

# The New York Times

ART REVIEW

## A Bit of Hollywood, Minus the Tinsel

by Roberta Smith

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People who take things into their own hands and try to operate outside the institutional grid deserve our gratitude. So hats off to the organizers of “Greater LA,” a sprawling survey of recent art from Los Angeles arrayed in an immense, unrepentantly raw SoHo loft. It represents a tremendous effort on the part of three temporarily allied art professionals: Benjamin Godsill, a curator moonlighting from the New Museum; Joel Mesler, a partner in Untitled, an art gallery on the Lower East Side who began his art-dealing career in Los Angeles; and Eleanor Cayre, a Los Angeles collector and consultant who organized “The Station,” a large group show in Miami during the Basel Miami art fair in 2008.

The curators have selected a title that nervily echoes “Greater New York,” the messy survey of young local talent that MoMA PS 1 has mustered at five-year intervals since 2000. They have assembled more than 100 works by nearly 50 artists in painting, sculpture, photography, drawing, collage, film and video, and installation art. But the show comes off as a stew with too many cooks who never quite decided what they were making.

The opening wall text deplores the “second fiddle” status of Los Angeles to New York as an art scene, which seems a bit melodramatic. Fantastic artists have been emanating from Southern California for decades, as the 30-plus exhibitions of Pacific Standard Time, a multimuseum extravaganza beginning this fall in the Los Angeles region, will attest.

I would venture that New York long ago accepted it as an equal in the production of art, and that New Yorkers may even suspect that on a per-capita basis, Los Angeles harbors more good artists than New York does. New York has an edge in terms of sceny-ness because it has more galleries, but also because of prevailing urban conditions: density, a smaller movie industry, an encompassing subway system.

Basically this show seems to have blinked when it came to the risk of showing New York something it didn't already know. It chose to concentrate on Los Angeles artists who are already familiar here, rather than treating us — in the spirit of “Greater New York” — to a display of work by younger or relatively unknown artists. As a result, while large and ambitious, it represents a missed opportunity.

Most of the artists here are under 40, which is not old, but too many of them have had two or more solo shows in New York galleries or been included in Whitney Biennials. Sterling Ruby, Mark Grotjahn, Karl Haendel, Alex Prager, Jonas Wood, Matt Johnson, Carter Mull, Jason Meadows and Pae White seem especially overexposed for this exercise, and often contribute to its status-quo feeling. So do several other familiar, less stellar talents, among them Skip Arnold, Andrea Bowers, Dennis Hollingsworth, Kaz Oshiro and Kori Newkirk.

And regardless of the stature of the artists, the selections often feel slight and cryptic; they don't give you enough to go on, a chronic problem with large group shows. Mr. Oshiro is represented by a negligible single painting. Mr. Grotjahn, who has an excellent exhibition at the Anton Kern Gallery, contributes three small drawings and three boxy masks and barely makes a dent.

The immense stack of bulky beams by Mr. Ruby — covered in yellow Formica that has been scuffed, spray-painted and carved with the words “cry” and “cop” — is clearly intended to be one of the show's centerpieces. It comments sardonically on Minimalism and its often baleful derivatives, among them anonymous geometric public art, and also conjures urban neglect, but it provides a rather scant notion of Mr.

Ruby's considerable talent. A group of his gnarly, oozing ceramics pieces would have been more vivid and helped cut down on the show's general dryness.

Occasionally, better-known artists surprise. Eric Wesley's mysterious two-part work consisting of a bronze sculpture that looks like the outer shell of its plaster cast, displayed nearby, is probably the best work he has ever shown in New York. The same goes for the three uncharacteristically restrained pale paintings, two involving strips of torn canvas, contributed by Matt Chambers.

Justin Lowe, who last made a splash with an immense installation called "Black Acid Co-op" (made with Jonah Freeman) at Deitch Projects in 2009, is back with weirdly assertive little collages made from the often lurid covers of paperback books. And Anna Sew Hoy continues to make intriguing objects out of almost nothing — bits of cloth and metal — and some hand-built ceramic. Patrick Jackson's "City Unborn (gold)," a precariously elegant arrangement of found and made objects on glass shelves, is from 2008, but it is better than most of the works that were in his debut at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in Chelsea last fall.

For the most part, the show's energy comes from the relatively few younger or lesser known artists that are included. Some of them make work that could only be made in Los Angeles, including Melanie Schiff's lush color photographs of the city's largely dry, extravagantly graffitied aqueducts. Drew Heitzler evokes a bygone Hollywood innocence with dreamlike projections of appropriated films that feature the actors Dennis Hopper, Warren Beatty, Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson as almost shockingly beautiful, untouched young men.

Joe Deutch's tension-filled five-minute video "Boot, Re-Boot," shows him brazenly attaching an automobile boot to a police cruiser in broad daylight on a Los Angeles street, extending the tradition of incendiary performance works initiated some 30 years ago in Southern California by Chris Burden. Nearby an inexplicably touching video by Melodie Mousset gives a violent subject — stoning — a happy ending through the use of a kind of reverse pantomime: the artist is shown with stones held to her head by elastic bands while white-gloved hands appear and cut them off, one by one.

Alex Israel's installation "Property," consists of found objects that form a kind of tawdry sculptural rebus about the pursuit of physical perfection by evoking the body, gyms, medicine and illicit sex. A label adds a Los Angeles slant by informing us that the assembled items have been rented from a prop house where they will be returned once the show closes.

Aaron Wrinkle contributes a completely hapless painting, but also presents documentation about the short busy life of a small gallery that he instigated and named for the Post-Minimalist artist Dan Graham, who also briefly had a gallery in New York some 40 years ago. Shoe-horned into a large closet, the intriguing display includes a wall-mounted wood file of material that might almost be a Graham sculpture and a small dark abstraction by Peter Demos, one of several artists who exhibited at Dan Graham.

Both **Brian Kennon** and Matt Lipps are finding new things to do with various blurrings of set-up and re-photography, making smart, visually arresting art-about-art that relates to the work of East Coast artists like Sara VanDerBeek and Anne Collier. And Olga Koumoundouros brings new life to the tired found-object formula, combining using a classic Eames lounge chair and ottoman, a Brancusi-like column of Himalayan salt lamps and a bit of spray paint to funkily totemic effect.

Organizing large group shows is often tantamount to herding cats. This one gives every sign of having gotten away from its organizers. But if their effort disappoints, it also gets an important ball rolling. Ideally, regular updates on new developments from Los Angeles should be a part of the New York exhibition diet, and vice versa. It would help art on both coasts.