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Flash Art



*Eric Wesley
"Untitled"
Object*





SCI-FI HISTORICISM

PART 1: THE TIME MACHINE IN CONTEMPORARY LOS ANGELES ART

Jan Tumlir

THE CONSENSUS EMERGING from the 2006 Orange County Museum of Art California Biennial is that young artists on the West Coast are operating in an idiom closely linked to science-fiction. The concerns that have characterized this genre over the years are all accounted for: the imagination of future and alien civilizations (Leslie Shows); interplanetary and/or time travel (Scoli Acosta); the colonization of, or invasion from, the alien outlands (Pearl C. Hsiung); the encounter with the other (Christian Maychack); the redefinition of the idea of the human in response to the other, either alien or homemade (Sterling Ruby); the technological transformation of the human as such (Andy Alexander); the social functions of disaster, apocalypse (Marie Jager); utopia versus dystopia (My

Barbarian), and so on. Even those who strive for a measure of documentary *verité* (Sergio De La Torre, as well as the collaborative teams Bull.Miletic and The Speculative Archive) employ the everyday as a foil for the strange. Perhaps most significantly in regard to our present moment, that quintessential sci-fi theme of communication breakdown and its inevitable outcome, war, is pervasive.

Against the backdrop of a war that the current administration still wants to paint in the broad, unifying strokes of "a battle against totalitarian ideologies" like WW2, but that is obviously much closer to the divisive 'quagmire' of Vietnam, artists are revisiting a range of oppositional strategies mainly called from the 1960s and 1970s. Some indulge in all-too familiar sorts of

stylistic revivalism that are merely the 'last word' or 'shriek' of an '80s/'90s-era endgame. But then there are those who want to quantum leap right over the '80s and '90s and to reconnect more substantially with the political sensibilities of prior eras. The 'anxiety of influence' arguments that determined the specific mode of melancholic citation throughout the '80s and '90s have all but evaporated. The eternal return of the past no longer bespeaks an impossible future, nor does aesthetic influence automatically deny inspiration. For many young artists, the appropriated objects of the past serve as a sort of aesthetic springboard. Intensive concentration on these various artifacts is aimed at somehow 'breaking through.'

In Los Angeles, where art school and art world are one and the same, it comes as no

surprise that what begins as a critical imperative should be so swiftly converted into a productive strategy. If one figure can be called out to exemplify this mode — this archaeological pop baroque — in its infancy, it is Christopher Williams, whose minute attention to every stylistic nuance of the found object places him on the opposite end of Andy Warhol's openly indiscriminating pop. Moreover, in contrast to Warhol's absolute devotion to 'the new,' Williams' appropriations are acutely untimely: visions of the future pulled from the past, haunting the present.

From the classical oracle to the street-corner fortune-teller, prescience is always linked to an object that allows for worldly reflection while also effecting deep structural distortions. A smoldering fire blurs one's vision, a pool of water ripples, and the old crystal ball bends every straight sight-line around its contours; all these things allow one to peer into the distance while obstructing one's view. The art and popular culture of 'late-style modernism' serves a similar purpose for contemporary practice. As we approach the 'end of art' in both the most positive and negative senses, that which is still wholly made by clever hands and nimble thoughts is granted a last surge of expressive vitality. As with Benjamin's aura, burning most brightly just before it is extinguished, there is an insistent romanticism at work here, implicitly linked to thoughts about death. The products of the imagination are externalized as ruins.

Ruins abound in Marie Jager's most recent project *The Purple Cloud*, which was screened at the 2006 OCMA Biennial in a dark gallery "theater" with related installation elements scattered about outside. These included a series of small collages presented as lobby cards and a purple vinyl cut-out of the eponymous cloud affixed to the museum's windows and extending the film's sci-fi story line of ecological catastrophe and global exodus into the space of everyday life in Southern California, where climate change and illegal immigration are already the reigning topics of the day. Titled *Sunscreen*, it metaphorically figures the imaginary disaster that drives the filmic narrative while literally shielding the interior of the museum, just as it would a car, from the real disaster of the sun's increasingly 'angry' rays. More literally still, *Sunscreen* reminds us that cinema is fundamentally a process of projection: light passed through tinted films.

Clearly, Jager still wants to make art out of cinema, to extrude its technical operations as aesthetic objects. She remains committed to this structuralist program while recognizing that it no longer stands to yield any sort of zero-degree. As Jean Louis Baudry's "basic cinematographic apparatus" is itself flickering on the threshold of obsolescence, its deconstruction becomes suffused in a nostalgic sense



of the uncanny, like the dismantling of an automaton. As Jager has already suggested in her filmic adaptation of Karel Capek's *RUR (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, 2003, the medium is haunted throughout by just such baroque/gothic figures: the counterfeit human filled with machine parts or else, conversely, the counterfeit robot hiding the human inside.

Once understood as the space of synthetic convergence of all arts, cinema now undergoes a reverse-process of fragmentation. Like *RUR, The Purple Cloud* is based on literature, an obscure apocalyptic novel from 1901 — cinema's year zero — by the British author M. P. Schiel. Here, also, it is the book as such that supplies the film's structural foundation; not just its

From top: MARIE JAGER, *Solitaire*, 2005. Collage on digital print, 33 x 48 cm. Courtesy the artist; AMIR ZAKI, Untitled 54, 2006. Archival pigment photograph, 114 x 145 cm. Courtesy Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Los Angeles. Opposite: CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS, *Kiev 88*, 4.6 lbs. (2.1 Kg) Manufacturer: Zavod Arsenal Factory, Kiev, Ukraine. Date of production: 1983-87 Douglas M. Parker Studio, Glendale, California, March 28, 2003 (NR. 1), 2003. Dye transfer print, 41 x 50 cm. Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

ideational contents but the printed word as it appears on the page. Words that describe the world's ruin are themselves ruined via the same cut-up montage-process that William Burroughs, for one, likened to avant-garde art and practiced expressly to "advance"



literature to the next stage of 'visual literacy.' The vintage Stockhausen-style splicing of *concret* and synthesizer sounds on the score drives home the point: *The Purple Cloud* is caused as much by climactic disaster as, to quote Paul Virilio, "the information bomb."

No doubt, the current fascination with all things analog is compelled by a nostalgic fetish for a still-embodied technology, one that shores up a "warmth" that gradually dissipates as we approach the present. More substantially, the analog era is scammed for theoretical objects that can explain our digital present. Mathias Poledna, another recent European transplant to Los Angeles, turns film in on itself to discover, in place of a general foundation, a hyper-specific ruin. Appropriately, he calls his works "fragments of twentieth-century culture," as they are just the sort of thing one might expect to find buried deep within scorched earth, or else, worst-case scenario, orbiting a distant planet alongside other items of earthly detritus. Typically short — at just under 30 minutes, *Crystal Palace*, Poledna's latest exercise in ambient ethnography, is the longest — these works demand intensive scrutiny and repeat viewing. Every detail matters, those pertaining to content as much as the technical specifications of camera type, film stock, projector, etc., and here again the parts become significant precisely by refusing to gel.

As with Christopher Williams' object-portraits of the Kiev 88 camera or Braun's

Top left: MATHIAS POLEDNA, *Version*, 2004. Still from 16 mm film, 18 mins. Courtesy UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; top right: FLORIAN MAIER-AICHEN, *Untitled*, 2005. C-print, 137 x 107 cm. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and 303 Gallery, New York.

Below: SOO KIM, *North East*, 2001. C-print, 76 x 102 cm. Courtesy Sandfront Rey, Los Angeles; ALEX SLADE, *Cucamonga Creek Dam*, Upland, CA, 2005. C-print, 48 x 152 cm. Mary Goldman Gallery, Los Angeles.



"Snow White's Coffin" record player, aesthetically exquisite specimens of modern design that are famously problematic on a practical level, Poledna's films ask us to think through the dysfunctions of the analog fetish. The dressed-to-kill but musically questionable rockers of *Actualité* are exemplary of the form or amateurish fashion-victims; likewise the dancers in *Vernon*, who are Martha Graham acolytes or a random group of "world-music" stoners. Sound betrays vision as our first interpretative cue in both cases, as well as in *Crysal Palace* which was shot in the shrinking rain-forest of Papua New Guinea as a "straight" documentary record of what is disappearing (if not already gone) or an immersive Maya Deren-esque art experience. It is hard to tell, and further complicating the matter is the vaguely clichéd soundtrack, partly inspired by the notoriously un-systematic archival practices of the Folkways record label. One especially popular title from the 1950s, *Sounds of a Tropical Rain Forest in America*, is singled out for attention, its promise of aural exotica delivering what has long been rumored to be the cut-rate special effect of a mic'd shower in a downtown apartment.

The question that haunts so many post-apocalyptic sci-fi narratives returns here without the protective armor of fantasy: How should one go about reconstructing a civilization from just a few broken, cryptic clues? And what if those clues related not to the productive apex of a culture, nor even to baseline functionality, but to its nadir? What if the

information were itself corrupted? In Adria Julia's recent installation, *La Villa Basque*, the documentary functions of film and photography are strained by their essentially unstable object. The titular Villa that the artist discovered in the industrial city of Vernon, on the outskirts of L.A. is both a Basque restaurant and a museum of sorts to the glory of its founding immigrant family. From the first moment, however, the history preserved therein is riddled with fiction, as the account of arrival of the pater-familias from the "Old" to the "New Country" swiftly segues to a Hollywood-style shootout. Close to empty on most days, the Villa has nevertheless managed to perpetuate its fantasies via Adria's work. It is one of those great decaying frontier outposts, a memory palace already partly corrupted by the forgetting it is trying to keep out, and in the process contaminating everyone that steps in.

From the typographic works of Ed Ruscha, Judy Fiskin, John Divola and, again, Christopher Williams, to those of Florian Maier-Aichen, Alex Slade, Amir Zaki and Soo Kim, the relocation of the historically-grounded, exacting aesthetics of the Neue Sachlichkeit to Los Angeles, the very "capital of forgetting" in Norman Klein's estimation, is inevitably carried on millenarian currents. The process of cultural uprooting, scattering and realignment that is documented in Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* as the first phase of a still road-bound globalism continues apace in the work of all the above artists, as the channels of exchange grow increasingly baroque.

At its extremes, Los Angeles gives way to the beach and the desert, its geological bookends. Both preceding

Above from left: ADRIA JULIA, *La Villa Basque*, Vernon, California, 2004. Two stills 16mm film transferred onto DVD, 35 mins. Courtesy Galeria Soledad Lorenz, Madrid. Below from left: MARIE JAGER, Lobby card for *The Purple Cloud* (They were traveling with their landscapes), 2006. Collage on paper, 25 x 18 cm; CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS, Photosuper SK4 radiogramme ("Snow White's Coffin") 1956. Sheet steel wood, plastic (perspex) Design Hans Gugelot, Dieter Rams, Manufacture Brawn AG, Germany, 1996. Ilchrochrome print, 28 x 35 cm. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

and succeeding the account of its relentless, sprawling development, these are also zones of intensive sci-fi speculation. In cinema, and art as well, these have always signified both the pre- and post-historical, a manifest absence that enables cultural reinvention as if from scratch. Because its endless becoming is bounded on either side by equally endless void, Los Angeles is itself often figured as a wavering mirage, an imaginary place floating just above the sands of time. ■

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This is Part 1 of a two-part essay that will be continued in the next issue.

