Walk.” One imagines a Burning Man bohemia passing by your door one Thursday a month: a parade of artful new bodies. Cold, white, rectangular rooms become sites of desire. This desire is perhaps cynical, maybe ironic, always mediated, but also perfectly, desperately sincere. The post-postmodern city would pose itself as desirable by association; a new, same, un-ironic urbanism; a new, same, un-ironic body. Always young, always hustling, always LA. ■

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# River Work

*As the myth goes, performance art started the revitalization of the Los Angeles River.* by Kate Wolf

One day in the mid-1980s, Lewis MacAdams, then a forty-year-old poet, frustrated screenwriter, and former editor of Leonard Koren's bathing-centric magazine *WET*, cut an access hole in the chain link running along the river near the 1st Street Bridge. For the remainder of his clandestine performance, along with three other collaborators, he made his way down to the water's concrete channel and walked north, out of an "awesome concrete scape,"<sup>(1)</sup> with railroad freighters rumbling past and freeway bridges overhead, an industrial smell saturating the air. When the group reached the river's confluence with the Arroyo Seco—the stream that flows through Northeast LA from the San Gabriel Mountains and, like the river, was partially concretized after fatal floods in 1938 killed almost 150 people—MacAdams made an animistic pledge: to be a voice for the waterway "in the human realm."<sup>(2)</sup> His longstanding organization, Friends of the Los Angeles River, had begun.

A multi-media performance at the Wallenboyd Theater on Skid Row where MacAdams dressed as the ghost of water baron William Mulholland, best remembered as the creator of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which desiccated the Owens Valley, soon followed. Since then, though, Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), often referred to by MacAdams as his forty-year art project to "bring the river back to life,"<sup>(3)</sup> has dealt primarily in policy, not aesthetics. FoLAR has become a powerful advocacy group: the nonprofit remains an important propeller behind environmental protection for the river, public access to it, the creation of parks, and the securing of federal and civic funding for its redevelopment. It may be fatuous to interpret MacAdams's career in advocacy as one long, diffuse artwork. Instead it's his steely vision for the waterway's restoration—from the largest encased flood channel in the world to a riparian ecosystem where the steelhead trout can run again—that has, over time, become influential.

This mode of socially conscious, public works-oriented problem solving represents one pole of artistic approaches to the river. It seems founded on the ideal of the water's prelapsarian state, with the mass paving by the Army Corp of Engineers in 1938 of all but thirteen of its fifty-one miles serving as the inevitable fall. Lauren Bon, for example, is an artist whose work surrounding the river is modeled on ideas of restoration. Recently, Bon secured individual water rights (the first issued in a century) with a permit from the State Water Resources Control Board for her project, *Bending the River Back into the City*. Monumental in scale and the result of collaboration with city agencies, engineers, political fixers, and the philanthropic group the Annenberg Foundation, of which Bon is a family trustee, the proposed sculpture has three parts. The first is an inflatable dam that will sit in the LA River near Bon's studio. This will connect to a diversion canal shuttling water downtown via a seventy-two-foot water wheel (an ancient technology common until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a means of providing both irrigation and power) Bon has titled "LA Noria." Bon proposes the water her project delivers, projected to amount to around one hundred acres per year, will then be distributed to local individuals and agencies at her discretion. Access to the water is to be conditional: she has already successfully convinced a nearby state historic park to agree to change the pesticides and herbicides they use in exchange for it. Described by Bon as a kind of "avant-garde nostalgia"<sup>(4)</sup> *Bending the River Back into the City* references the time before the Los Angeles aqueduct was built in 1913, when the river was the primary source of water for the city's population; at the same time, the project has an eye toward the "avant-garde" imperative of finding innovative ways to reuse the wastewater transplanted by *LA Noria*.

Bon's conception of a better future engendered by the adoption and/or subversion of past models—whether of infrastructure, privatization, or the environment itself—frames the river as a place where progress is still possible. But others have treated the site with a darker optimism. For these artists, the river's neglect is equal

to its promise. In the sculpture of Charles Long, for instance, the unregulated, random stream of trash that blights the river provides physical material. For a series of assemblages exhibited in 2005 as *More Like A Dream Than A Scheme*, Long, who used to live in Frogtown, adjacent to the water, adopted items scavenged from it such as shopping carts (fashioned as bases), boxes, textbooks, rebar, plastic bags, and other forms of urban detritus. After plastering and painting the pieces, his process included returning the objects to the river, sometimes submerging them for days, further opening up the work to chance: the water's debris naturally resulted in different traces each time. Here, the river in its current state is a place meant for salvage; a place where nature neither stops nor starts, but heedlessly persists; an aleatoric zone rich with refuse of the city, yet somehow set apart from it.

Likewise, in their 2008 video *All Together Now*, Stanya Kahn and Harry Dodge treat as an instrument of survival what might otherwise be deemed waste or contamination. Shot at various points along the river, the work shows Kahn's tattered, sun-stroked character siphoning river water through a tube with her mouth, foraging a floating dead fish, collecting an empty

plastic chip bag from the concrete banks to piss in. Writing in *Artforum*, novelist Rachel Kushner notes that the video "plays on the idea of a parallel world that has already collapsed, creating a radically restructured social order."<sup>(5)</sup> But one need only look to the homeless encampments that have inhabited the river for decades to see real-life echoes of Kahn and Dodge's fiction.

For Kahn's character and many of the people who squat the waterfront, trash is indeed valuable, polluted nature functional, and the river's deaccessioned status a point of autonomy that allows for certain freedoms. "You're less in anybody's way [here] than anywhere else," a woman told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in 2006. She was living on an island in the Glendale Narrows area—the comparatively bucolic, eleven-mile sand bottom section of the river spared paving by the Army Corps because of the high water table. "You're not on somebody's personal property.... This is literally where nobody really cares."<sup>(6)</sup> Given the recent ramping up of revitalization efforts and real estate development, the statement no longer rings as true (especially as authorities prepare for evacuations amid the threat an El Niño will pose to those living in the low-lying riverbed), yet the sentiment

1\_ Joe Mozingo, "Quixotic River Activist Savors Major Victory." *Los Angeles Times* 29 January 2001: B1.

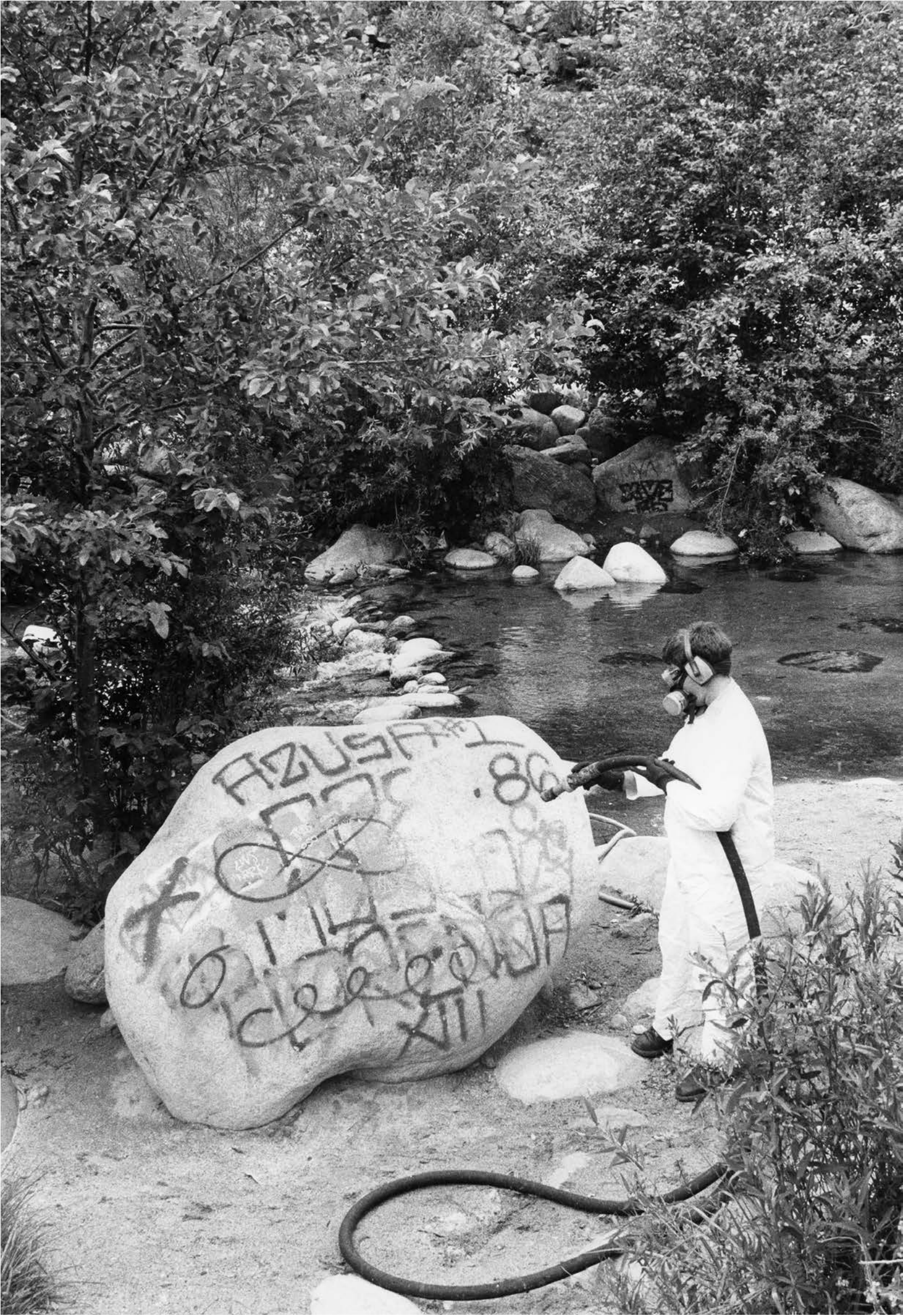
2\_ Lewis MacAdams, "A River-Again-In Los Angeles." *Los Angeles Times* 27 October 2013. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/27/opinion/la-oe-macadams-los-angeles-river-20131027>>.

3\_ Ibid.

4\_ Jon Christensen, "The Boom Interview: Lauren Bon." *Boom* Vol. 5, N° 2, Summer 2015. <<http://www.boomcalifornia.com/2015/08/the-boom-interview-lauren-bon/>>

5\_ Rachel Kushner, "1,000 Words." *Artforum* January 2008: 241-242.

6\_ Arin Gencer. "Home of Their Own on L.A. River." *Los Angeles Times* 24 July 2006: B1.



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PREVIOUS PAGE\_  
Sandblasting graffiti from  
a rock, 1989, photo by  
Chris Gulker/Los Angeles  
Herald-Examiner, courtesy  
of Los Angeles Public  
Library

ABOVE\_ Michael Parker,  
*The Unfinished*, 2014,  
photo by Alexis Chanes

BELOW\_ Vlatka Horvat,  
*This Here and That There*,  
July 31, 2010,  
photo by Kate Wolf

7\_ "Public Art Challenge:  
Engaging Creative  
Communities to Enhance  
the Quality of Life  
in Cities." Bloomberg  
Philanthropies. n.d.  
<[http://www.bloomberg.org/  
program/arts/public-art-  
challenge/](http://www.bloomberg.org/program/arts/public-art-challenge/)>.

8\_ Michael Parker.  
"The Unfinished: An  
Obelisk Along the L.A.  
River." KCET Blog, 27  
February 2014. <[http://  
www.kcet.org/arts/  
artbound/counties/  
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parker-frogtown-futuro.  
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it conveys is still revealing. The river has been a prime site for graffiti of record proportions, whether the football field-sized SABER tag, once billed as the largest illegal painting in the world, completed in 1997 after an entire year of work (but now white-washed), or the painted cat faces that began appearing frequently on storm drains as early as 1959.

As FoLAR's origin story suggests, parts of the river once felt so remote that the deliberateness of entering them alone seemed tantamount to a performance. Even fifteen years ago, the performance ensemble Osseus Labyrinth had such a difficult time securing a permit for their live show *THEM*—like MacAdams' piece, it started at the 1st Street Bridge, but in a slightly more death-defying move, the performers were bound and suspended naked from it—that they decided instead to stage it as a documentary by applying for a filming permit, which they secured within a week; their audience members acted as "extras" for the shoot.

These days, though, the river is less and less of an unsanctioned place for artists' involvement. Thanks in part to a million-dollar grant from Michael Bloomberg, plans are already in the works for a water-themed Public Art Biennial in 2016 that will take place there, and elsewhere, in the name of "increasing awareness of the city's need for water conservation." (7) More controversially, this past summer, news leaked that LA's own "starchitect" Frank Gehry had been in secret negotiations with the LA River Revitalization Corp., a city-led nonprofit that manages river policy, for the last year. Gehry is now working on his own plan for the river, which focuses on waste-water management.

Indeed, it can seem difficult to disentangle the slew of recent arts programming at the river from larger forces of development at play. In lieu of real estate speculation, some of these endeavors, like FoLAR's Frog Spot (featuring yoga classes, live music, and "premium snacks") or Project 51's "Play the River" series, despite what are likely good intentions, also hint at boosterism. The arts organization Clockshop is subject to this suspicion as well. Over the last year and a half, it has been putting on programs and installations in partnership with California State Parks at "the Bowtie," an eighteen-acre post-industrial parcel in the Glendale Narrows.

Still, some Clockshop-organized works like Michael Parker's *The Unfinished*, an ambitious and poetic 137-foot "buried" obelisk—carved directly into the site's asphalt—and Rosten Woo's interpretive signage project take into account the changing context in which they appear. In Parker's words, he wanted to "create a massive earthwork that is a... copy of a Pharaonic power symbol and also self-implicate the double-bind of being a gentrifier and a gentrified (pharaoh and craftsman)." (8) Certainly the sculpture—its deep trenches a liability that to its credit, California State Parks has allowed for—gives us a potent symbol of power laid to waste. Meanwhile one of Woo's three signs along the Bowtie is a diagram with commentary on the way the park has already played a role in the river's shift from liminal space to recreation zone to waterfront real estate opportunity. Somewhere in between MacAdams' dogmatic vision of a re-naturalized river and Kahn and Dodge's proposition of a post-apocalyptic one, both Parker and

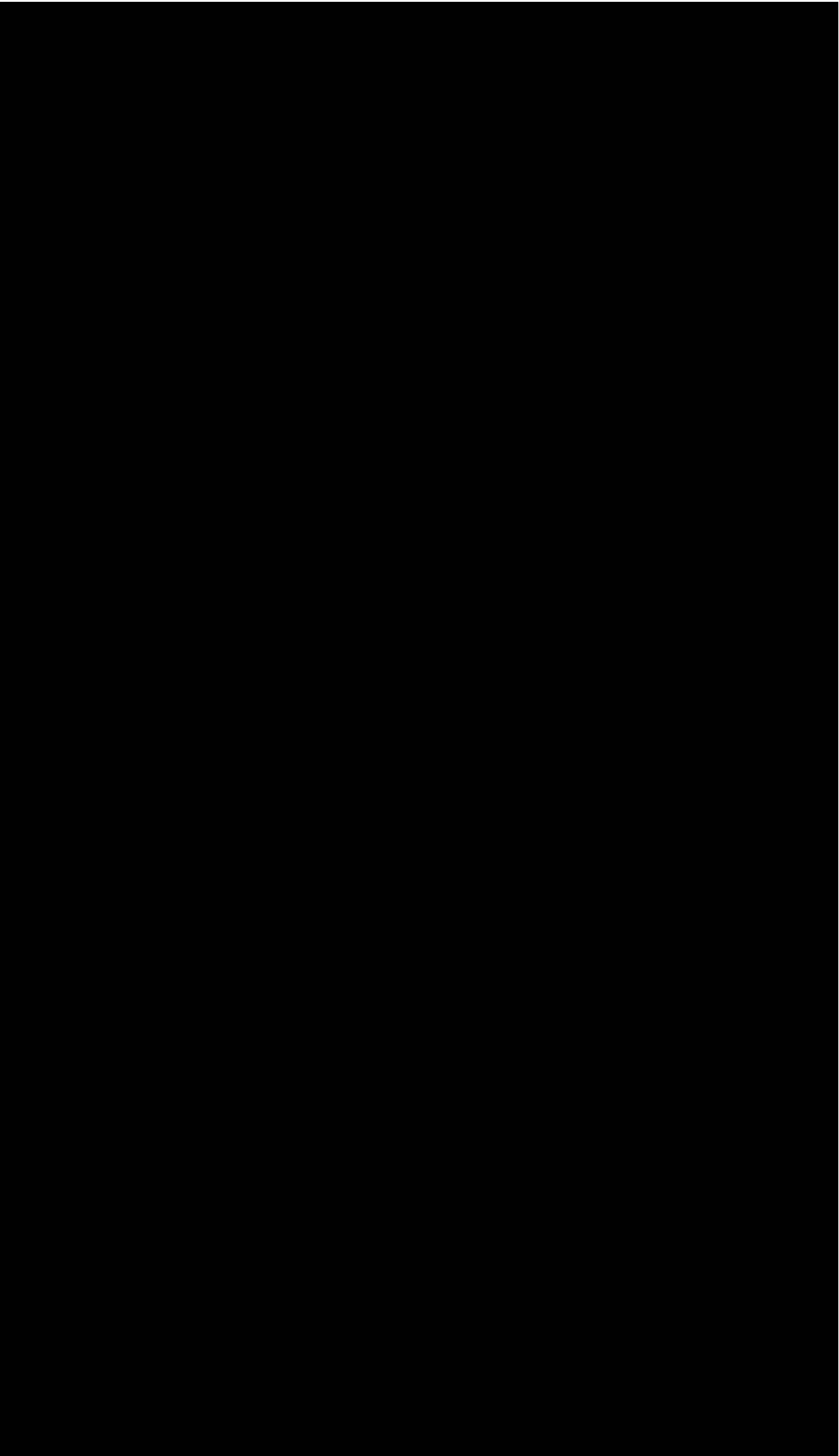
Woo address the ambiguities of the river's present moment.

And perhaps this moment is not so different than others in the river's history. Besides the threat of floods, real estate potential, Mike Davis reminds us in *Ecology of Fear*, helped spur the river's concretization in the first place. Now it's the prospect of de-concretizing it that's getting developers excited. As much as the landscape has changed, at times, the track it's on appears to be cyclical.

Five years ago, the artist Vlatka Horvat performed a piece called *This Here and That There* in the river, under the Fletcher Drive Bridge. For eight hours, Horvat constantly wrangled fifty plastic chairs into a series of set formations, no sooner alighting on one structure before she began to break it down and form another. She waded purposefully through the water in bare legs, surveying her work, the bottom seam of her black dress getting soaked. Sometimes her arrangements seemed to evoke ominous situations—a riot, an interrogation, a trial—or merely institutional settings like a class- or boardroom. It only took a slight shift of position for a whole other scenario to insinuate itself, the former arrangement giving way to the potential for the latter in a process that could have no real moment of culmination, but instead, as envisioned by the artist, was meant to just go on. ■

KATE WOLF is a writer and editor based in Los Angeles.







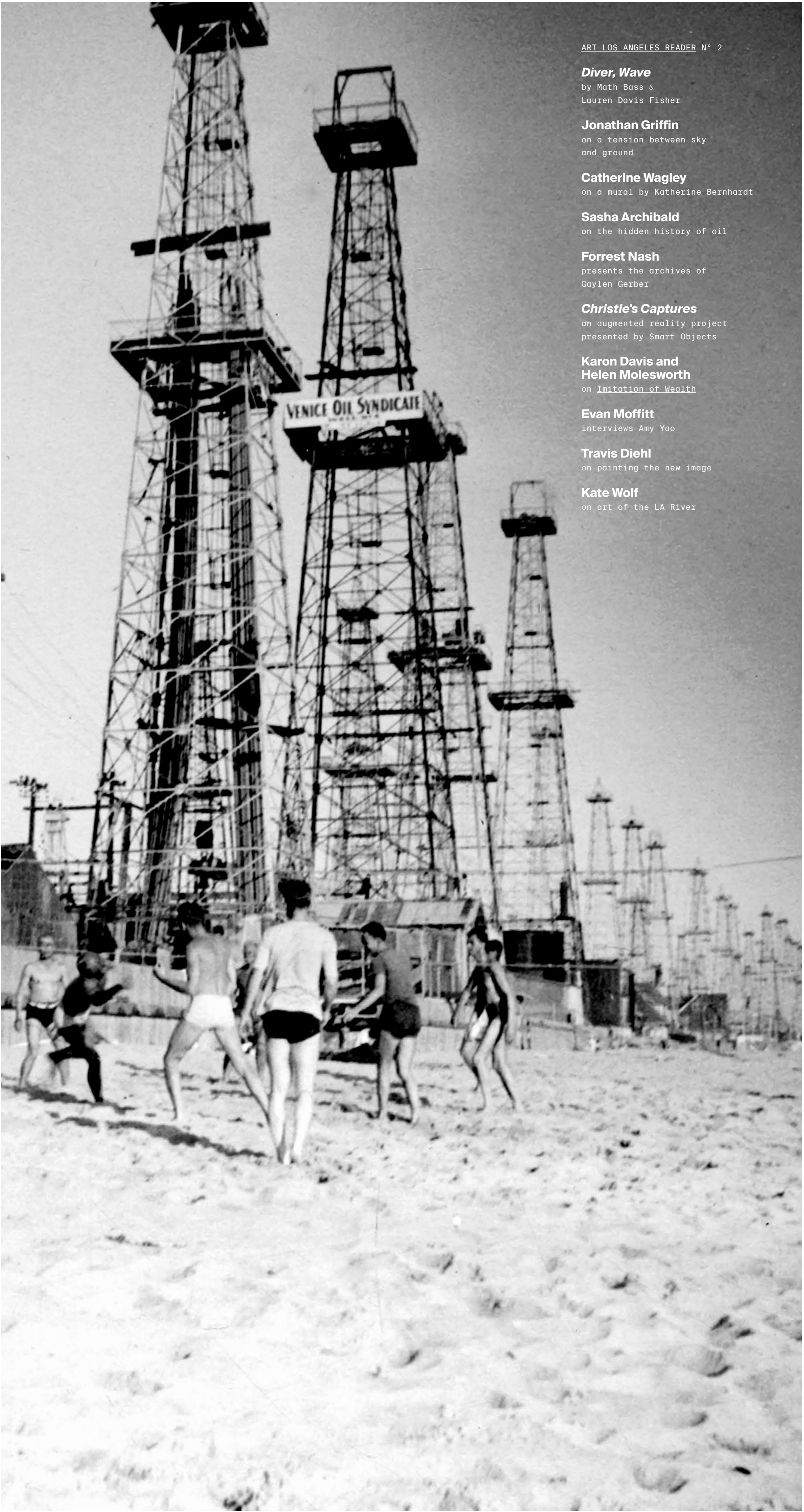
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