# Art Los Angeles Reader

ACID INTERIORS | N° 3 | JANUARY 2017

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ACID INTERIORS | N° 3 | JANUARY 2017




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## *From the Editor*

Every single scene in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's newly rediscovered *World on a Wire* features two central colors: burnt orange and emerald blue. Made in 1973, that era's cybernetic systems thinking (everything is related) found an exquisite analogue in the conspiracy theory of simulation, which motivates the film's science fiction plot (we're stuck in a virtual reality, we just have no idea). The colors of the interiors seem to prove the protagonist's suspicion: in his apartment, his office, the restaurant, his secretary's jacket, notes of orange and blue appear again and again, as if to betray the uniformity of programming. When (spoiling apologies) he thinks he's escaped the simulation by the feature's end, the color consistency leaves me unconvinced: the blue carpet, his savior's orange skirt. Is this just the auteur's aesthetic (film-as-simulation) or does it leave us haunted by recursion—how many orange and blue matryoshkas before we'd ever see the hues of the only, truly, final outside?

Some of us woke up on November 9th wondering if it was the real world we had woken up in. Some of us woke up on November 9th more sure that the programs our world runs on (capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy) were working just as they had been designed. The artists, writers, and thinkers collected in this issue were animated by the theme of "acid interiors"—how spaces live, how they change us, what they say about our lives. In centering techniques and practices that make spaces unreal, or too real, that use fiction, imagination, and ritual to show us what reality really looks like, acid interiors is now more relevant than ever.

What do I mean by acid interiors? Perhaps I mean that interior architecture comes to shape perception, as I discuss with Samara Golden, whose psychedelic illusions help us look sideways at the home. Maybe I mean that ideas have a way of forcing themselves into physical spaces, as Jonathan Griffin shows us in male artists' use—and abuse—of little girls' bedrooms as forms. Maybe it's just the depths that emerge when you look at a place with the x-ray vision of time, as Catherine Wagley tracks the evolution of the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, soon to house the Marciano collection of contemporary art, as Kate Wolf revives interior designer Tony Duquette's legacy through the prismatic lens of his destroyed Malibu Ranch, or as Courtney Stephens and Micah Silver take us to three Los Angeles control rooms, to show how these windowless sanctums both power and exercise power over the world beyond their walls.

Of course, interiors are only constituted by their outsides. Suzy Halajian and Michelle Dizon discuss how Dizon's free art school centers LA's marginalized communities, and gives us insight into whose voices we need to lift up and how. Aria Dean doubles back on 1970s black artists' interventions into public space, to see what rituals and reorientations were required for making the city a place they could inhabit. And Travis Diehl digs into the history of the *New York Times'* coverage of LA art, diagnosing a host of antipathic, boostered biases.

The theme acid interiors is inspired by William Leavitt's theatrical obsession with mid-century design, his installations of generic sets that deal with the drama of stuff. I am thrilled to present a work Leavitt made specifically for this publication—an artist project that both begins and ends in newsprint. For about three years, Leavitt has been drawing real estate advertisements pulled from the *Los Angeles Times*. This is the first place he'll show this work. Transmogrifying the details of those few inch squares with his quirky, sprinting hand, Leavitt catalogs Los Angeles homes as a vocabulary of forms—an a-frame, a dingbat, a sloping driveway, a palm tree—elements whose repetition and variation play out across these pages like found visual jazz. What is real estate advertizing but an attempt to transform place into a set, a springboard from life to lifestyle?

Smell's connection to memory is now a Proustian cliché, but Sean Raspet uses scent to evoke future experiences rather than past ones. In the scent Raspet designed as an artist project for this publication, the molecules and compounds he composed (and composed with) are not found in nature. Here, synthetic is not as an ersatz repetition of what does exist, but a demonstration of what can exist through chemical synthesis. Raspet positions the artist as product designer, or manufacturer of experience. Beyond the first hint of sweetness in the scent lingers a technique like sci-fi—the familiar, made strange.

According to Freud, the German word *heimlich*, meaning home-like, familiar, known, and comfortable, "develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich," foreign, strange, unfamiliar, unknown, and unsettling. The word contains within it its own haunting opposite. What better place to study the freaky parallax of interior space than Los Angeles, a city best known for playing itself in the movies? What better time to question the disorientation of staying put than under the impending presidency of Donald Trump? Maybe we should take acid interiors to mean ecstatic interiors, for the root of ecstasy is "ex-stasis," that is, standing outside. This issue—and I hope this publication, generally—asks what happens when we stand in our own home, beside ourselves.

*—Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal*


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**FRONT COVER:** Installation view of Samara Golden: A Trap in Soft Division, March 11, 2016–May 29, 2016 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, courtesy of the museum, photo by Charlie Villyard

# Lost Enchantment

*Interior designer Tony Duquette was known for bedazzling style. A short-lived Malibu ranch would have been his crown jewel.* by Kate Wolf

As one of the mid-century's preeminent interior decorators, Tony Duquette was practically obligated to make his own homes extraordinary: what could have been better self-promotion? But Duquette's personal residences also presented an opportunity for embellishment unhindered by his clients' tastes or prosaic concerns. While restraint could never be considered Duquette's trademark, here was where he could fully indulge in the fantastical maximalism, textural deluge, and theatrical interiors that would make his style famous.

A dropout of the Chouinard Art Institute, Duquette had worked designing the floors of department stores and freelancing for other notable decorators like William Haines and James Pendleton before being discovered by the grande dame of interiors, Elsie De Wolfe, during World War II. In 1949, when he was 35, he had achieved enough success to build a first house for himself. At Dawnridge, the Hollywood Regency-inspired, 900-square foot cube set on a ditch in Beverly Hills, Duquette riffed deliriously on a style his client, the heiress Doris Duke, called "Chow Fun." Visitors to Dawnridge were greeted by an explosion of ornate, eccentric *chinoiserie*, from outdoor pavilions constructed from cast off corporate office materials and scraps of Thai temples to lamps assembled from metal fruit pickers covered in Siamese silk. Duquette, who always favored effect over provenance, hung a Venetian-glass chandelier he designed in the drawing room alongside golden snowflake screens he constructed, in part, from hubcaps. His wife, an artist née Elizabeth Jonstone (but known as Beegle, for half bee, half eagle), painted murals of 18th century aristocratic life in the entranceway. A verdant mesh of exotic plants and trees grew outside. In 1956, while Dawnridge was being rented out to socialites and celebrities like Marlon Brando and Zsa Zsa Gabor, Duquette and Elizabeth converted an old silent film studio on Robertson Boulevard into a teeming showroom, workplace, and living space. Under a ceiling covered with hundreds of painted egg cartons and Styrofoam fruit containers, they held elaborate balls and *divertissements*, such as ballet performances, classical music, and kabuki, on the stage Duquette had built to showcase his set and costume designs.

Over more than 45 years, the couple also created jewel box interiors for themselves inside of miniature homes in San Francisco and the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine—when, in 1951, Duquette became the first American ever to receive a show at the Louvre. In all his projects, Duquette approached design as a radical refashioning of materials from across the hierarchy of production. But nowhere reflected this idea as much as his Malibu ranch. Christened "Sortilegium" (which Duquette translated liberally as Latin for "land of enchantment") and set in the shadow of Boney Mountain in Ventura County, the property was considered by Duquette to be among his greatest achievements. "The house in town and the other houses were just houses," he said. "But this was in a sense a kind of artistic fulfillment."(1)

Sortilegium was situated on about 150 acres and consisted of 21 individual structures, each given a name and theme, and each built around Duquette's collection of far-flung materials purchased or salvaged from across the world. Drawing from his travels, he named structures after countries like "Ireland" (it was made from 19th century Dublin shop fronts), "China," and "Ghum," for the town in India. He also conjured Los Angeles with "The Bullocks Wilshire House," appropriately replete with a collection of art deco, and the "Star Barn," which stored a series of decommissioned props from MGM.(2) Other Southern California relics integrated into the property included the elevator cage of the infamous Hollywood Hotel, reworked as a outdoor metal pavilion; stained glass rescued from Victorian homes from the by-then demolished Bunker Hill neighborhood; windows from Greta Garbo and actor John Gilbert's love nest, installed in a guesthouse called "Horntoad" that was once part of a moving van; and a score of deer antlers taken from Hearst Castle before it was given over to the state, and made into sculptures or follies.

The Duquettes began constructing Sortilegium in 1957. Little could have been more in opposition to the prevailing design of the decade, modeled by *Arts & Architecture* magazine's Case Study Program, which promoted houses for efficiency, cutting-edge technology, economy, and replicability. Though he continued to expand and redecorate the structures on the ranch to fit his needs, function was a weak mandate for Duquette, and he deemed any accepted notion of International Style irrelevant and dull. Instead, he seems to have had more affinity with early Modernists like the members of Bloomsbury, who threw off the drab formalities of the Victorian era and made their houses into colorful, uniquely self-expressive spheres meant to delight and entertain. Of course, Duquette's greatest influence was probably Hollywood. Having designed sets for films such as Vincente Minnelli's *Kismet* (1955), he built Sortilegium on the magic-making, illusion-rich techniques of film and theater. He erected facades, mixed the ersatz with the authentic (indeed, he included many elements of his own past sets in the property), the mass produced (skateboards, garden rakes, satellites dishes, rags) with the handmade (often by him), and relished in extreme ornamentation. His penchant for exoticism resulted in his own version of Shangri-La, a loose amalgam of Orientalist influence, devoid of authentic counterpart. He even went so far as to imagine a lost civilization named "Chu-chin-chow-mash" that had at one time inhabited the ranch, and in partnership with the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, invited graduate students to come and dig for the culture's "artifacts."

Nodding to the readymade and anticipating some of the binding characteristics of postmodernism, Sortilegium was to be Duquette's most pronounced and sustained example of assemblage, the one in which he showed the seams of his work and grew bolder in his gestures toward sculpture and architecture. After almost thirty years, in the late 1980s, the Ventura County Planning Commission finally began to object to him building habitable structures without permits; he argued that he was making a lasting document of his art. However, the document didn't last. On October 26, 1993, six months before Duquette's 80th birthday, Sortilegium burned to the ground in the Green Meadow fire, which torched 44,000 acres in all. A group of pro-surfers came to Duquette's aid to try to help put out the blaze, but little of the ranch was saved. A true aesthete to the end, Duquette was able to find beauty even in the destruction of what he had hoped would be a monument to him as an artist. "It was extraordinary," he said. "The top of Mt. Boney was all flame, the colors of black and mustard and white. The sky was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen."(3) But the fire was especially devastating as it followed shortly on the heels of another conflagration in San Francisco that had engulfed an abandoned synagogue Duquette and Beegle bought and refurbished to house a series of towering angel sculptures, tapestries, and altarpieces Duquette had made for the Los Angeles Bicentennial. Nearly all of Beegle's paintings were burned in the Sortilegium

**ABOVE_** Garden entrance view of Sortilegium, Malibu, 1990, photo by Tim Street-Porter

**HAD IT SURVIVED, SORTILEGIUM MIGHT HAVE BEEN DUQUETTE'S WATTS TOWERS, A PLACE AS ALL ENCOMPASSING AS NOAH PURIFOY'S OUTDOOR MUSEUM: AN ADMIXTURE OF ASSEMBLAGE, OPEN SPACE, AND FAR-RANGING INSPIRATION.**

1_ Mack Reed, "The Southland Firestorm: One Year Later: Sculptor's Phoenix Struggles to Rebirth," Los Angeles Times, 26 Oct. 1994: A18.

2_ Tony Duquette, Inc., "Tony Duquette's Sortilegium" <http://tonyduquette.com/tony-duquettes-sortilegium>.

3_ Amy Wallace, "Twice Burned Artist Who Also Lost Collection in 1988 Fire Wonders If He Can Start Over Again," Los Angeles Times 30 Oct. 1993: A5.

**LEFT_** Tony Duquette, n.d., photo by Tim Street-Porter

**RIGHT_** Sortilegium interior, 1990, photo by Tim Street-Porter

blaze, and Duquette lost almost thirty kitschy yet commandingly intricate large-scale fiberglass and steel phoenix sculptures he had begun making in response to the work he lost in the synagogue. For someone who was so adept at recycling, after the fire he found himself unable to rebuild from the ruin.

But he did what any other fabulous Hollywood decorator and fiercely determined artist would do. Following a month working and recuperating in Bali and Indonesia, he started a jewelry line for Gucci. Eventually he also rebuilt the phoenix sculptures he had lost and was given a show at the Hammer Museum in 1995. Had it survived, Sortilegium might have been Duquette's Watts Towers, a place as all encompassing as Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum: an admixture of assemblage, open space, and far-ranging inspiration. More effete than either Simon Rodia or Purifoy, Duquette was also campier, effectively queerer, and connected to a whole other tradition of decorative art making.

In some descriptions, Sortilegium can almost sound like a modern-day Hameau de la Reine, the farmhouse Marie Antoinette commissioned to play at peasant life. Duquette kept a dancing "pet cow named Beaumont,"(4) and invited society over for a party called "Spa Ma Ma," "a kind of love-in for rich hippies" as Wendy Goodman and Hutton Wilkinson, Duquette's former business partner, write.(5) Duquette acknowledged the property's contradicting aspirations, referring to it a cross between Tobacco Road and San Simeon (one might throw in a bit Disneyland as well). Before the fire, he planned to leave it to the state, so anyone could visit and experience a bit of both. ■

**KATE WOLF** is a writer in Los Angeles.

**4_** Wendy Goodman and Hutton Wilkinson, Tony Duquette (New York: Abrams, 2007) 257.

**5_** Goodman and Wilkinson 316.

# Infrastructure Sketches

*In the late 1970s, Barbara McCullough and Senga Nengudi exited Ed Ruscha's freeway and claimed land under the off-ramps.* by Aria Dean

The freeway slices up Los Angeles. Its seemingly inert stretches of concrete, which maintain a facade of self-determination and freedom of movement for those riding across it, selectively connect some and isolate others below. These infrastructural boundaries create borders, constitute insides (and outsiders). These borders have a tendency to change at their designers' discretion—as the apparatus of government colludes with developers. As time passes, they seem to crumble, becoming more and more permeable. Money can always find its way through concrete. The freeway becomes a pressure point—or assumes the role that it was always meant to perform. It is no neutral body, no gift of freedom to all. The Los Angeles freeway pulses with the pressure of a city overcrowded, a clogged artery.

To many, and perhaps increasingly in the twentieth century, the Los Angeles freeway system expressed some "comprehensive unity."(1) At the very least, then, it was possible to apply to it some modernist rationality. Looking back, talk of the Los Angeles freeway was for many years a narrative of mobility, technological change, and liberation, garnished with some softcore futurism. Architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham was perhaps the greatest proponent of the worthiness of LA's freeway-centric urbanism. Banham wrote in *Four Ecologies*, his celebratory 1971 treatise on Los Angeles, that "the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life."

Banham's vision of a freeway-centric Los Angeles enables a thoroughly liberated, modern subject who can map his own course, beholden to no one. This Los Angeles looks something like the Los Angeles that we find in Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). It is no surprise that Banham links up with Ruscha on his tour of the city in the book-to-BBC documentary *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. Sunset Boulevard is a surface street, surely not a freeway, but Ruscha's treatment of it figures into the same effort as Banham's project. Ruscha's LA is witnessed from the middle of the road by a subject we never see. His posture is that of a disinterested documentarian, and the expected narrative of unimpeded travel unfolds across the book's pages.

Together, Banham and Ruscha posit Los Angeles from a narcissistic stance—that is, white masculinity—cloaked in modernist universalism. Their perspective is a privileged one, imaging a Los Angeles that requires a certain amount of capital to traverse. But even to those of us with cars, this smooth neutrality sounds absurd. As any Angeleno knows—or probably anyone who has spent more than twenty-four hours here can gather—the freeway is hardly a slick, speedy network rushing us to and fro at our leisure. Rather, the city on the whole is gridlocked and unpredictable. It looks and feels more like the dusty nightmare of the 1993 movie *Falling Down*, where a regular guy, played by Michael Douglas, finally snaps one day on his morning commute. The city denies him the privilege of movement he expects. He abandons his car in traffic on the 110 in favor of traversing the city on foot.

Los Angeles looks quite different once you hit the off-ramp. The freeway criss-crosses through neighborhoods, sectioning off the wealthy from the poor, the black, the brown. For instance, what writer Mike Davis once called the "financial core" of the city, downtown Los Angeles, is almost entirely barricaded by concrete freeway walls—the 110 to the west, the 10 to the south, the 5 to the north, and the LA River to the east—separating it from the surrounding, primarily Latinx, neighborhoods. Once a collection of historic residential and industrial districts, Downtown is now populated with glossy high-rise offices, heavily-engineered loft communities, and cultural institutions, bringing with them

**1_** Reyner Banham, Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 23.

**2_** Claudia Springer, "Black Women Filmmakers," Jump Cut 29 (Feb. 1984): 34-37.

**3_** Jacqueline Stewart, "Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification," UCLA Film & Television Archive <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/films/water-ritual-1-urban-rite-purification>.

**4_** Stewart.

**5_** Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space, dir. Barbara McCullough, video, 1979.

**ABOVE_** Senga Nengudi, Ceremony For Freeway Fets, 1978, C-print, courtesy Dominique Levy Gallery, New York, London, Geneva, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, © Senga Nengudi

**BELOW_** Production still from Barbara McCullough, Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification, 1979, black and white, 35mm

an influx of neo-yuppies who demand more and more of this rapid development to meet their "needs."

Leave the man-made island of Downtown by freeway and one version of the city bleeds into another. Make the transition on foot, and trek under the 110, the 5 or the 10, and the disjunction is even more apparent. Artist and filmmaker Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979) approaches this dissonance. The video depicts a black woman (played by Yolanda Vidato) in a desolate landscape, placing a series of objects into a circle and performing some sort of ritualistic act, the final rite of which is her urinating on a pile of rubble. McCullough speaks of the work's commitment to the experiences of displaced people the world over,**(2)** situating the construction of the freeway within a legacy of destructive colonialism.

Though not immediately apparent when one views the work, the video was shot on location in Watts, at the intersection of 118th and Main, where the urban and rural seem to overlap. The site had been designated for freeway construction. The city razed homes and businesses only to abandon the project. **(3)** Claiming this space, McCullough's work questions representations of the city—images like Ruscha's and Banham's—asking who the city is designed for, who it neglects, who it outright rejects, and how those neglected or rejected might come to re-inhabit or take up space in new, even mystical ways. Reimagining ritual within African diasporic spiritual and artistic practices, she explores the violence that is required for the realization of the modernist, here neo-colonial, project and ultimately, suggests, through this "rite of purification," that "sites of urban blight can be activated as consecrated ground."**(4)**

Senga Nengudi, a friend and collaborator of McCullough's—and another black female artist working in Los Angeles in the 1970s—further enacts this suggestion, activating the freeway's underside in her performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978). The performance, staged under a freeway overpass on Pico Boulevard near the Los Angeles Convention Center, brought together Nengudi, artists Maren Hassinger and David Hammons, alongside a band of musicians known as Studio Z. There is little documentation of the performance aside from a small collection of photographs, but it is known that, at the site, Nengudi and her collaborators performed an improvised dance and musical performance in costumes designed by Nengudi. The performance was centered around a series of sculptural works that adorned the outdoor space—Nengudi's signature nylon and mesh forms were wrapped around freeway support columns, both costuming the urban landscape and tethering the body to its context.

Nengudi later spoke of these sculptures as "fetishes," and said during the performance that it was as if her body became "possessed."**(5)** Like McCullough, she was attempting to "renew an urban area through ritual movement." Rather than engaging the freeway—or its underbelly, really—in any sort of beautification effort, Nengudi and McCullough insist on a different method of retrieval, a more conceptual reconfiguration of the use of space, one that begins with a perspectival shift (and does not end with an invocation of Africa). The shift makes the infrastructure of Los Angeles central to the city's story and its inhabitants' experiences, acknowledging that for every surface there is an underside. Of course, to frame the city as double-sided is essentializing in some way. But in their departure from practices like Banham's and Ruscha's, Nengudi and McCullough push beyond the modernist, horizontal narrative of Los Angeles and consider its verticality, literally and figuratively.

In our time, the freeway's ability to concretely structure the horizontal landscape of Los Angeles seems to have waned. Those neighborhoods that were cordoned off, 'blighted' as they say, now sparkle in the eyes of white gentrifiers to-be. They are speckled with young white renters, baited by now-hallmark horizontally slatted fences and "tastefully" sparse metal house numbers that signal a cheap redesign. The freeway, in all of this, is some kind of pressure point, a place where tensions can boil over. The same overpasses and swaths of land across LA used by the likes of McCullough and Nengudi now host whole makeshift neighborhoods of tents and temporary shelters set up by the homeless. Certainly, these have always existed, popping up as night falls due to city ordinances prohibiting such structures during daylight hours. But in the last two years, the number of encampments has almost doubled.**(7)** The city responds aggressively, regularly trashing temporary shelters and seizing belongings. Perhaps its anxiety is that what's underneath LA's freeways will spill over onto the surface, exposing the city for what it actually is.

In physically considering the vertical, Nengudi and McCullough present a sort of subaltern narrative of Los Angeles, a history from below. In this version of the city, unlike Ruscha's antiseptic view from nowhere, the body is always in the frame. Here, we are hyper aware of the body in these spaces and its entwinement with them—McCullough urinates on the ground, purifying the land with her own bodily waste, fertilizing it even. Nengudi wraps the freeway's supports in biomorphic sculptures. Rather than competing with the likes of Banham and Ruscha to catalog and objectively document a different view of the city—one seen from the margins—these artists employ another toolkit entirely, one imbued with magic and spirituality. Their work centers perspective, and their perspective is one that looks past the literal, joining mundane and spiritual ritual to transform the city's infrastructure from just a conduit for individuals, molding their movements through the city, to an active element in shaping a sense of (un) belonging. The freeway, touched by those on the topside and the underside, births a strange symbiosis, crackling with the energy of the power and bodies that circulate along and around it. ■

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**6_** Rebecca Peabody, "African American Avant-Gardes, 1965-1990," Getty Research Journal 1 (2009): 214.

**7_** According to reports by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Christopher Hawthorne, "What those homeless camps along LA's freeways mean for a public space once above it all," Los Angeles Times 26 Dec. 2015 <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/architecture/la-et-homelessness-and-the-freeway-20151226-column.html>.

# Hell Heats Up

*How the New York Times covers LA art—and why Angelenos should care.* by Travis Diehl

"Basically, this show seems to have blinked," writes Roberta Smith, senior art critic at the *New York Times* "when it came to the risk of showing New York something it didn't already know." The camera-shy show? "Greater LA"—"a sprawling survey of recent art from Los Angeles arrayed in an immense, unrepentantly raw SoHo loft."(1)

But does Smith's paper likewise blink every time it gets an eyeful of Klieg light?

Smith notes in her 2013 review of another LA coterie effort, "Made in Space," that, in Los Angeles, "studio space is cheaper and more plentiful" than in New York. (2) Her take on the title's joke nearly encapsulates the *Times*'s outlook. Yet for those of us living in this always-second city, "Made in Space" is also a coy rejoinder to boosterish exhibitions like "Made in LA," the Hammer Museum's biennial since 2012, which hungrily claim artists fresh from the grad schools that drew them here. There's also lots of space, as in spacing out–as in outer. But, like, totally whatever. Even as Angelenos wince at beachy, baked clichés, enough of us throw them on like fun outfits for them to pass fact check.

Thus the rhetorical symbiosis: New York is. Los Angeles will be. But it isn't, yet.

A survey of one and a half centuries(3) of NYT articles on LA art indicates that the tics of recent coverage–such as, days apart in spring 2016, "Los Angeles Art Scene Comes Into Its Own" and "Los Angeles: City of Breakfast"(4)–follow reams of dedicated, wary, and sometimes lofty appraisals of our perpetual coming-of-age:

"Art in California," 1948; "Art on the Los Angeles Front," 1956; "Making Like Competition in LA," 1965; "Los Angeles Now the 'In' Art Scene," 1971; "Art in a City of Angels," 1979; "Artful LA," 1986; "For Art, Coastal Convergences," 1989; "The Los Angeles Art World's New Image," 1992; "Chinatown Reborn as a Bohemian Outpost," 2001; "Artquake," 2006;(5) "The Art's Here. Where's the Crowd?," 2007; "Southern California Stakes Its Claim as a World Art Center," 2011; "Art Scene Heats Up in Downtown Los Angeles," 2016.(6)

NY thrills to style LA as a golden-hour dreamland that never quite wakes up; LA gladly concedes to NY the status of the overbearing and immutable reality it rejects. As with any good rivalry, each sustains the other. Even complaining about the *New York Times* has become an LA standard–as slighting LA (and indeed, any city that's not New York) must be for the aptly named *New York Times*. But who does this dynamic really serve? Who are these articles for? And–forget the scene–what about the art?

The *Times* titles its review of Mike Davis's cynical LA history *City of Quartz* with a haunting question: "If This Is Hell, Why Is It So Popular?"(7) Maybe LA is lucky that the paper sees fit to fly over its best writers as often as it does, if only to reiterate the problem. From our coast, the question may be just as hard to face. When top critics and arts reporters cut their copy with little snubs, or when the *Times*'s Travel or Style sections run condescending trend reports, or when all its contributors hold up LA's art scene to Manhattan hotspots and to Hollywood, why does it bug us so much? Why should LA artists care?

## SELF-CENTERED TIMES

It's understandable that an international but New York-based newspaper of record would consider its home city the one to beat. The terms of the contest, however, have shifted–from merit to market. In her "Greater LA" review, Smith ventures "that New York long ago accepted [Los Angeles] as an equal in the production of art."(8) But, she qualifies in 2014, "New York remains the center of the gallery world, and galleries are the bedrock of any truly thriving art scene."(9) In 1948, Los Angeles "artists exhibit locally but keep weather-eyes on Fifty-seventh Street," and the uptown money.(10) An unequivocal state-of-the-city address, appearing a year ahead of Los Angeles's second Olympic Games in 1984, states that "New York City's position as the capital of the art world seems, at the moment, even more invincible today than it has been in the last 25 years."(11) Again and again, the *Times* rushes to reassure its readers that what makes an art capital isn't art, but capital. In this regard, "Los Angeles is still," and will always be, "a far cry from New York."(12) When Downtown LA gentrifies, it's "much as New York's SoHo has."(13) "Like a nascent Chelsea, in New York," one writer notes of Culver City, "white-box art galleries are sandwiched between industrial supply stores and auto-repair shops, including one that only repairs classic Mustangs."(14) When another reverses the formula, it's not meant as a compliment: "Big, whitewashed art galleries in low industrial buildings, their garage-style doors giving onto broad, sunny streets that are dead quiet except for the fit-for-life types in-line-skating westward toward the water. Is this a description of the latest art district in Los Angeles? In fact, it is West Chelsea."(15)

These articles often come padded with quotes from former New Yorkers, confirming the biases of current ones. Jori Finkel, easily the best LA-based arts journalist on the *Times* roster, calls "Made in LA" "the West Coast answer to the Whitney Biennial."(16) Ann Philbin, now director of the Hammer Museum, describes her town as "like New York in the '80s."(17) "This could be our West Village," says Peter Frank, a local critic and one-time writer for the *Village Voice*.(18)

Lost in this refrain is the question of why gallery districts on both coasts tend to flare up and move on like the burning edge of a newspaper, leaving neighborhoods transfigured. Few *Times* articles mention gentrification in Los Angeles; fewer link the trend to art. The most damning, a review of Hauser Wirth & Schimmel's inaugural show, ends with a warning: "For some years now, we've seen the same kind of growth in New York," admits a *Times* critic, "where money drains art of blood, and slow death by gentrification is far advanced."(19) Far more plentiful are pieces that gloss LA art as merely a bonus of the abundant, magic-lit, and (relatively) affordable "space" available on the city's industrial fringes. New York dealer "Michele Maccarone, in a flowy black jumpsuit, was striding across the cement floor of her cavernous new gallery here last week," ledes a 2015 article. "'There's just, like, this endless amount of really incredible space,' she said. . . . In true Los Angeles fashion, the broker drove prospective clients around from the front door to the back, judging it too big simply to walk through."(20)

## HELLO TO ALL THAT

Abstract districts redeveloped without fallout,(21) a discourse as breezy as the hillsides, and hot new galleries teeming with artists (never mind the art): no wonder they're all slouching West. "It was an old friend … who, happening to visit the coast last year, fell an unresisting victim to its charms," read a 1906 special to the paper, "and now declares that he is not going back to New York 'until he has to.'"(22) Fast forward a hundred years: "The wagon train mentality, it seems," reads the Style section, "is taking hold among the L train set: Go west!" New Yorkers "grumble that their own city is becoming a sterile playland for the global-money set (Dubai with blizzards, basically)," while "Los Angeles

**1_** Roberta Smith, "A Bit of Hollywood, Minus the Tinsel," New York Times 30 May 2011.

**2_** Roberta Smith, "Made in Space," New York Times 1 Aug. 2013.

**3_** Los Angeles incorporated in 1850, the New York Times in 1851.

**4_** Conrad de Aenlle, "Los Angeles Art Scene Comes Into Its Own," New York Times 11 Mar. 2016; Jeff Gordinier, "Los Angeles: City of Breakfast," New York Times 23 Feb. 2016.

**5_** Bruce Hainley, "Artquake," New York Times Magazine 1 Oct. 2006. By virtue of its sheer competence, this piece transcends the genre.

**6_** In her 2016 exhibition "Ten Paintings" at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco, LA-based artist Laura Owens incorporated a list of particularly laughable quotes from recent LA-boosting scene pieces, including several from the New York Times.

**7_** Bryce Nelson, "If This Is Hell, Why Is It So Popular?" New York Times 2 Mar. 1991. The article notes that the author is a professor of journalism at the University of Southern California.

**8_** Smith, 2011.

**9_** Roberta Smith, "Boldly Go: A Gallery Guide By the Art Critics of The New York Times" New York Times 3 Apr. 2014.

**10_** Aline B. Louchheim, "Art in California: Patrons and Painters in Los Angeles," New York Times 29 Aug. 1948.

**11_** Michael Brenson, "City's Position Secure As Focus Of Art World," New York Times 28 Feb. 1983.

**12_** Grace Glueck, "Artful LA," New York Times 23 Nov. 1986.

**13_** Suzanne Slesin, "Downtown Los Angeles: The New Settlers," New York Times 12 Apr. 1984.

**14_** Andrew Yang, "A New Art Scene in Los Angeles," New York Times 3 Apr. 2005.

**15_** David Colman, "Welcome to the New Los Angeles: It's on the Hudson," New York Times 15 Nov. 1998.

**16_** Jori Finkel,"Artists Named for Hammer Museum's Los Angeles Biennial," New York Times 18 Feb. 2014.

**17_** Alex Williams, "Los Angeles and Its Booming Creative Class Lures New Yorkers," New York Times 1 May 2005.

**18_** Frances Anderton, "Out There: Chinatown Reborn As a Bohemian Outpost," New York Times 3 Jun. 2001.

**19_** Holland Cotter, "Are All-Women Shows Good or Bad for Art?" New York Times 16 Mar. 2016, See also: Anderton 2001; Randy Kennedy, "Boyle Heights Gallery Scene in Los Angeles is Still Growing," New York Times 30 Mar. 2016; Edward Wyatt, "Economic Realities Press on Artists' Outdoor Eden," New York Times 11 Aug. 2008; Solomon Moore, "Some Respite, if Little Cheer, for Skid Row Homeless," New York Times 31 Oct. 2007.

**20_** "Ms. Maccarone was tipped off to her building by Laura Owens, an artist involved with 356 Mission, a neighboring joint venture with the New York gallerist Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao, whose book and design shop is just inside the entrance. That art space was an early outpost in Boyle Heights, a part of the district that still has an anything-goes feel. "It still has a dangerous quality – I kind of like that,' Ms. Maccarone said. 'I like that we spent a fortune on security.'" Melena Ryzik, "New Art Galleries Enjoy a Los Angeles Advantage: Space," New York Times 16 Sep. 2015.

**21_** Activists have directly protested galleries in Boyle Heights. In July 2016, one group demanded that the galleries "leave immediately." The LA Times and others have followed the story; the New York Times has not. See Brittny Mejia and Steve Saldivar, "Boyle Heights activists blame the art galleries for gentrification," Los Angeles Times 4 Aug. 2016.

**22_** Montgomery Schuyler, "Westward the Course of Empire: A Panorama of Our Country, in Eight Daily Tableaux, as Seen by a Passenger on the Los Angeles Limited," New York Times 21 Jan. 1906.

**23_** Williams.

**24_** Hainley.

**25_** At press time, De Aenlle's Twitter profile read, "Financial columnist and feature writer for The New York Times Reuters and MarketWatch.com, among other organizations."

**26_** De Aenlle.

**27_** De Aenlle.

**28_** Manohla Dargis, "In the Studios' Shadow, an Avant-Garde Eye," New York Times 8 Nov. 2004.

**29_** Cecelia Ager, "Antonioni Hero in Hollywood," New York Times 5 Feb. 1967.

**30_** Julia Chaplin, "Art Scene Heats Up in Downtown Los Angeles," New York Times 12 Feb. 2016.

**31_** Chaplin.

**32_** Adam Nagourney, "Lights! Cameras! (and Cheers) for a Rock Weighing 340 Tons," New York Times 10 Mar. 2012.

**33_** "'Culturally we've always been overshadowed by the film industry, and now the art world is at a weird parallel with it,' said Sterling Ruby, one of Los Angeles's most bankable artists,

### *Correction: February 21, 2016*
An article last Sunday about the rise of art galleries in downtown Los Angeles misstated the age of the painter Sojourner Truth Parsons. She is 31, not 27.

### *Correction: May 10, 2015*
An article last Sunday about New Yorkers who move to Los Angeles described incompletely the Los Angeles living arrangement of a former New Yorker. Christina Turner shares her bungalow with a roommate; she does not live alone.

### *Correction: July 18, 2013*
An earlier version of this post misstated the title of the artwork by Katie Grinnan. It is "FYI," not "TMI."

### *Correction: October 14, 2011*
Because of an editing error, an article on Thursday about the Pacific Standard Time art festival, at 130 museums and galleries in Southern California, misstated at one point the name of the Los Angeles museum where Jeffrey Deitch is the director. As the article correctly noted elsewhere, it is the Museum of Contemporary Art, not the “Los Angeles Modern.” (There is no museum by that name.)

### *Correction: June 7, 2011*
An art review on Wednesday about “Greater LA,” at 483 Broadway in Manhattan, misidentified the city where an organizer of the show, Eleanor Cayre, is based. It is New York, not Los Angeles.

### *Correction: February 19, 2011*
An earlier version of a map with this article misspelled part of the name of a street in Los Angeles. It is Cesar Chavez Avenue, not Sezar.

### *Correction: February 1, 2016*
An earlier version of a picture caption with this post misstated the provenance of a rock sold at the Paramount Ranch art fair. It was reimagined by the artist Emily Mast, not sourced from Quartzsite, Ariz. by the artist Andrea Zittel.

### *Correction: August 3, 2013*
An art review on Friday about “Made in Space,” at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in Manhattan, misstated the given name of one artist in the show and misspelled the given name of another. They are Josh Mannis, not John, and Laeh Glenn, not Leah. The review also omitted a co-owner of Night Gallery in Los Angeles, where the show was first seen. Besides Davida Nemeroff, the gallery is run by Mieke Marple.

### *Correction: July 19, 2016*
An earlier version of a map with this article misidentified the location of the Farmers’ Market in Santa Monica. As the article correctly notes, the market is at Arizona and Second streets, not Main Street and Pico Boulevard.

### *Correction: February 10, 2008*
A Style article on Jan. 27 about Emi Fontana, a Los Angeles curator and gallerist, misidentified the typeface used in collages by one of the artists, Barbara Kruger, featured in Fontana’s new production. It was Futura Bold Italic, not Helvetica.

### *Correction: November 22, 1998*
A picture caption on Nov. 1 with an article about the changing art scene in the Chelsea section of Manhattan misidentified a gallery with an interior described as ''antiseptic and awkward.'' It is Leslie Tonkonow Artworks and Projects, not the Andrea Rosen Gallery.

is enjoying a renaissance.”(23) As early as 2006, “thanks to no major earthquake in more than a decade and brutalized New Yorkers’ finding respite here,” LA stalwart Bruce Hainley foresaw the doom of objectively cheap rent.(24)

Climate is a metaphor for ease. You’re not likely to freeze to death in your giant LA studio. Nor, the thinking goes, is LA’s local art market likely to freeze out your abstract painting. A hapless 2016 feature by Conrad de Aenlle not only combines unqualified bicoastal rivalry with voyeuristic clips of blue-chip lifestyle; it also offers a uniquely unsubtle clue as to its target audience: De Aenlle is a financial columnist.(25) “For art to flourish in a city,” he begins, “it helps to have well-off individuals and institutions with a desire to keep and exhibit it. Diverse, lively, colorful neighborhoods also come in handy, and if they have plenty of room for reasonably priced studio and gallery space, so much the better.” His sources include a director of Art Basel and the head art advisor at Citigroup, a bank.(26)

“Los Angeles has not taken as firm a hold on [artist] Jordan Wolfson,” offers De Aenlle. “‘Being from New York and also traveling, I don’t feel like LA has culturally arrived yet,’ said Mr. Wolfson, who is 35 and single.”(27) This article appeared in the international edition, and (despite Wolfson’s and the author’s hedging) is the latest to announce LA’s arrival as a serious city. That an artist’s dating status made the cut insults the intelligence of readers far and wide. Yet more notable is the implication that, while Los Angeles hasn’t “culturally arrived yet,” it will—and you’ll want to buy in before it does.

**SUN, SHADOW; LONG TAKE**

At least De Aenlle describes Wolfson’s work—albeit, in the light-and-spacey terms of the Southland’s two major exports, as “projects combining elements of film production and aerospace technology.” Even though just a tiny fraction of Angelenos work in film, the Industry nonetheless provides an easy metaphor for our city’s ongoing aspiration. “Hollywood casts a long shadow,” writes the *Times*, “and nowhere does that shadow seem darker, more enveloping and inescapable, than in Los Angeles.”(28)

The paper rarely argues otherwise. You won’t find much about Ferus Gallery, midcentury’s most famous “LA Cool” art clubhouse, until it’s gone. Yet a 1967 celebrity profile of film star David Hemmings mentions “Ferus-Pace,” where he’s curating a show with Dennis Hopper.(29) “A glittery film premiere this was not,” reports Julia Chaplin, taking stock of a video screening by New York artist Maggie Lee at 356 Mission Rd.(30) The “booze-soaked openings” at nearby Night Gallery, a former warehouse, “are like populist galas.”(31) And when LA bureau chief Adam Nagourney covers the procession of Michael Heizer’s Levitated Mass from Riverside to LACMA, the piece bears the headline: “Lights! Cameras! (and Cheers) for a Rock Weighing 340 Tons.”(32)

Granted, LA artists and institutions seem to crave the role.(33) LACMA’s Art + Film Gala, “billed as the West Coast’s version of the Costume Institute Ball at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” has proved irresistible to *Times* party hounds.(34) (“‘Gucci,’ said Michael Govan, the museum’s director, when asked about his black tuxedo.”)(35) Randy Kennedy describes a taping of *General Hospital* at MOCA PDC: “Jeffrey Deitch, a small, trim man in a double-breasted navy suit with a little makeup dabbed on his cheeks and forehead, stood encircled by television cameras, preparing to play a character called ‘Jeffrey Deitch, director of MOCA’ — a role he had just taken on in real life...” Fair is fair: “The sprawling soap-at-the-museum operation was Mr. Deitch’s idea.”(36)

The Deitch tenure, it bears repeating, is what happens when art takes its cues from Hollywood: museum directors emphasize the director and forget the museum, artists become stars, and the whole production makes dazed concessions to patrons and paparazzi. Chaplin thrills at 356 Mission’s barbed wire and passing trucks; she seems less curious about the content of Lee’s “art film.”(37) Yet for all these oversights, the *Times* nonetheless registers our fears about what LA art can be: a gentrifying force, an investment prospectus, and, worst of all, just another entertaining product.

**PAPER MIRROR**

The three iterations of the Paris Photo art fair’s LA franchise garnered mentions in no less than five articles in the *Times* and in *T Magazine*, the paper’s style supplement. It’s not hard to see why. “Dozens of exhibitors have traditional booths inside some of Paramount’s biggest soundstages,” reads one report, “while others set up shop in the storefronts of the legendary ‘New York Street’ backlot. . . . It is an art fair that feels like entertainment,” says the *New York Times*.(38)

As early as 1927, a *Times* columnist chides a man dissatisfied with Los Angeles culture. “Instead of the busy, young, healthily growing town which has hardly had time to think about the arts as yet,” says the NYT, “he would have a city pervaded by an atmosphere of Greenwich Village ‘artiness.’” Never mind that California-style salons do exist. The Los Angeles art scene’s biggest worry is that we might (or already do) subscribe to *New York Times* values. As that paper’s city gentrifies beyond thaw, one critic sends up a flare: “The news media dotes on the idea of Los Angeles and New York as cultural rivals,” writes Holland Cotter. “But Los Angeles can do much better, look much higher, by taking New York as a cautionary example and paying close activist attention to itself.”(39) Sometimes a critical eye is the most needed correction.

So forget the *Times*. Past that codependent striving, we’d need to face the question that rises in the East each morning, and each booze-soaked Western evening sets unanswered: What goes on, exactly, in these sweltering neighborhoods of ours? Without the *Times* to get it nearly wrong, we’d need to have a look ourselves.■

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**ABOVE_** Recent corrections from the Arts and Style sections of the New York Times

who has a four-acre studio complex in Vernon, Calif., an industrial city just south of the Arts District.” Chaplin.

**34_** Peter Haldeman, “In LA, Art + Film + Fashion,” New York Times 30 Oct. 2012
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**35_** Haldeman. See also Finkel, “Kanye West-Steve McQueen Video to Have American Premiere in Los Angeles,” New York Times 19 Jul. 2015.

**36_** Randy Kennedy, “Museum Role Fits a Former Art Dealer,” New York Times 30 Jun. 2010.

**37_** Chaplin. See Wendy Yao, “1000 Words: Maggie Lee,” Artforum 54, no. 8 (April 2016): 211.

**38_** Steffie Nelson, “The Distinct Californication of Paris Photo LA,” T Magazine 1 May 2015.

**39_** Cotter. To this end, a few hopeful examples: LAist revels in cataloguing the New York Times’ awkward West Coast coverage; Carolina Miranda of the Los Angeles Times demolishes De Aenlle’s fumbling accounting on Genius, the annotation website; Even The Source, a blog published by the Los Angeles Metro, disputes a Times piece about the new Expo Line.

# Domestic Trips

*In a wide-ranging conversation, Samara Golden discusses the influences and processes behind her psychedelic, room-sized installations.*

Interview by Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal

**ABOVE_** Samara Golden, In Studio, 2007, continually changing mixed media installation, view from 7-foot loft, photo courtesy of the artist

**OPPOSITE_** Samara Golden, The Flat Side of the Knife, 2014, mixed media installation at MoMA PS1: video projection, live video feed, video mixer, CRT monitor, three soundtracks, photo courtesy of the artist

**WOULDN'T ART BE SO MUCH BETTER IF ART WEREN'T DEADENING? IF ART WERE THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT WE'RE DOING TO SURVIVE ALL THE TIME.**

I spent most of my adolescence sitting on a pink leather sofa my mother had thrifted, staring at a television embedded in a faux rosewood cabinet, resting my feet on a Memphis-style coffee table of primary colors and geometric shapes. That living room (and the Manhattan apartment) no longer exists. Yet it does exist, as a barometer of scale when I enter a home anywhere else, in my inherited taste for the borders of tacky, and, of course, in memory, which itself is often metaphorized as a house—as a set of rooms, where we can re-inhabit our experiences, or leave them shuddered, collecting dust.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard tells us that the house we grew up in continues to house our psychology, that architecture shapes perception. In Samara Golden's work, domestic space gets this metaphysical due. Golden makes human-scale rooms, furniture, and household objects, often from home building materials, like polystyrene insulation. She takes control of our vantage points, building platforms to orient us into her work, which then works to disorient us—mirrors make spaces double or objects tacked to the ceiling appear below; live-feed video reveals hidden texts. When Golden and I met at her studio on a too-hot August night, she told me she wants viewers to see themselves in her work. What might this mean when her spaces would only be inhabitable if we could enter a mirror, or walk on the ceiling, or exist in multiple places at the same time? When her spaces are saturated in unlikely hues—kaleidoscopes of silvers, pinks, and whites—as if we're looking at them through the hazy glasses of memory, fantasy, or a dream? Perhaps here, architecture shapes perception by letting us hallucinate.

Moments from our roving, four-hour conversation that didn't make it into this final cut: the ethics of optical illusions (do you have a reason?); Lacan (see the mirror stage, if you must); that time Golden almost died of pneumonia, and a nurse told her she had to decide if she wanted to live (despite some reservations, she did); that when we met I was Berlin>LA jetlagged, and she had been melting plastic all day. What's here is a much-condensed version, one that moves through her psychedelic (my word), riddling (her word), cinematic (our word), hand-made (!), large-scale installations, and the small-scale ideas about contradiction, fragility, and control that go into making them.

**Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal: Do you think your work is psychedelic? Not in a cheesy topsy-turvy way, but in terms of how psychedelia was about transforming perception, hacking the nervous system.**

Samara Golden: I talk about it as creating a psychological space, but I don't think I could ever really know what anyone else is really experiencing. I used to talk about my stuff through this idea that more than one thing could be happening in one space, which is related to psychedelia. You could also think about it as equal or parallel with film, in terms of how it can make you feel, make you relate. It's amazing how many different perspectives can be shown in film, how many conflicting things can be happening at once, how you can end without an answer.

In *The Flat Side of the Knife* (2014) there is a white room at the bottom which is really the reflection of what's on the ceiling. For me, it ended up being an escape, or a vacation, or maybe death—the fantasy that we have of things being different later. I liked the way that the white room becomes an impossible space that doesn't exist on earth that nobody can ever actually access—this idea that making art, that anything I make will never be as good as I really want it to be, that it will always be pale.

**TJR: Sometimes you make spaces that aren't spaces, they're images.**

SG: Not to be a riddler, but I also make images to make images. I do all my own documentation. They are completely different mediums, installation and photography, but I always make the image have the same kind of life that I wanted the piece to have. My sister and her husband used to be retouchers and color reps for magazines in New York, so she taught me a lot. I want to represent the actual place, but the photo itself can't really capture anything close to the real experience. In order to give it the feeling that being there does, you have to go back in and create this other thing that isn't there, but was.

I always loved just making anything but I never felt like I had the intellectual rigor or ability to back up what I was making, especially in painting. In the second part of my life—I applied to grad school when I was like 35—I started taking photographs of paintings in a way where you couldn't really tell whether it was a painting or a sculpture. When I got into Columbia, I built a seven-foot loft in my studio and made all these installations where you looked at them from the loft, and I took photos of them. The conversation was about where the experience is. Is the experience you having the perspective, or is it the photograph? I was frustrated that you had to pick one of those.

I do really think in terms of cinematic framing of a shot. When there's no peripheral vision on the situation, no breaking the illusion. The first thing I said was I'm not interested in manipulating people; I'm contradicting myself.

**TJR: Well if you say you want things to be cinematic, then you're engaged in a history of manipulating people.**

SG: I've been thinking about cinéma vérité, this idea of controlling in the editing room, but not directing during production of the film. You could argue that you become so manipulative by creating the frame and editing, or that you don't, you just make what you get into its own thing. Sort of a magical, witchy situation, getting to a place you didn't know existed through the process. For me, I both am pained by, but also love, the fact that just to physicalize the idea you go out for a walk and wind up in a country you never heard of and the people speak a language you don't know.

**TJR: Does your use of "cheap" materials, like polystyrene, help relinquish this idea of control—in that you can see the seams and yet the magic works anyway?**

SG: That's a beautiful thing if it's possible. A trick where you see no seams has no humanity in it. It's like brainwashing. I've only been to Disneyland once but the thing I love most about it is you could see all the ways it was made. Even in the Small World, it was just stuff. It's stuff anyone could have or use. This is going to make me sound like I'm full of myself but I think of it as fighting for a more low-class or middle-class way of being in the world.

**TJR: Disney's trick for the town square was just making everything three-quarter scale. I wonder if this relates to the perspective you achieved from your seven-foot loft and how that has come through in your more recent work.**

SG: Yeah there's some inception—I talked about those early works as physical Photoshop. All of the objects you saw from the loft were actually cutouts of photographs. And when you're in this certain place at the top of the loft, the pieces lock together as kind of an image—although the camera can never get it, because the camera doesn't have two eyes.

**TJR: Do the mirrors in your work function similarly? Mirrors are strange materials—they both create space and create images at the same time.**

SG: I like the way that through mirrors, things become more clear. They almost become—I don't know if I want this printed, but I did my share of psychedelic drugs when I was younger, and I always found it fascinating that on certain drugs, it's almost like your eyesight is wider, and the amount of color you see and the clarity is just totally different. If it were possible to take a picture through your mind—we're not talking about saturation or psychedelic colors or anything, we're talking about a really clear something. It's not exactly an aesthetic thing—it's just a different world kind of, and you can see that you're in that. And I feel that there's

**EARLIER ON I HAD A SPECIFIC CREDO THAT I'M FRAGILE, SO MY WORKS ARE FRAGILE. BUT IN ORDER TO MAKE BIG IDEAS HAPPEN, YOU NEED A LOT OF RESOURCES. MAYBE I THINK OF IT AS DOING WHAT I CAN WITH WHAT I HAVE NOW.**

something about the reflection in a mirror that convocates some of that kind of clarity.

**TJR: Convocate?**

SG: I'm not sure if it's the right word, but convocate is summoning a spirit or creating this thing that's otherworldly. I made a stupid joke to [my partner] John that the best kind of artwork would be this weird hovering jelly blob that would become whatever you wanted it to become, that doesn't have any relationship to gravity or the physical properties we have to deal with. But then, the joke is on me, because I'm always making stuff that goes against gravity, that's impossible for everyone to install. Everything that looks draped is actually stiffened and tethered so it doesn't fall. And it needs to be light–because I'm small. I want to do it myself instead of sending it to a fabricator. It's just everyone's nightmare.

[The work] doesn't actually belong in the world in a permanent way. This sounds crass, but often people can't help support these ideas, because if they want to collect the objects themselves, it's always this long conversation about, well, is it going to last? Earlier on I had a specific credo that I'm fragile, so they're fragile. But in order to make big ideas happen, you need a lot of resources. Maybe I think of it as doing what I can with what I have now.

**TJR: I'm thinking about places you put yourself or your labor into the work–like in *The Fireplace* (2013) your face is projected.**

SG: I don't want it to be about autobiography, though I'm in it. I want it more to effect the person, as a space where they can feel the themselves in it.

**TJR: Like at the movies. You go to the movies and there's a projector and what you do is project.**

SG: Right. You project yourself all over the characters and stuff. And other types of projection. I heard this thing on the radio today about jet plane fighters. At the certain level of g-force that makes people pass out, the pilots would have these experiences, and often they would feel like they were outside of the plane looking back at themselves flying the plane, until suddenly they would realize that they were that person in the plane. This kind of astral projection or being outside of yourself actually happens.

**TJR: It takes you out of the cliché.**

SG: Yeah, the psychedelic is cliché now. I grew up right after the hippies had lost their idealism–the future they thought was possible was not happening, but at the same time I was surrounded by books and stuff that said it could happen. I remember my dad telling me he wore upside down glasses for a week as part of a military study that they were doing on conscientious objectors of the Vietnam War–

**TJR: Upside down glasses?**

SG: One possibility is that I'm really gullible, so I don't know if that's a true story. But regardless my imagination went crazy. It was supposedly a trial where you're locked into the ward and everyone wears glasses with lenses that make everything upside down. My understanding is that your actual mind starts flipping upside down after a while. You don't notice, you start interpreting it, you start to know when right is right and left is left. In the upside down world your body adjusts. It you take off the glasses you're totally screwed up for a while, but then it flips back.

**TJR: That's also a potent example of the militarization of perception—perception as something that has been structured by power.**

SG: I will always be a teenager in the way that I just always believe everything we are living in is a kind of fabrication. Even though I'm totally emotionally connected to those weird structures that we made. When I was in high school, my friend and I had this saying, "only the loonies have clear glasses." I used to scribble it everywhere.

I had a couple friends–let's say their sanity was pretty loose. In a way, they were too sensitive for this world. If you really were able to see everything that was happening without creating a critical format to protect yourself from it, you would go crazy. It's just too much to hold on to.

**TJR: Survival is actually a deadening of perception and not an enhancing of perception.**

SG: Wouldn't art be so much better if it weren't deadening? If art were the opposite of what we're doing to survive all the time.

**TJR: You have a really romantic view of what art can be.**

SG: I mean, I have a pretty naive and romantic idea about both the world and my life and what art can be. But sometimes it's sort of a bit of a setup, like a setup for disappointment.

I feel very untethered to the earth in a way and I think it's something I've always struggled with. I think it's a gift and a curse. I do tend to see all of everything all at once. I guess one effort of making stuff is to try to make sense of that.

**TJR: Maybe another way to think about the politics of your work besides this idea of perception is through domestic space. This idea that architecture is so overcoded with how we're supposed to live, how we're supposed to be. I'm thinking about utopian feminist design to eliminate housework, about queer spaces.**

SG: But maybe it's not utopian. Maybe this is too much info, but part of what's in the work is actually negative stuff that I'm trying to exorcise. Say I'm more traditional than I really think I am–say I'm a person who did used to want to get married, or that I love clothes or fashion. When you realize that some of that stuff is actually really bad crap being fed to you, and then you try to change it, your aesthetics don't necessarily match with your own politics. A really harsh example is high heels. They are basically torture devices but at the same time I still think they can be sexy...it's a contradiction. Contradiction is something I'm always thinking about.

**TJR: I don't get to say this much, but we're both under five feet tall. Do you ever think about your size in relation to the work you make?**

SG: I have to laugh at myself because most of my installations have been about having an overview or looking down or having power over something. I always love being high up in the air. Of course I like high vantage points, because in a normal life, I don't have that way of having power.

**TJR: That wheelchair on a staircase in *Flat Side* is really haunting to me in demonstrating that it's really the built environment that makes you disabled, not you. If you're in a wheelchair and there was a fucking ramp, you could get across, but instead there are stairs.**

SG: It's about control. We've created a world where only one kind of person can be the most in control.

It's also about class. I think there's a deep under part of my work that is about class. I'm not saying I know anything, but at one point I was homeless, or really more of a "transient," and I have deep connections with my friends who maybe are still in that situation. I can't get a hold of them, I don't know if they died or what.

To me the ceiling vaults at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts were like 18 different ways of being in the world, or different classes. You came in and you were on a kind of mezzanine and down here you would see all of the vaults, but in reality everything was above you. When I first saw the space, I just saw the work. I saw eighteen vaults in this really scary idea of the future–everyone living in their own little space, like a hotel room, with no entrance or exit.

**TJR: Thinking about cinema and you working and living in Los Angeles, this reminds me of sunshine noir; the way these gritty narratives play out in complete contradiction to the location. Could this be analogous to the things that only appear in your work through surveillance video, or on monitors that use this surveillance video?**

SG: This goes back to your question about how I put myself in my work. For the monitor in the MoMA PS1 piece [*Flat Side*], the text that is color-keyed behind the bed is literally all the work and labor and emailing that went into the piece, all my worries about how it's going to come out, all my anxieties–almost a labor log along with a psychological log. And in Bad Brains, there was a black sash across the whole installation (in the monitor you could see this scrolling writing on it) like an insanity script–some of my thinking and "insanity tests" you take online to see if you're crazy.

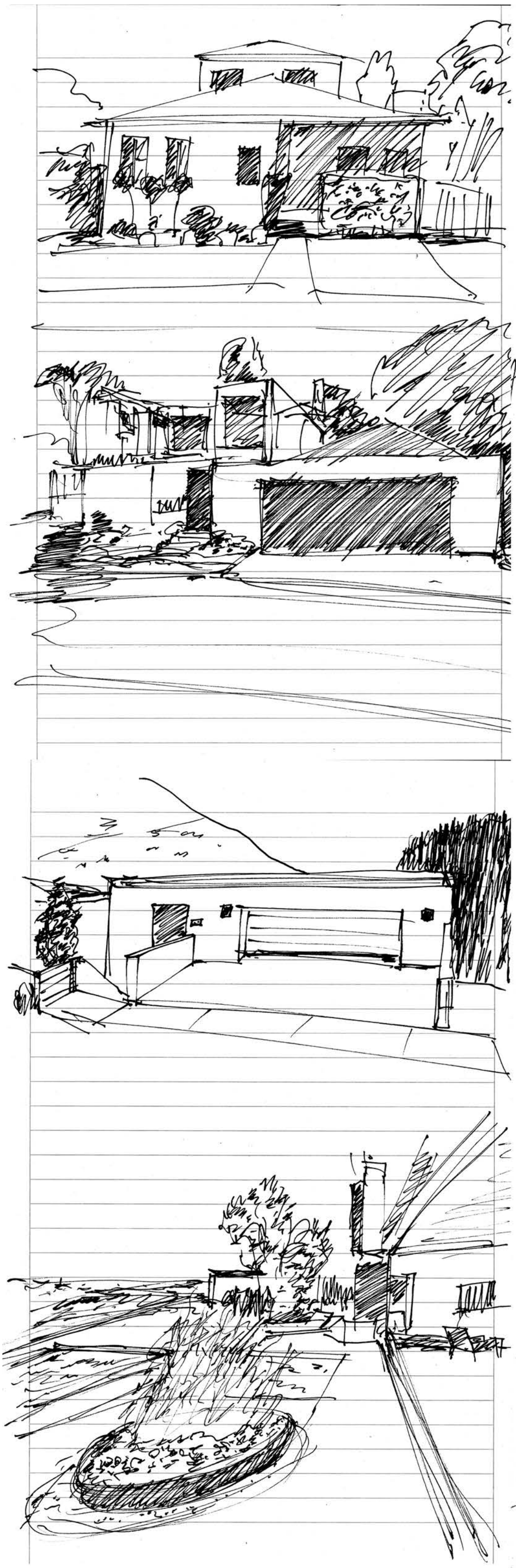
**TJR: Do the monitors provide clarity in the same way the mirrors do?**

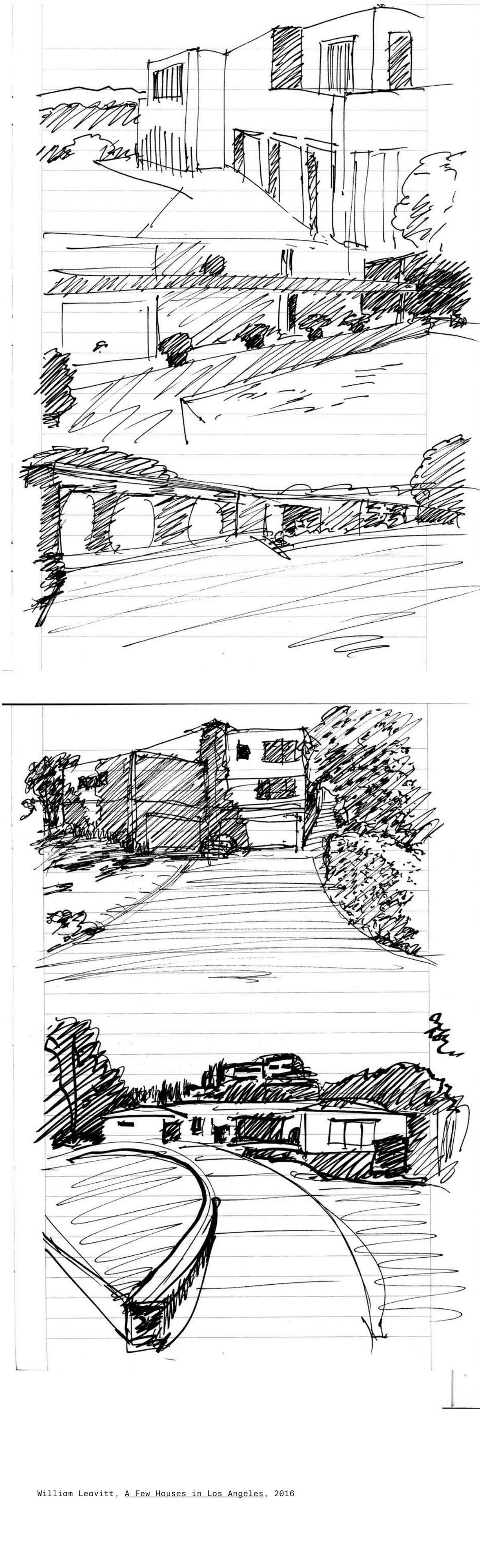
SG: Both of them are kinds of mediation. At one point I felt like the pieces in the installation were all in service to the image into the mirror, but it's actually truly sculpture and alive as its own thing. At one point I decided the work was what was mediated in the television screen, and that all the other parts of it were in service to that image. I feel pretty unsatisfied with all those ideas as the final terms, or final thoughts around the piece. For me it's more interesting if every take on it and every final attitude is wrong.

**TJR: Rather than every perspective is right?**

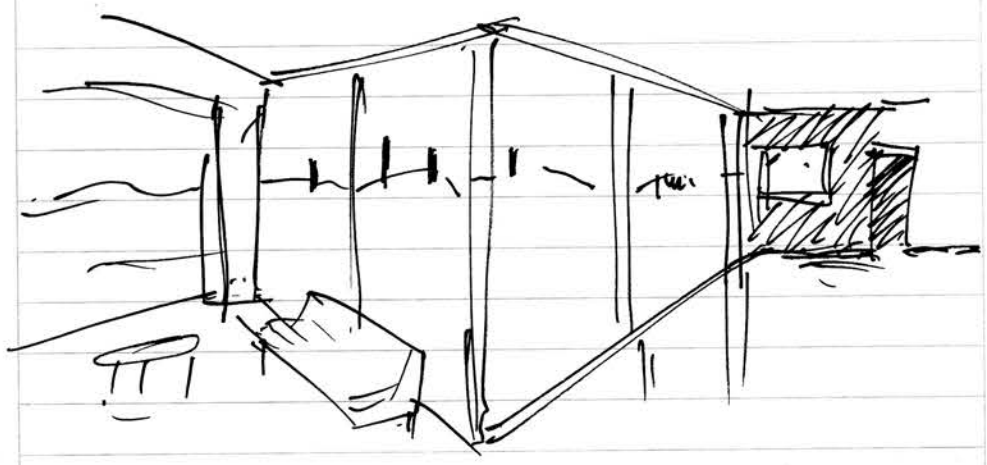
SG: Those words don't really mean anything anyway. Everything is both wrong and right. Or maybe it can't really be right or the whole thing until it's all of it at once, and there's no way to actually take that all in. In that way that mimics life more clearly. ■

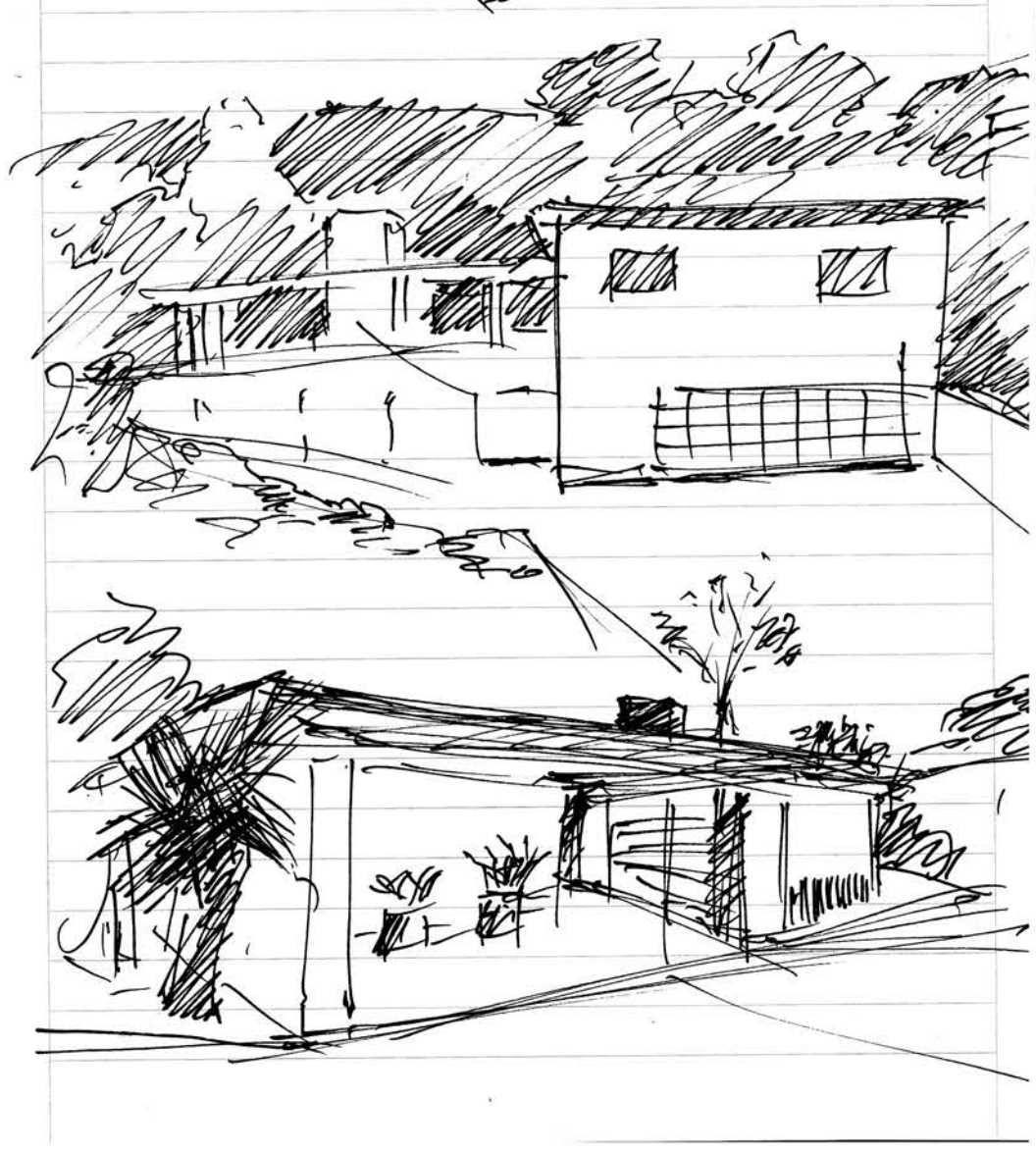
**TRACY JEANNE ROSENTHAL** is a writer based in Los Angeles. She is writing a book about the Americana at Brand.

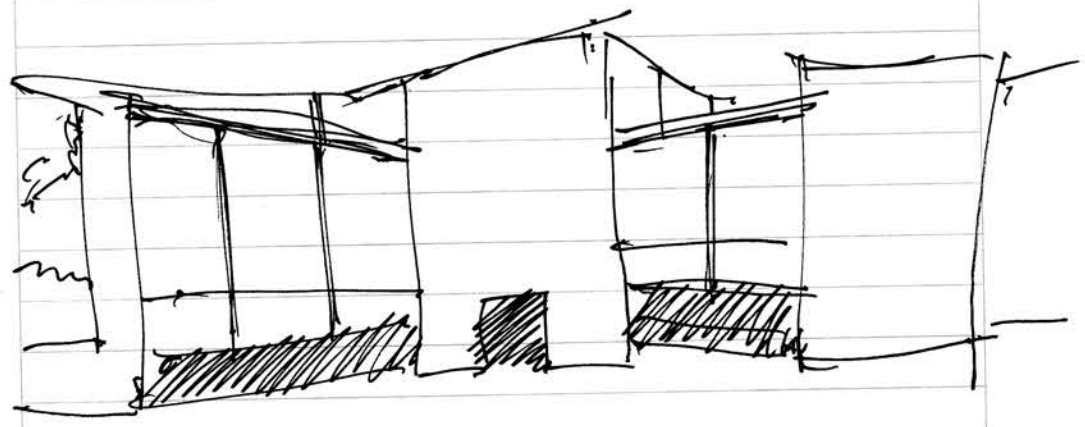


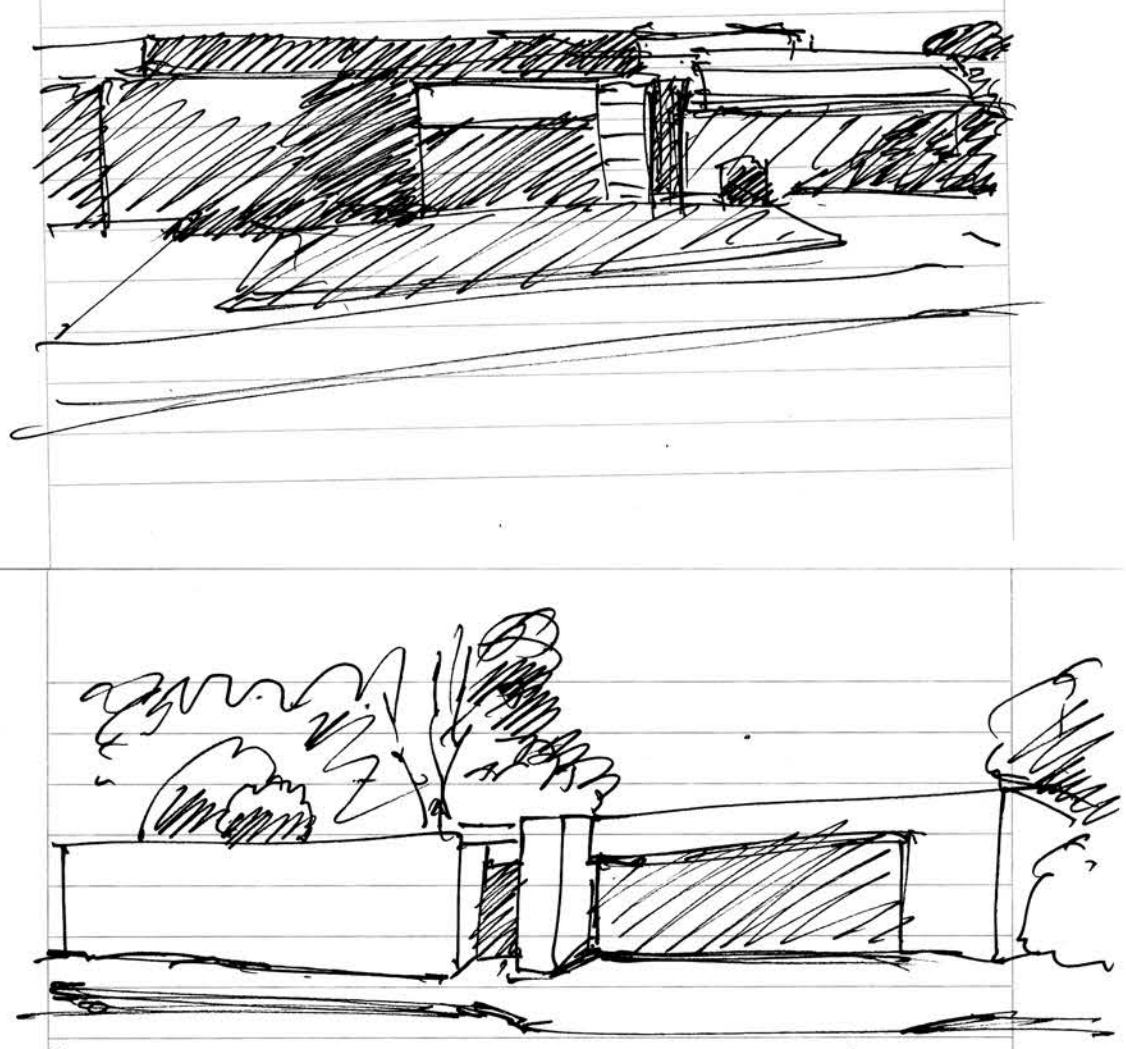


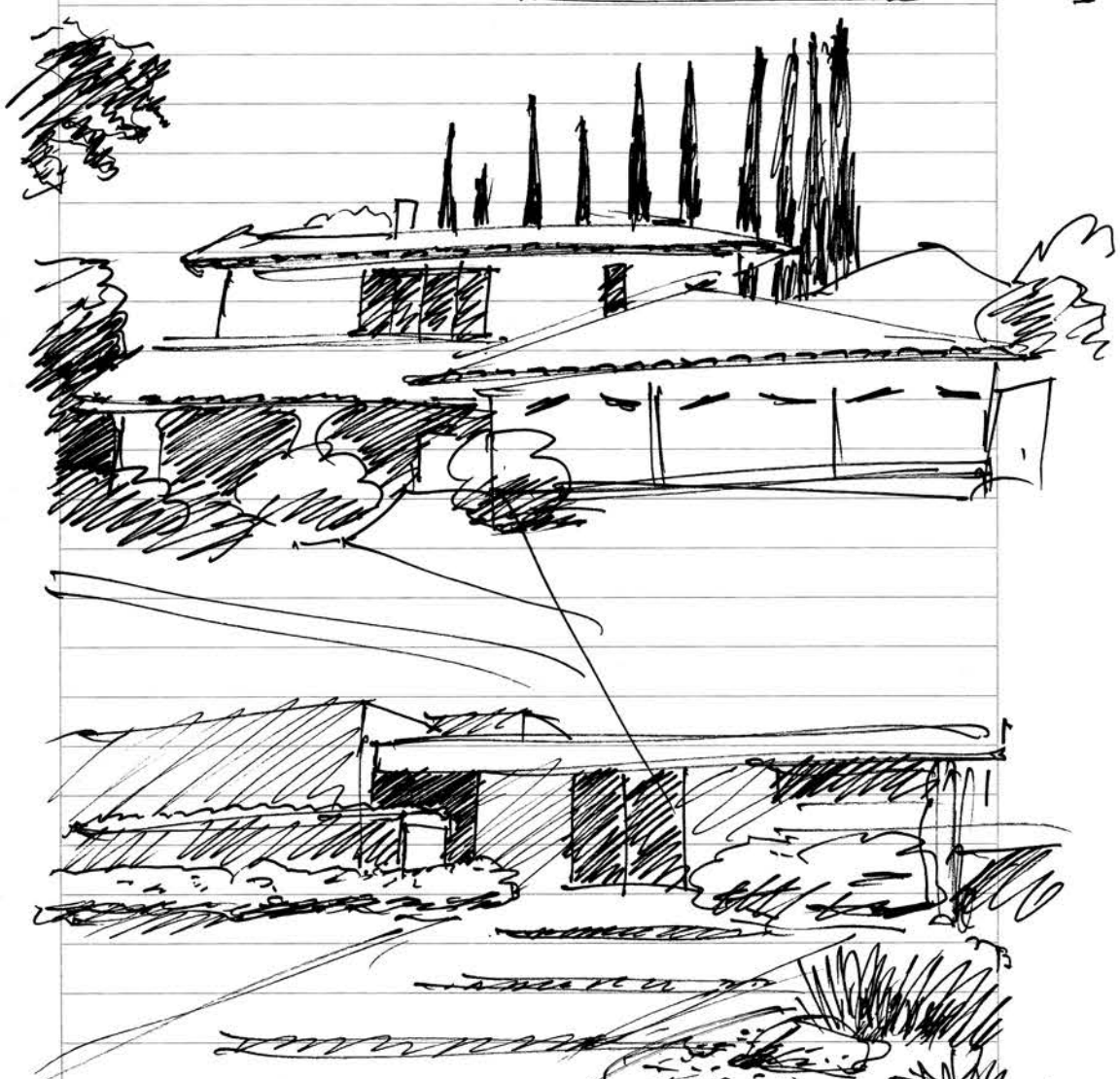
William Leavitt, A Few Houses in Los Angeles, 2016

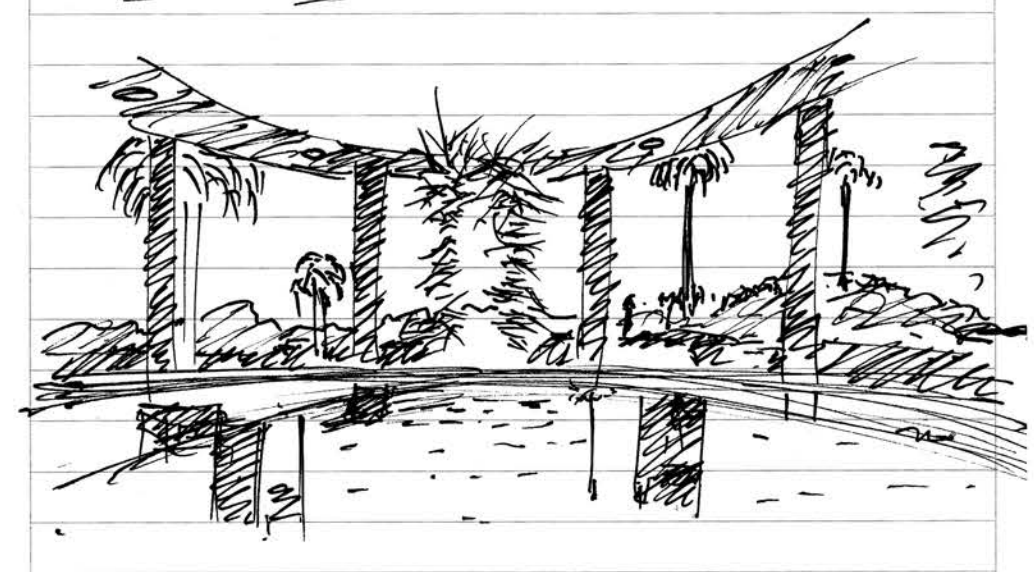


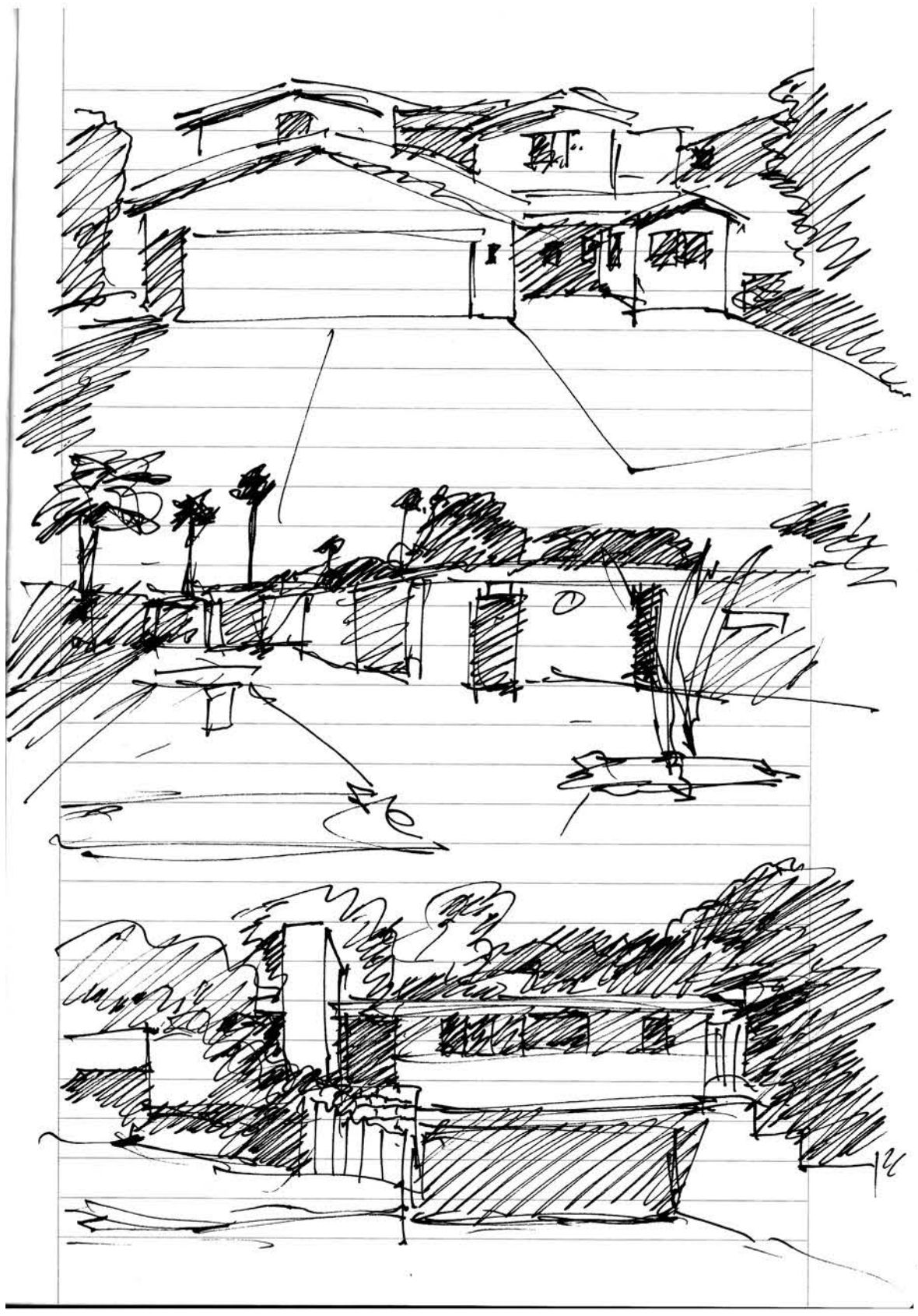


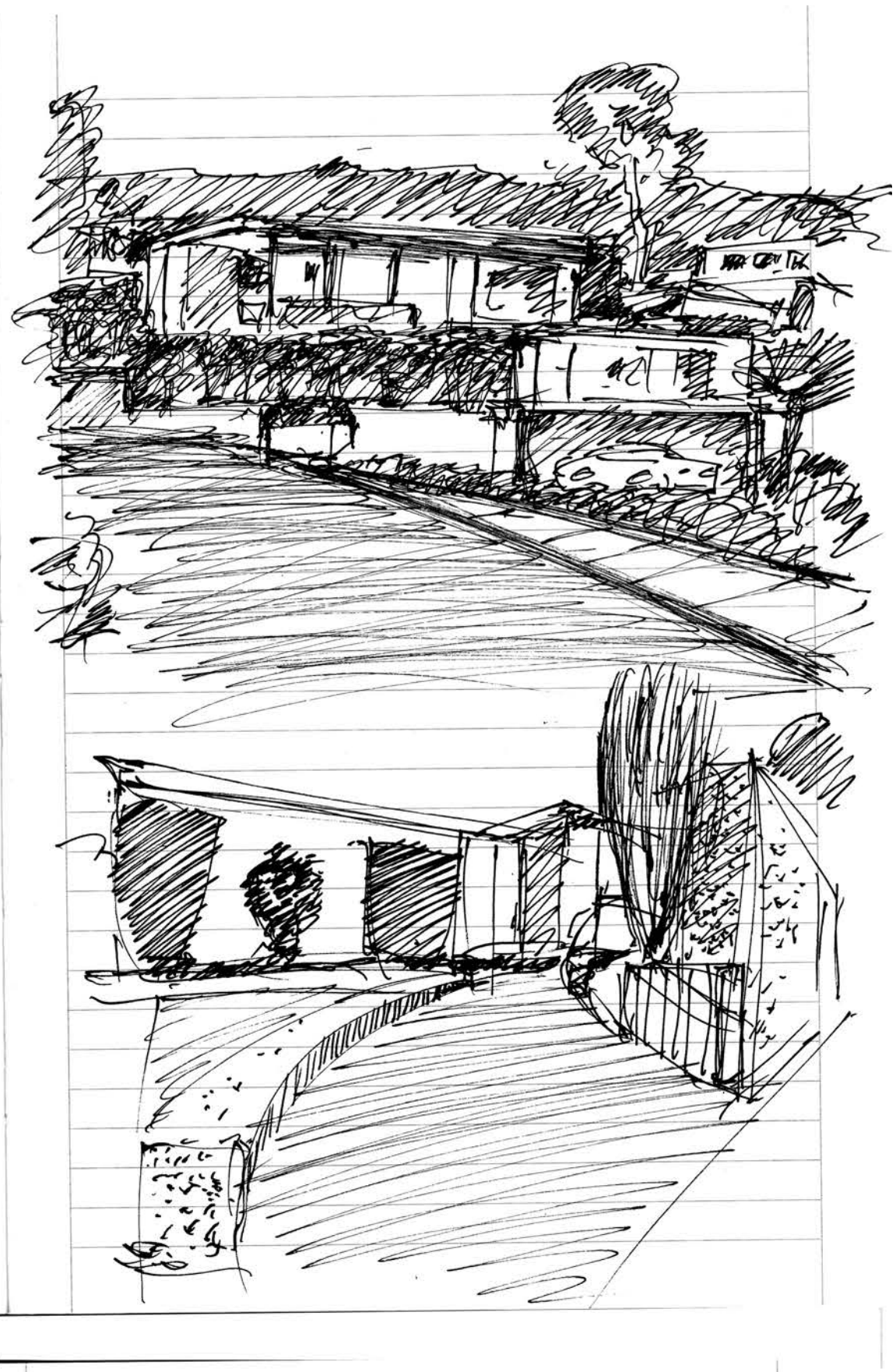


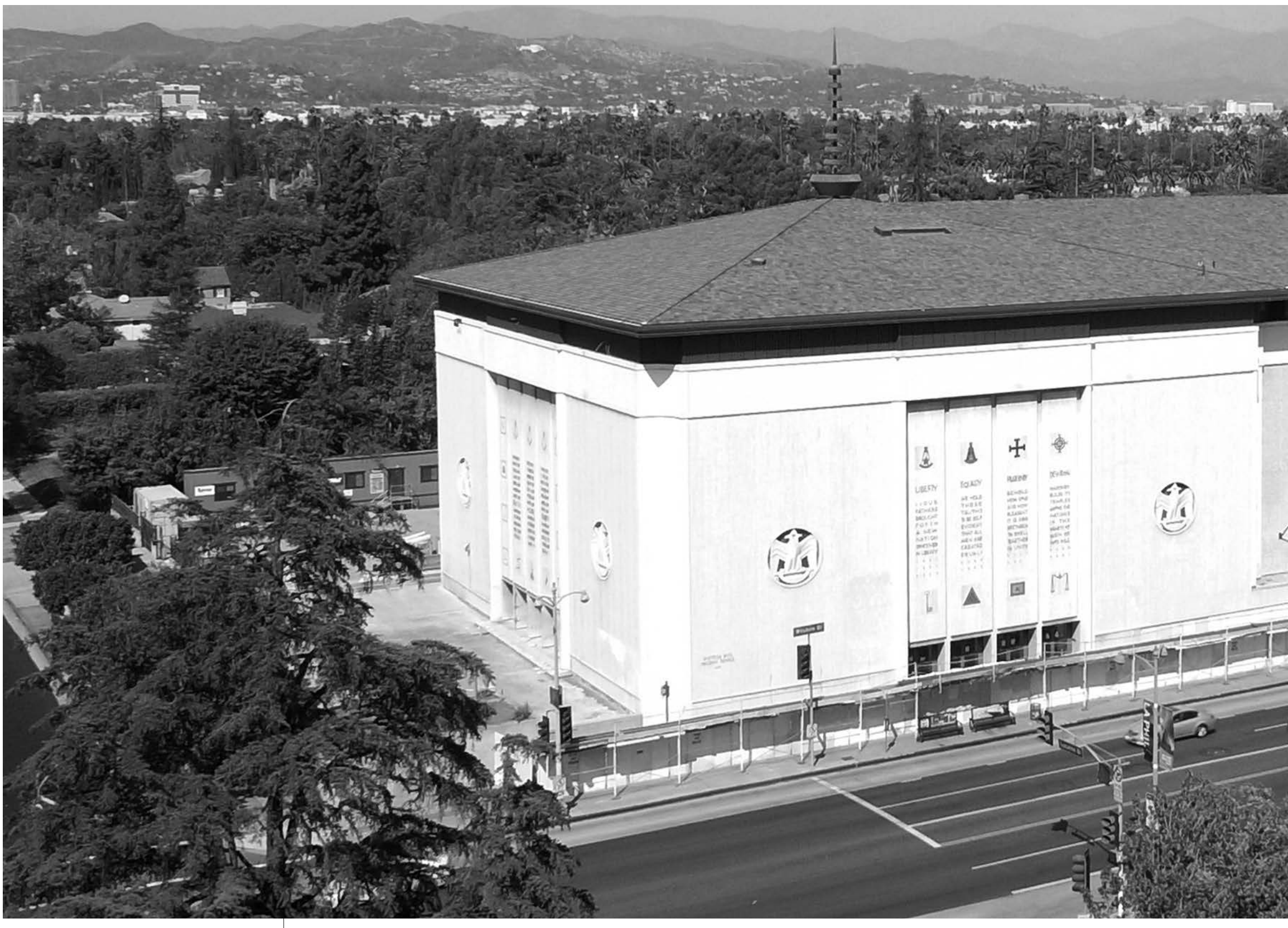












# Last Rites

*The Scottish Rite Masonic Temple is an impressive, isolated place, built to celebrate power and solidarity. This year, it reopens as a private art museum.* by Catherine Wagley

**ABOVE_** Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, Los Angeles, 2016, photo by LA Drones for Art Los Angeles Reader

**OPPOSITE_** Temple interior, 2012, photo by Irwin Miller

**BELOW_** Ryan Trecartin, Temple Time, 2016, HD video, 54:32, © Ryan Trecartin, courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

"We were like the Rock of Gibraltar," said Gaylord Roten in 1994, speaking of the five-story, 90,000 square foot marble temple on Wilshire Boulevard that his fellow Freemasons had occupied for over 30 years. Roten, the manager of this Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, was about to put it on the market. Operation costs had grown as Mason membership fell. The building, a strange and majestic structure, had a windowless exterior decorated with double-headed eagles, murals, and statues celebrating an eccentric mix of fabled men, from Persian emperor Zerubbabel to George Washington. Inside, the temple had a 3,000-seat auditorium, where the Masons would perform pageants as members moved up in rank, and a 1,500-seat dining hall, as well as special lounges and meeting rooms where Masons of various degree-levels would congregate and volunteers would provide free speech therapy, the Scottish Rite's chosen charity, to children. Now, all this space would have to be repurposed.

Perhaps, by comparing it to Gibraltar, Roten simply meant the temple loomed large—a physical place that lent strength to the organization as an idea. Perhaps he meant, as in the myth, the temple was a Herculean Pillar serving as a beacon, drawing strong men—would-be Masons—toward it. When he made the reference, Roten did not yet know that the building wouldn't sell for nineteen more years, and that the upscale Westgate Square neighborhood surrounding it would keep the Masons from renting it out for revenue. So he probably was referencing legend over the history of Gibraltar, the landmass Spain and Britain keep fighting over. Still, it does make sense to think of the temple as contested territory; it is an impressive, isolated place built to celebrate old notions of power and solidarity that would become endangered as new ones took their place.

As Sergeant Ron Batesole of the LAPD's Wilshire Community Police Station told the *Los Angeles Times*, the cops were especially sad to see the Masons go.(1) The temple had hosted weapons and tactical team exercises. During the 1992 Rodney King riots, the National Guard had used it as their base. Imagine cavernous halls walled with epic mosaics depicting presidents and crusaders housing men in riot gear, awaiting deployment: government-employed enforcers, inhabiting an aspirational homage to mastery and lawmaking. In 2013, after almost two decades of limited use, Paul and Maurice Marciano bought the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple for a reported $8 million. The brothers, who co-founded the apparel company Guess! with two other siblings, planned to renovate it to house and display their expanding collection of contemporary art. Their foundation is scheduled to open to the public—by appointment—in the first half of 2017.

Millard O. Sheets designed the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple in 1960. He was, according to his own recollection, the only non-Mason considered for the project.(2) A well-liked artist, academic, and architect who had by that time designed a number of mosaic-adorned Home Savings and Loan banks, Sheets knew the director of the temple in Los Angeles, a local judge named Ellsworth Meyer. Meyer invited Sheets to a dinner at the Athletic Club downtown, where a number of doctors and lawyers joined them. The men, all Masons, told Sheets they wanted to build a cathedral. "The important thing is why do you think you need a temple?" Sheets asked them. "Maybe the idea of Masonry isn't even practical today."(3)

The history of the Scottish Rite is hazy—or "hidden in mist."(4) Masonry, which originated with stonemasons, based its

initial rank system on craft guild rankings: apprentice, journeyman, master. In Masonry, as with Scientology, one's relation to the secrets of the order, as well as the divine, are mediated by attaining higher levels; in conservative sects, no women are admitted. In 1761, a French wine dealer named Stephen Morin decided to "establish perfect and sublime Masonry in all parts of the world," starting with the Caribbean.**(5)** He invented a series of higher "Scottish" degrees that influenced the current 33-degree system of the Scottish Rite. Individual chapters, called lodges, operate independently, miniature kingdoms that appoint and promote their own royalty from within.

A few months after their initial meeting, Judge Meyer invited Sheets to another dinner. The Masons told him they wanted their cathedral to function like a Gothic church, serving as a book for people who can't read, allowing them to feel part of a grand historical narrative. Sheets took the job, and relayed the Mason's self-image through decorative opulence and epic imagery. He sourced travertine from Italy so that the temple, though rectilinear and formalist in design, would reference classical history in its materials. The multiple recreation spaces, upstairs lodges, and library were all comfortable and thoroughly ornamented. He used mosaics, his forte, to relate the current era to earlier times. The mosaic on the east exterior wall depicts the stonemasons who built King Solomon's temple, crusaders in the Holy Land, and King Edward VII, himself a Masonic grand master. "I'm not a Mason," Sheets said in 1977, "but I do feel that it's a tremendous attempt toward the freedom of man as an individual."**(6)**

In 2012, a year before the building sold to the Marcianos, Irwin Miller got inside and photographed. He finds a lushly carpeted gathering room with velvety curtains cascading down the wall and sconces dangling from the ceiling. The seats in the auditorium have floral patterned upholstery that echo the wallpaper appearing elsewhere in the building. The rooms look as if they'd once hosted *Mad Men*-worthy parties in which men in business suits mingled around an upholstered bar in a corner. But now the rooms appeared static, left-behind reminders of a fraternity's style and sway.

Paul and Maurice Marciano planned to renovate the Temple in stages, one floor at a time. But before the brothers started construction, they handed the building over to artist Ryan Trecartin and his longtime collaborator Lizzie Fitch. (They also allowed *W Magazine* in for an "art meets fashion" shoot.) The brothers gave the artists free reign, with one exception: "Don't destroy the mosaics."**(7)** It's a "strange building," Trecartin noted in a 2016 interview with Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, one "that has the logic almost of a convention center and of all the spaces in a hotel that aren't hotel rooms."**(8)**

The artists inhabited the building with its furnishings and decorations largely intact, as if it had been suddenly abandoned decades before and simply left to decay. In the three grainy, frentetic, horror-inspired videos Trecartin and Fitch shot there, the temple is a character as much as a set, party mystery land, part squat. They and their actors smash mirrors and set up tents in empty rooms. They use hand-held cameras and employ parkour practitioners to do stunts, flipping in stairwells and beneath worn chandeliers. As in most of Trecartin's videos, the dialogue moves fast. Viewers who took the time to watch *Site Visit* (2014), *Temple Time* (2016), and *untitled work in progress*, when they screened at Regen Projects in Los Angeles and later at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York could just begin to unravel the frenetic narrative. In Fitch and Trecartin's multi-part story, the temple contains a national park, which is there to give refuge to computer-generated creatures and preserve certain notions of "the natural." As the videos go on, it seems less a park and more a quarantined disaster zone.

"It's a violent claustrophobic reaction to the idea that the world is a finished piece of work," writes French theorist Camille de Toledo, commenting on the impulse to revolt among young people coming of age after 9/11, in the midst of economic collapse.**(9)** Fitch, Trecartin, and company perform this kind of claustrophobia, but show us what happens when a response to the world is not reaction but inaction. Stunted by the structures they revolt against, the characters behave as undirected activists. They are occupiers riding on impulses rather than mission. They have cameras but not plans. Certain characters were Anticipators, individuals with access to everything but no agency to do anything but boast about their access. They, like the contemporary subjects they index, are trapped in a place built to ensure that an established history continues; they can't see outside of it, even though they're dismissive of what it represents.

In Trecartin and Fitch's videos, the characters always have the sense that

**1_** Jake Doherty, "Masons Forced to Put Scottish Rite Temple Up for Sale," Los Angeles Times 19 Mar. 1994.

**2_** Millard Sheets, transcript of oral history interview conducted by George M. Goodwin, in Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, 1977.

**3_** Sheets.

**4_** S. Brent Morris, The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry (New York: Alpha Books, 2006). One has to start somewhere.

**5_** Condensed History of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Masonry from Its Introduction to the United States to its Present Time (New York: Drummond & Neue, 1887).

**6_** Condensed History.

**7_** Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, "Ryan Trecartin," BOMB 135 (Spring 2016).

**8_** Lehrer-Graiwer.

**9_** Camille de Toledo. Coming of Age at the End of History (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2008).

**10_** De Toledo.

**11_** Ian Lovett, "A Bigger Closet for Their Art," New York Times 25 Aug. 2013: C1.

**12_** A blog called Free to Find Truth uses numerology to connect the Rodney King beating to a purposeful race war organized by the "international masonic network," and a book called The Truth about Freemasons, Illuminati and the New World Order connects the Masons to earlier unrest, including the Watts uprising. Zachary K. Hubbard, "Race War Needless Division," Free to Find Truth 6 July 2016 <freetofindtruth.blogspot.com>. S.D.S. and C.M.W., The Truth about Freemasons, Illuminati and the New World Order (Lulu.com: 2012).

**13_** Julie Grist, "Marciano Art Museum Unveils Plans for Masonic Temple on Wilshire," Larchmont Buzz 22 May 2014.

**ABOVE_** Daryl Gates, chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, eulogizes officers who perished in a car crash, 1988, photo by Chris Gulker

**DURING THE RODNEY KING RIOTS, THE NATIONAL GUARD USED THE TEMPLE AS THEIR BASE.**

"some big event happened" in the temple. Said Trecartin, "It's like big history folding back on itself and becoming this niche thing."(10) Perhaps Trecartin forecasts the "niche thing" the temple will become when the Marciano Art Foundation opens in 2017. Shorn of much of its interior ornamentation, the building will reopen as a museum with mostly white walls. Ostensibly, it will reflect the aesthetic tastes of the two men, although, if recent Los Angeles history repeats itself, it will probably show work by the same few famous artists, like most museums opened by collectors. Indeed, the foundation is part of a larger trend in Los Angeles by which power is codified in cultural, rather than religious or even governmental centers. "There is such a vibrant, vibrant art community with so many artists living here," Maurice Marciano said, neutrally, of his motivations.(11)

Conspiracy theorists don't need to know that police used the Scottish Rite Temple in the 1990s to argue that the Masons incited the race riots in the first place.(12) Of course, there are other, lighter theories: about the Masons rigging NFL games and James Cameron's films conveying Masonic messages. It's easy to blame an organization with prominent buildings and old-fashioned ideas of mastery and rank-climbing for contemporary injustices. They're more tangible as culprits than newer corporate and political forces that proliferate in a global, diffuse, and virtual way. But it's these forces that make windowless, mosaic-covered buildings better suited as semi-public showrooms than private headquarters. Perhaps the temple's change of hands, from the Masons to the Marcianos, helps make the transition literal.

A rendering by architect Kulapat Yantrasast shows the temple's auditorium turned into a large main gallery, the decoration stripped away to create an adaptable environment.(13) Trecartin and company did some of that physical stripping. And, in spite of themselves, their probing and anxious experiments facilitated the transition between one individualistic, solidarity-centered idea of power to another streamlined, possession-centered idea. Their videos capture a space between these ideas that, in this context, no longer physically exists. ■

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

# Father Figure

*A white, middle-aged artist cohort plays out anxieties of modern American manhood through the bedrooms of little girls.* by Jonathan Griffin

"A crock of shit" is how Mike Kelley once described what he called the "modernist cult of the child."(1) He was talking about the idealization of children—of childhood, rather—over the past two centuries, since Romanticism exalted it as a pure state, uncorrupted by the mores and hang-ups of culture and society. In visual art, this was manifested in the self-consciously childlike styles of Picasso, Miró and Klee, and the later affectation of children's art by Dubuffet, Jorn, and countless others who, for associated reasons, also fetishized the "primitive" and the "insane." "Where do the children play?" asked Cat Stevens in 1970, testifying to the persistence of that myth of purity even through late '60s counterculture, the era of the Flower Children.(2)

By the end of the 1970s, the youth had turned nasty. In Los Angeles, there emerged a now-canonized cadre of artists that centers (in the myth, at least) around Kelley and Paul McCarthy, but which also includes Richard Jackson, The Kipper Kids, Raymond Pettibon, Tony Oursler and Michael Smith, aka Baby Ikki. An overwhelmingly male, straight, white group, they wrestled with (amongst other things) the anxieties of modern American manhood, often through the figures and spaces of adolescents, children or babies, particularly young girls.

These artists roundly rejected the two most pervasive clichés about childhood—the idealized view that childhood is a prelapsarian time of piety and purity, and its antithesis, the view that childhood is a time of savagery and violence, of unsocialized ignorance that can (and must) be remedied by acculturation. Instead, Kelley and his peers adopted a third line, strongly informed by psychoanalysis, in which childhood is by no means innocent, but is the wellspring of adult fears, desires and aggressions.

In 1980, for a show at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions alongside Oursler and Syrop, Kelley made his first installation, titled *The Little Girl's Room*. The installation, Kelley later claimed, was prompted by a "dream within a dream."(3) A little girl has a vision of "a pimp-like man whose smile revealed an infinity of sharp teeth."(4) She is immediately motivated to redecorate her room, switching from girly pink to austere modernist black and white, from pictures of horses and heartthrobs to Malevich and Bridget Riley. Kelley's installation was not even really a fabrication of a bedroom interior. An enclosed space was lit with black light, empty except for one leaning sculpture and a picture of the lasciviously grinning pimp over the door. In his narrative, the prospect of adult sexuality impelled the girl to put away childish things, to embrace masculine "advanced culture." She is left with little more than a schematic shelter, virtually all her furniture and possessions displaced from the room and turned into minimalist ciphers—cold comfort, indeed. In this equation, abstraction is desolation.

In 2011, Richard Jackson created an installation for an exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery also called (with an unacknowledged nod) *The Little Girl's Room*. As in Kelley's piece, innocence, puberty and sexual initiation are allegories for cultural indoctrination. The girl, here, is a fiberglass cartoon with a smiley yellow face who grasps an upside-down pink unicorn. Her bedroom walls (actually stretched canvases) bear a conflation of clouds and stars overlaid with copies of Frank Stella *Protractor* paintings. Before the exhibition opened, Jackson activated the installation, pumping buckets of paint out of the pink unicorn's ass, in a rather distasteful demonstration of defilement as imagined by a naughty little boy—defilement of Stella, of Modernism, of tacky consumer culture, of the little girl herself. The creepiness that lurks within Kelley's work is fully unleashed by Jackson's fantasy—a fantasy that is both knowing and ironic, but also more than a little gleeful about the violence that it enacts. The abstraction of symbols such as the cartoon girl and unicorn, and the ostensibly innocuous substance that Jackson splashes over them (*it's only paint, people!*)(5) give him license to transgress in a way that reveals more about latent masculine desires than he

**OPPOSITE_** Richard Jackson, The Little Girl's Room, 2011, fiberglass, steel, stainless steel, MDF, acrylic on canvas, wood, rubber, motor, acrylic paint, 190 x 288 x 312 in., courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, photo by Fredrik Nilsen

**LEFT_** Charlie White, Patrimony, 2006, chromogenic print, 47 x 52.25 in., courtesy of the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles

**BELOW_** Martin Kersels, Tumbleroom, 2001, installation, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

may have ever intended.

Both Kelley and Jackson's *Little Girl's Rooms* have nothing, in fact, to do with little girls. "All this stuff is produced by adults for children, expressing adult ideas about the reality of children," Kelley later commented on the stuffed toys that he often used in sculptures and installations.(6) Perhaps Kelley and Jackson reveal a deeply sublimated adult fantasy: our culture invents girls in order to defile them.

In his installation *Tumbleroom*, first created for an exhibition at Deitch Projects in 2001, Martin Kersels takes a girl's bedroom and smashes it to smithereens. The work was inspired, in part, by the scene in the 1951 movie *Royal Wedding* in which Fred Astaire—newly in love and feeling lighter than air—dances on the ceiling of his apartment, but it also pays homage to McCarthy's nightmarish *Bang Bang Room* (1992), a kinetic sculpture in which walls of a living-like room move in and out, while their doors slam open and closed.

Kersels replicated the steel gimbal set that enabled Astaire's apparent defiance of gravity, and decorated the room as the pink-walled bedroom of a teenage girl. When the room was rotated by a motor, at about four revolutions per minute, its loose contents crashed from corner to corner, gradually disintegrating. The sculpture, Kersels has said, is "an entropy machine," a grim visualization of adolescent aging, the loss of childhood innocence, and the upheaval of time.(7) He also saw it as a stomach, digesting its contents and occasionally spewing out small flecks of debris.

Paired with *Tumbleroom* was a video titled *Pink Constellation* (2001). In it, a fixed camera recorded a young woman dancing nimbly from floor to wall to ceiling as the room turned, and then Kersels himself, careening and crashing into the fragile furniture. As with Kelley's *Little Girl's Room*, Kersel's teenage girl's room ingests, then spits out, the adult male culture that would normalize or transform it.

By putting himself in the work, Kersels told me he wanted the work to convey the idea of himself being shaken loose from the center of his own universe. About four years before he conceived of *Tumbleroom*, Kersels became a father. That experience of being displaced from the center of one's own orbit is a feeling familiar to any parent. (The day I spoke to Kersels on the phone, I had just let my baby son slip from my grip and fall face-first onto the floor. He was sporting a split lip and a bruise.) The sense of giant clumsiness, of parental inadequacy and potential harm, is allegorized by Kersels' large frame as it collides with—and is potentially harmed by—the child's environment. *Pink Constellation* takes a less depressing position than Kelley's and Jackson's works: a demonstration of the devastating power that childhood—especially female childhood—holds over grown men.

It is too little noted that around the time that McCarthy made his first mature work, videotaped performances from the mid-1970s in which infantilized characters (mis) used commercial foodstuffs, he too became a father. Aside from the abject messiness of childcare (a messiness which children are blissfully oblivious to), one theme through McCarthy's early work is the fragility of domestic space, which in his performances is constituted by flimsy, temporary sets.

There is a photograph by Charlie White, the final part of a trilogy from his series *Everything is American*, that echoes the monstrosity of fatherhood, even to fathers themselves. Titled *Patrimony* (2006), the image shows a huge, hirsute man with baked red skin, more satyr than human, standing naked in the living room of a modernist wood-paneled home. Behind him, white leather Mies van der Rohe and Eames furniture is tipped over on the rug, and a vase is smashed. In his thick-clawed fingers, the creature holds a tiny white baby girl. The baby may be at the center of the scene, but her monstrous father is the subject with whom the viewer is invited to ambivalently empathize.

White has said that he cannot conceive of his subjects without their settings; the defiled modernist interior (the grown man's room) is as integral a symbol in this narrative of patrimony as is the helplessly grotesque father.(8) The work is not so much about the raw, messy, and confusing experience of fatherhood as it is the raw, messy, and confusing experience of historical cultural dominance by white, Western, male figures, as perceived by white, Western men in the present day. All these artists have chosen to reckon with their own implication in the ignoble histories they have inherited. In doing so, they cast themselves both as victims and aggressors. There are generational differences in their approaches, however; whereas Kelley, McCarthy, and Jackson hurl themselves, abjectly, into the depths of their own ids, Kersels and White remain more circumspect, analyzing their anxieties about adulthood rather than wallowing in them.

A precursor to these works is *Aktion mit Diana (Action with Diana)*, a 1967 performance by the Viennese Actionist Günter Brus, who was an influence on artists such as McCarthy. While his four-month-old daughter Diana lay naked for an hour on a white cushion, Brus, painted from head to toe in white body-paint, manipulated objects including a rattle, a breast pump, nails, a corkscrew, and Diana herself. Given the extreme nature of Brus' performances, which often included real or simulated acts of violence, Diana's presence must have lent the scenario an ominous atmosphere. By the end of the performance, however, the baby gurgled contentedly while Brus cowered in a corner of the white space. Brus' performance shares with all these works a fundamental narrative arc. The little girl leaves the male artist at a loss, as clumsy and helpless as White's satyr, reduced to an angry, scatological man-child, impotently savage and transgressive in only the most pathetic of ways. ■

**JONATHAN GRIFFIN** is a contributing editor for Frieze magazine and the author of On Fire.

**1_** Ralph Rugoff, "Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed," Mike Kelley, ed. Thomas Kellein (Basel: Edition Cantz, 1992): 87.

**2_** Cat Stevens, "Where Do The Children Play," Tea for the Tillerman (Island Records/A&M, 1970).

**3_** Mike Kelley, written contribution to Under The Big Black Sun, eds. Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Munich: DelMonico Books, 2011) 194.

**4_** Rugoff.

**5_** See also Paul McCarthy's oft-repeated defense of his work: "there's a big difference between ketchup and blood." McCarthy, et al., Paul McCarthy (London: Phaidon, 1996) 134.

**6_** Rugoff.

**7_** Tumble Room, dir. Peter West, perf. Martin Kersels, 2008. This video documentary was shot on the occasion of "Disorderly Conduct: Art in Tumultuous Times," an exhibition curated by Karen Moss at the Orange County Museum of Art.

# Centering the Margins

*Michelle Dizon explains how conversation, mentorship and research are integral to her nomadic institute.* Interview by Suzy Halajian

**ABOVE_** Michelle Dizon, 2016, photo by Gina Clyne

**BELOW_** Xiomara Rios, "Jailhouse Orange Chicken," recipe from Incarceration: Commissary Sanity, 2016, photo courtesy of the artist

**OPPOSITE_** at land's edge research fellows meeting, 2016, photo by Gina Clyne

**WE OF AT LAND'S EDGE UNDERSTAND THAT YOU HAVE TO PRACTICE YOUR WAY INTO THEORY. YOU MUST LEARN FROM WHAT IT IS YOU DO OR HAVE DONE AND DEVELOP THE THEORIZATION FROM THAT LIVED EXPERIENCE.**

Artist, filmmaker, and educator Michelle Dizon founded the nomadic pedagogical platform at land's edge in 2015, attempting something new in Los Angeles. at land's edge is a free educational and mentorship program based in East and South Los Angeles that doesn't seem to follow the workings of any existing institution or educational platform. By design, it does not require the costly tuition of MFA programs at accredited colleges, nor does it reproduce the worn-out modes of knowledge production we've become accustomed to in museums and cultural spaces—lectures, predictable Q&As, and panel discussions that often fail to reach beyond Eurocentric biases. Rather, the project aims to offer individual mentorship for and focus on the political struggles of underrepresented communities, which together anchor the platform and put forth a deliberate model of institution building.

The platform unapologetically invites those who have not historically been granted access to art or educational institutions—people of color, immigrants, indigenous and undocumented people, and those from a broad generational spectrum. Each year, fifteen fellows participate in seminars, lectures, workshops, and public events over the course of six months, examining issues such as decolonization, historical and intergenerational memory, social transformation, and the broader intersections of art and politics as they are situated within a global perspective. Based on a volunteer system, each fellow is paired with a mentor to develop a project in line with their independent research. Conversations form the crux of the platform, centering the research process over any final product.

When Michelle and I met for this interview at her home, where many at land's edge meetings have been held, issues around trust and ethics stirred to the forefront of the conversation, concepts that Dizon and collaborators have been thinking deeply about as at land's edge evolves.

**Suzy Halajian: What was the impetus that led you to initiate at land's edge? And how has Los Angeles, the city where you were born and raised, shaped the development of the platform?**

Michelle Dizon: There are several points of origin for at land's edge.

The Los Angeles where I grew up was an immigrant Los Angeles. I was raised in a low-income apartment building where Haitians, Pakistanis, Mexicans, Costa Ricans, Trinidadians, African Americans, and Filipinos lived next door to each other. It was out of this context of an immigrant Los Angeles that I began to navigate the educational system. The word that I would use to describe my educational experience from kindergarten through graduate school is "alienating" because all of the mirrors that I was given did not reflect me or my history and were part of a logic of assimilation that demanded the immigrant subject to forget her history, disown her people, and take on these Eurocentric mirrors as her own.

In 2015, I had been teaching adjunct at a prominent art school in Los Angeles for seven years. When two permanent positions opened in the department, I applied and made finalist but was not hired for either position despite four consecutive years of student-led petitions that bore witness to my abilities and the fact that my classes, which focused on race, ethnicity, feminism, postcoloniality and globalization, filled an important gap in the curriculum. Out of this event, a number of students asked if they could continue to work with me. I knew the ways in which we both knew how to "work together" had been determined by that institutional context, so my proposition to these students was to build something different.

Finally, it is important to understand that at land's edge developed in 2015 during a specific moment in United States history. It developed during the student debt crisis, which revealed that the educational system that exists is deeply broken. It developed during the Black Lives Matter movement, the ongoing wars in the Middle East, the deportation of women and children from Central America, the building of pipelines on indigenous land, the drafting of multinational treaties that control forty percent of the global economy, and in the midst of a virulent racism and Islamophobia that has only escalated with the upcoming election. All of these elements influenced the development of at land's edge.

**SH: Were there other models of experimental education and/or pedagogical platforms that you were looking at when formulating what at land's edge would be, particularly with the mentorship model in which the platform is rooted?**

MD: One model that has been important to the vision of at land's edge is Universidad de la Tierra, an open university in Oaxaca that is grounded in indigenous cosmology and develops from indigenous peoples' understanding that the education offered by the state does not teach their children how to contribute to and sustain their communities. In this model—inspired by the work of Paul Goodman, John Holt, Gustavo Esteva, and Ivan Illich—study is self-directed, self-paced, and led by practice. Another model from Latin America that has been important for at land's edge is Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which pedagogy is not just a method of education, but instead a reflexive process where teacher and student, self and community, are both involved in the liberatory process of overcoming the false perception of reality that has been structured by power. at land's edge is also influenced by the Black Panther Liberation Schools, whose curriculum centered the histories and experiences of African American and poor people in the U.S. Not only do these models teach us how state-sponsored education can be a form of a violence, but they also offer a genealogy of grassroots efforts that try to counter such violence and develop new educative possibilities.

During "at land's edge: Dialogues," our capstone event highlighting the work of our 2015-2016 research fellows, I began to better understand the power of the pedagogical platform we were building. One research fellow, Xiomara Rios, presented *Incarceration: Commissary Sanity*, which comprised a photography series in which she explores how prison commissary can function as a form of resistance. Xiomara (who worked with artist Gina Osterloh) collected recipes, such as Jailhouse Orange Chicken (pork rinds, strawberry jam, peanut butter, Tapatío) and Tamales (Doritos, Hot Cheetos, pork rinds, cheese spread, beef jerky), from people who had been to jail. Importantly, Xiomara situated this project in the school-to-prison pipeline and within her own incarceration experience from the ages of nineteen to twenty-four. With great force and eloquence, she critiqued the lack of rehabilitation in prison, its for-profit system, and the seven-hundred percent rise of the prison population in recent years. She explained that at land's edge was important for her on a personal level because it helped her to open up about her history of being incarcerated. Prior to at land's edge, being an ex-convict was something she wanted to hide and not talk about. She said that at land's edge provided her with a support system in other artists, and it was this support that allowed her to face her history and begin to incorporate it into her work.

**SH: at land's edge does not operate out of a fixed physical space, and many of its free and public discursive programs (panels, talks, screenings) have been held in arts and community spaces throughout Los Angeles, including the Women's Center for Creative Work, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, William Grant Still Community Arts Center, and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Has this nomadic mode proven to be critical in keeping one foot carefully out of institutions while shaping the direction of the platform?**

MD: Initially, this nomadicness was borne out of necessity. We had no money. We had no space. Yet, we wanted to initiate a public

programs series that could be accessed by a larger audience. When we started trying to find venues for our lectures, we approached the spaces with a high level of geographical intentionality. Our focus on East and South Los Angeles is a focus on Brown and Black histories of resistance and the fierce and loving communities that exist in these locales. It was through a lecture organized by Suné Woods with Alile Sharon Larkin, an important filmmaker from the LA Rebellion movement, that I began to understand another significant dimension of the work at land's edge does: transmit intergenerational memory. We screened two rare films by Larkin: *Your Children Come Back to You* (1979), which presents a child's perspective on wealth and inequality, and *A Different Image* (1982), which is about an African American woman contemplating self-identity, heritage, and perception. After the screening, Larkin engaged in a lecture and Q&A where she spoke about memory and how, with the renewed interest in the LA Rebellion filmmakers, she was being asked to remember experiences that she had stored away many years ago. It was of the utmost importance that Larkin's screening and lecture took place at the Southern California Library, an autonomous library in South Los Angeles that houses the archives of radical social movements, such as the Black Panthers, the Labor Movement, the Chicano Movement, and the Women's Movement. at land's edge creates forums where essential creative practices, like Larkin's, can have a new and different audience, an audience who sees themselves reflected in her films and who in turn feel deeply inspired.

**SH: I'm interested in how the words "alternative" or "experimental" function when defining modes of knowledge production that operate outside of the traditional institutions—it suggests another possibility—and at the same time it points to a lack of satisfaction with the possibilities present. Can you speak about how at land's edge comes to understand what an "alternative" or "experimental" project or platform or space can look like today?**

MD: I've always had problems with those two words. Part of my problem is that they re-center what they are trying to displace. Thus, they're limited by the center's terms. Anticolonial and decolonial thought are integral to our platform. On the one hand, they are about understanding how the legacies of slavery, genocide, and colonialism continue in our present. On the other hand, they are about seeking and centering cosmologies that aren't possible to think of within the boundaries set by Western knowledge. at land's edge is neither alternative nor experimental. Instead, we seek ways of being and thinking in the world that precede and exceed those cosmologies in a way that neither term can even begin to account for.

**SH: How does your program connect urgent and day to day political realities with the context of art making?**

MD: It's clear that we're in a moment in Los Angeles when questions about art's involvement in systems of development and profit is foregrounded. One sees that in the recent struggles that have been going on around the galleries in Boyle Heights, which is only part of the larger violence of gentrification taking place in our city. It's impossible for any cultural producer to not engage with these issues and to not question if their production either serves the logic of profit or struggles against it. In this political climate, at land's edge is called to respond. At the core of our 2016-2017 organizing team are people who have been actively involved in anti-gentrification struggles across East and Northeast Los Angeles. These questions will no doubt be a strong element of the seminar that takes place this term.

**SH: How has your thinking about at land's edge shifted since its founding? Have you found the need to redefine your project for yourself, or for your audience, and has it been feasible to remain flexible in your working mode without compromising the project's content or intention over time?**

MD: The only way at land's edge can survive is by growing and changing. In order to move into our second session, organizers, research fellows, and mentors engaged in an active group process. Together, we asked questions concerning what was produced by the last session, how we can understand our work within the larger field of education, and what vision we have for the upcoming term. We of at land's edge understand that you have to practice your way into theory. You must learn from what it is you do or have done and develop the theorization from that lived experience. If you keep your vision frozen in a certain historical moment, then it's a fossil, it's not alive, and it can't be relevant to the present. Built into at land's edge is the courage to undo what we have done, to learn from this undoing, and to remake with an expanded perspective. The process of learning and unlearning that is at the heart of our platform is not only in the way that we engage with ideas, but is also embedded into the very structure and survival of the platform itself. For me, all of this is pedagogy—a responsibility to the future that is acted upon in our present. ■

**SUZY HALAJIAN** is a curator in Los Angeles.

**OUR FOCUS ON EAST AND SOUTH LOS ANGELES IS A FOCUS ON BROWN AND BLACK HISTORIES OF RESISTANCE AND THE FIERCE AND LOVING COMMUNITIES THAT EXIST IN THESE LOCALES.**

# Behind the Curtain

*Underground and out of sight, Los Angeles' control rooms house hidden nodes of power.*

by Courtney Stephens and Micah Silver

If you've hosted first-time visitors to Los Angeles, you've probably had the experience of struggling to explain where "the city" is. Its micro-regional enclaves and endless mini malls fit at odd angles into the expansive, paved, and falsely-flora'd county. American conceptions of power and control derive from Hollywood's riffs on the architecture of New York and DC: mile-high verticality, leather board rooms, penthouse parties. Where is the seat of this power in Los Angeles? The Hollywood sign?

In New York you can visit the Stock Exchange or the United Nations; in DC you can visit the White House or Congress. In Los Angeles, you can visit Disneyland. You can visit the '80s LA-based Greco-Floridian architecture at the Cheesecake Factory (or at any one of their 160+ locations nationwide). You can visit an opulent 1920s Orientalist cinema now retrofitted with Laser 3D. Power appears and disappears here. You might be at Petco grabbing some cat food and have a murdered-out Lamborghini pull up next to you, no big deal. It feels like a part of the smog, particulates we're all moving through, breathing, unquantifiably. The engines of power within this city are largely hidden. They are interior spaces of control, multitudes of control facilities and broadcast suites dusted invisibly throughout the region in all scales: a nondescript building in Pasadena housing a rendering farm; four flights below ground, the Automated Traffic Safety And Control Room (ATSAC) downtown guiding traffic flows towards the algorithmic ideal; the Jet Propulsion Laboratories managing the mission to Mars; cramped projection rooms full of abandoned film technologies.

■■■

It's approaching 100 degrees outside, and a UCLA summer film class has assembled to watch Antonioni's *Blow Up*. The James Bridges Theater, located inside Melnitz Hall on the UCLA campus, possesses one of the most sophisticated projection rooms in the country, able to handle 16mm, 35mm, 70mm and digital projection, and one of only a handful of theaters equipped to legally show nitrate prints. Nitrocellulose was one of the earliest forms of plastic film base. It has a characteristic and arresting beauty. It is also catastrophically flammable, responsible for horrifying, fast-spreading theater fires, the death of hundreds of engulfed, panicked moviegoers, and archive fires that wiped entire celluloid histories.

Up narrow stairs and into the dim projection room, Jess Daily greets two protégés, who will run the screening for the class. A retired projectionist who worked at the Bridges Theater from 1973 to 2009, Daily oversaw numerous overhauls and redesigns of the room, which was for many years the primary screening room for UCLA's immense motion picture archive (now in rotation at the Hammer Museum). Daily describes the many tools and objects of the room, everything from a state of the art digital projector to drawers of seldom-used 16mm manual lens mounts. One of the most unexpected items in the projection room is the toilet that resides, discreetly but very much visibly, in one corner. Guarding against the dangers of nitrate requires not only a fireproof room, but a fireproof projector. While a private toilet is often built to the side of a projection room, in a nitrate-approved room, the toilet faces the projector: the operator's attention must never waiver.

Red velvet curtains hang over the screen. The lights are slowly and manually dimmed from the booth. The projectionist cues the digital projector, and the picture begins onto the closed curtains, which then pull open


**ABOVE_** Space Flight Operations Facility, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, 2016, photo by Courtney Stephens

**BELOW_** Projection booth at James Bridges Theater, University of California–Los Angeles, 2016, photo by Courtney Stephens

**LIKE A ONE-MAN BAND, THE "MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN," THE PROJECTIONIST WAS THE INVISIBLE SHEPHERD OF THE SPECTACULAR SLIPPAGE INTO THE CINEMATIC. INDEED, THE WORK OF THE PROJECTIONIST WAS TO MAKE THE APPARATUS OF THE ROOM DISAPPEAR.**

dramatically. "The audience should never see a white screen. It breaks the illusion," Daily says. "That's precisely why you had the MGM lion and other logos, to give a chance for the curtains to open."

An early movie projectionist was responsible for controlling all aspects of this illusion: audio levels, dimming and raising the lights at an appropriate pace, making quick repairs if a print tore, doing changeovers of reels. The projectionist was charged with managing the automated-seeming seamlessness of the cinematic experience. Like a one-man band, the "man behind the curtain," the projectionist, was the invisible shepherd of the spectacular slippage into the cinematic. Indeed, the work of the projectionist was to make the apparatus of the room disappear.

Daly watched the human-controlled magic of the projection room become automated. A projectionist was no longer needed to change rolls of film, as all reels were joined onto a single giant "platter" that could be loaded, started, and left to run all the way through. "If the film ripped, or fell out of sync, no one was present to fix it, but the attitude was 'oh well, if they walk out, just refund their money, it's cheaper than paying to have a projectionist in every booth,'" says Daly. Complex lighting cues were programmed, curtains became motor controlled, never closed at all and then eliminated. Slowly, the theater stripped down to become a self-driving machine. With digital distribution, one individual can be paid to monitor the video infrastructure of an entire multiplex. The man behind the curtain, the human guiding the spectacle, becomes a button pusher. Like a long flight in a 787 jet, itself a kind of in-air movie theater, we wonder if anyone is flying the plane or if we should take comfort in the fact that it flies itself.

■■■

Driving up Oak Grove Drive towards the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Cañada, we pass ranch houses and horses, then the zig-zagging white balconies of La Cañada High School, alma mater of both Brian Behlendorf, designer of the Apache web server, and porn star James Deen. JPL sits at the foot of the arid San Gabriel Mountains. Deer freely roam the large campus, grazing alongside buildings with names like "Regional Planetary Image Facility." The Space Flights Operation Facility control room at JPL is a part of the Deep Space Network, a lattice of facilities and antennae that communicate with objects in space. Specifically, JPL monitors and is essentially the communications hub for all unmanned NASA vehicles beyond the moon: the Mars rovers, and the probes that circle Jupiter and Saturn, for example. The room has been in constant operation (24/7) since 1964.

There is a sense, when encountering the room for the first time, that you've seen it before in a movie: the dimly-lit semi-circle of desk monitors, the scientists monitoring them, photographs of other planets and arcane data feeds under the names of space objects: Curiosity, Exploration, Opportunity. Originally, the room was kept in near-total darkness because the cathode ray tubes used to power computer monitors were extremely hot. The dark room was, instead, illuminated by its screens, a kind of manifold-movie theater. When upgrades in the 1970s meant that the lights could be turned up, and should be for insurance reasons, a nasty patina from cigarette smoke was visible on the ceiling. (The original workspaces actually had ashtrays built into the consoles). The ceiling was painted black, and everyone kept smoking for another decade or so.

Over the years, layouts and color schemes changed, and with the redesigns, the sense of what was taking place on the ground also changed. Notably, since its construction, the room's design has always included a second-story observation chamber, where the public could (and does daily) gather to peer down at the scientists. The room had two public purposes then, to both do science, and to perform science (and scientific transparency), by giving visitors the thrill of classified access. The most recent remodel harkens back to the original 1960s design: "We discovered that, for the public, the wow-factor is the darkness," says SFOF operations manager Jim McClure. In a case of Los Angeles playing itself, the room is frequently scouted by set designers when designing control rooms sets for movies. Most recently, it served as inspiration for *The Martian*. "It scared me to death when I found out they were also making notes for costumes," said McClure. Of an engineer seated nearby, looking beachy in a pair of shorts, McClure says "he just sent a command to Mars. It will reach there in a few minutes, traveling at the speed of light."

In the 1960s, a series of lunar probes were monitored from this room, in preparation for the manned Apollo missions. The "Surveyor" probes provided humanity with its first close-up images of the lunar surface, as each was equipped with a television camera that could be panned and tilted from here at JPL. The data passing through the control room at JPL is analysed, processed, and broadcast into narratives that orient us in the universe, including the idea that space can be managed and controlled by people (namely Americans) on Earth. On the floor of the room, between desks, a plaque has been embedded that reads "This is the center of the universe"—a telling bit of Copernican humor, exalted—the control room is precisely where humans can discover just how multi-centered the universe really is.

"Isn't it amazing?" says McClure, whose father also worked in this room in its early days. McClure thinks that it makes sense that the aerospace industry is situated in close proximity to the movie industry, as so many scientists find their way to careers in science through an early love of fantasy and science fiction movies, like *Star Wars* and *2001*. Cosmology, like cinema myths, possess the incredible, invisible power to tell us what we are. "Right here in Pasadena, lightweight, highly efficient robots are designed and built and flung out into the solar system, but every one of them has an electronic radio signal tethered to this room," he beams. "It really puts LA on the map."

■■■

The elevator opens four stories below street level in City Hall East. We exit into a quiet hallway full of cold war ruins. Below ground were the secure floors, now mostly unused and peppered with abandoned office furniture and old Xerox machines, some with papers taped to them that say "salvage." Tucked away nearby is ATSAC: the Automated Traffic Safety and Control room. A branch of the LA Department of Transportation, the room looks something like a spacecraft dashboard. Two women sit in darkness before the many screens, which display about a dozen live-feeds from intersections across Los Angeles. The room receives real time traffic information from 500 cameras and thousands of sensors below the street, monitoring a total of 4,600 traffic lights and all the major freeways in the city, overseeing the most elaborate, longest running, multi-camera shoot in LA's history.

The cameras are used as data streams, but they aren't recording. "Otherwise we'd be in court all day long," says engineer Suvimol Nilprapa. The cameras exist for the express purpose of watching traffic, and they can be commanded to pan, tilt, and zoom in on an object fallen into the road and slowing traffic, or zoom out towards Catalina, as Nilprapa does periodically. "We don't have any windows in here," she says.

The overall timing of traffic lights in Los Angeles is fully automated, but has some room for manual adjustments, made on account of everything from marathons to water main bursts to presidential motorcades. "We monitored Carmaggedon from here" says Nilprapa, referring to the two-day closing of the 405 freeway in 2011. Lights can be re-timed to more efficiently clear out an area that has become congested, or reroute completely for an event like the Academy Awards. "We never get to see the stars," says Nilprapa. "I think they deliberately planted that palm tree right between the camera and the Red Carpet." The room was built in anticipation of the 1984 Olympics, which put enormous stress on traffic infrastructure, and has been utilized in other emergency situations, with the entire team of engineers called in at five a.m. following the Northridge earthquake in 1994.

Nilprapa describes managing traffic as playing an instrument. She says it's intuitive, an enormous amount of math, geographical data, and tempo that she has internalized. "You have to be creative with signal timing. It's an art that is about intuiting the rhythm of traffic." But the work of traffic tuning is also about intentionally controlling perception, about keeping drivers sane. "The public is always complaining. The system can be timed beautifully, but volume will simply break that system. So we try to combat some of the frustration." Apparently, nothing infuriates LA drivers more than not being able to take advantage of a green light for fear of getting "stuck in the box." Engineers will time the lights to account for this, going red even when it isn't necessary, to let us live in the temporary comfort that we are immobilized by natural law.

■■■

According to Jess Daily, showmanship in movie exhibition is dead, in part, because "when you can watch the movie on your iPhone, why would you care about a curtain opening and closing." The movie theater as a hand-operated spectacle has been twice obsolesced, first by the television-centered living room and now by the laptop-centered lifestyle. What kind of theater do we find ourselves in today? A control room without walls, in which we are the operators? Our current interface with the world is overlayed by a gauze of reconstructions, from navigation systems to targeted ads. What have we gained, as Waze leads a woman to her murder, and Pokemon Go takes players off cliffs? When the mechanisms of power were more tangible, did we feel less in control of our lives?

The fading control rooms of the 20th century not only reveal hidden nodes of power, they reveal something about how power shifted in the age of mechanization, and how it is changing in the age of the algorithm. Rooms like the ATSAC show us how "automated" systems were (and still are) tuned and monitored by living, thinking humans, who can, we hope, intervene on behalf of humanity (as well as err). Increasingly, however, this model of human authority, along with the rooms themselves, are becoming relics of an old order, replaced by a desire to eliminate human intervention altogether. Power has become thermodynamic—designed to grant us more but smaller acts of agency, transactions ever-closer to a constant state of shopping, umm, curating. While iPhones grant us sovereignty in our fiefdoms of one, Silicon Valley elites prepare for life on Mars, which, Jim McClure muses, one day may be monitored from the control room at JPL.

Some miles south of Baywatch, on the boardwalk in Venice, is the famous outdoor gym—really a performance grotto—Muscle Beach. "I can put you on my shoulders, make you feel like a princess, like you're royal," says a man dubbed the Muscle Beach "Giant" to an East Coast visitor. In societies of excess, meaningless but profound displays of discipline are signifiers of control; the gym body, transformed into a series of quantities that can be measured and shaped, insulates our vulnerable inner forms, but against no actionable threat. Muscle Beach will likely be the last control room left in Los Angeles. When all the others have scaled down beyond the microscopic, when artificial intelligences are mixing us perfume as we shower, when our cars are dating each other, we'll still be here. ■

**ABOVE_** SFOF, 1964, photo courtesy of Jet Propulsion Laboratory

**BELOW_** Live feeds of Los Angeles intersections, as seen in the Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control room, 2016, photo by Courtney Stephens

**COURTNEY STEPHENS** is a filmmaker in Los Angeles and co-curator of the screening series Veggie Cloud.

**MICAH SILVER** is an artist in Mexico and the author of Figures in Air: Essays Toward a Philosophy of Audio.

**THE CONTROL ROOM AT JPL HAS TWO PUBLIC PURPOSES, TO BOTH DO SCIENCE, AND TO PERFORM SCIENCE (AND SCIENTIFIC TRANSPARENCY), BY GIVING VISITORS THE THRILL OF CLASSIFIED ACCESS.**


# Art Los Angeles Contemporary

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## EXHIBITORS

**10 Chancery Lane Gallery** HONG KONG
**1301PE** LOS ANGELES
**313 ART PROJECT** SEOUL
**Adams and Ollman** PORTLAND
**Alden Projects** NEW YORK
**Michael Benevento** LOS ANGELES
**Peter Blake Gallery** LAGUNA BEACH
**Shane Campbell Gallery** CHICAGO
**Galerie Bernard Ceysson** PARIS / LUXEMBOURG / ST ÉTIENNE
**Cherry and Martin** LOS ANGELES
**China Art Objects Galleries** LOS ANGELES
**Clages** COLOGNE
**Anat Ebgi** LOS ANGELES
**Edel Assanti** LONDON
**Ever Gold Projects** SAN FRANCISCO
**Gallery EXIT** HONG KONG
**Henrique Faria** BUENOS AIRES / NEW YORK
**Feuer/Mesler** NEW YORK
**fiebach, minninger** COLOGNE
**Honor Fraser** LOS ANGELES
**Asya Geisberg Gallery** NEW YORK
**Ghebaly Gallery** LOS ANGELES
**Jack Hanley Gallery** NEW YORK
**The Hole** NEW YORK
**Ibid Gallery** LOS ANGELES / LONDON
**Kayne Griffin Corcoran** LOS ANGELES
**Lisa Kehler Art + Projects** WINNIPEG
**David Kordansky Gallery** LOS ANGELES
**Galerie Christian Lethert** COLOGNE
**Josh Lilley** LONDON
**Gallery Luisotti** SANTA MONICA
**M+B** LOS ANGELES
**Martos Gallery** NEW YORK
**Meliksetian | Briggs** LOS ANGELES
**MIER GALLERY** LOS ANGELES
**Mixografia** LOS ANGELES
**Shulamit Nazarian** LOS ANGELES
**Nicodim Gallery** LOS ANGELES / BUCHAREST
**Night Gallery** LOS ANGELES
**ONE AND J. Gallery** SEOUL
**Parisian Laundry** MONTREAL
**Peres Projects** BERLIN
**The Pit** GLENDALE
**Praz-Delavallade** PARIS / LOS ANGELES
**Ratio 3** SAN FRANCISCO
**Clint Roenisch** TORONTO
**Marc Selwyn Fine Art** BEVERLY HILLS
**Jessica Silverman Gallery** SAN FRANCISCO
**STANDARD (OSLO)** OSLO
**STARKWHITE** AUCKLAND
**Steve Turner** LOS ANGELES
**VALENTIN** PARIS
**Vermelho** SÃO PAULO
**Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects** CULVER CITY
**Tracy Williams Ltd.** NEW YORK
**Yautepec** MEXICO CITY

## FREEWAYS

**Alter Space** SAN FRANCISCO
**Club Pro** LOS ANGELES
**EIGEN + ART Lab** BERLIN
**Jenny's** LOS ANGELES
**Park View** LOS ANGELES
**PPC Philipp Pflug Contemporary** FRANKFURT
**Queer Thoughts** NEW YORK
**TIF SIGFRIDS** LOS ANGELES

## EVENTS

Featuring **William Basinski, Roger Corman, M. Geddes Gengras, Todd Gray, Jamillah James, Eric Kim, Dan Levenson, Jasmine Nyende, Rick Prelinger, Puppies Puppies, Pat O'Neill, Jory Rabinovitz, Huang Rui, Keith J. Varadi, VEGGIECLOUD, Cascade Wilhelm, Mary Woronov**

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