



Made in L.A. 2018

June 3–September 2, 2018



Jade Gordon and Megan Whitmarsh,
Made in L.A. 2018 (2018) (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artist and the
Hammer Museum. Photo: Brian Forrest.



Diedrick Brackens,
Made in L.A. 2018 (2018)
 (installation view). Image courtesy
 of the artist and the Hammer Museum.
 Photo: Brian Forrest.

Rosha Yaghmai, *Slide Samples*
(Lures, Myths) (2018). Found and personal
 artifacts, resin, glass, steel, rust. Image
 courtesy of the artist and the Hammer
 Museum. Photo: Brian Forrest.

Unfinished Finish Fetish

On *Made in L.A.* 2018

Biennials, with their clockwork two-year progressions, provide a snapshot of the present moment in art-making. So it surprised me that, while walking around Rosha Yaghmai's prismatic sculpture *Slide Samples (Lures, Myths)* (2018) in the Hammer Museum's *Made in L.A. 2018*, the reference point I kept turning to was 50 years in the past. In 1968, a *Made in L.A.* exhibition of new Los Angeles art would have given significant real estate to Finish Fetish: painting and sculpture that employed industrial materials and methods to generate clean-edged, pristine, and often monumental objects. Artists such as Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and John McCracken were interested both in the elegance of the objects and spaces they were creating, as well as the phenomenological, subjective encounter of the viewer.

A work like Yaghmai's evokes this SoCal artistic past in its use of translucent plastics, washes of colored light, and a commanding and minimal central structure—a large folding screen—that encourages perambulation. But from here, the artist refreshes the tropes of the 1960s "L.A. look." The clear resin panes checkering Yaghmai's screen are not flat and immaculate. She embeds and overlays them with bits and pieces of simple things and childhood relics such as eyeglass lenses, chair caning, plant cuttings, cellophane sheets, and an evil eye medallion. The rainbow-like light streaming through these elements has a decidedly familiar source: abstract slides shot decades ago by Yaghmai's father as a recent Iranian immigrant studying in California. At every turn, Yaghmai trades the whole for the fragmented, and the dispassionate for the intimate.

That characterization appears throughout *Made in L.A. 2018*, where—in notable contrast to nearly all exhibitions mounted 50, or even 10 years ago—the artists are exceptionally diverse in gender, ethnic background, and age. The fetish at work, if any, is for the *unfinished*. Not in terms of fabrication (there is much polish on display), but rather in the open-ended and iterative nature of so many of the biennial's projects. Discrete objects are consistently rendered complex and variable. Alison O'Daniel's *The Tuba Thieves* (2013–present) is an ongoing film-in-progress whose interlocking prompts and narratives have also spawned echoing sculptural works, and will continue to do so; taisha paggett's multilayered sound and video installation, built from recordings of friends and collaborators, will be activated and altered at different times by performances. Candace Lin's dayglow magenta mound of earth, seeds, and guano seem to be budding untold organisms, while, like Yaghmai's work, giving a nod to and updating late 1960s Los Angeles sculpture with its minimalist primary form, lights (in this case, grow lights), and reflective plastic wall coverings.

To be unfinished is to leave room for ambiguity, multiplicity, and evolution—arguably what is needed most at this crossroads moment of reactionary white supremacism in the U.S. The diversity of the artists put forward by the biennial curators, which reflects the city's makeup significantly more than past *Made in L.A.* exhibitions, provides a hopeful blueprint for how to move forward by using and altering past models.

Precarious Healing

On *Made in L.A.* 2018

Absent suns, blue tarp pools, and cigarette-smoking tree stumps: these are but a few of the gestures in *Made in L.A.*'s third rendition that acknowledge collective anxiety. From Charles Long's visually bombastic installation of an anthropomorphized forest to Jade Gordon and Megan Whitmarsh's feminist spiritual practice-cum-collaborative art project, many of the artists selected for the exhibition use their artworks as sites of projection to address both interior emotions and growing political fears.

In an easily-overlooked, small corner gallery, James Benning's multimedia installation, *Found Fragments* (all works 2016), uses nature as a starting point for conversations about U.S. history and politics. In *scorched earth*, for instance, Benning documents embers burning out in the remnants of a massive forest fire, a powerful moving image which, like the forest's reconstruction—or perhaps the aftermath of trauma—moves so slowly it appears almost stagnant.

In stark contrast to Benning's mournful, slow-burning landscape, Suné Woods' immersive and fast-paced video installation *Aragonite Stars* (2018) posits water, a common symbol of rebirth, as a potential antidote to feelings of unrest (some of the water sites in the film are known to be used for healing purposes). Woods' installation consists of projected moving images that nestle and span across crudely assembled tarps that line the gallery walls. The main video depicts a plethora of human bodies intermingling with each other in a spirit of joyful renewal, a refusal of the pain which lead the figures in pursuit of healing waters.

This feeling of delight continues, albeit in a more serene state, in Luchita Hurtado's paintings, primarily done in the late 1960s to '70s, wherein the artist depicts her own body as a landscape in a gesture she calls an "affirmation of self." During this stage of her career, Hurtado shifted her practice from abstraction to figuration partly as a response to social movements such as women's liberation and environmental activism. Now, with the accomplishments of both these movements under renewed scrutiny, the works (although made almost 60 years ago) appear strikingly relevant.

Artists Neha Choksi and Charles Long similarly use nature symbolically, as a response to interior states of being. In one storyline of Choksi's multichannel video installation *Everything sunbright* (2018), dancer Alice Cummins slowly tears at a mural of a sunset in which the sun itself has been omitted, replaced by a vast black semi-circle—the removal of such a vital life source alludes to the acceptance of absence, change, and even mortality. By comparison, Long's installation, *paradigm lost* (2018), seeks to rectify the collective trauma of climate change and historical patriarchy with tragicomic depictions of tree stumps that resemble a collection of severed human penises.

With current political turmoil reaching fever-pitch levels, a feeling of precariousness ripples throughout *Made in L.A. 2018*, a sense that everything we have previously presupposed could suddenly be at risk. While the individual responses present are as varied as reactions to trauma, what remains consistent is a sense that while the past can never entirely leave us, we must find a way to move forward—from a place of collective fear to one of communal healing.

Loose Aesthetics and Agreeable Politicking

On *Made in L.A.* 2018

What's so L.A. about *Made in L.A. 2018*? Well, for starters, you have sunsets (which happen everywhere, but especially in the Golden State), the defining feature in Neha Choksi's rueful video rumination on mortality and/or existence. You have water, L.A.'s perennial source of life, anxiety, and breezy, beachy identity—Patrick Staff's afflicted, depressive performers crawl out of a shallow, rectangular metal pan, half-filled with water, and never dry off. You have junk food—Michael Queenland's austere shelves of cereal—and actual junk, retooled in the works of Nancy Lupo, Rosha Yaghamai, and Aaron Fowler to the (mixed) effect of either weak

ecopolitics or the arty romanticization of L.A.'s chronic litter problem. Lastly, you have illusion—Gelare Khoshgozaran's uneven rumination on a desert stretch of California serving as a simulation (battle)ground for soldiers training to go to the Middle East. An overlaid Google map of a stretch of border between Iraq and Iran reminds the viewer that they're seeing a mirage, lest they forget.

You would be forgiven for coming away from *Made in L.A. 2018* with the impression of L.A. as a land of restless, if not necessarily meaningful, production. The exhibition—sometimes to its credit—doesn't resist the dominant and problematic figuration of L.A. proper as a land of fantasy, desire, and pleasure, rather than, say, history, or deep thought. That this neatly dovetails with an art world precipitously aligned with power and capital sheds an often-unflattering light on the works here centered around the intertwined claims of identity politics and the deconstruction of power, in turn amplifying the L.A.-isms of *Made in L.A. 2018* to a level of slickness that is often hard to trust.

In the first main gallery at the Hammer, one arm of MPA's pair of broken, large-scale red knockoff Ray-Bans leans against a gallery wall, the lens facing down into the floor. An Oldenberg-y throwback to consumer culture as kitsch, the sculpture also functions as an oversize name-drop (these frames aren't Oakleys). At a time when our choice of grocery store can reveal our political affiliation, describing these broken frames, as the exhibition text does, as "[a] metaphor for the current state of political affairs" strikes as particularly tone-deaf. Perhaps this explains why Lauren Halsey's outdoor drywall temple, with its emblazoned, but colorless formality, space-clearing size, neighborhood-y vernacular, and total absence of on-the-nose metaphor, succeeds, whereas EJ Hill's vault—a running track interrupted by a tall, wooden blockade, augmented by hand-wringing, but ruefully aspirational neon—falls a bit flat. Even considering its most salient, albeit oddly self-aggrandizing wrinkle—Hill's enduring, actual physical presence throughout the exhibition's run, standing on top of a three-tiered wooden plinth—the work leaves little to unpack in its generally agreeable politicking.

Four artists in two adjacent rooms showcase an unrefined, née fashionably distressed, materiality. Nikita Gale and Aaron Fowler leave a messy racket in a shared gallery space, the former's kinetic, yet opaque, sculptural installation of amplifying elements paired with the latter's flattened junk assemblages. In the neighboring space, Christina Quarles' casually overlapping, vividly-hued figural drawings show opposite Diedrick Brackens' frayed weavings, the latter employing an irresistible combination of historical form and contemporary subject. Weighted by a poignant

and tragic narrative, Brackens' nuanced and meaningful textiles stand out in their subtlety of politic, leaving other nearby works feeling a bit ham-fisted. To counter the loose aesthetic of Gale, Fowler, Quarles, and Brackens, *Made in L.A. 2018* offers the graphical, tightly-controlled works of Luchita Hurtado, John Houck, Eamon Ore-Giron, and Linda Stark as contrast, if not apology.

Made in L.A. 2018's most successful works occur where the artists forget anxiety of place (whether social or geographic) and trade identity for its subtler, less fraught, cousin: experience. Alison O'Daniel's engagingly strange installation, *The Tuba Thieves* (2013-ongoing)—a rumination on acoustics, hearing loss, and a strange local news story—situates its subjects (human or otherwise) squarely at the center, interpreting rather than reacting to the world through which they move. Michael Queensland's perverse, clever installation of breakfast cereal, naked in unopened cellophane and re-boxed into wire mesh cages, is paired with a tiny video showing cereal commercials on a loop, most zeroing in on the zany-making prospects of eating sugared corn by the bowlful. Queensland finds a rare language of dispersive, rather than rote, identity politics, "the body" here merely a cultural-collective recipient (and target) of sugar-based pleasure. Lastly, and ironically, one of *Made in L.A. 2018's* best works engages L.A. stereotypes head-on: Megan Whitmarsh and Jade Gordon's frothy, hilarious installation and video meditation on self-help and vaguely defined universal energies. The two contemplate the endless circular path of life (or something) with cutting humor and campy costuming. Rather than anxiety of place, Whitmarsh and Gordon simply forget to have anxiety, poking fun at a new-age milieu with which they also have an obvious sympathy.