

# L.A. Povera

Sunbeams shuffled through the gallery's dust-colored windows on gangrenous feet. Between wooden columns and around white plinths, past sutured metal and ceramified condoms, a black plastic bag dragged itself across the concrete floor, as slow as the changing light. The piece was *Tucson Rug* (2009), one of Robert Breer's more trashy kinetic sculptures—a squashed and abject version of his droidlike domes. Here, at 356 Mission, in a show curated by Mitchell Albus and Olivia Shao and called *Sunlight Arrives Only at Its Proper Hour*, the creeping sculpture fit the mood.

What mood was that? Uneven and post-industrial. Clean surfaces intersecting grimed. Warmly lit, translucent, and crisp. Objects seemed to drift, if not crawl, between being art and being trash. There, on a little shelf, rested a resin model of a rodential severed head—a piece by Matt Hoyt. Up on the wall was Michael E. Smith's *Untitled* (2015), a lengthy sunflower stalk angled just so and fixed to a plastic “prisoner transport seat” like a relief. These objects felt casual and found, yet piercingly, obsessively sure. It wasn't just any trash: it had to be this way. Near Smith's piece were 30 cigarette cellophanes filled with tiny refuse, trash-world terrariums by Yuji Agematsu, who famously makes one a day, every day, on his daily walk.

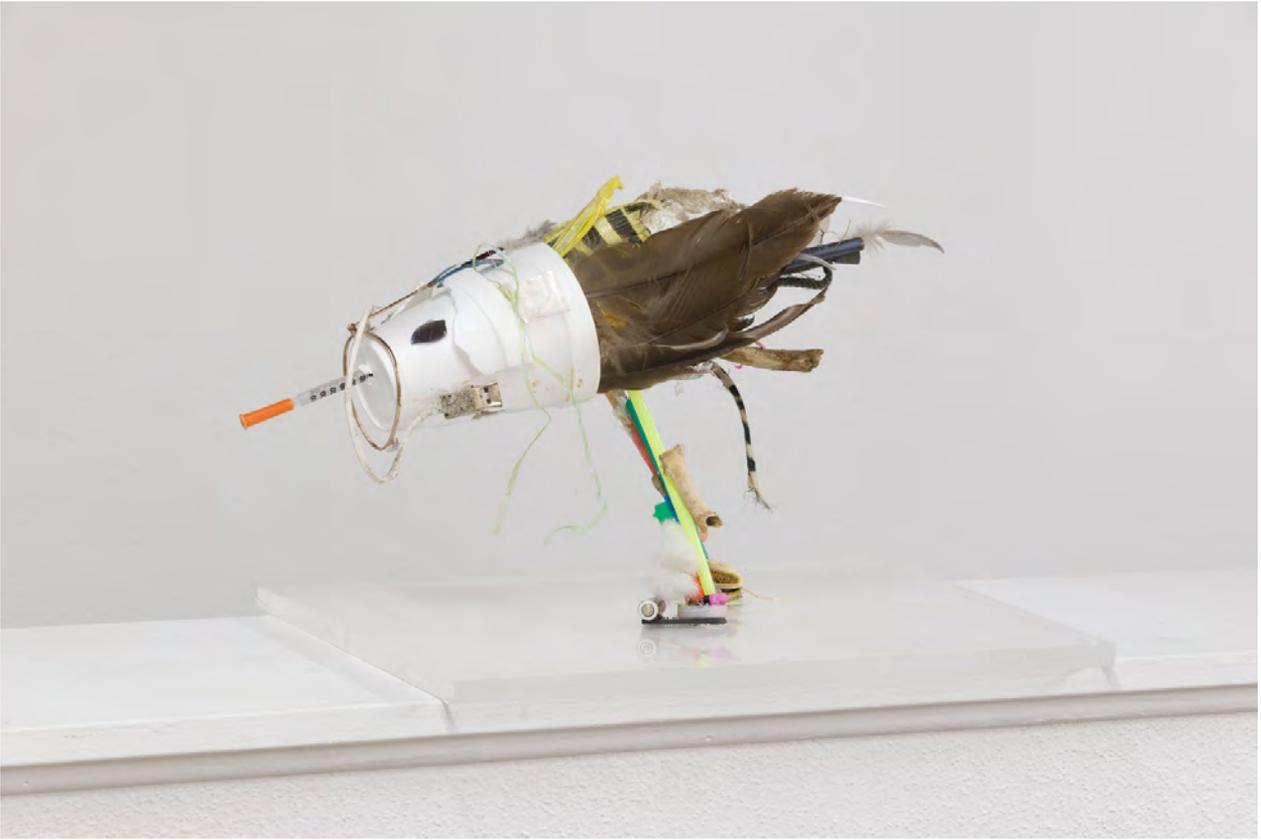
It's as if to know a place, you need to root through its trash. Or else, in certain unfinished circumstances, such as 356 Mission's roughly refurbished warehouse, on a block trenched with old rail sections and puddles of sewage, the trash on the

inside recalled that in the gallery's surroundings. This, perhaps, to contradict art's tendency to grow aloof in its sunstreaked white boxes. Found materials seem to signal a kind of local awareness, even a claim to localness. This despite the fact that both Smith and Agematsu are from New York, and their work probably is too.

For *The Great Indoors*, Klara Liden's recent show at House of Gaga // Reena Spaulings Fine Art, the artist made a point of locally sourcing her materials. Several pieces of “furniture” consisted of benches that double as stands for salvaged plywood construction barriers from the Los Angeles area. Liden's act of reuse amounted to a kind of site-specificity that was less invested in the building itself than the city around it. The barriers were painted with rectangles of a custom whitewash. Playing in their shadows were two videos: one of a pigeon in New York City, the other of ducks in MacArthur Park Lake, visible through the gallery's mission-style windows, swimming around a drowned shopping cart.

This take on urbanism, part vampiric, part critical, carried over to the gallery's very next show, Bernadette Corporation's *The Gay Signs*. Among some custom beer pong tables, lit from within by LEDs and variously etched and printed with quotes from Sylvere Lotringer, was another that doubled as a vitrine filled with garbage from the surrounding streets. And, to match Liden's birds, BC fashioned a seagull sculpture crafted from a “locally sourced” styrofoam cup, disembodied feathers, and bits of plastic. In BC's hands the use of found materials took on the aura of

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disaster—the sort that formed the backdrop for their “collectively authored novel” *Reena Spaulings* (from which the gallery drew its name). At the story’s climax, a tornado savaging Manhattan skyscrapers is a crude realization of New York’s enduring millennial disaster—not 9/11, but the real-estate boom that would follow. As with the galleries on the edge of Boyle Heights, the neighborhood’s unfinished feel is its appeal. In rooting through its garbage, *Gaga // Reena* nods to the working-class neighborhood which it has a part in gentrifying—and while *Gaga // Reena* was not the first gallery to move to MacArthur Park, it did so with aplomb.

Indeed, is there something about galleries in “transitional” L.A. neighborhoods that makes them interested in trash-based, trash-like art? 356 Mission finds itself at the center of heated protests against the gentrification of Boyle Heights; activists have fingered the galleries there as prime suspects. In 2016, the NAH Fair (an off-site alternative to the Los Angeles Art Book Fair) printed a map of the district and described each business with brevity and wit. “They got a fire pit outside,” says the guide of the now-defunct Harmony Murphy Gallery. “They often show art of found trash.” It’s meant as an insult—your precious art—but it’s no accident that several recent shows have been proud to feature found trash. Perhaps this is partly to absorb that very criticism: galleries in gentrifying parts of town might say as much by invoking a trashy site specificity—a conceptual retrofit, if not camouflage. Perhaps this is also part of the process by which what resists today sells out tomorrow.

If the show at 356 Mission had an airy, depopulated feel to match its venue, and the two shows at *Gaga // Reena* riffed explicitly on the

neighborhood outside the windows, the garage gallery Reserve Ames in West Adams, where artists are slowly but surely buying houses, has the look of a fixer-upper—stubbornly unrenovated. In a recent two-person show there featuring Brian Dario and Christian Tedeschi, the sculptures had the dark readymade tang of Michael E. Smith—for instance, a push broom in a form-fitting plexiglass box, or a Felix Gonzalez-Torres lightbulb piece “remade” with broken bulbs cast in blobs of glass. The show looked like junk you’d find lying around in an old shed—and a lot of it was. A conscious effort had been made to play on this confusion between the pile of boards and chain link fence and miscellaneous poles that always sits in the gallery’s back left corner, and the similar items moved into the space by the curator—many of which, in their turn, had been lying around the artists’ studios.

Leave it to artists to “appreciate” a pile of yellowed lumber, or a disused commercial space. The ICA LA, newly relocated from Santa Monica in an old garment warehouse across the street from the downtown Greyhound bus station, opened with an artist project by New York-based artist Abigail DeVille. Over several days, DeVille combed Los Angeles second-hand shops and curbsides for materials—shoes, red and blue party lights, hub-caps—then clamored them together around a chicken wire tornado, beneath a punctured black trash bag sky. In all of this, she is the only artist among the aforementioned who declares that her work is specifically about gentrification and displacement. Themes latent in Albus and Shao’s exhibition at 356 Mission, and central in Liden’s and BC’s exhibitions at *Gaga // Reena*, manifest as the whole of DeVille’s piece.



Yet DeVille's remains an abstract gesture. Does it matter that her materials were sourced from Los Angeles—? And does this proximity lend these displaced objects a particularly Angeleno sense of displacement? To the point, Liden dressed up her chipped and grimed plywood barriers with white abstract paintings, like fresh drywall over old brick. These barriers could have been from anywhere, but they weren't—they were from L.A., and their damage was sustained for the construction and demolition of L.A. buildings. In that sense, Liden's installation has a particularly "Los Angeles" texture, as if the city was expressing itself on its own canvas. Yet this was also, consciously, reflexively, a fetishized urbanism—wherein the "urban" is characterized not by diverse communities and dynamic culture, but by the convection of blight, displacement, and reinvestment. Such is an urbanism without a city.

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Bernadette Corporation, *The Gay Signs* (installation view). Image courtesy of House of Gaga.

2

Kara Linden, *The Great Indoors* (installation view). Image courtesy of Reena Spaulings Fine Art.

3

Brian Dario & Christian Tedeschi, *Untitled* (2017). Plastic socks concrete pump hose, 32 × 18 × 12 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Reserve Ames.

4

Bernadette Corporation, *The Gay Signs* (installation view). Image courtesy of House of Gaga.

