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 trashly kinetic sculptures—a squashed and abject version of his droidlike domes. Here, at 356 Mission, in a show curated by Mitchell Algus 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 Sylvère 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 Travis Diehl lives in Los Angeles. He is an editor at X-TRA and a recipient of the Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.
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 Algus 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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