

Zellen, Jody. "Composite Landscapes and Bar Paintings, William Leavitt at Margo Leavin Gallery." *dArt International* (Winter 2000), p. 26.



William Leavitt, *Landscape with Exercycle and Interior*, 1991, pastel on paper, 28 x 56-5/8".

Composite Landscapes and Bar Paintings William Leavitt at Margo Leavin

by Jody Zellen

William Leavitt's drawings and paintings depict a city space that is quintessentially Los Angeles. From the palm trees to the deep blue skies to the fiery sunsets, he explores that city's vernacular. Leavitt does not depict a picture-postcard view of the city, however; he is more interested in the details of a shadowy street or a store window. In this exhibition, paintings and photographs from both the present and past are juxtaposed, illustrating the depth and complexity of Leavitt's vision.

Black and white photographs from 1969 are the earliest works in the exhibition. These conceptual photographs, entitled *Random Selection*, depict a grouping of disparate objects lined up on the studio floor—a perfect postmodern still life. In *Random Selection: Bag, Glove, Fire, Mice*, the sequential nature of action is implied. The photograph presents a glove that has been set

on fire. This glove comes out of a paper bag. What happens after this moment is what the photograph is all about. Do the bag, mouse, and glove go up in flames? Leavitt is able to transform his interests in absurd juxtapositions into both observed and created situations.

In a series of multi-framed photographs from 1996 he explores the camera's ability to record and re-present successive moments in time. Leavitt photographed a window reflection, moving the camera ever so slightly to give the final composited image a larger-than-life perspective of the space. By presenting a shifting point of view Leavitt alludes to the transient nature of his subjects and the city at large.

Leavitt's photographs and paintings are remarkably similar. Restaurant patios, fences with graffiti, and the silhouettes of

power lines are all subjects that Leavitt explores in both. He does not simply paint what he has photographed but also transforms the space of his paintings into the flattened space of the photograph.

His style of painting, although realistic, is not preoccupied with detail and fine brushstrokes. Rather, he is interested in conveying the feeling of a street at sunset, a darkened shadowy corner, or the foliage that surrounds a well-known designer house. These are fleeting moments reminiscent of location shots for film shoots, where the quality of light and exactness of the fragment is important. Leavitt could be considered an urban wanderer, a 20th-century flâneur who travels through the city at night with his camera and sketchbook looking for the ordinary and the extraordinary. He transforms his impressions to canvas or paper, confirming that the Los Angeles cityscape, with its urban sprawl, architectural monuments, and contained nature, is like a stage on which numerous illusions and odd juxtapositions occur.