Snapshot: New Art from Los Angeles

UCLA HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, USA

The kids are all right in this overdue exhibition of work by 25 relatively unknown artists living and working in Los Angeles. Gallerists, collectors, and writers have been knocking on studio doors at local art schools for the past decade or so, in search of the next big thing. Thrust into the spotlight, the rising stars exhibit (often prematurely) in major galleries around town as well as in New York and Europe, before they’ve even finished school. “Snapshot” offered these emerging artists a place to shine their talents without burning out their bulbs.

This well-installed survey included a relatively conservative assortment of artworks, with a particularly strong selection of paintings and sculpture. Thomas Eggerer’s flat and vibrant paintings recall geometric abstraction and seventies-style graphics. In Trio, 2000 three groovy disco kids in bright red jumpsuits, pose atop a green- and orange-striped tour bus, against an unfinished backdrop. Nearby, Monique van Genderen’s eye-catching, abstract wall mural made of vinyl films and enamel featured the palette of Clyfford Still and the playful use of forms and space of Laura Owens, with a dash of gloss. Paying homage to art history, Edgar Bryan’s Old Master takeoffs slyly update the still life and self portrait genres: In an untitled painting the artist’s head rests “Thinker-style” on his hand, a desk is stacked with calligraphic bills (one reads: “This is your third notice . . .”), and a yellow Post-It stuck to a lamp reads: “Pay bills!” (i.e. Feed a starving artist!).

Mark Bradford and Kori Newkirk opt for less-traditional materials in their paintings. Bradford takes Agnes Martin to the beauty parlor with his delicate collages of layered permanent wave end papers (his day job is at a hair salon). The shiny, waxy papers are burnt to create an uneven pattern of wavy lines that resemble Udomsak Krisanamis’s newsprint and rice paper collages. Kori Newkirk’s inspired beaded-curtain paintings of urban skylines possess a kitschy seventies feel: Think the Sunset wallpaper in Scarface via pony beads.

A master of the aesthetic of the pathetic, John Pylypchuk’s collages featured some of his strongest pieces to date. Part “South Park,” part Mr. Bill, the stick figures placed in desolate landscapes (literally) speak of
failure and desire: “You are entering one moment of despair you will not escape”; “you fuck seashells for a living”; and “I am contented failing this life fucker!” Another standout in the show, Eric Wesley, built a cardboard and foam-core model of the office building that houses the Hammer, with a car in the underground parking structure receiving an oil change. The model illustrates how the used oil gets pumped through a tubing system within the museum, culminating with a painting: a dirty canvas stained with motor oil. Wesley smartly plays with the history of the institution and the relationship between art and commerce (the Hammer was financed by the Occidental Petroleum Corporation, of which Dr. Armand Hammer was the chairman). The quirky object, Rolling Sketch, 2001, by Aiko Hachisuka, is a totally wrecked and misshapen grocery-store cart with a limp fabric replica attached. As for photography, Florian Maier-Aichen stole the show. His picture-postcard images are slick and utopian, with an underlying skepticism: a large American Airlines jet holds up a blanket of thick gray clouds; an urban skyline looms over a crisp body of water reflecting perfectly the partly cloudy sky above.

Surprisingly, the videos in the show were some of the weakest pieces on view. Linda Kim contributed an excruciating short in which a one-inch section of the hair on her head is plucked out one-by-one with tweezers—ouch! Ronald Santos’s lackluster video diptych, Lovers, 2001, presents two orbs of light that look like groaning mouths or singing assholes. Deb Lacusta flexes her thespian muscles in Being Slapped, 1999, in which the artist/actress repeats her lines with varying emphases and gets slapped by an invisible hand: It’s like a drama-class exercise. Other disappointing works included Alex Slade’s skyscraper photographs, Bea Schlingelhoff’s derivative Handwritten Resumes of Participating Artists, Amy Wheeler’s abstract paintings titled after high-end fashion boutiques, and Robert Stone’s Strap-On Subwoofers.

Overall the exhibition provided an interesting survey of the broad range of art being made in the area. Although some pieces were derivative and less accomplished than one might expect for such a talked-about city, there was enough potential demonstrated to keep this art Mecca on the map. There is, after all, a basis for the hype: Los Angeles is an artist-friendly city with cheap rents and lots of space, and it’s also home to some of today’s most important living artists, not to mention the sunshine, sand and celebrities. It just may be a Greater Los Angeles.

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