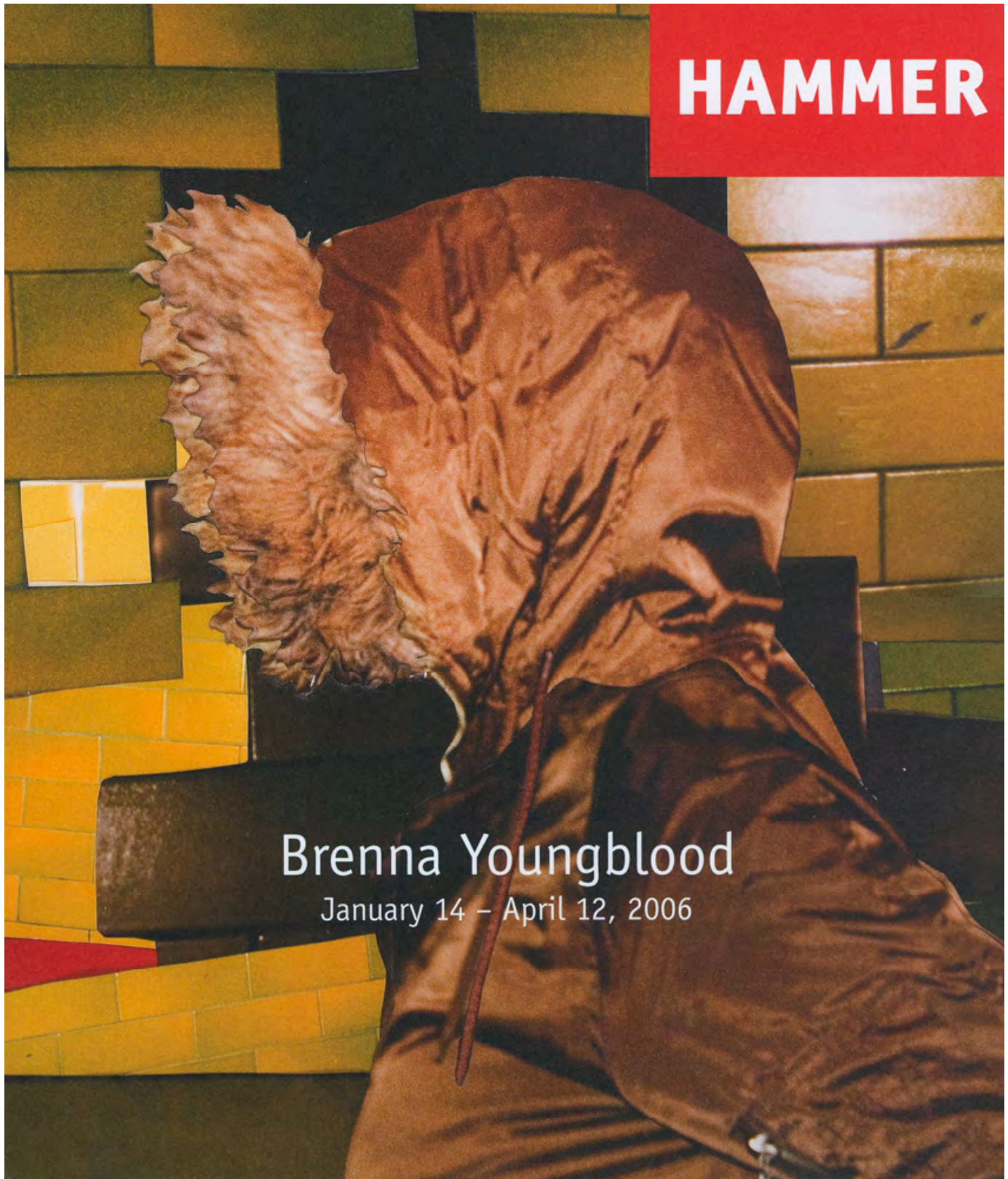


MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

812 n. robertson boulevard los angeles 90069

Ford, Kianga. "Brenna Youngblood." Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2006.



310 273 0603 fax 310 273 9131

HAMMER PROJECTS

Brenna Youngblood

January 14 – April 12, 2006

Kianga Ford

Brenna Youngblood's is a whirlwind chronology that moves from straight portraiture to large-scale landscape collage in less than a couple of years. The figures of Youngblood's family and friends, prominent in her earliest works, have receded over time and given way to what the artist articulates as issues of ethics and contemporary representation. In Youngblood's current work, these figures have been drawn into a narrative-driven landscape where subjectivity is implied, rather than exploited, in the architectural details and imagined horizons of her dystopic urban scenes.

If, as a very young photographer, Youngblood started with an interest in her family, friends, and friends' families, and in the architectural and interior details of their domestic lives—from the embroideries on their cabinets to the chairs in their living rooms—then, in this maturing body of new work, as she herself notes, “the people sort of became architecture.”¹ In an intellectual double take, she returns to photography to reckon with the question of how one represents already saturated and disregarded figures. She lands front and center in a contemporary ethical struggle over “not using an iconographic image of a black man/black woman” in a medium best known for its capacity to render the body with compelling veracity and for its historical fetishization of just such bodies.

In Youngblood's newest group of works, bricks carefully removed from her archive of domestic images are bricolaged and repeated to create roads and facades and imminent environs; the roads creep up to meet windows stolen (well, borrowed) from architectural images, and the sky is punctuated by the odd letter transposed from the standard advertising circular. In Youngblood's newest landscapes, the photographic document is subsumed in a mélange of urban matter. It is as likely to be present as unexposed old photo paper cum color palette as it is to be an actual detail from the artist's documentary archive. And if the photograph is swept up by the city, this subsumption is repeated formally in its irreversible amalgamation with the tactile bodies of paint and matter. From sprayed to poured, in these collaged landscapes, paint builds up to take on an active surfaceness that resounds with the material and symbolic weight of the city, of blood and asphalt.

The treatment of the figure that appeared in Youngblood's earlier composite portraits of her mother and friends reemerges in a way of seeing the paint itself as “a body to manipulate.” A body in a field of bodies, Youngblood's photographs move into land-



Hammer Projects are a series of exhibitions focusing primarily on the work of emerging artists.

Hammer Projects are made possible with support from The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Annenberg Foundation, Fox Entertainment Group's Arts Development Fee, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, and members of the Hammer Circle.

Organized by James Elaine, curator, Hammer Projects.

Above: *Untitled (Donuts)*, 2004 (detail). Color photographs. 47 x 24 inches. Photo by Brenna Youngblood.

Right, top: *The Army*, 2004 (detail). Color photographs. 35 x 44 inches.

Right, bottom: “It’s suicide...you can’t win!” yells Adrian Balboa. “Bla, Bla, Bla,” I Reply, 2005. Color photographs, acrylic paint, acrylic medium, and spray paint on wood panel. 72 x 196 inches. Collection of Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica.

Far right: *Untitled*, 2005. Color photographs. 97 x 49 inches.

Unless otherwise indicated, all works courtesy of the artist; photos by Joshua White.

scape and aim to get to something beyond the solitary gesture of the individual in the portrait, beyond representation into a field of gesture(s). In her current project at the Hammer Museum, both the end of this chronology and its foreshadowing are presented. *The Army* (2005), reversioned for inclusion here, offers an endless proposition of gestural possibilities with a solitary subject.

One of the most arresting pieces from Youngblood's current body of landscapes is "*It's suicide... you can't win!*" yells Adrian Balboa. "*Bla, Bla, Bla, I Reply* (2005). The voice that emerges from this scene is that of Adrian Balboa, devoted wife of icon-of-the-oppressed Rocky Balboa. Overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of the battle he prepares to engage against Russian destroyer Ivan Drago, Adrian pleads with Rocky to step down. But those of us who know the scene know, of course, that the fight continues and that ultimately, to the satisfaction of a worldwide cinema audience, Rocky prevails. If you know Los Angeles geography, you may recognize the figures that remain in *It's suicide* as the runners who have finally managed an escape from that mural on the 5 Freeway. In *It's suicide*, the runners run on, seeming as if at any moment they might come bursting through the fence that separates them from a new cosmology of almost golden brick roads that drop down just below them and wind around a much-encumbered center of nature that reaches simultaneously for foreboding skies of menacing collaged clouds and these streets of gold. This narrative mining continues in *Really, You Shouldn't Have* (2006), and—at least for an audience just four months away from the natural and governmental disaster that was Hurricane Katrina—the references of the flowing rivers and ominous orange clouds are direct.

Youngblood describes works such as *The Subtle Shift between Then and Now* (2005), with its seemingly endless repetition of collaged chairs, and *Detail of a Fine Mess* (2005), with its echoing lamps, as studies. Like the hooded figures that appear in her exhibition at the Hammer Museum and suggest the engulfing of a figure into a field of fantastic architecture, these studies function as investigations through which both Youngblood and her viewers come to grasp the expanded landscapes of *It's suicide* and *Really, You Shouldn't Have*.

Like much of the art that has fallen under the rubric of a broadly post-black gesture, Youngblood's works are materially and architecturally sensitive innovations that remain deeply concerned with flow, position, people, and relationships. Clearly resonant is the urban collage work of artists such as Mark Bradford, whose aesthetic proximity, Youngblood would argue, is a function of being engaged in the same conversation. The work, too, has fantastic elements that reveal the spaces and conversations that she shares with the boys of Cornceptual Popstraction² and other UCLA contemporaries such as Elliott Hundley. Beyond the contemporary dialogues to which she adds a clear voice, Youngblood presents here a body of work with a broad range of historical citations and interlocutions, from Romare Bearden to Mark Rothko, from William Eggleston to Nan Goldin.



With a finely balanced combination of care and abandon, study and proposition, Youngblood approaches the subtleties of the relationship of the photograph to states of disenfranchisement at precisely this historical moment. She proposes, for the time being, an endlessly repeatable figure that ultimately recedes into a narrative sustained by its objects and environs.

Notes

1. All quotations from Brenna Youngblood are from an interview with the author, November 2005.
2. The artists of Cornceptual Popstraction, a self-generated label, are Amir H. Fallah, Chris Grant, Nathan Mabry, Antonio Adriano Puleo, and Rob Thom. The artists published a book documenting their experiences and the work they produced as students in the UCLA graduate fine art program and participated in a group exhibition of the same title at cherrydelosreyes gallery in Los Angeles; see *Cornceptual Popstraction* ([Culver City, Calif.]: Beautiful/Decay, 2004).

Kianga Ford is an artist and scholar. She is a 2003 graduate of UCLA's MFA program; a doctoral candidate in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz; and an assistant professor in the Studio for Interrelated Media at Massachusetts College of Art.



Biography

Brenna Youngblood was born in 1979 in Riverside, California, and currently lives in Los Angeles. She received her BFA in 2002 from California State University, Long Beach, and her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2006. She participated in group exhibitions at Hayworth Gallery and Compact/Space in Los Angeles in 2004. Her photographic collages were included in *Hand-made* at Wallspace, New York, and *State of Emergence: Unsuspected Cracks in the Art World Infrastructure* at Track 16 Gallery, Los Angeles, both in 2005. This is Youngblood's first museum exhibition.

Hammer Museum

10899 Wilshire Boulevard Los Angeles, CA 90024
Information: 310-443-7000 www.hammer.ucla.edu

The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center is operated by the University of California, Los Angeles. Occidental Petroleum Corporation has partially endowed the Museum and constructed the Occidental Petroleum Cultural Center Building, which houses the Museum.

Copyright ©2006 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.

Above: *The Subtle Shift Between Then and Now*, 2005. Color photographs. 48 x 72 inches.

Front cover: *Brassvase*, 2004 (detail). Color photographs. 57 x 28 inches.

Back cover: *Foreva*, 2005 (detail). Color photographs, marker, acrylic paint, watercolor, charcoal, and glue. 40 x 60 inches.



