

“Superficiality and Superexcrescence” at Otis College of Art and Design, Ben Maltz Gallery by George Melrod for Art Ltd, September, 2009



Installation view of Blue McRight's "Swarm".

Just to get it out the way up-front: “superexcrescence” means, according to the catalogue, “the accumulation of superfluous details.” It would likely be the word just ahead of “superficiality” in my dictionary, if it were included in my dictionary at all, which it isn’t. Never mind. Despite its title, this smart and thoroughly stimulating group show at Otis College of Art and Design’s Ben Maltz Gallery boasted an unusual degree of substance and succinctness. Considering the show’s interest in glossy pretense, that’s not the contradiction it sounds. Assembled by the curatorial trio of Christopher Bedford, Jennifer Wulffson, and Kristina Newhouse (who until last fall was curator at the Torrance Art Museum), “Superficiality and Superexcrescence” brought together 13 contemporary artists who examine the use of external facades: “surface, skin and sex” in the words of Gallery Director Meg Linton’s introduction. Put simply, the show is about poses and presentation; concealment and exposure; materiality, anxiety and seduction. Which is to say, just another week in Hollywood.

Los Angeles has long defined itself, for better or worse, by its glossy surface culture, and the “finish fetish” movement was one of SoCal’s calling cards in the 1960s and ’70s. While David Hockney delineated flatly graphic poolside worlds of beckoning sensuality, sculptors like John McCracken applied a sleek sensual veneer to the industrial austerity of minimalism. Both Hockney’s flattening and McCracken’s materiality are recalled (and at times directly referenced) in works included in this show, among several other equally potent distancing devices. For instance, Rebecca Campbell’s

ambitious realist paintings, with their cryptic middle-class narratives, and the brashly colorful oil-and-graphite works by San Diego artist Marcelino Gonçalves, reclaiming private snapshots found in a rummage sale, both echo Hockney's wistful sensuality in very different ways, while Lia Halloran's cibachrome prints capturing swirling trails of light left by skateboarders could be said to update Hockney's reflective graphic squiggles, investing them with new performative immediacy.

In the context of this show, the most resonant paintings are by those artists who directly address the topic of veiling, and embellishing, personal identity. Kurt Kauper's Diva paintings, begun in 1996, rendered in oil on birch panel, elevate everyday people into opera stars by dressing them in sumptuous gowns, while his heroic portraits of male athletes likewise play with ideals of personal iconography, status, and desire. Salomón Huerta's masterful portraits of masked Mexican wrestlers imbue their subjects' mythic (and ethnic) stature with mystery, brazenly flaunting one aspect of identity while cloaking another. Both these painters manage to conflate the technical craft of Ingres with the silky pizzazz of a fashion advertisement. Amy Adler's weirdly mesmerizing self-portraits owe more to Alex Katz than Ingres in their style, but tilt toward Cindy Sherman in their fascination with role-playing. By making drawings from photographs, which are then in turn photographed (and often carefully staged), she sifts through levels of artifice, to mediate on the nature of guises and presentation, and personal and professional identity.

No less haunting in their own modest way are the framed collaged compendia by Elad Lassry, with their little color schemes and still life formality, which draw from a mid-century aesthetic and sources like LIFE magazine to explore how images produced for mass consumption can evoke such comfort and nostalgia. Of all the artists included in the show, Elliott Hundley is the most superex-crescent: his opulent mixed-media composition on foam core panels takes McCracken's minimalist planks as a starting point. But the world he posits is too dense to engage the other works in the show: you get lost in it. Likewise Catherine Sullivan's highly involving video work, weaving together imagery of silent film actress Louise Brooks; her admirer, British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan; and scenes from "Oh! Calcutta!," the infamous 1960s nude Broadway musical Tynan co-authored, presents its own dreamlike exploration of personae. More viscerally seductive and unsettling are Blue McRight's sculptural swarm of glittery crimson lawn bunnies and squirrels, in which consumerist artifice and nature seem to run amok at once, and Tia Pulitzer's slippery-smooth ceramic sculptures of female deer—one lying casually with swollen genitals, the other holding out a suggestive snake—in which imagery of innocence and sexuality are seamlessly merged to uncanny effect. Kori Newkirk, known for his elegantly clever installations investigating power, race, urban life, and African American identity, is represented by a giant cape-like cloak of Mylar and vinyl hanging from the ceiling in wry homage to post-minimalist sculptor Robert Morris.



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

If Newkirk taunts the boundary of abstraction and representation, sculptor Joel Morrison makes an art of indeterminacy. One of LA's most significant young sculptors, Morrison is represented here by three pieces, including a stainless steel weather balloon snared in a bear trap (which suggests a human brain, or a mangled spawn of Koons and Brancusi), and a stainless steel cast of a McCracken-esque plank garbed in bubble wrap: a drolly brilliant monument to the spot where modernist idealism intersects with consumerist excess. No less dazzling is his blobbily amorphous, blanced blue head/animal/object/thing from 2002, mounted on its wooden pedestal like an acid-induced vision of formalist sculpture in which modernist authority has morphed into postmodern doubt and disorientation. At once beautifully crafted and suspicious of its own identity, his work is simultaneously luxurious and evasive. Not all these works achieve that duality so concisely, or complement each other that effectively, but in bringing them together the curators create a beguiling dialogue. While there's an element of frustration being amid so much coolly seductive posturing, the challenge of engaging the work, and ferreting out its authenticity, is also invigorating. Dense, rigorous, and a treat for the eyes, it's the sort of exhibition university galleries were made for: superexcrecent, or not.



Detail, Blue McRight's *Swarm*