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Peripheral Visions: Nine of L.A.'s Square Pegs Get Hammered

Exhibition keeps the quirk factor but shifts focus to living, working L.A. artists

By Doug Harvey

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Lynn Foulkes, *Dali and Me* (2006)

Toward the end of *Membrane Lane*, Charles Irvin's faux conspiracy documentary on the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (an organization that champions people claiming to have been falsely accused of child sexual abuse), there's a particularly startling non sequitur. In the midst of the relatively straightforward montage of appropriated news footage and sequences in which the camo fatigues-sporting narrator/artist explains his conspiratorial flow charts, there is a jump cut to a strangely familiar image, which takes a second to place — a shot of the "foaming brush" in one of those DIY car washes, leaning upright against the generic tile wall, oozing globs of white soap. Then, just as you realize the footage is reversed, and the brush is sucking the foam up from the gutter back into its infinite milky reservoir, the rebunking of the Satanic abuse debunkers continues, leaving you with that distinctive "Wait! What the fuck was that, and how did it get in here?" sensation.

This sort of conceptual embolism seems to be the curatorial premise of "Nine Lives: Visionary Artists from L.A.," the current museum omnibus exhibit where Irvin's DayGlo-primitivist cartoon paintings — and video — can currently be experienced. "Nine Lives" is something of a curatorial coming-out party for Hammer adjunct curator Ali Subotnick, whose genealogy as co-founder/director of prank Chelsea nonspace Wrong Gallery and occasional high-end journal *Charley* (both in collaboration with fellow critic/curator Massimiliano Gioni and eminent Vaffanculist Maurizio Cattelan) should have pushed her to the front of the schedule of exhibitions a couple years ago.

Tellingly, "Nine Lives" is more reminiscent of one of these prior joint efforts than it is of the Hammer's string of previous regional survey shows ("Snapshot," "Thing," "East of Eden") with which it is publicly equated. The most recent *Charley* (No. 5) is a treasure chest of idiosyncratic visual genius (if not the corresponding data — none of the artworks is dated or identified, and most of the essays are cribbed from Wikipedia), compiling the work of diverse outsiders like Jess, Noah Purifoy, Ree Morton, Forrest Bess, Christopher Knowles and more than 100 other remarkable figures from the margins of the contemporary art-historical canon.

“Nine Lives” shifts the focus to living artists working in Los Angeles but keeps the quirk factor — and its attendant awkwardness in terms of art-world acceptability — cranked to 11. Foremost among these are two of L.A.’s elder statesmen of quirk: Lynn Foulkes and Jeffrey Vallance. Foulkes is a remarkable painter, whose half-century of work seamlessly integrates Abstract Expressionism, West Coast Assemblage and Pop alongside his darkly personal political ruminations and signature obsession with exaggerated pictorial relief effects, with his carved-out Disney figures and post-Apocalyptic landscapes verging on the dimensionality of dioramas. Great as it is to see such a stellar selection of his work in one place (particularly his epic *The Last Frontier*, last seen briefly in the back of Patty Faure’s gallery), one hopes it doesn’t function in lieu of the overdue full retrospective Foulkes and the L.A. art community deserve.

Vallance has likewise been simmering under the surface of respectability for some time, his masterful and superficially humorous geographical and conceptual dislocations — Blinky the store-bought frying chicken to the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery; postal necktie trades with Anwar Sadat and Jordan’s King Hussein; a second Richard Nixon Museum in Rosamund Felsen’s gallery; and the artist’s own pilgrimages and peregrinations to Tonga, Iceland, Lapland and the Vatican — generating a wealth of startling artifacts and a surplus of respect from fellow artists but no admission to the upper echelons of trustee-determined art-historical significance. Tired of waiting, Vallance recently embarked upon a massive project of autohagiography, crafting intricate reliquaries that document every phase of his career. For “Nine Lives” he has extended this taxonomical conceit by re-creating *The Brown Wall* from his Canoga Park bungalow — a tchotchke-encrusted précis of his journey thus far. Again, hopefully a glimpse at a major survey yet to come.

None of the other artists included in “Nine Lives” provokes the same level of cognitive dissonance between their achievements and accolades. But since they’re from more recent generations than either Foulkes or Vallance, there’s still time. And in the meantime, they all manage, to a greater or lesser extent, to prompt that crucial philosophical inquiry, “Wait! What the fuck was that, and how did it get in here?” The sense of art-world discontinuity ranges from the extreme — as in the case of Irvin, who is without gallery representation — to the slight, represented by Hirsch Perlman, a full professor in the sculpture department at UCLA, who shows with contemporary blue-chip powerhouse Blum & Poe.

In some ways, Perlman is the biggest mystery here. I’ve liked his work since he appeared on the L.A. scene in the mid-’90s with a series of photos depicting slouched figures made from cardboard boxes and other debris from the street, but I’ve never understood why the powers that be agree, or how he’s done so well hunkered down in his apartment setting up and photographing tableaux of fake rocket science and — with his gorgeously printed and apparently unironic contribution to “Nine Lives” — documenting the antics of his pet cat.

Less puzzling is the successful self-marginalization of Lisa Anne Auerbach, whose content and choice of media are overtly political. While the LOL slogans on her hand-knit sweaters and cheerleader outfits tackle unlikely-to-rock-the-boat mainstream progressive issues like abortion and the preference for Obama over Bush, her commitment to self-sufficiency and involvement in DIY 'zine publishing and bicycle culture are in clear and open opposition to the high-end material consumerism of the art world — and just the tip of a generational iceberg of socially motivated artists. But hey, keep rearranging those deck chairs!

Victoria Reynolds' masterfully rendered oil paintings of the viscera of reindeer and our other mammal friends are out of step for a number of reasons — first and foremost their insistence on the viability of traditional painting techniques as contemporary art practice without relying on the tired psychosexual content most successful academic figurative painters are obliged to incorporate. Not that these paintings aren't sexy. But their disturbingly attractive content also preempts the designer-friendly cachet such accomplished work would otherwise possess.

Both Kaari Upson and Julie Becker have created extensive bodies of work based on found boxes of personal leftover ephemera from the lives of men with whom they have no personal connection. Becker's gallery provides a fragmentary overview of this and several other projects, begging a more coherent or extensive overview. Upson's project is creepily erotic, and her multichannel video installation depicting her idea of the Playboy Mansion grotto is probably the most unsettling contribution to the show. Though Charlie White's suite of photos matching teenage girls and tranny look-alikes against a Modernist grid and his beautifully realized short film *American Minor* (a sort of *90210-meets-2001* hotel-room sequence with Matthew Barney on self-lubricating props) run a close second.

Above and beyond the singularity of each artist's vision, "Nine Lives" is remarkable for the idiosyncrasy of its curatorial premise. While there are certainly formal and conceptual resonances and overlaps between some of these artists, their greatest common denominator is their ability to pique Subotnick's curiosity; and the almost casual associative connections that led to each artist's inclusion — Subotnick knew Irvin from the Art Institute in Chicago; Reynolds was introduced by hubby Vallance — gives the exhibit the quality of an organic exploratory essay as opposed to the too-frequent practice of jamming complex art into simplistic conceptual frameworks that just don't fit. It's a timely and flexible model, and could be put to good use every few months for several years. There are hundreds of repressed artists just waiting to pop up at the wrong place and time.

Nine Lives: Visionary Artists From L.A.: Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., L.A.; through May 31.