

Carlson, Ben. "Arctic Summer, Margo Leavin Gallery." *Artforum* (December 2012), p. 284-85.

The melancholic air of "Arctic Summer" was given added poignancy when, two weeks after the opening, dealer Margo Leavin announced that this show would be her gallery's last. As Leavin partner Wendy Brandow told the *Los Angeles Times*, "People are approaching art differently today. They're not seeking out the thoughtful, complete statement that artists make when they create gallery exhibitions. The exhibitions have been such an important part of what we do, and they are no longer valued as much by the public." Though art viewing hasn't declined per se, the proliferation of fairs and international biennials has significantly changed the way art has come to be seen since Leavin first opened her doors in the studio of designer Tony Duquette in December 1970. Coming only a month after John Baldessari's resignation from the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, this announcement from Leavin, his gallerist of more than twenty years, felt like a double blow to a certain sector of the LA art world—the same sector, perhaps, that would take little interest in a show such as Jeffrey Deitch's 2011 blockbuster "Art in the Streets," which doubled LA MOCA's attendance figures for the year and set a template for the museum's populist embrace of televisual culture. For artists who would rather interrupt media flows than be blindly led by them, art's loss of distinction from all too readily available forms of entertainment seems imminent across this city. Thus, the ending of a program that, at its core, had long maintained the criterion of "difficulty" was lamentable to say the least.

As a representative slice of Margo Leavin Gallery's history, "Arctic Summer" reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to artists working within the framework of mass-cultural forms, though, unlike those heralded by Deitch, with an engagement that could hardly be called an embrace. The artists who would join Leavin's stable—including Baldessari, Sarah Charlesworth, Joseph Kosuth, William Leavitt, and Sherrie Levine (all represented in this show)—were addressing questions of representation prior to Douglas Crimp's seminal 1977 "Pictures" exhibition in New York. Yet Crimp's essay for "Pictures" nevertheless aptly characterizes the "difficulty" to which Margo

John Baldessari,
*Double Bill (Part 2):
... and Gerard*, 2012,
varnished ink-jet
print on canvas with
acrylic and oil paint,
90 x 53½". From
"Arctic Summer."



... AND GERARD

Leavin was committed: “[T]hese artists have turned to the available images in the culture around them. But they subvert the standard signifying function of those pictures, tied to their captions, their commentaries, their narrative sequences—tied, that is, to the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified.” It is this reflective sensibility that still resonated in Leavin’s gallery some forty-two years later when, this summer, it brought together a series of snow-white Sol LeWitt cubes and a Larry Johnson C-print of the alphabet rendered in a “frosty” font, alongside eleven other works under the thematic rubric of the “arctic.” In Leavin’s hands, art offered a friction within the means of representation that made visible the process of representation itself.

Of the other pieces chosen for this unexpected curtain call, Leavitt’s *Wind Sound*, 1970, was exemplary of the gallery’s position. Consisting of a looped recording of howling wind beamed via a Ramsey AM transmitter from one side of the exhibition space to an AM/FM radio hanging on the other, the piece created a situation in which it was intermittently difficult to discern the blustering howl of its content from the similarly modulated, rising and falling static produced by Leavitt’s chosen mode of transmission. The oblique association of the real radio waves traveling across the exhibition space and the illusory movement implied by the kind of sound effect one might associate with a Hammer horror movie called attention to the likelihood that the loop itself was probably not an actual field recording but more likely a bit of studio trickery pulled from the sleeve of a Foley artist. In this, *Wind Sound* pointed to a psychological tendency to favor the ambiguous signal of static over the harsh clarity of the wave’s “noise.” Given that mediating conditions have become only more pervasive during the life of Margo Leavin’s seminal space, the gallery’s closing is felt not least by a younger audience that is just now tuning in to this same wavelength.

—Ben Carlson