There is a myth surrounding Southern California that claims the local culture is all surface; that it is glamorous, slick, devoid of content and meaning.

by Andrew K. Thompson

And while it is difficult to discern the difference between reality and mythology in a region where the entertainment industry’s shadow looms over everything, Southern California remains a dynamic mix of cultures that are melded together then shined and buffed by the imagination of a producer. Donnie Molls’ photo-paintings demonstrate his unique capacity to merge meaningful content with dazzling surface quality.

Moll’s personal story is mythical in its own right. He was born in Concord, California where he was taught to construct various objects by his father who owned a mason yard. From seven to eighteen years old he was a golden glove boxer in San Francisco. At eighteen, he moved from the Bay Area to Idaho to help friends build a log cabin from scratch, only to return to San Francisco to work in the building demolition field. It was around this time that his life took an abrupt turn. A local photographer took his picture and suggested he give modeling a try. Skeptical at first, Molls took his one photograph and went to a casting call where, to his surprise, he was one of three chosen to be featured in a Levi’s ad campaign.

He soon moved to Europe, first to Milan and then to Spain, to pursue modeling, ultimately landing campaigns for both Calvin Klein and Armani. Molls had always been interested in photography and art but never thought to pursue it during his blue-collar upbringing. During his time off between fashion shoots he would hang out with local street painters examining their various techniques. He would also ask the photographers he worked with a lot of questions while on set. His examine, learn and attempt method of autodidactism is how Donnie Molls became the artist he is today; he never studied art in college, he doesn’t have an MFA and he is not part of a “school of artists”.

As his modeling career dwindled, Molls moved to Los Angeles and returned to construction work where he would build sets for productions. He started to take his artwork more seriously and began working toward an exhibition. His first solo show took place in 1997 at the Melrose Gallery in Los Angeles and soon he had caught the attention of gallerist Carl Berg who has championed Molls since 2005. After dedicating seventeen years towards the creation of his art, Donnie Molls is still emerging in a certain sense; his paintings are collected internationally but he is generally overlooked when talking about Los Angeles artists. His work is like a diamond ring hidden in beach sand waiting for a wise person to recognize it.

Molls’ artwork inhabits a space between photography and oil painting. Many of his images begin as photographs that are projected onto canvas and developed using liquid light chemistry. The photographs on canvas are then painted on with oil paint or car enamel and wet sanded until the surface glistens and is smooth to the touch. There is a distinct sheen that emanates from the picture plane that can only be experienced in person. Reproductions can only hint at the glass-like surface and rich saturation...
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Much like earlier Los Angeles artists, the mixture of cultures in the area heavily influences Donnie Molls. Images from his 2012 Disposable Culture exhibition depict scenes from a junkyard including piles of tires, stacked cars and men rolling dislodged wheels. Moll’s has been working on cars since he was young and his familiarity with the mores of the men in the photographs is clear. They are recorded with a straight-ahead matter-of-factness that would not be possible for a tourist. When speaking to Molls about these paintings, he referred to the men’s tires as “stations of the cross”. He went on to speak about his father losing the mason yard and having to settle for a job as a butcher. His speech quickened as he retold a story about the time he decided that he wasn’t going to settle, that he wanted to do something he loved and was going to be successful with it. It is clear that Molls hasn’t forgotten his blue-collar roots.

 Despite his foray into the glamorous role of male model turned artist, Molls remains personable and approachable. He can talk about cars just as easily as he can tell stories about modeling in Milan. He can build a log cabin or discuss the subtle aspects of a Bill Viola video. This facet of his personality exemplifies his artwork; it is slick yet honest, sincere yet seductive, almost too good to be true in a “based on a true story” Hollywood movie way. His artwork is not over thought or engorged with theory; it is glossy yet filled with organic emotion. His creations project a polished confidence that is a result of being comfortable with the dichotomies in his life. With his high gloss photo-paintings, Donnie Moll’s produces his version of a Southern Californian mythology that is heavily imbued with a disparate mix of blue-collar ethics and high-end glamour.

www.donniemolls.com

Double Wide
mixed media, oil on canvas, 76 x 90in., 2009
(left) **Stacked Abundance**
mixed media, oil on canvas, 76 x 90 in., 2012

(bottom) **950 Fairfax**
mixed media, oil on canvas, 70 x 48 in., 2014