

Israel, Alex. "Myths of Decline." *Artforum* (January 2010), p. 67-70.

DISPATCH

Myths of Decline

ALEX ISRAEL REPORTS FROM LOS ANGELES

In upcoming months, *Artforum* will feature a series of letters from correspondents across the globe, each one detailing developments in art and culture in a different urban center. To begin, Alex Israel looks back at the past year's exhibitions and events in Los Angeles.

SOMEWHAT FRETFUL and carrying that extra bit of holiday weight, the Los Angeles art world rallied in mid-January of last year for the big season opener: "SHE," the Wallace Berman-Richard Prince two-man show curated by Berman biographer Kristine McKenna at Michael Kohn Gallery. In contrast to the bleak state of affairs in the immediate wake of the economic downturn, everything felt eerily back to normal that night—if 2007 can be called normal. The event attracted everyone from Beverly Boulevard passersby (swingers, biker chicks, swinging biker chicks) to notables art-world and otherwise: Ed Ruscha, Anthony Kiedis, and Pamela Anderson, who played live hood ornament to Prince's *Girlfriend*-wrapped El Camino. Everything looked to be running smoothly, if only because no one was willing to pop the hood.

Was the engine running? Market? Future? MOCA? The New Year was off to a rocky start. Eli Broad's bailout plan for the Museum of Contemporary Art was moving forward in the aftermath of the November revelation that the renowned MOCA had burned through all its unrestricted funds and had been dipping into its restricted ones. Broad agreed to donate thirty million dollars to match other fund-raising efforts in order to keep the museum's doors open and replenish its shrunken endowment. Questions naturally arose as to what MOCA would be, or might become, as it set out on its new course.

But there was hope on the horizon, even then, in the form of a new president, and an Oscar nomination for Mickey Rourke. (If he could manage a comeback, so could the museum.) And an antidote to the times, "Dan Graham: Beyond," was set to open at MOCA in February. The beloved and influential artist seemed weirdly attuned to the moment, given his critical treatment of corporate culture—its architecture and its ethos. Curated by Bennett Simpson and Chrissie Iles, Graham's first comprehensive American museum

survey went on view on Valentine's Day. The artist, who has a passion for astrology, gave MOCA a definitive horoscope—his two-way-mirrored-glass-and-steel pavilions insisted on transparency and self-reflection, messages that took on deep significance within the walls of an institution in search of itself. In pure good faith, *Artists' and Architects' Works That Influenced Me*, 2009, paid breathtakingly honest homage to an assortment of his inspirational transgressor heroes, including locals Michael Asher and Larry Bell, who, like Graham, are still going strong.

Just days after the MOCA opening, another ripe-for-retrospective resident iconoclast was honored with an award for lifetime achievement. In his acceptance speech at the College Art Association's ninety-seventh annual conference, Chris Burden spoke of the limits of art, apparent when compared with the infinite power of pure fantasy itself. His words resonated shortly thereafter when "One Ton One Kilo," his solo show set to open March 7 at Gagolian Gallery in Beverly Hills, was canceled, instantly becoming a fantastic myth. The story of three million dollars', or one hundred kilos', worth of gold being seized by the SEC—the bullion company's owner, an alleged Ponzi schemer, was facing fraud charges—rang from blogosphere to the *New Yorker*. Burden, a mythmaker nonpareil, found himself (no surprise) at the center of a media blitz. Had "One Ton" been realized—a golden ziggurat rising in the midst of a recession—it would surely have raised eyebrows. But the work's failure to happen seems a great emblem of the financial bubble



Clockwise from top: Anthony Burdin, *Authentic Gold Stash Protection Policy No. 1*, 2006/2009, 24-karat-gold-plated razor wire; hand-etched, signed, and numbered 24-karat-gold-plated tag, dimensions variable. Pamela Anderson with Richard Prince's *Car*, 2009, at the opening of "SHE," Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, January 15, 2009. Photo: Andreas Branch. Elliott Hundley, *Achilles' Tomb*, 2009, polystyrene, wood, plastic, epoxy putty, pins, paper, photographs, willow, bamboo, string, wire, spray paint, found wax vessel, 76 x 67 x 53".

(the phantom ziggurat, illusory pyramid schemes).

At a performance event by another local mythmaker, this one named Burdin, in March, a locked wooden shed nearly filled Michael Benevento's Sunset Boulevard Gallery. Like Burden's gold, the performer—artist and musician Anthony Burdin—was made more mythic by his apparent absence. Was he in the shed? Assuming he *was*, some spectators slipped notes under its walls while others banged on them, to no avail. The gallery itself was unusually chilly—so cold, in fact, I had to suspect that Burdin's diabolical hand had set the thermostat. In the window hung a tie-dyed fabric piece titled *Sunset Strip Mall Kook Koture Curtain* (*Fall Collection 2013*), 2009. The work indeed became a curtain, concealing and revealing the famous boulevard behind it. Burdin the rocker loves to piss us off

JANUARY 2010 67

DISPATCH



Clockwise from top: William Leavitt, *Warp Engines*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, LAXART, Los Angeles. Photo: Kelly Barrie/LAXART. Tony Duquette and Hutton Wilkinson at a party given in Duquette's honor at Wilkinson's home, Hollywood, ca. 1985. Photo: Ken Levine/Berliner Studio/BEImages. Entrance to Michael Jackson's Neverland ranch, Los Angeles, ca. 2008. Photo: Julien's Auctions.

while keeping us interested. He traffics in illusion and rheatics; his MySpace page lists Kiss as the sole influence on his music. And while his artwork is indebted to both Burden's and Vito Acconci's, he also engages the market's ability to commodify his, and others', rock 'n' roll transgressions. In true Sunset Strip fashion, he understands that a well-packaged myth sells best.

As the myth of the boom era gave way, it became apparent that artists had been busily engaging or re-engaging the cultural myths of LA itself. Elliott Hundley's "Hekabe," titled after Euripides's tragedy, opened the night Chris Burden's show didn't. Regen Projects II was filled with wall-mounted, hanging, and freestanding sculptures, paintings on canvas, and light-box photographs. In *By Achilles' Tomb*, 2009, Hundley reimagined a classical ruin as a fragment of a theatrical set. Straws, leaves, twigs, charms, bits of photographs of decadently styled characters, bamboo shoots, a miniature birdcage, a plastic lily, and the dismembered stamen of a plastic anthurium were held together with pins and grew like fungus all over the beautiful wreck of a hanging, spinning foam column.

Key to Hundley's works is their tense fragility, the possibility they might fall apart at any turn—a sculptural interpretation of the narrative pressures fueling

the Hecuba myth: grief, torment, and revenge. However, most impressive is the alchemical transformation to which Hundley subjects his odds and ends. The ghost of Tony Duquette, the Hollywood decorator-cum-folk artist who designed MGM sets for Vincente Minnelli, wedding decor for collectors John and Frances Bowes, and jewelry for Gucci (during the Tom Ford years), looms large in Hundley's work. Deploying feathers, seashells, frogs' skeletons, plastic wastepaper baskets, and similar detritus, Duquette combined the precious and the thrown away to create a remarkable regional oeuvre. He is the subject of not one but two recent Abrams monographs, and his legacy lives on at Dawnridge, his Beverly Hills home, which has been largely preserved. There, tropical gardens surround recycled-plastic pagodas and frame the twenty-eight-foot egg-engulfed-by-fire sculptural

explosion *The Phoenix Rising from Its Flames*, 1994.

Stripped of ornament, the magic space on Robertson Boulevard that once housed Duquette's studio and salon is today a different, if no less legendary, sort of creative showplace: Margo Leavin Gallery. Los Angeles-based artist William Leavitt's "Molecules and Buildings" opened there on March 21. I was particularly drawn to three 1998 paintings of foliage: *Eucalyptus*, *Silhouetted Branches*, and *Night-Lighted Trees*. Point of view is consistently peculiar in all three works: In each case, we see a single horizonless frame extracted from what feels like a panning sweep. The uplift trees, faded sunset, and golden-glowing eucalyptus locate the work in iconic noir LA. Leavitt supplies enough information to enlist his viewer as a private detective: Philip Marlowe scanning the scene for clues. In Leavitt's September show at LAXART, "Warp Engines," curated by Aram Moshayedi, a faux-Deco lamp and a spotlight illuminated a similarly noir sculptural tableau: a clear plastic model of some kind of molecular structure hidden behind two foam "flagstone" walls, the whole set-in-the-round revealing its falseness via the walls' exposed wooden armatures. Bubbling noises and blips, mechanical clatter, and a jazzy bass solo emanated from speakers. Establishing theatrical illusionism only

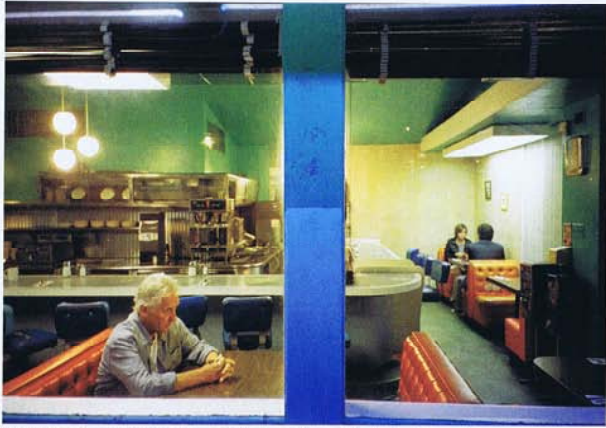
to undercut it, Leavitt's work is once removed from entertainment, thereby engaging us all the more in thinking about how entertainment works. In fact, we may become more sensitive to its power, more willing to suspend disbelief for a fragmented moment—to imagine a mad scientist tinkering away in a Silver Lake garage or a train's approach heard through thin motel walls.

"Welcome to Neverland! Walk through the magical gates!" instructed the usher guiding foot traffic through "The Collection of the King of Pop: Michael Jackson," which went on view at a vacant Beverly Hills department store during the final days of "Molecules and Buildings." Close inspection of the gates revealed scuffs and chips on their brass ornamentation—but wait, that's not even brass. The gates of Neverland, like Leavitt's flagstones, were made of foam. A golden harp ornamented with a bust of Tutankhamen, BeDazzled gloves, a People's Choice Award, and the decapitated head of the Neverland clock tower were among the memorabilia and Disneyana set for the auc-

Sharon Tate and friends: gone. Leo Ford and John Sex: gone. John Belushi, the slide projector, Perino's Restaurant, Madonna's acting career, all gone, vanished into the ether.

tion block. Tacky and worn down, these objects stood in blaring opposition to Jackson's metaphysical celebrity status. But maybe they weren't as mournful as they looked at first. As David Robbins once put it, Jackson was among the rarest breed of celebrity, able to "use his media access to conceptual, as opposed to a purely commercial, effect." Walking past object after object, I began to feel Jackson's masterful conceptual machinery at work. Were the kitschy faux antiques and outdoor bronzes personal keepsakes or the calculated props of his lifelong performance for the cameras? Michael Jackson knew how to keep the world invested in the myth of Michael Jackson. Fittingly, he canceled the auction.

SUMMER ARRIVED, and with it Larry Johnson's retrospective at the Hammer Museum. *Untitled (Movie Stars on Clouds)*, 1983, hung high on the wall in the entrance gallery. Made while Johnson was a student at CalArts, the work is a group of six photos of dead



Doug Aitken, *Frontier*, 2009, still from a color film in 35 mm, 17 minutes 40 seconds.

celebrities' names on cloudy-sky backdrops: MARILYN MONROE, JAMES DEAN, CLARK GABLE, NATALIE WOOD, SAL MINEO, and MONTGOMERY CLIFT. While curator Russell Ferguson's show was loosely chronological and even thematic at times, he, like Johnson, made a point of mixing things up. The show afforded viewers the kinds of plot twists and surprises that define a movie or tragically end a movie star's brief life. Death, an ongoing theme in Johnson's work, waited around every corner. First JFK and RFK, then Aristotle Onassis. John Lennon, perhaps alluded to by the textual diptych that read: LIKE HIS VIBRANT LIFE AND ART, HIS TRAGIC DEATH SHOOK A GENERATION AND MARKED THE TUMULT OF THE TIMES. Sharon Tate and friends: gone. Leo Ford and John Sex: gone. John Belushi, the slide projector, Perino's Restaurant, Madonna's acting career, all gone, vanished into the ether. During the show's run, numerous celebrities followed suit: Ed McMahon, John Hughes, Farrah Fawcett, Walter Cronkite, DJ AM, Dominick Dunne, Eunice Shriver, Ted Kennedy, and, of course, Michael Jackson.

One thing that struck me about Johnson's coming to terms with death is his consistently belated reaction: RFK was assassinated in 1968; Johnson dealt with this fact in 1985. As Ferguson notes in the exhibition's catalogue, Johnson was dealing not with the assassination but with *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, the 1985 USA miniseries. Like fad diets, best sellers, and comebacks, Johnson traffics in the moment, *in the air*. Through this landscape of Dawnridges and Neverland ranches, of paparazzi gridlock and the looming letters spelling HOLLYWOOD, Johnson navigates freeways and back roads with unerring precision and masterful semiotic flexibility. It's easy to forget, but crucial to *his* myth, that practically all his works are color photographs, born in front of the camera (and that Johnson doesn't even drive).

living environment was seamless. Even his Prius was outfitted with a custom sunshine-yellow interior. The home, a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was completed by Bengston's bright polo shirt and Crocs.

Bengston had recently finished a cycle of new paintings, all the same square format, some on stretched canvas, some on Tyvek. They hung gridlike, floor to ceiling. Each had a small square section and floral graphic in its center. There was one with a gnarly green ground that looked like the algae growing up the pylons on the Venice Pier. Another had the look of a wet waxed surfboard catching the last rays of light before sunset. Painting by painting, Bengston had indexed the world around him: beach, sun, cars, and abalone seashells. House, outfits, furniture, Prius, paintings—they all seemed strikingly cheerful. But what happens when you stare too long at the sun? How does Tyvek age? Maybe the aesthetic is horrific, Ruby suggested. Maybe that little flower is a menacing memento mori.

Ruby is himself an artist working from the landscape, drawing from paintball-blasted barriers and tar-pit goo, underpass gang graffiti and the finish fetish of Bengston and his peers. He works through his own magic Los Angeles landscape, sourcing and indexing both the city and the work of its artists past. In this sense, he and Hundley, another critical repurposer, seem to find common ground—particularly as both artists propose the potential of the regional at a moment when macroglobal aspirations and international-airport aesthetics feel like outmoded ciphers of an era past.

September arrived: new season, renewed optimism. MOCA announced a fund-raising milestone and declared its financial situation back in the black. (The thirtieth-anniversary go-go Gaga gala a couple months later may have been the crowning success of the MOCA

New rebound, a desperate cry for Hollywood endorsement, business as usual, or some combination of all these things—nonetheless, it was certainly a moment to celebrate.) Meanwhile, Blum & Poe upped the ante with a sprawling new space.

Elad Lassry's show opened at David Kordansky Gallery the same night as Leavitt's "Warp Engines" just up the block. Like Leavitt's work, Lassry's photographs, collages, and films—whose keen play of color and appearance of vacuum-sealed, fetishistic perfection exude an alien attractiveness—are invested in a process of revealing the workings of the entertainment-image system (ironically embodied by the studio just blocks from the galleries: Sony Pictures). *Skunk*, 2009, which appears to be a wildlife snapshot, is actually a staged portrait of a hired animal actor (shades of the late great Jack Goldstein). *Laurel Canyon (Smile)*, 2009, a black-and-white photograph of actor Anthony Perkins and his wife, seems to capture a happy couple's intimate moment, when in reality it is plucked from a series of images commissioned to mask press reports of Perkins's homosexuality and infection with HIV. Foil strips cover the heads of figures in Hollywood publicity stills: We don't see Ann-Margret's likeness—we see, under Lassry's direction, the system of set, lighting, and costume that makes her celebrity possible. In *Ropes*, 2009, the kind of crafty fabric ropes made to pull back the curtains become the objects to be appreciated in and of themselves.

Amid the fall-season rush, I ran into Leavitt and told him about an event I had just come from: the opening of David LaChapelle's "The Rape of Africa" at David DeSanctis Gallery. Pamela Anderson was there, this time in a short-cropped onesie like the one she wore in Kanye West's "Touch the Sky" video. West was there with a Keith Haring pattern shaved into his hair. Leavitt listened, then responded that somehow what I had witnessed was probably in fact the *real* art world. Maybe so. Later that week, I visited the Venice set where Doug Aitken was filming night scenes for *Frontier*, which stars Ed Ruscha as a synesthetically inclined midnight marauder traversing a landscape that stretches from Los Angeles to Rome. It got late, and I realized that the fog would soon roll in. Ruscha was framed *Nighthawks* style in the neon-trimmed window of Rae's diner on Pico Boulevard. Action! □

ALEX ISRAEL IS A WRITER AND ARTIST BASED IN LOS ANGELES.