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# "William Leavitt: Theater Objects"

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

**Tim Griffin**

**IT MUST HAVE BEEN A THRILL** when poststructuralism hit the scene in Los Angeles in the early 1970s: Hardly a picture, it seems, could pass through an artist's studio without a new kind of caption being affixed, totally altering that image's sense. For *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*, 1973, Bas Jan Ader endowed dim snapshots with romantic grace, scribbling snatches of song lyrics at their bases. Five years later, in his series "Blasted Allegories," John Baldessari paired snapshots of televised imagery with single words, prompting (by making, for example, angst seem like enthusiasm and vice versa) viewers to take actors' expressions at more than face value. Sure, for some artists out East, linguistics laid the groundwork for institutional critique. But for those seduced by the ways in which the connotations of an image, object, or gesture are shaped by context—and don't forget Guy de Cointet's use of soap-opera elocution to give even random numbers, spoken aloud by actresses in his theatrical productions, the air of heartrending melodrama—linguistics offered new possibilities for art through the arbitrariness of the sign. Emphasis on *arbitrary*.

Very early on in "William Leavitt: Theater Objects," we get a sense of how this artist—long overlooked in chronicles of the period and only now the subject of a full retrospective (organized by Ann Goldstein and Bennett Simpson)—would engage with such models. For *Symbolic Objects*, 1974/2008, Leavitt assembles a checkerboard of iconic photographs punctuated by individual words and phrases rendered in neat calligraphy: An image of a tree is matched with STRENGTH, a rose with PERFECTION, a stone with RESOLVE, a swan with THE VIRGIN. Deadpan and droll, every one. Indeed, each pairing is so overdetermined that the ready-made cliché crumbles under its own weight, revealing an empty idea behind the facade of meaning. And this approach, I think, may be discerned throughout Leavitt's oeuvre, particularly among those works for which he is most recognized: sculptural installations whose furniture, curtains, and freestanding walls immediately seem the stuff of set design.

Most often, and very amusingly, the inspiration for these pieces is attributed to Leavitt's arriving in Los Angeles shortly after the 1965 Watts Rebellion and, as a member of the National Guard Reserve—while he was studying art at Claremont Graduate School—receiving anti-insurrectional training on the fake streets of a Hollywood studio's back lot. (Avant-garde meets National Guard in a movie scripted and shot by Jacques Tati.) Yet moving beyond the paradoxical realism of pseudoreality in the City of Angels, it's also provocative to explore the ways Leavitt's works might operate just within the field of art and, more specifically, within dialogues around sculpture at the time. For if the debates around Minimalist "theatricality" had by the '70s risked becoming stale tropes, Leavitt nevertheless pushes such discourse well past the end of the line—indeed, as with *Symbolic Objects*, to the point of collapse. Comparatively speaking, the Minimalists were, by any measure, quite subtle in suggesting that the viewer's presence completed a given work, whereas this proposition becomes utterly literal for Leavitt. Anyone perambulating *Spectral Analysis*, 1977/2010—the first, exquisitely installed work at MOCA—might well be tempted to sit down on its couch, which occupies the floor space between, on one side, a lighting rig hanging from the ceiling and, on the other, curtains hosting a projection of bright hues. (Here it seems worthwhile to mark our own historical perspective: Minimalism always had a liminal design element, but this would become manifestly evident for general audiences only in the design culture of the 1990s.)

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This impulse to inhabit the installation wouldn't be unwarranted, since the "theatrical environment" (or "tableau"), as the artist prefers to call such a piece, once served as the set for a Leavitt-scripted play of the same title. Further, a nearby strip of photographs (dating from 1977), homonymously titled and seamlessly mounted on a horizontal ground—featuring a sun, a crystal ring worn on an anonymous hand, and a spectral curtain—suggests that the viewer, standing between light and curtain, is a prism through which the illumination of any work must filter to make sense. The only thing holding one back is a sense of mediated distance—the odd impression of having mistakenly walked onstage. Minimalists may have risked scripting space, in other words, but Leavitt scripts time, and audiences inevitably feel themselves to be standing on the precipice of narrative. They look, on occasion, at decor



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Opposite page, from left: **William Leavitt, *Spectral Analysis*, 1977/2010**, sofa, starburst light fixture, end table, television with DVD of rotating prism, wooden wall, curtain panel, six ceiling-mounted theatrical lights with gels, recorded highway-traffic sounds, dimensions variable. **William Leavitt, *Cutaway View*, 2008**, wooden wall, artificial potted plant, acrylic-on-canvas painting, text, 98 x 75 x 26". This page, from left: **William Leavitt, *Set for "The Tropics,"* 1972**, watercolor, pencil on paper, 22¼ x 30". **William Leavitt, *California Patio*, 1972**, artificial plants, Malibu lights, flagstone, sliding doors, curtains, wooden wall, text, 8' x 12' x 8'. **William Leavitt, *Forest Sound*, 1970/2007**, artificial trees, dirt, floodlight, recorded birdsong, dimensions variable.

that seems out of the past, but only while being turned toward the near future, with the feeling that something is about to happen. For instance, the sliding glass door and diminutive, lit garden of *California Patio*, 1972, produce a retro vibe that originally must have seemed nothing other than outmoded, and yet the pregnant air of a scene having been *set* is amplified by an accompanying text describing a small cocktail party whose hostess has just announced that dinner is ready. This tableau is concerned less with the act of its own making than with whatever acts might take place in turn—or, better, with the socially scripted actions one expects to take place around it.

In this regard, Leavitt might be considered an unsuspecting precursor to Mike Kelley, at least in terms of the latter's ongoing *Extracurricular Activity* project, since both artists suggest typologies of behavior shaped by media, implicating the viewer as a kind of performer on the broader cultural stage as he or she moves among different sculptural settings. For Leavitt, however, such narratives also apparently provide scaffolding for his own artmaking. He has, intriguingly, remarked that his theatrical efforts gave him a means of accessing the very idea of painting. "I just wanted a way to make a painting that functioned as an object within a narrative," he says in an interview with catalogue essayist Annette Leddy. "I didn't want to get into a history of painting; I didn't want to be allegorical. It would just be iconic, something that could be used as a prop." Only by speaking through fiction, as it were—standing in the wings, allowing himself to be displaced—is Leavitt able to obtain a voice of his own (a voice that, it turns out, is only a tapestry of so many others). And so walking through the galleries of "Theater Objects" is an experience of perpetual ventriloquism: A painting—say, *Jaguar (from "The Tropics")*, 1974—may hang in one gallery, but it also appears above a couch in a nearby 1972 drawing of the set for an unrealized play, as well as in a photographic strip featuring a necklace and a jungle at night (*The Tropics*, 1974). Every image and experience is only partly there, yet also multiplies there, subject as it is to delay or dislocation.

Wit always involves a skip or a jump in the logic of language, playing off the rules of a given context, and such maneuvers account for the levity, even comedy, of Leavitt's work. (I direct you to the installation *Forest Sound*, 1970/2007, whose arrangement of fake trees around a mound of dirt conjures a vegetal cocktail party. Or, better, when considering the ambiguous status of Leavitt's installations and the artworks hanging therein, think of a question I once heard asked at Art Basel about *Cutaway View*, 2008: "How much for the horse painting?") Yet saying as much risks bypassing the discomfiting air of the artist's work, and the uncanniness that pervades MOCA's exhibition. A good example for conversation in this vein is Leavitt's *Painted Image*, 1972, a small framed canvas (picturing a German shepherd) resting on an easel. As with many of the artist's pieces, there is a sense of its being unfinished—as if the Sunday (or department-store) painter responsible happened to walk away just before you entered the room. But stand in front of the work and, after a minute or two, you'll realize that the dog is a little closer to your level than you might like, and that, while the dog's posture is that of a pet staring up at his owner, he's actually looking somewhere over your shoulder. And at that moment, Leavitt's dislocations give rise to subtle disorientation, if not low-grade schizophrenic paranoia. (It comes as no surprise that Jack Goldstein cited *Painted Image* as the inspiration for his film *Shane*, 1975; and, in fact, certain storyboard-like image strips by Leavitt, such as the lightning-bolt-wielding *The consequences can be real*, 1975, underline the two artists' affinities.)

Leavitt's works often produce such an effect, if not always so dramatically. Look at the oddly anthropomorphized furniture in *Twin Lawn Chairs*, 1987 (they begin to resemble those alien pods in the trunk of a Chevy Malibu in *Repo Man*), or at the branches of a Joshua tree poking their way into the living room of the small drawing *Sliding Door*, 1980, or at the deep-focus yet strangely shallow *Silverlake Garage and Carport*, 1999, which, somehow capturing in a still image the cinematographer's quick rack and zoom, makes it seem as if the architecture has moved forward, toward the viewer, for whom the perspective lines are at once skewed and shrouded in darkness. The last work in particular exemplifies the way this artist manages, time and again, to tinge the lonely desolation of depleted, Hopper-esque architectural settings with a sense of our never being totally alone, even if all one encounters, in the end, are curtains, walls of faux stone, and incandescent lights in the distance. In Leavitt's Hollywood, it seems, the hills are alive. (No, they're really alive.)

Such trembling ambience ends up everywhere in Leavitt's work, even when the artist courts such genres as sci-fi (see *Warp Engines*, 2009, which is accompanied by an electronic sound track composed by the artist), neo-noir (a 1986 drawing of an iron seems a study worthy of *Blue Velvet*), or classic Surrealism (do not stare too deeply into *Manta Ray*, 1981, for the manta ray also stares into you). Indeed, what is most striking about "Theater Objects" is the very consistency of its vision, with works across the decades deploying similar figures and motifs, absolutely trumping conventional notions of chronological development and artistic evolution. Here again, perhaps, Leavitt makes us aware from the wings of the clichés by which we live, while posing the oddly foreboding question, in art, as to what it might possibly mean for us to exit the stage. □

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