

# MEAT PHYSICS/ Metaphysi- cal L.A.

On the bed of a blank canvas, Charles Irvin births his *Cryptic Response* (2014): Mushrooms, some more glanslike than others, sprout from a cave of eyes. Orange rocks morph into the purple folds of a passageway, enveloping a green figure with yellow, humanoid legs. Below this prisma-color vision sit the words CRYPTIC RESPONSE, as if the rectangular spread of white fabric were a question to be answered—a chance to deliver, into the void, some version of a personal metaphysics. Yet when the artist is a painter, this fact triggers the suspicion held in special reserve for the medium—namely, the charge of escapism—as if by making a painting an artist engages in an irresponsible abdication of the shared world in favor of something idiosyncratic and unsharable—the shadows thrown on your own closed eyelids, say. This even when the mystical aspects seem integrated into a given corpus. Still, at its best, an insistence on the human body might root such figments in the physiological—from which, in this life, there is no escape.

Mid-century visionaries apparently took a less ironic approach to contemporary advances in psychoanalysis and psychoactive drugs. Many canonical abstract expressionists started out as Jungian symbolists. Painting, before arriving as an end in itself, served to extract the artist's vision: once fixed, thus

interpretable. Under the rubric of “Personal Theory,” a recent exhibition curated by Irene Ttatsos at the Pasadena Armory proposed a lineage of “mysticism and metaphysics” between two other Californian artists, together spanning three generations. Jim Shaw (b. 1952) bridged Irvin (b. 1971) and Sara Kathryn Arledge (1911–1998). This show marked the first (posthumous) exhibition of the latter's paintings; the artist was better known for her experimental video work in the '40s and '50s. Arledge's moody visionary watercolors, in which stringy blooms of rainbow color leak into dark fields, read like the intensive, intellectual anchor to Irvin's bright scatology. Rather than stony cartoons, Arledge's swaths of paint read as the transcription of a sub-lingual vision.

Irvin's paintings, while often excessive, are undercut by the “low-seriousness” of his hairy, brushy style. His psychedelic treatises join dozens of works which seem less invested in inward exploration, and more interested in minting hip-nouveau amalgams of druggy images and text. Efforts like Irvin's *Hoop Dawgz* (2013)—a painting of naked yogis and a golden retriever dunking a glowing basketball—or a group of canvases with the phrase WOMB KIDZ implanted in colored bands, seem more calculated, more referential, than the washier styles of past painter-shamans. Yet, despite this meme-like simplicity, Irvin is doubtless invested in metaphysical visions—born in the brain, yet visions, more often than not, of meat. At the Armory, Irvin's work hung alongside Shaw's *Initiation Ritual of the 360 Degrees* (2002) (which title reads like a goofy post-y2k redux of

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Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*), a video where a procession of cultists enter an empty silo playing grotesque instruments shaped like body parts; a leg trombone; a hand bass guitar. The exhibition opened by pairing Irvin's 2014 *Figure in Landscape*, and Arledge's 1953 *Angry Man*: two grotesquely rendered, reddish lumps of glands and eyeballs. No accident that Irvin's quick patterns resemble organs—edible and suckable—intestinal mandalas extruded in sudden mystic fits.

On the metaphysical spectrum of contemporary L.A. art, the fecal/bodily Irvin falls on one side, the latticed/cerebral Zach Harris on the other. One critic<sup>1</sup> writes that his work might be mistaken for that of 20<sup>th</sup> century mystics, but, surprisingly, is the product of a 2006 MFA graduate of Hunter College. Harris proves that visionary work can also be highly constructed—self-aware—and at the same time serious. It is precisely his insistence on the value of other-worldly motifs that grounds his work in an academic tradition. As with the so-called “Zombie Formalists,” Harris couches his seductive canvases in the business-savvy axiomatic rhetoric of contemporary painting. Yet the question of authenticity here hinges not on more recent ambivalence, but on the almost classical visionary role of art.

Harris's signature innovation is his wide carved frames, psychedelic topographies in themselves, which border his small canvases. In *Observatory (Dark Rainbow School)* (2012), over a foot of eyelets and waves encase a small diamond-shaped oil painting of a sun ripping through mountainous clouds. The final composite product serves to embody the vision with weight and labor: a physical insistence. Though, like Irvin, playfully engaged with the possibility

of “visionary art,” Harris's paintings exhibit a more studied/meticulous self-evidence akin to that of Arledge.

It may be fashionable (now, or always, in California) to flirt with the effects of belief. At the recent *Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman*, at the MOCA Pacific Design Center, wall texts seemed to take for granted metaphysical feats such as Cameron's psychic ability. But it's important to distinguish between the reality of the effects of belief in metaphysics, and the reality of metaphysics; sincere belief in which few artists would fess up to without qualification. It's easier, perhaps—and better for business—to retain the plausible deniability of an intellectual stance, without canceling the attractive intimation of magic.

What is valuable, then, in visionary painting—foregoing the escapist “space for reflection” of AbEx—is the exercise of a physical projection of the psyche. This is not to say that the symbols generated in work by Harris, Arledge, Irvin et al. will bear direct interpretation on the order of dreams, but rather that in their fetal and genital imagery they insist on the physiological link between vision and the body. Irvin's symbology, for example, exploits an almost illustrative slippage between the mushroom, the penis, the man, and the trip. Harris's paintings recall a journey taken across the forking patterns of your own blood vessels, or the mountains and valleys of the brain. Arledge's most well known visionary work, the gauzy *Introspection* (1946), takes the form of a dance for film.

Is the inward journey not also an escape? But that it were so easy to disappear into the slow mandala of the self. Without further probing the artistic merits of these practices, we might nonetheless take them as indications that visionary art contains its own fraught territories. The

physiological origins and dangers of these paintings should only attenuate the recurrent theme of “metaphysical art”—especially as concerns California—into something not free-floating or magical, but solidly predicated, before the meta-, on the physical.

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Zach Harris, *Sanyo Sunset*  
(2014-2015), water based  
paint, spray paint, wood  
46  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 35  $\frac{1}{16}$  x  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Image courtesy of David  
Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles, CA  
(Photo: Zach Harris).

