

Outliers and American Vanguard Art at LACMA

November 18, 2018–
March 17, 2019

I searched and searched, but nowhere could I find, explicitly stated, the proposition that seems to be at the heart of Lynne Cooke's *Outliers and Vanguard American Art*: that the categorical separation upheld primarily by specialist dealers, curators, and historians of "outsider art" between self-taught artists and those with college or university degrees is untenable, and should be henceforth abandoned.

That idea, at this point in time, is not even so controversial, having begun gathering steam as early as 1992, when LACMA mounted *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, and arguably reaching its apotheosis in 2013 with Massimiliano Gioni's the *Encyclopedic Palace* exhibition for the Venice Biennale and the 2013 Carnegie International.

I, for one, had half expected—hoped for, even—Cooke's show to be the final word on the matter, a definitive demonstration that categorizations like "outsider," "folk," "visionary," or "naïve" are not only inaccurate but also ethically compromised. What separates sculptor John Flannagan, for instance, who incorporated ancient Celtic references into his stone carvings, from William Edmondson, whose motifs often came from African American burial traditions,

but race and class? Evidently, it was me who was naïve. While *Outliers* seeks to broaden the art historical conversation to include voices previously ignored, drowned out or condescended, Cooke is rightly careful never to blithely paper over the divisions that have long existed, and which continue to exist, in the contemporary art world as in American society at large.

Outliers maintains focus on three periods in the last 100 years or so when the boundaries between the center and the margins were especially porous. (Retrenchment usually followed.) The implication is that these are moments to be celebrated—and indeed the brilliance of the work in the exhibition backs this up—but the presentation and the interpretive didactics retain the dispassion and fastidiousness of historical analysis.

Cooke's study begins in the 1930s, when WPA programs allowed a host of skilled amateurs to be employed in artistic pursuits. Concurrently, Alfred H. Barr was making compelling arguments at the nascent Museum of Modern Art for the significance to American Modernism of what he regrettably termed the "modern primitive." (His ridiculed exhibition of the self-taught artist Morris Hirshfield contributed to his dismissal in 1943.) What is clear from the outset is that in the 1930s, "primitive" was usually a euphemism for work by African American or Latinx makers. Artists such as Horace Pippin—whose *Holy Mountain III* (1945) recalls

the jungle scenes in Henri Rousseau's *Tropical Forest with Monkeys* (1910), in the previous gallery—were not so much uneducated as schooled in a different set of folk aesthetics that they each applied to contemporary subjects and themes.

Next, we leap forward to the early 1970s, when Chicago Imagists and Bay Area Funk artists such as Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Roy De Forest, and William Wiley enthusiastically promoted "outsiders" including Joseph Yoakum and Martín Ramírez, influenced not only by their styles but also by their aberrant relation to the mainstream. While this section of the exhibition contains some of the most powerful work from both sides of the academic divide—notably Ramírez's grand *Untitled (Madonna)* (c.1948–63)—it is also not without ethical unease. What were the power dynamics of these relationships, especially when one artist could not speak for himself? (Yoakum died in 1972; Ramírez in 1963.) Did the academically credentialed younger artists really consider their unschooled colleagues to be equals? (We can never know.)

Instead of "outsider," Cooke proposes the more sympathetic term "outlier"—a word implying unexpected exceptionalism rather than inevitable exclusion. My guess is that, sadly, it won't catch on, not because it isn't better but because it lacks the tragic romance of "outsider"—a romance that is especially appealing to the "insider" art world.

It is in the third section of the exhibition that we become most aware that *Outliers* offers no overarching thesis about the relationship of the artistic center to the margins—still less a model by which we might proceed in the future. Cooke observes that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when photography, performance, and text-based work was prominent in American contemporary art, self-taught artists working in those media, such as Lee Godie or Eugene von Bruenchenhein, were championed by the vanguard. Separately, the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, were celebrated thanks in part to their affinity with textile artists and abstract painters like Mary Heilmann, whose gorgeous *Orchid Lady* (1994) features here. In the final gallery, Cooke enacts what in her catalog essay she calls “curatorial fabulations,” in which artists who may not have been aware of each other’s work are placed together, such as Nancy Shaver, Jessica Stockholder, and Judith Scott.

Curatorial fabulations may be the most honest and least objectionable means of bringing together the schooled and the unschooled, but they are nevertheless somewhat unsatisfying. Is there anything more than a coincidental relationship between the severely handicapped Scott, who created her bound yarn and fabric totems at the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, and Stockholder, who graduated with an MFA from Yale and is currently a professor at the University of Chicago? By the conclu-

sion of this exhibition, I was hungry for something more hopeful, less arbitrary and speculative. While *Outliers* might be the most substantive contribution to this debate in years, it provides no bromides, no facile generalizations, and no remediations for past injustices.

Sperm Cult at LAXART

**November 11, 2018–
January 6, 2019**

Sperm Cult, a group show at LAXART, took its inspiration and its name from a 2017 book collaboration between artists Richard Hawkins and Elijah Burgher. The publication is a celebration of queer, male transgression that combines photographs of nude men enacting unknown sexual rites—some wearing crude, cartoon-like masks, their bodies painted—with Burgher’s drawings of mysterious symbols, and a text which reads like an orgiastic *Lord of the Flies*. An updated PDF supplement released to coincide with the show adds homoerotic collaged images from pop culture (a shirtless Nick Jonas), art history (St. Thomas fingering Christ’s wound), and pornography. Photos of a man ejaculating onto a bowl of fruit (literally spilling his seed) wryly counter the notion of non-normative sex as fruitless. Through the lens of the sperm cult, the well-spring of creative energy is located outside of traditional procreation. As the press

release stated, “*Sperm Cult* is an unabashedly phallogocentric affair,” though far from patriarchal.

The exhibition built off of this foundation, featuring six artists or pairs that explored the nexus of queer sexuality, magic, ritual, and community. In their collaborative works, Ryan M Pfeiffer and Rebecca Walz drew on art historical and erotic sources, layering black, brown, and blue line drawings of ancient sculptures, architectural elements, Renaissance portraits, and gay porn. In one drawing, a nude youth strikes an elegant pose next to another male attempting auto-fellatio, both rendered with the same delicate hand. In doing so, they inserted these libidinous images into a more traditional pictorial lineage going back to fertility icons like the Venus of Willendorf.

On the floor, Burgher laid down drop cloths onto which he painted sigils, or occult symbols related to desire. The geometric forms resembled letters, but were essentially unreadable. Still, we didn’t need to be able to decipher the glyphs to recognize an attempt to conjure. A large red and black canvas was titled *The Forrest of the Poets* (2018), presumably a reference to Forrest Bess, the abstract painter who was obsessed with the idea that hermaphroditism was the key to immortality. Bess went so far as to perform self-surgery, creating an opening where the penis meets the scrotum, which he believed could result in the ultimate form of intercourse if penetrated. Elsewhere, Pfeiffer and Walz also paid

homage to Bess, titling one of their works *The Mystery Cult of Forrest Bess* (2016).

Pushed to one corner, also resting on the floor—in a rejection of conventional, hierarchical presentation—were ektor garcia’s sinuous ceramic pieces, collectively titled *desechos* (2018), or “waste.” These shiny, black glazed objects were wound and woven into vulva-like forms, interlocking hooks, or looping snakes that ended in a tangle, offering a less literal interpretation of hedonistic coupling. Given the title, these coils of clay couldn’t help but take on an abject, scatological reference.

Placed around the room were four sculptures by Ariana Reines and Oscar Tuazon, based on ancient Greek *herms*—pillars that featured a male bust on top and a phallus carved at groin level—thought to protect against evil. These particular herms were crudely constructed from everyday materials—wood, buckets, candles, concrete—and covered in pages of Reines’ poetry. They too played with gender identity—a pair were titled *Ma* and *Pa*, another was *The Lesbianator* (all 2016)—and furthered the ejaculatory conceit. A bucket placed beneath an engorged protuberance in *Old Spice* (2016) was filled with liquid soap resembling semen.

In a small gallery space upstairs sat two cases filled with the *Sperm Cult*’s literary precedent, Canadian artist Scott Treleaven’s late-’90s “queer, pagan, nomad, punk zine,” *Salivation Army*. The eight issues that were produced of this collaged and photocopied publication reflect a search for new ways

of living outside the bounds of the homogenous, capitalist status quo, being guided by “insurrectionary magick, radicalism, nomadism, sexual & social diversity.” It’s a world where romantic libertine Arthur Rimbaud, occultist Aleister Crowley, and grunge rockers Mudhoney exist side by side. As the zine’s title suggests, bodily fluids are seen as the lubrication for this liberation, and although cocks are cut and pasted throughout the issues, gender is less important than radicality. (Treleaven implores in one, “More GRRRLS Should Send Stuff In!”)

Some may have viewed this ejaculatory infatuation as nothing more than a puerile obsession with molten manspreading, an update to Pollock’s suggestive drippings. But that overlooks the emphasis on collaboration, community, and consent that was evident in much of this work, that offered a queer male rejoinder to the popular rallying cry, “the Future is Female.” In adherence to hedonistic pleasure, the sperm cult offered an alternative, not a support, of the status quo.

The show *Sperm Cult* thoughtfully fleshed out the themes explored in Hawkins’ and Burgher’s publication—offering conceptual as opposed to simply aesthetic links—but somehow left the viewer wanting more. So much of the work in the show seemed to have a performative aspect, of which these physical objects were merely mementos. Burgher’s sigils reflected ritualistic origins, as did Tuazon’s and Reines’ herms, one topped with dramatically melted candles. Even Pfeiffer and Walz’s

drawings implied some sort of dance as the two moved around each other in a flurry of mark-making. Viewers could certainly glean the process implicit in these works, but absent a participatory invitation, it was harder to locate themselves within the ceremonial bacchanal. Perhaps that distance between the object and its origin was simply a function of the gallery setting, in the sense that all artworks are remnants of their making. But an accompanying dose of performative drama would have gone a long way in juicing up this mostly static vision of transgressive ritual liberation.

Kahlil Joseph at MOCA PDC

November 17, 2018–
February 24, 2019

Towards the end of Kahlil Joseph’s essayistic film *Fly Paper* (2017), on view at MOCA PDC, an orchestra of heavy, ambient, oceanic bass quiets as a disembodied female voice reads: “Memories must make due with their delirium, with their drift.” This phrase, excerpted from Chris Marker’s pioneering 1983 film *Sans Soleil*, punctuates a scene in which two men—one young, one old, and both shrouded in shadow—begin to drift towards each other as their bodies gradually fall into a synchronized series of choreographed movements. An abrupt cut to grainy color footage reveals a bespectacled man resting in a hospital bed, his head freshly sewn by a patchwork crown of silver staples. Elsewhere,

young, resplendent black men and women converse and mingle in regal surroundings. A crowded subway train arrives at a Harlem station. A voice recites, “Madness protects, as fever does.”

A counterpart to MOCA Grand’s larger exhibition *One Day at a Time: Manny Farber and Termite Art*, *Fly Paper* is paired with a sole painting by Farber, a large-scale tondo, entitled *Marguerite Duras, Possibly* (1981), that depicts a surrealist, birds-eye view of a meandering urban landscape-turned-artist’s-work-table, with trains and architectural elements interweaving with books, people, and paintings. In a literal sense (arguably exceedingly literal), the painting echoes the film’s own compositional structure as a fractious and hallucinogenic audiovisual collage— itself another nod to Marker’s *Sans Soleil*—in which disparate images superimpose a complex, multilayered soundscape. Oscillating from the breathy intimacy of quiet conversation, to the din and thrum of Harlem’s streets, to the deafening drumbeat of amplified music, Joseph’s film manages to compress discordant auditory sensations into a singular orchestral score. This feeds the feeling of being physically submerged within the film’s narration, as a fluid montage of textured visual and acoustic moments evoke both the poetic fog of memory and the twilight state of fever dreams.

Fly Paper borrows its Harlem setting from *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the 1955 literary collaboration between Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes that paired DeCarava’s attentive photo-

graphs of quotidian life in Harlem with Hughes’ fictive yet palpable insights into the Manhattan neighborhood and its African American inhabitants. As a lyrical, nomadic ode to present day Harlem—a ballad of black life, steeped in the architecture of the city—Joseph’s film similarly shepherds an intimate view of the neighborhood’s vernacular character. It also doubles as a metaphoric ode to black artistic excellence, marked by the appearance, in work and in body, of a distinguished roster of black artists, writers, and musicians.

In addition to text from *Sans Soleil*, the film appropriates slivers of narration from Hughes’ titular text, writings by Zora Neale Hurston, and text from *Harlem is Nowhere*, a memoir by the writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. In the film, Rhodes-Pitts appears in her Harlem apartment, holding her child and gazing through a window as a gauzy, diaphanous curtain floats above them. The two seem unaware of the camera’s quiet gaze—a result of the film’s subtle diaristic undertones, which confer each face and façade with an aching familiarity. A second shot focuses on the book *Black Theatre USA*, a noted anthology of dramatic works by African American writers (including Hughes and Hurston), balancing in the foreground on her windowsill. Here, an intimate moment between mother and child is compounded with a domestic still-life of black literary achievement, suggesting a shared sense of tenderness and legacy.

By folding such an authentic moment of domestic intimacy into

a strangely hypnagogic mosaic of filmmaking, Joseph ultimately points to the inherently performative nature of the medium itself. In this sense, his prominent placement of the title *Black Theatre USA* can be read as an allusion to the narrow ways in which American popular culture—historically written and transcribed by whiteness—expects blackness to perform for its gaze. Contextually, however, the book itself commands, and harkens back to, the same literary prowess ingrained in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*: it infers the respective ways in which black creative excellence has been—and should continue to be—folded into the cultural canon.

Towards the end of the film’s digressive narrative stream, the score quiets again and bridges to shaky footage of a sun-soaked street, where a woman passerby meets our gaze and asks, “Is that a camera?,” to which the omnipresent filmmaker responds, “It’s a little tiny film camera, yeah.” This moment immediately and beautifully punctures the veil of the fever dream, and of the film’s own performance. As a work steeped in the intimate history of Harlem, as well as in the intricate potentialities of filmmaking itself, *Fly Paper* proposes the moving image as a living monument for *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. This quotidian exchange serves, perhaps unwittingly, as one the film’s most emblematic memorials to the ways in which Hughes’ original text transgresses formalities to capture something akin to a lived, collective truth.

The overarching framework of *One Day at a Time: Manny Farber and Termite Art* attempts to echo this sentiment. While the inclusion of Farber's painting appears wholly unnecessary, his 1962 thesis on termite art reads as prescient in this context. A termite is a communally-inclined creature, an omnivorous burrower capable of consuming and regurgitating vast islands of material. A termite artist, then, metaphorically "leaves nothing in [his] path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity....and feels [his] way through walls of particularization."¹ *Fly Paper* embodies a thoroughly modernist exercise in the alchemy of experimental filmmaking: it rewinds and accelerates, bends and flattens time, and blurs the threshold between verifiable documentation and febrile mirage—in a sense consuming and reformulating film and its ability to hold time as malleable matter. Inasmuch as the film's nonlinear structure mimics the mechanics of memory, it also complicates the notion of memory as a one-sided, individuated realm of private recollection. Mirroring Farber's indefatigable termite, Joseph dissolves memory, dreamscape, and urban consciousness into a singular filmic landscape, rendering the peculiar qualities of each in feverish relief while unmooring their perceptible boundaries.

Ingrid Luche at Ghebaly Gallery

December 15, 2018–
January 19, 2019

One can tell as much about a culture by the paintings it produces as by the dresses and articles of clothing it uses for individual and collective expression.

—Georges Bergés,
Gallerist

Despite the long and tangled history of fashion bleeding into art and vice versa, these categorical distinctions are debated ad nauseum. And, while I may contradict myself, proceeding to debate said categories here, this line of questioning is a bit tired, isn't it? Over the last couple of decades many high-end fashion houses have presented exhibitions in major international museums (Alexander McQueen at MoMA; Saint Laurent at Petit Palais; Chanel at the Met; Dior at the Denver Art Museum). Just this fall, 69 held an exhibit at MOCA Pacific Design Center, and Eckhaus Latta hosted a pop-up-store-cum-exhibition at the Whitney. And still, we are implored by curators and gallerists to be dazzled by the fluidity between haute couture and contemporary art.

The objects in Ingrid Luche's Ghebaly Gallery exhibition, titled *They can't live without it. We can.*, looked like fashion. Dynamic printed images folded over afghans and pleated skirts. A handful of photographs repeated as printed motifs across multiple

works, making the exhibition feel like it was showcasing the complete clothing line from some recent season. Similarly, the forms of the sculptures, which the artist called *Ghost Dresses*—familiar and namable clothing items (shawl, shirt, skirt, dress)—were installed with all the trappings of high-end retail. Luche created inventive hangers for each garment: assemblages of rope, chain, jewelry, and rattan. Rather than clothing racks, the artist swapped in metal frames used to hold photo backdrops. The installation begged the question: if it looks like clothing and is hung like clothing, isn't it?

Yet, throughout press materials, there was an insistence that the artist's pieces are meant to be mused upon rather than worn. Her garments (referred to in turn as both sculptures and dresses in the press release) elicited the body while also denying it, and herein lay the contextual divide. Fashion is meant to be touched and artworks are meant to be pondered, as if touching might minimize the effect of the saintly art object. When the body utilizes and engages with an object, is that object less pure? Is said object less able to communicate ideas, once tainted by our imperfect flesh? It all sounds a bit biblical, doesn't it?

Luche, a Paris-based artist, was inspired on a recent trip to Los Angeles by our unique local trappings: you know, the burning houses and celebrity sightings that make up everyday Angeleno life. (The works were "conceptualized in California and

1. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," *Film Culture*, no. 27 (Winter 1962–63), 242–246.



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Above: Horace Pippin, *Interior* (1944).
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Below: *Outliers and American
Vanguard Art* (2018) (installation view).
Image courtesy of
the artists and LACMA.



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Above: *Sperm Cult* (2018) (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artists and LAXART.

Below: Works by Scott Treleaven.
Image courtesy of the artist and LAXART.



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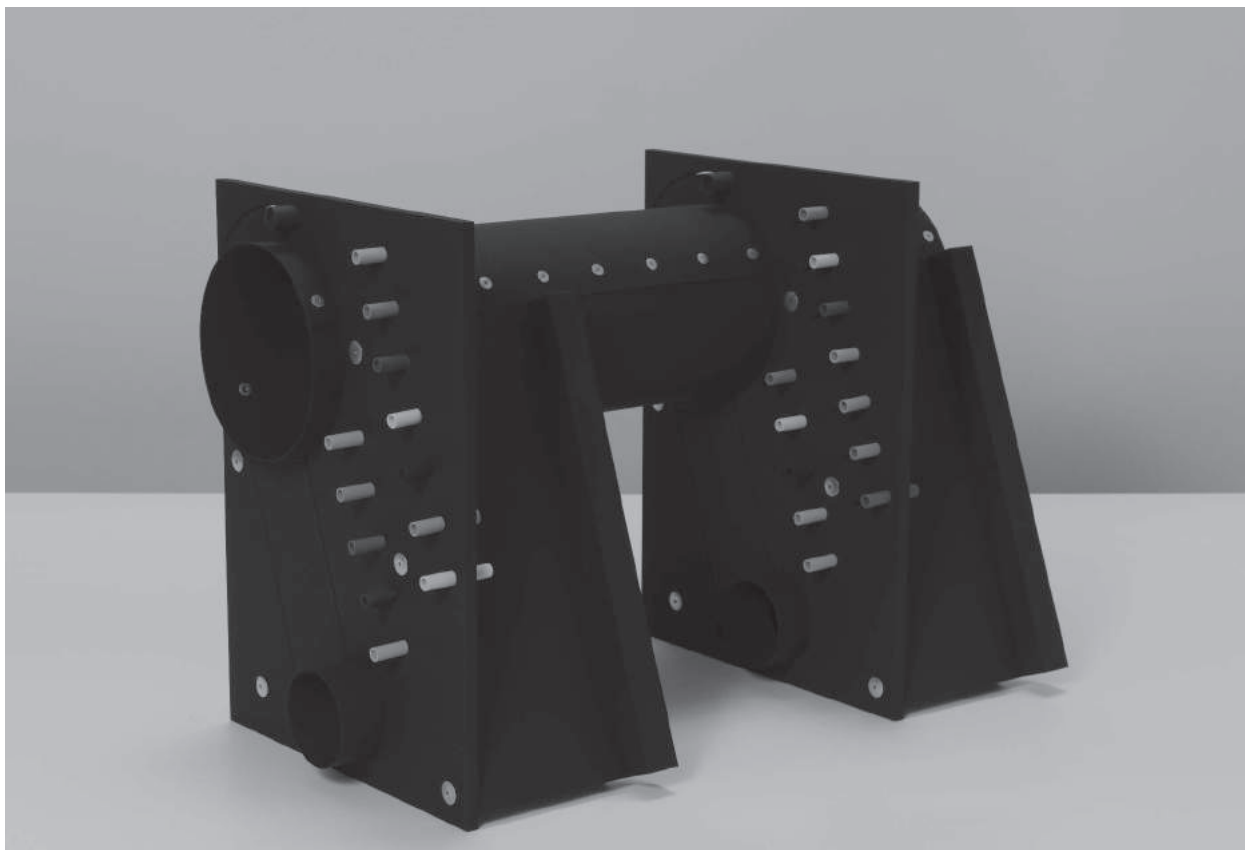


Above: Kahlil Joseph, *Fly Paper* (2017) (film still). HD video installation, color and black-and-white, sound, approximately 23:17 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

Below: Kahlil Joseph, *One Day at a Time: Kahlil Joseph's Fly Paper* (2018) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Zak Kelley.



Ingrid Luche, *House on Fire* (2018).
 Digital print on organic cotton, cotton,
 metal chain, sequined flocking, wicker hoop,
 cotton twine and metal ring,
 78 ¾ x 27 ½ x 3 ½ inches. Image courtesy of
 the artist and Ghebaly Gallery.



produced in Paris.”) *Green Denim* (all works 2018), a thick denim muumuu, was adorned with green plus signs—the all-too-familiar symbol of the weed dispensaries that dot our streetscapes. *House on Fire* took for its print an image of a burning L.A. house that the artist saw on TV. A series of pleated polycotton skirts (*RP-IL 01-03*) used as their pattern Western desert landscapes lifted from Richard Prince photographs that Luche saw on view at LACMA during her visit. Extending this Western motif, Luche fashioned several cowboy-inspired shawls (*Plastron 03* and *Plastron 01*)—made with faux leather and dotted with stars, tassels, and sequined flocking, like glammed-up sheriff’s vests. California was generalized into patterning,

motif, surface. Many of the graphic tees wouldn’t feel out of place on an Urban Outfitters sale rack.

Perhaps to personalize otherwise broad geographic generalizations, each work was dappled and accessorized with objects: cotton flowers, headphones, sleeping masks from an Air France flight, a plastic badge holder. In their function, these objects recalled the accessories Eleanor Antin employed in her sculptural portraits of notable female artists. Yet Luche’s garments lacked the highly-tuned specificity of Antin’s object pairings (an easel, a jar of honey, and a lush drape of red velvet make up Antin’s Carolee Schneemann portrait). Although Luche doted upon and fine tuned each garment, they still felt

mutable and transient, meant to be seen as part of a collection rather than individually.

As a writer, I can’t help but get stuck in language. Calling a pleated skirt a *sculpture* rather than a garment is, of course, a fall out of Duchamp’s notion that is nothing new—the same way Darren Bader can plop a wheel of cheese into a gallery, the result being a dairy product that takes on the value of a high-end art object. Shifting the conceptual boundaries around an object is so passé at this point, that I’m left thinking, “yes, and?” So here, the conversation about the fluidity of fashion and art ultimately distracts from any deeper inquiries into the objects themselves.

While interesting moments of printed image

Matt Paweski, *Switch - Switch* (2018). Aluminum, aluminum rivets, and vinyl paint, 18 x 24 x 12 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Park View/Paul Soto, Los Angeles. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

occured in small doses across the sculptures—on one garment, a muscled Arnold Schwarzenegger’s body became warped when stretched over a hoola-hoop rattan hanger—their fast namability into clothing categories didn’t provide a deeper inquiry into their formal qualities. The display mechanisms lifted from the realm of retail shopping added to this quickness. (Luche’s pleated skirts don’t exactly entice me to walk around and experience them in the round.) Doesn’t a skirt called a sculpture become beholden to qualities of sculpture: form, balance, contrast, and dimensionality? Call me a traditionalist, but I still expect a good sculpture to do these things.

Matt Paweski at Park View / Paul Soto

December 16, 2018–
February 9, 2019

Upon entering Park View / Paul Soto’s new Mid City storefront gallery on Washington Boulevard, you would be forgiven for thinking the recent exhibition—four modestly scaled sculptures of painted, bent, and assembled aluminum plates—was authored by a deceased modernist recently being re-evaluated for entry into the postwar canon. However, the work on view was created in the last year by Los Angeles artist Matt Paweski, and a closer viewing of the curving, riveted forms revealed a complex but playful assembly

concerned with a more human negotiation of production, technology, and culture.

The largest of the works in the exhibition, *Look out* (all works 2018), was about the size of a carry-on suitcase, and, while stationed front and center in the gallery, it operated much as the title implied. The focal point of this dynamic combination of flat angles and curves in deep navy blue, canary yellow, and crimson, was a cantaloupe-sized cylinder that pierced through the work around head height. This negative space visually framed two smaller works (*Couples* and *Switch - Switch*) at the back of the gallery while also recalling the transgression and transcendence of Robert Gober’s Virgin Mary with a drain pipe thrust through her torso. These bodily inferences cast the four sculptures in the exhibition as anthropomorphized junctions in an invisible network of conduits; a connective energy occupied the empty space of the gallery. The persistence of the open ducts and planes continued in *Fountain*—a horizontal composition of three hopper-like modules connected by another cylinder. The work hung low on the left wall, and recalled a drinking fountain while also pointing to a lineage of works by the same title (Duchamp’s urinal and Nauman’s portrait of the artist spitting water). Paweski’s *Fountain* connected Nauman’s irreverent spitting with two elements of the built environment (one that supplies a biological necessity and

the other that receives it), reminding us that we have become increasingly inseparable from the systems that support us.

Although Paweski’s four works displayed a buzzing compositional inter-relationship, what ended up setting them apart from each other was their respective color palettes, which were frustratingly unharmonious when taken as a whole. Deep, rich blacks and midnight hues were set off by bright and saturated tones that would seem at home in a *Looney Tunes* animation. This created an air of lost innocence, like an abandoned Peter Shire chair sitting on a sidewalk in the rain. In contrast to the reductive palettes of elemental primary colors favored by Joel Shapiro or Louise Nevelson, Paweski injected a sense of melancholy into his work via the combination of dominant dark hues and off-kilter tertiary tones that gave each work a distinct identity that felt at home in a constant state of anxiety.

West Coast Finish Fetish artists like John McCracken exploited polished, mirror-like surfaces on straightforward, geometric forms as a way to complicate the boundaries of their volume. Similarly, Paweski embraced a recent trend in custom car culture, a light absorbing matte finish, to push the boundaries of refraction. His finish along with subtle tonal shifts in color obscured and flattened the incised, curving cuts and joints that permeated his interlocking compositions. In addition to chromatic tension, the exhibition

projected a physical tension in the constrained aluminum sheets held in exact angles and tight curves by precise lines of rivets. Conforming the cold metal into highly articulated and intricate positions—that took more cues from the natural world than from manufacturing—infused the exhibition with breath.

In pursuing a totalizing vision of pure form, minimalists like Donald Judd espoused a vision of universality that was inspired by the efficiency and consistency of Henry Ford's assembly line, leaving little room for diversity of experience. Adopting a managerial role that removes the artist's hand from the work was a useful strategy for questioning authorship for many postwar movements like Conceptualism and Minimalism, but by obscuring the labor required to produce their work, these artists were inadvertently reinforcing the rigid class structure and systemic exploitation of the natural and human resources necessary for industrial production. Contrasted with Donald Judd—whose logical, gridded compositions pivot on an interplay between solid forms and the negative space contained in their precise arrangement—Paweski refuses to fully enclose a volume, creating and insisting on space for transparency and difference.

If Modernism's celebration of industrial production nurtured its denial of ornament, then the details and complexity at play in *Look out, Switch - Switch*, *Couples*, and *Fountain* could be regarded as a testament to the small-batch, DIY

production model described by post-Fordism. Facilitated by advances in on-demand technology like water jet cutting, 3D printing, CNC, and ink-jet printing, today's artists have no need for the corporate managerial structure and outsourcing of labor championed by the industrialists, modernists, and conceptualists of the last century. Instead, many have chosen to take advantage of a collapsed production chain that can exist in the artist's studio, of all places.

Trenton Doyle Hancock at Shulamit Nazarian

January 5–
February 17, 2019

In a self-portrait titled *Becoming the Toy Maker* (all works 2018), we see a haunting rendition of a prodigal son being anointed by a colorless hand. While the religious symbolism is pronounced, the piece—included in Trenton Doyle Hancock's solo show at Shulamit Nazarian—also operates as latent commentary on creating art and the existential questions around who artists serve.

It's unclear whether the artist is “coming home” to the world of comics and graphic novels that influenced his career, or if he's grappling with his place in the commercial art world, but if we use Hancock's lore and thematic body of work as a guide, that ambiguity

appears intentional. His work revolves around characters that eschew categorization, and they pave the way for the artist to challenge our compulsion to define the art world through binary constructs. By creating access points to his work through high and low art, Hancock allows the space for viewers of his work to meet somewhere in between, revealing a world where distinctions between the two are unnecessary.

For his first solo show in Los Angeles, titled *An Ingenue's Hues and How to Use Cutty Black Shoes*, Hancock introduces an L.A. audience to the characters he's been depicting for years in a mythical universe he calls the Moundverse. The show guides viewers through Hancock's fantastical world in a series of paintings that use text and vibrant color to represent the two energies that govern his work: the stark rigidity of dogma and the fluid pliancy of love.

As a young artist influenced by comics, pop culture, and Greek mythology, Hancock received critical and institutional acclaim when his work was featured in back-to-back Whitney Biennials in 2000 and 2002. His fictional universe revolves around a species of half plant, half human mutants called the “Mounds” who are introduced through a series of 12 enlarged ink panels of the first chapter of an epic graphic novel currently in progress. The Mounds' sole purpose is to transform negativity and trauma into beauty and love; however, their existence is threatened by a group of cursed,

colorless beings whose mission is to destroy and harvest them as food. A superhero named Torpedo Boy—the artist’s alter ego—protects the mounds but finds himself under attack by external forces and inner demons.

Hancock deploys his multidimensional characters in the Moundverse in an autobiographical exploration of his youth in North Texas where the religious beliefs of his conservative Baptist community informed the strict, black and white, unyielding characteristics of his dogmatic characters. Conversely, according to the gallery, the strong, protective, nurturing traits of the women in Hancock’s family are artistically rendered in the colorful guardians within the Moundverse. With a nod to the narrative structure of graphic novels, Hancock reveals the origin stories of his characters within his paintings, refusing to allow them to neatly fit into paradigms of good and evil. He teases out this tension on canvas.

In the painting *Step and Screw Part Too Soon Underneath the Bloody Red Moon*, heroes and villains are not quite what they appear to be. Hancock’s alter ego is playing football while being chased by a cartoon klansman whose body is inhabited by the colorless enemies of the Mounds. The klansman’s hatred, which appears to be fed by the beings inside him, is represented in a digestive tract made from a long red rope fashioned into a noose. Within the background of the painting, Hancock has embedded panels from his

first comic book (also called *Step and Screw*), a horrifying tale of blind altruism met with betrayal as Hancock’s superhero is tricked into his own demise by a group of hidden klansmen. In this piece, Hancock reveals a vulnerability and fallibility in his superhero that’s mirrored in other multidimensional characters in the show.

Elsewhere, a life-size sculpture of a cosmic deity, *Udom Endgle*, stands with her arms extended in a powerful Vitruvian woman stance; she’s surrounded by halos of brightly colored shellacked balls that are strung together with white steel hoops. A constellation of similarly patterned circles and bottle caps are painted on the white gallery wall behind her. Within this cosmic scene, Hancock reveals subtle details that belie the colorful galaxy over which she reigns. She’s wearing a black and white bodysuit that gives way to series of small pink silicone figures of children and wolves that appear to protrude from her body. While the dolls ground her in motherly, protective guardianship, they also expose a tenuous relationship with the wolves that intensifies in a nearby painting.

A dizzying maze of colors yields to a dismembered head of the wolf caught in the clenched fist of a goddess in *The Sound of Ocello Opo as the Sun Rises in Her Hands*. It’s a gruesome scene of entwined limbs and fists radiating in a kaleidoscope of color that’s beautifully rendered through Hancock’s use of color. The same pink dolls that are embedded in *Udom*

Endgle are depicted in this work, standing along the side of the scene, serenely watching the battle take place. Their inaction implies a darker complicity.

Hancock uses common threads among disparate works to reveal his commitment to the continuity of lore as his practice and the themes in his work evolve. In addition to the work on view in the show, prototypes of trading cards and vinyl collectible dolls from Hancock’s Moundverse are on display in the gallery. While these items would be more at home in a booth at Comic Con, they are important signifiers of Hancock’s straddling of two different art worlds. While on the surface this appears to be fraught with potential channel conflict, the diversification of his work expands his audience rather than cannibalizes it. The grey space he occupies is mirrored in many of the characters on display in the show, revealing complexities that challenge us to think beyond the rigid paradigms that govern how we see the world. Operating in an art world that draws a bright line between high and low art, Hancock has carved out a place where his work is legible in multiple spaces.

(L.A. in N.Y.)
**Catherine Opie
 at Lehmann
 Maupin**

**November 1, 2018–
 January 12, 2019**

Some people just want to see the world burn. In 2014, an arsonist burned to the ground an unfinished portion of the Mediterranean-style, ugly AF Da Vinci apartments in downtown Los Angeles. Local investigators assumed it was a crime (rather than an accident) because the buildings and their developer were universally reviled. “There are probably a million people who wanted to burn down that developer’s building,” one official remarked.¹

What if the motives were reversed? What if a pyromaniacal lust motivated an arsonist to destroy what they admired rather than detested? In Catherine Opie’s recent exhibition at Lehmann Maupin in Chelsea, *The Modernist*, Opie used the archetype of the arsonist to create a mood of ambivalence as a thoroughly modern condition. The result was a film pulled apart and overemphasized through its repeating parts.

The Modernist, first shown at Regen Projects in L.A. in early 2018, was an exhibition in two parts: a series of photographic prints and a sprawling collage upstairs and a film downstairs. In the upstairs gallery, the photographs

told a nonlinear story of an arsonist. The character was played by Opie’s friend and frequent subject, San Francisco-based artist Pig Pen, a.k.a. Stosh Fila. The sequential portraits showed Fila as a budding pyromaniac in watery black and white pigment prints. We saw Fila outside Lowe’s with equipment purchases in *Arsonist (The Modernist)* (all works 2016); Fila hiding in a pile of manicured rocks along the flat lines of the Chemosphere (a stilted and octagonal L.A. house once described as “the most modern home built in the world”) with gas can in tow in *Chemosphere #1*; Fila’s reflection radiating in double on the glass panes of L.A.’s Sheats-Goldstein house in *Sheats-Goldstein #2 (The Modernist)*.

But Opie’s true subject was the flame. In each shot, a single source of light, whether from matchstick, light bulb, or the skyline, acted as what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*—an element in the photograph that jumps out at the viewer. In five prints, Fila’s thumbs were shown pinching the wooden stick of a lit match close up and cocked at angles as if to present the wondrous glory of fire. While the 20 sequential images abstracted Opie’s overall concept, the payoff waited in the darkened room on the basement level.

The film, also titled *The Modernist*, was composed of 852 still, sequential photographs set in the style of a French photo-roman film. Opie’s film frames destruction as a means of avenging the sins of capital-M Modernism, turning its case study houses into the effigy for the era’s

bad politics. Yet, *The Modernist* read more as novelty a la Charlie Chaplin—a portrait of psychotic pleasure and madcappery—rather than a cautionary tale.

The movement of the film ticked along like a metronome, each image leading the viewer along through a silent narrative. We saw Fila burning maquettes, then outfitting their stylish modern room with flowers, sneaking onto properties to start fires, then picking up the next day’s paper to ensure that their success has been catalogued. Here, Opie attempted to make a moralized dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor and set out to invert the power dynamic. The result was too canny to shock. The firestarter film was more a sleeper than an incendiary tale of good versus evil.

Mural by Stosh Fila (aka Pig Pen), the collage from the first floor made a cameo in the film, as Fila burned through modernist properties, then paired images of each house with clips from news reports of the arson. Words from the newspaper articles were chopped and layered out of context (troubled, guarded, plight), which, paired with an overlay of hand-painted and oil stick red and orange flames, evoked a campy aesthetic: Barbara Kruger meets *True Detective*. Headlines such as HOT PROPERTY and SCORCHED EARTH glued over glossy magazine cut-outs of celebrity homes were as kitschy as they were charged. *Mural* in a sense was a prop plucked from a cinematic landscape then

1. Hiliel Aron, “Why Did an Arsonist Target One of DTLA’s Most Reviled Buildings?,” *LA Weekly*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.laweekly.com/news/why-did-an-arsonist-target->

[one-of-dtlas-most-reviled-buildings-7553100](https://www.laweekly.com/news/why-did-an-arsonist-target-buildings-7553100).



Catherine Opie, *Artist #2 (The Modernist)*
 (2016). Pigment print, 40 × 26 ½ inches.
 Image courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects,
 Los Angeles, and Lehmann Maupin,
 New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Becoming the Toymaker, Phase 2 of 41: All is Forgravened* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

hung in the gallery, a gesture akin to merchandising. Similarly, the accompanying light boxes featured photographs of the collage close-up and excerpted on the basement level (*Mural Study #1, #3, #4*) and felt like afterthoughts or commemorative images from a movie set. Though Fila's vigilante arson was meant to even the spectrum of class, Opie's (or the gallery's) formal choices distracted. We were brought back to the salable art object in the end.

How the rest of the world pictures Los Angeles is akin to a shopworn Joan Didion essay—having never felt the heat of a wildfire or the slap of the Santa Ana winds, city mice can only dream of tropical Armageddon from a distance. If a place is topically known

by its icons and their accompanying aesthetics, mid-century modern design might as well be shorthand for Southern California. Outsiders are comfortable with an incomplete vision of Los Angeles, and Opie's ambivalent and psychotic *Modernist* added predictable lore to the pile of Los Angeles fables. (To see Fila's bare tattooed arms glinting in the California sunlight while sunken in the middle of a dreary New York City winter would have been effect enough.)

In the end, according to the police report, the Da Vinci arsonist's motivation was abstract revenge against the system in general for the murder of black teenager Mike Brown. The off-the-streets, castle-style architecture of the Da Vinci

apartments symbolized to the arsonist all that is oppressive in this world: the ugliness of gentrification, the inaccessibility of wealth, and the cruelty of greed.

Opie's arsonist plotted with the precision of a sniper. If midcentury modernist politics delivered the world to the mess it's in now, why not reduce its hallmarks to ash as reparations? To burn the pristine hallmarks of the midcentury's Modernism—a time of extreme simplification and whitewashing in favor of making clean lines out of sociopolitical stress—is a way to purge an era's sins. Not all stories need endings—*The Modernist* was fragmentary and ultimately inconclusive, an apt metaphor for our off-kilter and indecisive era.

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