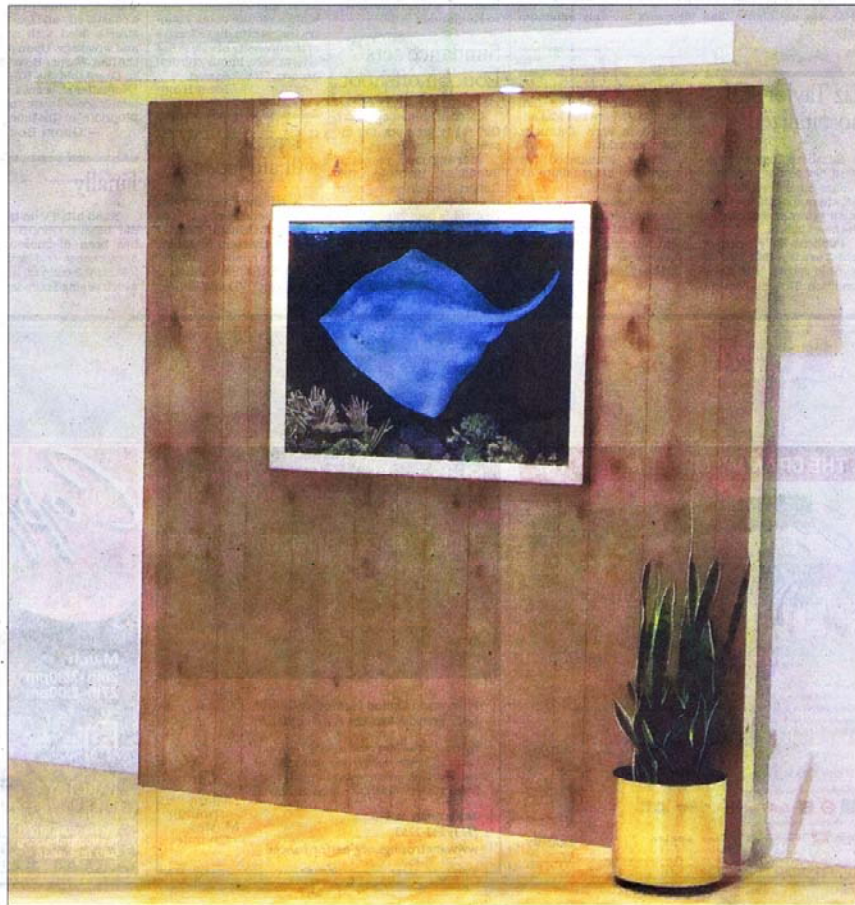


Knight, Christopher. "On center stage: 'Theater Objects' shows how William Leavitt transforms the everyday into the mysterious." *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 2011, p. D1, D6.



**'MANTA RAY' (1981):** William Leavitt's rumpus room is included in the retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art. CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT LOS ANGELES TIMES

# On center stage

'Theater Objects' shows how William Leavitt transforms the everyday into the mysterious.

**CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT** ART CRITIC >>> Rare is the museum exhibition that ranks as a revelation, but "William Leavitt: Theater Objects" most certainly does.

Galleries have featured Leavitt's installations, paintings and drawings in numerous solo and group shows ever since the artist, now 69, began exhibiting 40 years ago. His work has also been included in a healthy list of museum shows in Los Angeles, New York and abroad, so he is no stranger to audiences. Yet the retrospective that opened Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art feels remarkably fresh, as if a visitor is discovering an important artist for the very first time.

Perhaps that quality of surprise is a function of the work's primary attribute, which a retrospective offers in abundance rather than piecemeal. Leavitt renders the familiar civic and, more often, domestic landscape of postwar L.A., which is dominated by a modest, scrappy, relentlessly future-oriented sense of architectural optimism. All the same, what marks his work is a profound sense of estrangement. Neither antagonistic nor rancorous, it pushes familiarity aside in ways that make us see the world anew.

"Manta Ray" (1981) is emblematic. A plain old suburban rumpus room becomes a place of unexpected wonderment. [See Leavitt, D6]



Museum of Contemporary Art  
**'PAINTED IMAGE' (1972):** Leavitt plays it subtle with a pet's portrait.

# Out of the ordinary

[Leavitt, from D1]

The tableau is composed from a wall of fake wood paneling, a bit of cottage-cheese ceiling with recessed eyeball-lights overhead and a clump of sansevieria, commonly known as mother-in-law's tongue, rising from a cylindrical gold pot on the floor. That's it. But soon the artificiality of the wood, coupled with the domesticated nicknames for the tableau's other parts — eyeballs? cottage cheese as shelter? mother-in-law's what? — contributes to making an otherwise ordinary scene begin to seem odd.

The kicker is the large framed painting that hangs in the center of the wall, mimicking the arrangement one expects to find in an art museum's pristine gallery. An amateurish, emphatically handmade picture shows a tropical fish gliding through pitch-black water above a brightly painted coral reef. In no time flat, the painting begins to suggest a mirror reflecting a viewer's

## William Leavitt: Theater Objects

**Where:** Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles  
**When:** Through July 3. Closed Tue. and Wed.  
**Information:** (213) 626-6222, [www.moca.org](http://www.moca.org)

own encounter, transforming the everyday gallery into a mysterious, exotic place.

"Manta Ray" sets perceptual receptors adrift. How odd the ordinary world and the things we admire in it suddenly look. How strange both art and imaginative capacity become.

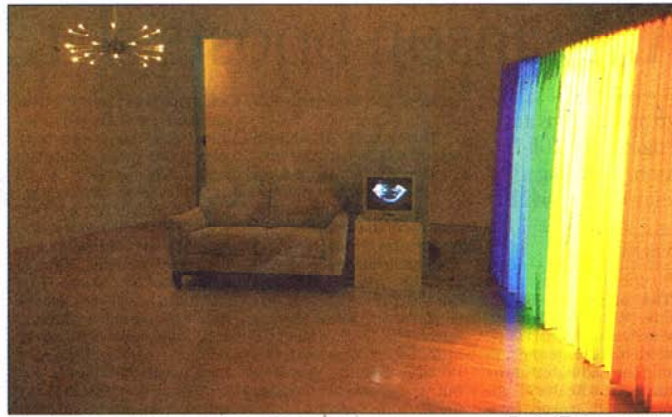
The tableau's theme and title, "Manta Ray," is surely a nod in the direction of Dada and Surrealist artist Man Ray. An American expatriate in Paris, he spent a lengthy sojourn in Los Angeles during and after the traumatic upheaval of World War

II, providing one of the deepest encounters with principles of European avant-garde art for the young city.

He was also known for admonishing artists to take advantage of their ability to experiment freely and engage in an alchemical quest for the philosopher's stone. Leavitt apparently listened.

Leavitt's retrospective was ably organized and beautifully installed by MOCA curator Bennett Simpson and former curator Ann Goldstein, now director of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. It includes 83 paintings, drawings and photographs arranged around seven tableau sculptures. The earliest work dates from 1969, but the installation favors affinity among objects over chronology.

It opens with a large, slowly mind-bending tableau, "Spectral Analysis," the stage set for a 1977 performance piece shown alone in a darkened gallery. Leavitt never hides the stage-set quality of his work. (The



FRASER HARRISON WireImage

**CONTRASTS:** A drab sofa sits next to a black-and-white TV and under a starburst chandelier. Theatrical lights project a rainbow of color on a curtain.

wood-paneled "Manta Ray" wall stands several inches in front of the gallery wall.) A drab brown sofa, star-burst chandelier and side-table with a television are arranged in front of painted theatrical flats, anchored in place with sandbags. Angled out at the side is a long beige curtain, the kind that would hide sliding glass doors in a

contemporary tract house or apartment.

On the black-and-white TV screen, an ersatz diamond spins on its axis like a hypnotist's device. Overhead theatrical lights project a sequential rainbow of color bars on the curtain, starting with violet and working backward to red. The colors recall a TV test

pattern, broadcast when the transmitter is active but no program is being shown.

The shifting lights, projected onto the familiar covering of a picture window, transform household curtains into those of a theatrical stage. Leavitt's "Spectral Analysis" makes the composition of domestic life as highly charged yet remote as the Andromeda galaxy glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. An effervescent sense of life's transience is enhanced by a lonesome soundtrack of traffic whizzing by in the night.

In fact, curtains might be the most common of Leavitt's "theater objects," turning up in nearly two-dozen works. Movies are also often implied — not least in the wide-screen format that characterizes the Cinema-scope-like ratio of height to width in more than half the show's paintings and drawings. And the television set in "Spectral Analysis," with its paste-diamond prism spewing fractured, mesmerizing light, completes the trio of modern stage motifs.

Leavitt's work crystallizes threads observed in work by a variety of artists, including Ed Kienholz's tableau format, Ed Ruscha's deadpan redesigns of Pop graphics, John Baldessari's flat-footed photographic puns, Alexis Smith's suggestive literary collages (some environmental).

Joe Goode's scruffy suburban idylls and more. The theatrical disorientation in Leavitt's work is distinctive, however, and it speaks to his commitment to overturning a primary issue that was being contested when he began making art.

Art's quality was once claimed to degenerate as it approaches the condition of theater. Critic Michael Fried's hugely influential 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" argued that great modern art instead allowed a viewer to be absorbed into the experience. An art viewer conscious of his own act of perception was being short-changed. Fried claimed, not transported. He described such perceptually framed work as theatrical — fine for the proscenium stage, but not for the art gallery.

When the issue was being formulated and the battle fought, Leavitt was an art student — first at the University of Colorado and then at Claremont Graduate School. With a title like "Theater Objects," his retrospective is explicit in describing which side of the divide he favored. And sometimes his theatrical gestures are extremely spare, such as putting a pet's painted portrait on an easel to italicize a humble quality of display.

People don't often figure in his imagery, except as a stark absence that makes you wonder, "Where did they go?" The theatrical objects that make up installations such as "Manta Ray" and "Spectral Analysis," or the ones that populate his paintings and drawings of domestic environments are pretty emphatic.

Even more emphatic, however, is reading the show's title as a two-word sentence — a noun followed by a verb. "Theater objects!" this compelling work declares, in convincing repudiation to a supposed degeneracy found in theatrical art.

I'm with Leavitt. There is no man lurking behind the curtains in his (or any) art, as the wizard did in Oz. There is only the experience of the curtain hung before your eyes and the way the artist has deployed it.

Or, put another way, we're the only folks behind the curtains, trying to make sense of where we are and what we're seeing and experiencing. Leavitt stages an achingly familiar yet mysterious *mise-en-scène*, and we get to be the players.

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