



# Walk Artisanal

It's no secret that the eastside of Los Angeles is gentrifying fast, and that most of us in the contemporary art community wring our hands in weak perplexity over the part that we play in the process. Nevertheless, many residents of Glassell Park were happy to see a new coffee shop open on Eagle Rock Boulevard in early 2015. Yelp reviewers have approved of the "clean and creative atmosphere." ("Super chill place and the quality of people is very high as well," wrote Anthony E.) Notwithstanding the "rude" servers, the clientele seems broadly to approve of the new establishment.

A few years ago, next door to where the coffee shop now stands, artists Peter Harkawik and Mateo Tannatt rented, renovated, and sublet a large building as studios for artists. Now those artists are being forced out by a consortium of property speculators who are raising the rents. As a swansong to the space, Harkawik and the New York-based artist Miles Huston curated the ambitious group show *Walk Artisanal*, pointing at—more or less non-judgmentally—art's contribution to the current state of affairs, in which a coffee shop called Habitat is judged on the quality of its "people" as much as on the quality of its coffee.

*Walk Artisanal* was not, as one might have expected, an angry protest show, nor was it what you could call a pointed critique. It included forty-six artists whose concerns and aesthetics are inevitably heterogeneous. The exhibition did not have a press release until a couple of days before the show ended, at which

point the organizers emailed out a dense and circuitous text that took as its starting point meditations on the "experience economy"—a term coined in 1998 by two business management authors, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore—and concluded by enumerating the related categories of artwork within the exhibition.

For those not already familiar with the term, the experience economy is the stage of late Capitalism that supersedes the service economy; instead of just delivering a service, a company will charge higher prices for a *memorable* experience (Pine and Gilmore use the example of the taxi driver Iggy, from the TV show *Taxi*, who sings to his passengers in order to get better tips)<sup>1</sup>. In their text, Harkawik and Huston don't mention Habitat by name, but it must not have been far from their minds. Their assertion, roughly put, is that through the dematerialization of the art object—and subsequently through the 1990s discourse around Relational Aesthetics—art presaged the experience economy. "Can the re-materialization of the art object," they ask, "constitute an ideological rejection of the fluff and fakery of contemporary Capitalism?" As previously noted, *Walk Artisanal* was not a polemical exhibition. Instead of directly confronting art's entanglement in the toxic effects of gentrification, the curators soft-pedaled the subject by proposing instead a situation akin to a home-shopping network product demonstration in which non-utilitarian artworks argue for their own indispensability.

That said, *Walk Artisanal* did not try to ingratiate itself to the

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viewer, as might an entertaining retail experience. Nor did it bend over backwards to explain the inclusion (or exclusion) of any particular works. A handwritten sign welcoming visitors was taped up outside the door; in the entrance corridor, banners pinned to the rafters announced “Art Show in L.A.” and “A Whole New Ballgame.” As with all the banners that Otis Houston makes, they were done in spray paint on white towels. Houston is normally to be found by the side of the road at the entrance to the FDR Tunnel in New York, performing to the traffic. Huston, apparently, is a fan. Spaced around the gallery, three welded amalgamations of rusted steel by Brett Goldstone were each titled *Untitled Jig* (1985–2015), hinting at a vague mechanical function that—in the context of the exhibition, at least—remained inaccessible. Harkawik and Huston were evidently considering the ways in which art might advertise other kinds of worth than economic value, and with more than a trace of irony.

Several works in the show seemed to make self-conscious fun of the somewhat absurd existence that is the professional artist’s *métier*. Amanda Ross-Ho’s laugh-out-loud *BLACK GLOVE LEFT #2* (2015) is a giant rubber glove—the kind artists use when painting or when mixing toxic chemicals—with giant simulated paint splatters on the fingertips. A piece of humdrum and utilitarian studio equipment becomes a preposterously self-aggrandizing event. An untitled drawing from 2013, by Josh Mannis, shows a bearded and beret-clad painter about to put brush to canvas, while a gigantic and crudely rendered naked female looms nightmarishly on all fours above him. Shifts in scale are nearly always funny. A tiny purple yoga mat, unsmilingly titled *Purple Yoga Mat* (2015), by Gracie

Devito, was comically positioned on a too-big and too-low white plinth.

Many artworks suggested functionality, such as Matt Paweski’s sleek beech and aluminum sculptures, or Nevine Mahmoud’s *Old Slide* (2015), and a few even delivered it, albeit to ambivalent ends. A hanging ceramic form by Anna Sew Hoy, titled *Rear Entry (Studio)* (2013), does double duty as a repository for lost keys. Another piece by the artist, *Tissue Dispensing (Red/Single)* (2012), consisted of an iceberg-like sculpture on red legs that proffered a tissue from a small hole, perhaps anticipating viewers being moved to tears by the nearby *Untitled (Rotating Painting)* (2015) by Elvire Bonduelle which, apparently, was turned 90 degrees by a gallery assistant at the start of each day.

In 2013, Harkawik (with Laura Owens) curated an excellent exhibition called *Made in Space*, which was an off-kilter survey of art produced in Los Angeles—a riposte, perhaps, to the Hammer’s *Made in L.A.* While by no means all the artists in *Walk Artisanal* are hometown players, the bias towards the city inevitably produces many works, like DeVito’s, that feel parodic of L.A.’s quirks and clichés. A wonderfully weird sculpture in painted AquaResin, by Hannah Greely, depicts a life-sized man sitting cross-legged in a headband and shorts, his hands together as if in supplication. His eyes are marbles; if you poke them with your fingers (I had to be shown how by the gallery assistant) the marbles roll through channels and pop out of his wrists into his cupped hands. The work is called *Beholder* (2015–’16); I came to wonder if it was the tubby pink truth-seeker or I, the eye-poker, who was being made fun of in the work.

Is that what was intended by Harkawik and Huston’s response to the experience economy? Artworks

that seem to ask for interactive engagement, offering usefulness, but which then laughingly reject any such external validation? For every work that reflected such ideas, there were several that didn't. Many were excellent, but by no means all argued for their own relevance or inclusion in the show. Fittingly, for an exhibition curated by artists, *Walk Artisanal* never reduced itself to a single, graspable point, or even (discernably, at least) into a series of different points. Instead it amounted to a demonstration of the awkwardness and incommensurability of good art; of practices that cannot be coopted by property developers to generate interest or value, nor coopted by curators to illustrate ideas read in a book on economics. Amen to that.

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*Walk Artisanal* (2016) (Installation View). Image courtesy of the artists. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

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*Walk Artisanal* (2016) (Installation View). Pictured: Davida Nemeroff & JPW3, Christine Wang, Julia Dzwonkoski & Kyle Potter, Mateo Tannatt. Image courtesy of the artists. Photo: Ruben Diaz.