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William Leavitt,
Warp Engines, 2009,
mixed-media
with sound.

William Leavitt

LAXART

William Leavitt's *Warp Engines*, 2009, the most recent of his many domestic tableaux, is a spacey dream scene of cryptic simplicity. Pared down like a stage set, the installation features two fragments of ruddy brown stacked-stone walls stand adjacent to each other in a dimly lit room. The stone veneers, made from painted foam chunks affixed to thin plywood panels, are the backdrop to a fake potted houseplant with broad flat leaves and a chic retro lamp on a handsome midcentury side table. Together, these elements recall the living rooms of so many California ranch-style homes of the 1960s and '70s. Visible between the walls is a strange, bulbous sculpture brightly lit from above, a gleaming network of clear plastic tubes and spheres that describes a grossly enlarged molecule. In concord with the *Jetsons*-esque structure, speakers on the floor emit a layered, spasmodic sound track: mechanical clicks and beeps, pulses of a whirring fan, the blast of electrical charges, distorted drones, and the ascending and descending pitches of an electronic device powering up and powering down.

Leavitt's forty-year-long practice has often centered on astute examination and critical deployment of romantic clichés of middle- and upper-class American domesticity as they are propagated by popular cinema and television. Deeply skeptical of the ways in which Hollywood's sentimental representations reinforce mythical conventions of domestic life, Leavitt makes theatrical installations with a stiff and contrived formality that drily points to that lifestyle's subtle absurdity. As is characteristic of his past arrangements, *Warp Engines* isolates a few carefully selected props, whose distinctive, though largely subliminal, design cues and architectural features—the particular look of the stone wall, lamp, table, and plant—silently project and affirm so much coded information: social and economic status, values and education, a historical era and its conventions of taste and style. Leavitt masterfully establishes a mood, an evocative tension between objects that acutely suggests narrative potential, a dramatic encounter that never takes place.

But unlike Leavitt's previous groupings of theatrical objects, *Warp Engines* centers on the rather incongruous inclusion of the large transparent molecular structure, which, in conjunction with the disorienting stream of electro-synth sound effects, mutates an otherwise banal sliver

of meticulously composed suburbia into a bizarre cryptoscientific vision. Perhaps it is the living room laboratory of some rogue amateur inventor or Sunday scientist. The molecule-turned-prop is a cartoonish embodiment of pop science, and laughably retro-futurist. It relates to Leavitt's paintings of chemical compounds shown this past spring at Margo Leavin Gallery, also in Los Angeles, where several of the artist's drawings of unpopulated living rooms from the '70s and '80s were on view concurrently with this new installation. Conflating totemic elements of postwar suburbia with its hallucinatory sci-fi double, *Warp Engines* has the makings of a Philip K. Dick daydream, one nestled in the sprawl of anonymous single-family homes and condos of Fullerton and Santa Ana, where the author holed up during the '70s. With this departure from past installations, Leavitt has warped the familiarity of his austere domestic arrangements with an inscrutable alien presence that buzzes and revs spasmodically, as though about to zap the scene into another dimension, teleporting it back to the decade from whence it came.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer