

"Los Angeles Artists Sweep the Whitney Biennial." *Artillery* (May/June 2008)

The 2008 Whitney Biennial's inclusion of 26 artists from Los Angeles—a third of the exhibition, more than double the 2006 number, and topped only by the fifty-percent representation of New Yorkers—marks another step in LA's rise as the other major American art city. The Angeleno artists in the show represent a variety of backgrounds, media and tactics, demonstrating the complexity and innovation present within the city. That this attention has come despite LA's lack of a significant art fair or contemporary art survey exhibition indicates just how powerful the LA art scene has become.

LA-based video, photography, sculpture, installation, drawing and performance artists are represented. LA artists' contributions reflect the experimental, collaborative and mutually supportive nature of the city's art scene, which has so far prevailed despite the growing attention. Though New Yorkers still outnumber Angelenos two to one this year, the LA artists set many of the trends apparent throughout the exhibition. The inclusion of conceptual photography and of sculpture made with street materials, the better-than-average representation of artists of color, the ecological sensibility and the many social and performative works in evidence all belie Los Angeles' influence on the national level.

The trend most in evidence in this year's Biennial is assemblage sculpture in the vein of the late Jason Rhoades, who has long been hailed as a standard-bearer of LA art. His offering at the Whitney, *The Grand Machine/THEAREOLA* (2002), occupies the ground floor gallery and is the first work most viewers encounter. The typically scattershot installation has a powerful energy, and in its chaotic inscrutability it presages much of the work to come. The overt sexuality, oozy surfaces and assemblages of debris prevalent in Rhoades' work have surfaced repeatedly in the work of younger American artists throughout the past decade. The impact of Rhoades' installation on the whole show supports the assertion that this Biennial's aesthetics are largely derived from Los Angeles.

Younger sculptors who assume that legacy include Jedediah Caesar, whose *Helium Brick aka Summer Snow* (2006) is a massive block of paint-streaked, drippy resin over styrofoam that resembles a gooey sarcophagus. Caesar is better known for sculptures like the adjacent *Dry Stock* (2007), in which he embeds debris into large blocks of clear resin which are then cut apart and polished into Minimalist cubes of chaotic clutter. This transparent act of burial transforms the remnants of mundane objects that appear within the resin into monuments of banality, cast in geological layers for eternity.

Ry Rocklen's sculptures are made from found objects coated in celluclay that he uses to stiffen soft materials into objects that stand on their own. *Refuge* (2007) is made with the skeleton of a mattress whose springs support a skin of screen embedded with nails. *Sunday Spire* (2008) starts with an abandoned windsock, now a towering cone embedded in a crusty shell. Rocklen frames these discarded artifacts while steadfastly resisting the urge to transform them into anything other than the remnants they are.

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Amanda Ross-Ho's eclectic installation includes framed works on paper mounted on white pegboard walls, cut-canvas wall hangings and an oversized powder blue cat litter box. Ross-Ho's technical skill and crafty sensibility are overwhelmed by her noncommittal attitude, reflected in a drawing of a tattooed Care Bear and most of all in the litter box. Neatly ordered yet still unreadable, Ross-Ho provides a feminine counterpoint to Rhoades' hypermasculine eruptions downstairs.

Patrick Hill's sculptures are made from wood, glass, concrete and fabric. The crossbeam base of *Between, Beneath, Through, Against* (2008) is painted solid black, contrasting with the natural color of the concrete slab seated within, and with the reddish tie-dyed fabric draped over the concrete surface. Hill's objects are all about their corporeality, appearing as impromptu aggregations of contrasting parts.

Rodney McMillian's untitled black vinyl sculpture (2007) overwhelms its corner of the museum. Elephantine projectiles extend from a sagging backdrop, settling onto the floor as though exhausted. One remains defiantly erect. These forms provoke bodily associations, leading to meditations on Blackness, size and sexuality. In its abjectness, the work parallels much of the exhibition, while substantially upping the ante both for scale and for pathos.

Responding to LA's dominant industry, several Biennial artists use sound, film and video to ruminate on entertainment, celebrity and the problems of mass-media representation. Luke Fischbeck's art-rock experiment Lucky Dragons present *Make a Baby* (2005), an interactive project in which audience members can create sounds through touch, using conductive sensors that Fischbeck then filters through digital feedback loops to create improvised compositions. Additionally, a chill-out lounge is animated by the video installation, *Lucky Dragons Video Program* (2008). Imagining popular music as socially transcendent, Lucky Dragons is folk music for the technologically obsessed.

Stephen Prina presents an installation, *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: The Queen Mary* (1979-2006), in which every aspect is ostensibly intended toward maximal appreciation of the sound elements. The whole environment is petal pink, down to the carpets and the cushions, which rest on wooden benches that double as shipping crates for the work and storage shelves for other packing materials.

Edgar Arceneaux's contribution to the show is *The Alchemy of Comedy...Stupid*, a 9-channel projection environment that features David Alan Grier on a stage framed by chintzy gold curtains. Grier, a TV comedian known for racially-focused humor, both represents and parodies the typical black man in this work, which highlights the most awkward, transitional and uncomfortable moments in a live stand-up performance. The promise of a punchline is never fulfilled, comedy instead disintegrating into discomfort and celebrity into isolation.

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Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn present *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit it Out* (2006), a film set in Los Angeles, in which the city becomes a character representing violence, confusion, disconnection and tragedy coated with absurdist humor. The work centers on the constant observation that characterizes LA life, be it interactions with paparazzi in the bushes, or ubiquitous amateur cameramen like the one who captured the Rodney King beating, prompting the 1989 riots.

LA-based Drew Heitzler and NY-based Amy Granat present *TSOYW* (2007), a collaborative retelling of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Here, the young poet's love has been transferred from a woman to a motorcycle, which he rides across the West in a futile search for meaning. His journey takes him to various landmarks including Joshua Tree, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and peculiar roadside attractions, unfolding in a two-channel stream of stills and sprawling landscape panoramas.

Filmmaker William E. Jones' *Tearoom* (1962/2007) is a document of underground gay activity in the early 1960s. Jones obtained film from an Ohio police department's surveillance and raid of a clandestine hookup spot, used to prosecute the observed men on sodomy charges. Choosing to leave the footage unedited, Jones repurposes it as historic evidence of the social and ethnic diversity and the normalcy of these gay men, all of whom assumed a shared risk of oppression by choosing to express their sexual preferences.

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne have collaborated with Syrian artist Rami Farah to create two films, *Not a matter of if but when* (2006) and *epic (malhame)* (2008). In both, Farah delivers biting comic monologues on human behavior, conflict and reconciliation. The imagery centers on his animated face and hands as he describes the Syrian citizenry's constant state of anxiety. The work is meant to counterbalance the simplistic view of Syria promoted by the American media, and to show how shared assumptions grease the wheels of geopolitical unrest.

Mungo Thomson's work bridges Conceptualism and Pop. His *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest* (2005–06) is a cinematic koan. Screened at the Armory in a tiny room far across the massive Drill Hall, it is easy to miss. It makes no sound aside from the clatter of the 16mm projector, and the climactic moment when the tree hits the ground is replaced by a blank leader screen. The work operates as anti-entertainment, making its point even when unseen.

Further confounding the mass-produced image as commodity, photography as a conceptual medium pervades this year's show. Contemporary master John Baldessari is represented with *Arms & Legs (Specif. Elbows & Knees)* (2007), versions of his signature chromatic interventions into black-and-white photography that add a sculptural sensibility. Baldessari's influence on LA artists has been tremendous, both as an artist and as a professor at UCLA, and his presence in the Biennial is an anchor for the eclectic younger generation.

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James Welling uses everyday materials such as screen, aluminum foil and fabric to create luminous color photographs. His *Torsos* (2005–08) series of color Photograms obliquely references the human body, engaging with the history of photography as both representation and abstraction. In this way, his work deviates from the norm, as the historic context of this Biennial is largely limited to the last 50 years.

Walead Beshty's *Travel Pictures* (2006-08) are atmospheric large-scale color prints framed in antiseptic white. The mundane office depicted is the abandoned Iraqi mission to the former East Berlin, representing the alliance of two nations that have thoroughly transformed. This building is resigned to legal limbo as a non-place without sovereignty, in which the Cold War's hasty end is accidentally memorialized. The ethereal colors, generated by repeated x-ray exposure during Beshty's international travels, are the physical remnants of border crossings. Also on view are fractured glass boxes, displayed along with their FedEx shipping boxes in a Duchampian display of transit-generated chance.

Shannon Ebner's *Involuntary Sculpture* (2006) is an artwork *in potentia*. The crude wooden box filled with text painted on plywood suggests a toolkit for ad hoc protest, raw material for subversive public actions like the ones she has previously photographed. Beside it is *STRIKE* (2008), a large-scale collection of photographic letters spelling out revolutionary imperatives. Both works invite anarchic participation—a premise in conflict with the museum setting.

Frances Stark shows a slideshow, *STRUCTURES THAT FIT MY OPENING AND OTHER PARTS CONSIDERED IN RELATION TO THEIR WHOLE* (2006). The photographs incorporate her domestic life, her critical work and her artistic process into a personal feminist perspective on art and life. It bears noting that, though curated by two women and including a larger proportion of female artists than usual for shows of this kind, women still represent less than half the show. Only seven of the LA artists are women, a smaller proportion than in the show overall. Stark's work addresses some of the factors that may contribute to this under-representation.

The brutal Modernist sprawl of LA's landscape prompts many Angeleno artists to consider form and materiality from an ecological perspective. Sculptor/architect Fritz Haeg's *Animal Estate regional model homes 1.0: NEW YORK CITY* (2008) is an installation of domestic architectures designed for the use of Manhattan Island's long-diminished wildlife inhabitants. Haeg has identified these species and the climates they enjoyed 400 years ago, and attempted to rehabilitate these populations within the museum's courtyard and perimeter. A team of docents provides tours of the Estates crafted to house bald eagles, bats, opossums and other creatures. In keeping with Haeg's collaborative practice, a group of 12 New York-based performance artists have been invited to create and perform movement scores that represent these absent neighbors within the galleries.

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Alice Könitz' *Raffle Sculpture* (2008) appropriates the visual language of Modernism, while subverting it through her use of cheap materials like paper, plexiglass and pleather. From a distance, the structure has the clean lines one would expect, but up close it betrays its machined aesthetic. The Modernist legacy that Könitz engages remains in full effect in the Los Angeles landscape, and her work can be read as pushing back against that ideal.

Charles Long's spindly white sculptures are rooted in the process of their making. Made of papier-mâché, plaster, river sediment, sticks, and trash found in the Los Angeles River, their compositions are based on the splatter patterns of bird excrement along the concrete embankments. In the gallery, the sculptures' organic origins recede, and their making becomes a purely conceptual exercise.

Ruben Ochoa's sculpture *An Ideal Disjuncture* (2008) employs concrete, wooden pallets and rebar to represent labor, class and the Los Angeles landscape in the abstract. Chain link fence becomes a thwarted barrier on the verge of collapse. The concrete-coated pallets, balanced precariously, threaten collapse, while engaging with the Whitney's coffered concrete ceiling and with the Marcel Breuer building as a whole.

Emphasizing social conscience via conceptual methods, Daniel Joseph Martinez' installation *Divine Violence* (2007) turns a gallery of the Whitney into a cathedral to political terror. 125 near-identical paintings, each coated in a glistening layer of gold automotive paint, bear the names of every organization dedicated to political violence that the artist has as yet identified. The sparkling color evokes Byzantine icon paintings, while the black, blocky text and the repetitive forms indicate a direct link to the compulsive cataloguing of On Kawara. The uniformity creates equivalence, so that state-sponsored military organizations and rogue terror groups are indistinguishable.

Another kind of consciousness-raising is advanced by artists whose work reflects the heightened interracial awareness necessitated by LA life. Eduardo Sarabia stages *Salon Alemán* (2006–08) at the Armory, a functioning bar doubling as a sculptural installation from which he distributes free homemade tequila shots on scheduled evenings. It's likely that the tequila drinker will not understand that each shot is meant to represent the poverty of agave farmers, but perhaps Sarabia doesn't mind if his engagement with consumerism overrides the critique. At the Whitney, *The Gift* (2008) is a storeroom containing several collections of objects for sale. A catalogue functions both in the commercial and academic senses of the word, containing texts on the artist's work plus an order form.

Mario Ybarra, Jr.'s installation at the Armory, *The Scarface Museum* (2008), is a collection of movie memorabilia that once belonged to his friend Angel Montes, Jr. Montes, an LA gang member, left the collection to Ybarra upon his incarceration, and Ybarra has been cataloguing, displaying and expanding it ever since. The kitschy objects, displayed in glass vitrines, are cultural artifacts representing young Mexican-American males' misguided idolization of whatever flawed images of Latin men they can locate. The stately room unfortunately dwarfs the installation, as is the case with many of the works on view at the Armory.

The question that remains is what impact the Whitney's acknowledgement of Los Angeles' stature as a producer of internationally-noted artists and trends will have on the city's community of artists, who despite their engagement with the excesses of the art market, have so far remained staunchly experimental? It's much too soon to know, but whatever the effects of recognition will be, it's clear that LA's international influence will not be waning anytime soon. It is time, then, for Los Angeles to step up its taste-making by inaugurating an influential survey exhibition of its own—one that goes beyond the regionalism of the California Biennial or even the Whitney's own America-centric endeavor. Without such a forum, LA artists will continue to be cast as diversifying rather than defining American art.