

# “Superficiality and Superexcrescence” at Ben Maltz Gallery

Holly Myers for the Los Angeles Times  
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“Superficiality and Superexcrescence” at the Otis College of Art and Design’s Ben Maltz Gallery builds on a theme central to L.A. art for so long, one is inclined to wonder at the purpose of such an exhibition now or question the rationale for narrowing the scope to a mere 13 artists.

Whether it’s the candy-coated finishes of Craig Kauffman and John McCracken, the billboard lettering of Ed Ruscha, the flat, summer pleasure tones of David Hockney or the moonscape terrain in the foil and crumpled paper photographs of James Welling, the preoccupation with surface, exteriority and skin has become so ingrained that it would be difficult to name an L.A. artist of the youngish generation that is the show’s focus who isn’t grappling with it.

A perusal of the exhibition’s catalog, however, makes it clear that such questions are not lost on the curators—Christopher Bedford, Kristina Newhouse and Jennifer Wulffson—who come to their subject, it seems, in a spirit of earnest scholarly interrogation. If the result feels at times like a graduate seminar, it is only in the best way: sound in its argument, rich in its examples, with plenty of room left for debate.

With three heavily footnoted essays and substantive passages on each artist, the catalog is a dense but compelling read that traces the surface theme along an academically convoluted trail from modernism to minimalism to post-structuralism and post-modernism to arrive, more or less, at the proposal of a model that collapses the binary of inside and outside, surface and depth, cherished by so many theorists and critics in their analyses of L.A.

The artists assembled here, Bedford summarizes, dwell on the surface “not with the aim of privileging appearance over essence, but rather to suggest that appearance and essence commingle in the surfaces that surround us to generate day-to-day cultural meaning.”

Above, clockwise from top: Blue McRight, *Swarm*; Tia Pulitzer, *On a Mission*; Rebecca Campbell, *Crush*.

In surveying “some of the most provocative recent statements in this arena,” the show assembles a strong group of artists and an especially terrific assortment of works.

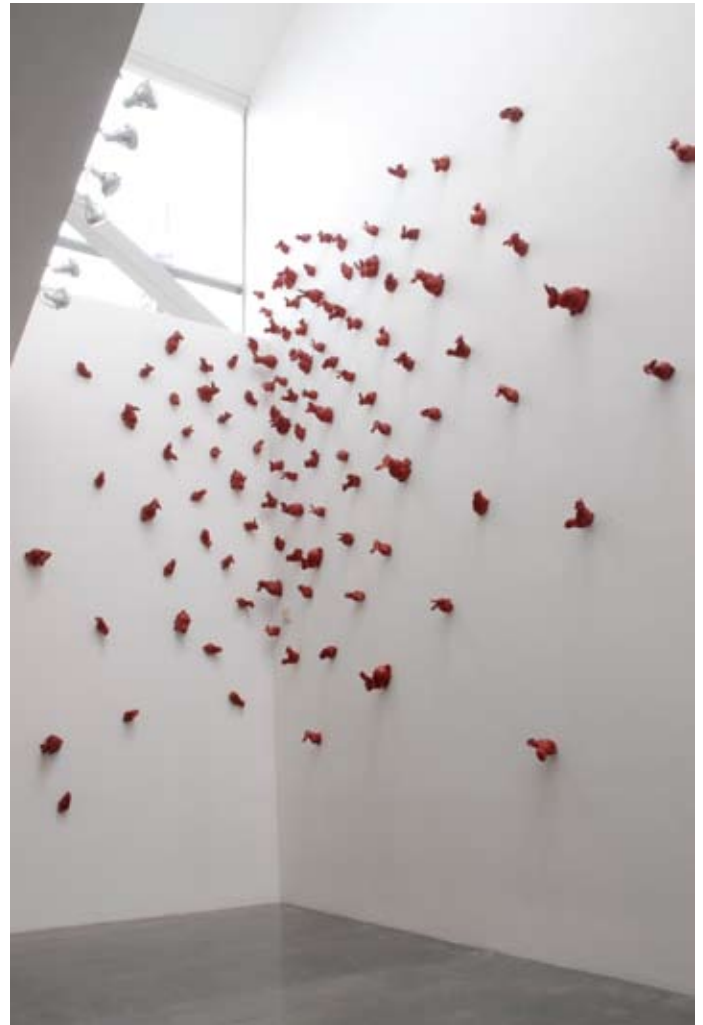
Particularly dazzling is “Landslide,” an exquisite five-panel 2003 wall piece by Elliott Hundley that makes much of his recent Regen Projects show seem halfhearted and bland by comparison. Rebecca Campbell’s “Salt Palace” is also one of her best: a disquietingly ambiguous 8-by-12-foot painting featuring a young woman and an older man facing each other on the deck of a house.

A number of the works — generally the more predictable inclusions — reflect the surface theme through an exploration of the mask-like aspects of racial, cultural and sexual identity: several self-portraits by Amy Adler; half a dozen examples of Elad Lassry’s photographic miscellany; a pair of paintings by Marcelino Gonçalves made from photos in an album found at a garage sale; Kurt Kauper’s self-consciously classical portraits of women in opera gowns; a fine example from Salomón Huerta’s series of Mexican wrestler portraits; and a frenetic, fragmented, vaguely erotic film by Catherine Sullivan revolving around silent film star Louise Brooks.

Others engage the theme by way of materials: Kori Newkirk’s “Dirm,” a dramatic vinyl and Mylar drapery; Tia Pulitzer’s mysteriously elegant deer-like sculptures, made from clay glazed with automotive finish; Blue McRight’s strange horde of red enameled rabbit lawn ornaments; and a gorgeous pair of large-scale photographs by Lia Halloran depicting streaks of light made while skateboarding.

One of the most memorable and by far the most amusing work — a welcome foil to the curators’ diligent historicizing — is Joel Morrison’s untitled sculpture, made specifically for the show. He cast a bubble-wrapped replica of a McCracken sculpture in stainless steel, creating a plank-like object of deliciously confusing character: simultaneously elegant and banal, minimalist and baroque, celebratory and parodic.

In symbolically burying the fetishized finish beneath a highly textured skin, ostensibly for its own protection, Morrison offers a playful sendup to the sacred cow of L.A. art history and a succinct demonstration of the call for a new model.



Above: Blue McRight, *Swarm*