

Contemporary Sculpture in Los Angeles, 2007

by Jennifer Wulffson for Sculpture Journal 17.1, 2008



A small selection of exhibitions held in Los Angeles during 2007 that featured contemporary sculpture showcased the breadth and strength of the genre in that city. Ranging from constructivist-minded experiential installations to mimetic sculptures inspired by nature, several exhibitions shared lyrical and hieroglyphic qualities. Gustavo Godoy's *What's the Big Idea* (The Happy Lion, 10 March–14 April 2007) was a site-responsive installation consisting of sculptural objects made of such everyday materials as prefabricated wood, coloured Plexiglas and rubber floor tread. Angles spill in every direction, a whirling dervish of lumber, and ledges tempt the more daring to climb higher and put increasing faith in Godoy. The seemingly haphazard sculpture rewards on a small scale as well: small areas under the ramp and ledge of *Fast Formal Object* (2007) make the attentive viewer feel as if they are towering over an urban landscape, just as the neighbouring untitled sculpture looms above. *Fast Formal Object* also raises the viewer to an intimate viewing level of Godoy's large work on paper (Green Wave Drawing, 2007), serving, perhaps as a reminder of the nature of their experience, that is, a visit to a gallery and not an ad hoc playground.

Utility and play are carefully jumbled, with each sculpture a measure of its dual identity as object to be regarded and object to be experienced. As participatory objects, they mirror the push and pull of urban life, being conceptually and formally shrewd, and accessible.

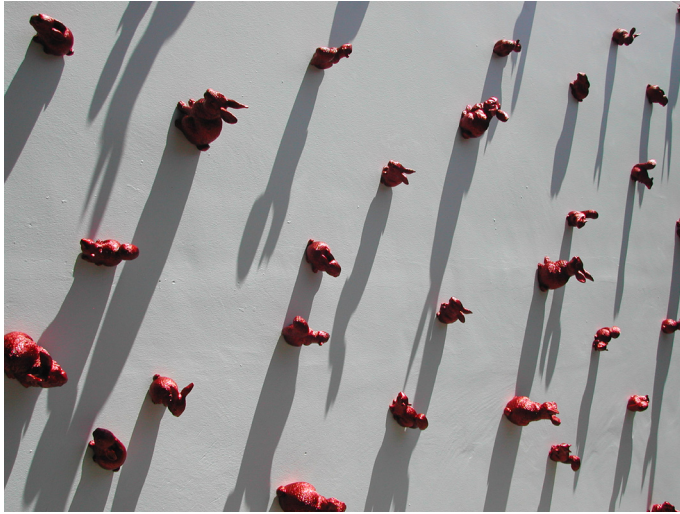
Swarm (2007), an installation by Blue McRight of cast resin lawn ornaments, was installed outdoors at the Patricia Faure Gallery (21 April–26 May 2007). Its rabbits and squirrels are the not-so-wild representatives of nature, here transplanted not just from 'the wild' to suburbia, but to the even more removed location of a gallery. By adjusting the angle at which they are bolted to a high courtyard wall, their colour (red) and surface finish (metal flake car paint), McRight forces the viewer to take notice of these benign yet awkward creatures. She intended the animals to be reminiscent of 'car culture' and cars themselves, which often have a secondary role as lawn ornament or status symbol. The squirrels and rabbits appear unperturbed by their unusual placement but the viewer might, or should, be. The title, while not indicative of action, suggests potential, even prophecy. What ends up seeming right is the not knowing if the animals are tame or dangerous.



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Charles Ray's show at Regen Projects II (5 May–30 June 2007) consisted of a single massive sculpture, in which modesty and monumentality meet. *Hinoki* is a detailed replica of a decaying 9.75 m (32-foot) oak log the artist came across. It took ten years to make. Ray hired the master carver Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his associates in Osaka to carve it out of Hinoki cypress from sectional silicone moulds made by the artist. While an homage to an actual fallen tree, and one person's fascination with this object, the subject is also mimesis and the possible variations within a mimetic act. The putrid, peachy hue of the new wood bears no resemblance to the wood of the original, although it will change and darken as it ages; in this sense (and in others) the original rotting tree is given new life. The many joins of the sections are not hidden and

the carved surface is unmistakable as such. The tree's surface appears topographic in its nubs, bug holes, cracks and crevices, and the eye can get lost in simple looking; there is no single viewpoint and the sprawling sculpture invites multiple circuits.

One of Tom LaDuke's uncanny works in his exhibition at Angles (12 May–16 June 2007) also took as its subject a tree, in this case a tree stump meticulously sculpted out of coloured, oil-based clay (Plastalina) that will never harden, thus leaving the sculpture, *I Renounce Myself* (2007), vulnerable to the touch. Not a 'real' tree like the one Charles Ray was drawn to, LaDuke's tree stump comes from Pieter Bruegel's *Magpie of the Gallows* (1568), and was sculpted from memory, and thus comes by way of the artist's imagination and personal history; for example, the rings of the tree stump correlate to LaDuke's age. *The Substitute Teacher* (2007), a small sculpture of a dead sparrow made from the same Plastalina and from the same process of 're-remembrance', is remarkable not only because it seems impossible that it is made only from clay and fingernails but for its emotional resonance. Like Ray, the subject of the exhibition is in large part mimesis, but the filters of memory, art history, artistic life and the effects of media exchange inflect the work greatly. This method of creation and the sculpture's overall richness and delicacy harmonized with LaDuke's paintings, which were also on display.

The work of Matthew Monahan was the subject of a MOCA Focus exhibition (Museum of Contemporary Art, 26 July–29 October 2007); Monahan has an aggressive and vigorous approach to figuration, a quality particularly evident in his approach to the amazing array of materials he employs (beeswax, drywall, floral foam, his own drawings). His figurative sculpture seem like characters from some lost epic from the past or future, and typically evoke psychological and physical struggle, whether it be heroic or demonic in nature. The exhibition seemed to need more space than it was given – an at times claustrophobic abundance of works in one room – but ultimately this fault heightened the mystery and unease of being close to these works, crowded on what seemed like an active playing field of fragmented or unfinished action figures. Monahan's provocative use of pedestals and display cases conceived as part of the works themselves was also made more apparent and palpable in such close quarters. His figurative sculpture of a mythic nature, unusual in these times, resonates, in Monahan's hands, in just that: the present.

The suggestive title of Jessica Stockholder's exhibition, *Sex in the Office* (1301PE, 8 September–20 October 2007), delivers in her assemblage sculpture, without any obviousness or crudeness. An inheritor of the strong West Coast assemblage tradition, Stockholder's work is tidier and less unkempt than the work of Edward Kienholtz, for example. The use of lighting in a number of works brings warmth and a feeling of domesticity to much of the installation, furthered by the incorporation of delicate items of furniture. The everyday – both in and out of the office – becomes a playground for the imagination in Stockholder's sculpture, but the fancy they inspire does not negate the impression that their production was a highly reasoned one. As objects to encounter and move around, they remind the viewer of how and why people organize personal space and emotions, both literally and symbolically.

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