

# CALIFORNIA BIENNIAL

## VARIOUS VENUES

### JAN TUMLIR

Where previous California Biennials have made comprehensive statements about the salient formal or conceptual proclivities of contemporary art on the West Coast, this year's version does not seem arranged according to any central theme. Nevertheless, the work on view is necessarily imbued with a sense of "place" and, in fact, organizers Elizabeth Armstrong and Irene Hoffmann are to be commended for highlighting artists who are all contending, in one way or another, with Lucy Lippard's "lure of the local."

Among the most compelling are the collectives VALDES (San Fernando Valley Institute of Design) and Futurefarmers, both of which are steeped in analyses of the fluctuating topographies of Los Angeles, attempting to reformulate such maligned developments as suburban sprawl, gated communities, and strip malls. In the case of VALDES, which consists of the Harvard-trained architects Jeffrey Inaba and Peter Zellner, the result here is a series of ban-

his family's tortilla business with all the accoutrements of a "white cube," this gallery on wheels has valiantly sought to confront the marginalized status of art in LA's outlying communities. Over the course of the biennial, Ochoa hosted three separate exhibitions in his van, each with a unique itinerary of stops throughout Orange County, San Diego, and Los Angeles. Ochoa's project casually conflates the pointedly specific (or "local") spheres of Kustom Kar Kulture and street vending with the generic (but, in this instance, wholly anomalous) experience of contemporary art. Art is presented as just one part of a cultural equation, the end product of a process where questions of context and site-specificity are as significant as objects.

At the hub of a spectacular "culture industry," one might say that the landscape of LA and Southern California becomes "sedimented" with cinematic and television images that have taken their place in the collective consciousness. Accordingly, a number of artists set their sights on those segments of the local topography most susceptible to phantasmagorical slippage. This is clearly the impetus behind Kerry Tribe's dual-screen video projection *Here & Elsewhere*, 2002. Apparently documenting an interview with a young girl, who is assailed by such philosophical questions as "Is an image real?" Tribe's piece covertly undermines its own credibility with an



Tribe's modus by presenting the mediated version of the landscape first—in this case, the crisply reductive (and here totally depopulated) desert of Chuck Jones's "Road Runner" cartoons. Yet, at the height of artificiality, here, too, the "real" returns in what could be termed a Baudelairean guise of "genuine illusion." (The poet famously railed that "the majority of our landscape painters are liars, precisely because they fail to lie.") Reducing Jones's animations to a succession of static tableaux, Thomson highlights their historically savvy artistry, but without obscuring, by contrast, the actual desert that was their original point of reference. Shorn of all action and drama, the hand-drawn vista becomes a psycho-geographic key to the area's past.

Similarly, by way of cartoon shorthand, Kota Ezawa's animations extract that highly volatile element of actuality from enveloping layers of mediation. In *Home Video*, 2001, which features an exterior view of a generic suburban home over the course of days and weeks, and *Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey*, 2003, which excerpts representative scenes from Mike Nichols's 1966 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* we are given a highly nuanced meditation on the public and private poles of the American middle-class character. The uninflected style of Ezawa's line erodes the distinctions between documentary and dramatic verisimilitude so as to render their respective points of purchase on fact entirely relative.

Among others, Libby Black, Mark Bradford, Sean Duffy, Michelle Lopez, and Kori Newkirk enact a Duchampian directive, pulling items out of the cultural landscape and then amending or wholly remaking them. Objects as diverse as skateboards (Black), gym shoes (Bradford), or Geo-Metro automobiles (Duffy) are approached as either the high-end cream

or funky dross of this capital of consumption. The results suggest that we have entered a period of détente between the once-opposed aims of alienated '80s simulation and the more affirmative personal poetics of '60s assemblage.

In fact, the same point applies to the California Biennial in general: Beginning with those artists who propose to transform the local landscape actively, we end with those who find that transformation to be already underway, or even complete. This second group either reproduces the landscape "whole" or extracts telling details that suggest the bloom of a commodified "second nature." As the impulse to reintroduce the hand to machine-made substance is increasingly foregrounded, a third group becomes discernible. And finally, once the readymade parts of the work are entirely eclipsed by the assisted parts, a fourth. Here, we witness a kind of resurgent subjectivism, a quasi-visionary art that floats freely over the earth. This is seen literally in Joel Tauber's film *Searching for the Impossible: The Flying Project*, 2002–2003, and metaphorically in the work of Brian Calvin, Mark Dutcher, Mindy Shapero, and Josephine Taylor. Documenting the realization of a dream that most of us abandon at childhood—i.e., to fly—Tauber's work also comes closest to resuming the romantic figure of the innocent savant; but Calvin, Dutcher, Shapero, and Taylor all share a quality of willful naïveté. No longer responding to worldly things so much as to their attendant fears and desires, these artists bring us full circle by displacing a referential materiality with that of their own production. These are all emphatically indigenous expressions designed to fill the landscape back up, anticipating yet another round of cultural excavation. □

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Top: Ruben Ochoa, *Class: C*, 2001–. Installation view, San Diego, 2004. Bottom: Kerry Tribe, *Here & Elsewhere*, 2002, stills from a two-channel color digital video, 10 minutes.

ners suggesting the wholesale exportation of Orange County's living standards to China—an only partly ironic gloss on the famous Situationist strategy of map switching. As with Futurefarmers' rethinking of the stalled "Great Park" project (the projected conversion of a former Orange County army base into a recreational space and nature preserve), this work obviously could not be made anywhere else.

Likewise Ruben Ochoa's continuing *Class: C* project. Begun in 2001, when Ochoa refurbished the beige 1985 Chevy van that served as the delivery vehicle for

arsenal of self-reflexive Godardian cues, including a series of cutaways that gradually reveal the context of the exchange—the interior of a modernist home set in the Hollywood Hills. Whatever suspicions are aroused by this highly cinematic setting, the girl's good looks and her undeniable TVQ are ultimately offset by the law of double negatives: Fiction times two equals an even higher form of reality.

The sense of déjà-vu uncanniness in Tribe's film is, to a great extent, given in her subject. Mungo Thomson's *The American Desert (For Chuck Jones)*, 2002, reverses