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BEYOND EXPECTATIONS:
HOW "PHANTOM SIGHTINGS"
DEFEATS CLICHÉ

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art may have spent a bajillion dollars hyping their spankin' new Broad Contemporary Art Museum, but it is their just-opened "Phantom Sightings" group exhibition that is the institution's greatest recent achievement. While the BCAM posits the belief that we can instantly assess (and place a market value on) the masterpieces of our time, "Phantom Sightings" reveals that what is truly new is the art that successfully defeats cliché; such art, therefore, is as inherently unfinished as we are terribly unprepared for its impact. "Phantom Sightings" is a sprawling exhibit, reminding us at every turn that the notion of a message in art is one that will likely only be glimpsed through the rear-view mirror--hindsight will explain to us what we once had, how prescient a few lonely artists were.

Even when presented as "experiential" art, the best shows are the ones we recall years later when the unique experience that they gave us then has become ubiquitous in the art of the present. When one looks at the art of each decade, we see time after time that the inscrutable and unfashionable suddenly take hold, establishing permanency in their late bloom. On the other hand, blue-chip status seekers such as Eli and Edythe Broad are historically more likely to disappear into the institutional attic; with a commitment only to status, all the investment dollars of the day don't add up to a single dowser's divining rod.

While the average artwork at BCAM's debut exhibit is a painting or sculpture, "Phantom Sightings" is not about

to cooperate with your need to see it all in one viewing. BCAM's room of dilapidated 1980s art stars reveals that their then-message of hot-money and easy portability hid a superficial nothingness that presently screams for some other meaning to be attached to it. But what is there beyond the names of the artists as former headlines? Beyond the faded price tags for David Salle, Phillip Taffe, Robert Longo etc.? Their "masterpieces" sure as hell didn't predict the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Jason Villegas, "Celestial Situation,"
2006, video projection with wall
drawing, dimensions variable.



Artists Carlee Fernandez (l.)
and Scoli Acosta (r.)



Scolli Acosta, "Floral Bouquet Headdress," 2007, acrylic, graphite, gouache, ink-jet print and blue eye shadow on paper, 32 1/2 x 42". Photo courtesy of Daniel Reich Gallery, New York.

Comparing BCAM's market manipulations with "Phantom Sightings'" free-range experimentation reinforces that the impact and lasting value of art is not understood at its birth. This is an upset to the applecart of economics that regularly tries to make art a commodity, rhythmically failing to do so with each and every stock market correction. Just because you cannot hear the hiss does not mean there isn't a slow leak in the Damien Hirst balloon. If you are on the bandwagon at the wrong time though, you will be stranded at the side of the investment highway with a flat tire in your portfolio.

In addition to being the most adventurous art exhibit at LACMA since, well since ever, "Phantom Sightings" delivers a stinging rebuke to many ingrained assumptions about identity and ethnicity, revealing both to be mutably indefinable whenever either seems approaching certainty. All assumptions are overturned. One chump at the press preview was under the impression he was covering a "Chicano" art show and suggested with a laugh that the artists posing for a group press photo at the entrance to the show all turn to the right as if they were there for their mug shots. Disappointing, but it would have been interesting to see the dejection on his face when there was nary a Señora de Guadalupe around. The very nature of the art in "Phantom Sightings" defeats presuppositions, stereotypes and cliché with a fierce fervor that champions the individual act over collective identity.



Artists Harry Gamboa, Jr. (l.)
and Sandra De La Loza (r.).



Gary Garay, "Paleta Cart," 2004, customized paleta
cart with lacquer and enamel, 36 x 46 x 33".



Delilah Montoya, "Humane Borders Water
Station," 2004, digital print, 14 1/2 x 31 1/4".
Photo courtesy of Patricia Correia Gallery.

This is an exhibit that posits action within aesthetics as the most righteous of all political action. Almost 40 years ago, the forbearers of "Phantom Sightings," a four-artist collective called ASCO (Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Herron III, and Patssi Valdez), held a tea-party at the center-divider of a

boulevard in East L.A. after some street riots. But there was something more important than this brave and creative action of insisting that art was a part of everyday life instead of just a reflection of it. The artists in ASCO made sure to document their action, and as "Phantom Sightings" shows, the "duty now for the future" has called a generation of artists to resist selling out with predictable art strategies and push the documentation of a thousand blooming tea parties straight into the belly of the art institutions.

If the artists in "Phantom Sightings" are even to be loosely labeled as Chicano, it is only as part of their resumé's, not apart from their CV, nor as their sole calling cards. The best thing about being a gavacho in the East L.A. art scene is never having someone try to tell me what my duty to the community is. The courtesy is not extended to many, as most everyone has a goddamned opinion these days. All of the artists in this show have been confronted with notions of the collective within the reality of being the outsider. There's inevitably either a chucklehead in the room expecting them to be posing for a mugshot any day now, or one of many self-appointed identity cops demanding that their art jump through loyalty hoops designed to retain them as feeble illustrators for "the cause." Their art against predictability is not a careful balance of aesthetics and career strategies. It is a two-pronged assertion of freedom within identity, an artist's right to embrace and ignore the conflicts of context.

Delilah Montoya makes cool desert landscape photographs of watering stations for nationals coming over the border. Without the gorgeous technique, this is a boring pamphlet, and without the politics it is airhead shutterbugging. Sandra De La Loza gives a video tour of an obscure Downtown L.A. monument that has long had its majestic central fountain removed. We are left guessing which grand tribute of yesterday is next, and of course, with two sides to every story, whether we will be the victors left writing our version of history on future monuments. Scolli Acosta has a room documenting many of his performances in a way that adds a relic

status to the homemade props and paintings gathered at LACMA. Acosta and Arturo Romo share a connection in that they drew inspiration for their separate installations from the very same East L.A. mural depicting a hippie-era Chicano couple as manifesting the virtues of race and love.

Acosta's expressionistic painting of this pair went on a world tour of installations and performances before this exhibit, while Romo's tighter depiction is part of an exterior wall with many references outside to prepare us for visiting a laboratory of pseudo-metaphysics on the inside. Romo delights in confounding meaning and makes it impossible to look too deeply into his installation without treading on a striped shag carpet the colors of the Mexican flag. Damned if you do, de-prived if you don't. Carlee Fernandez depicts a union with the men in her aesthetic life--photographs of her with famous men (Megadeth singer Dave Mustaine, poet Charles Bukowski) depict distance as much or more than they depict desire. Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios give us coffin sculptures that are shaped like an upright adjustable bed, the pair begging for two corpses to animate them in a race to the hereafter--and yet, the clean cool coffin structures function just as sculpturally as a minimal monolith without narrative. Gary Garay pushes a decorated popsicle cart past knockoff merchandise--two staples in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. But he has made sneakers from cardboard. These unwearable, unlicensed Nikes are critique and celebration inextricably linked.

When I returned from viewing "Phantom Sightings" my elation was challenged by a Netflix envelope near the television. It contained the DVD of an independent film, "Art School Confidential." I hadn't heard it ever discussed, and it came and went so fast from the theaters that it was a bit shocking to hear that everyone had seen it when, subsequently, I mentioned it in passing to art world acquaintances. While it was not on the level of greatness as art biopics such as "Frida" and "Basquiat," "ASC" was about as good as John Waters' art world opus "Pecker," which comes up in conversation now and again at lunches and chats with

the art set. Something about "Art School Confidential" cut deeper, though. Everyone admitted to having seen it when it was mentioned, but nobody celebrated it in conversation--they lamented it. Like Pope Innocent commenting to Velasquez on the ruthless evil apparent in his portrait, the film was "Too True!"

The film is a simple tale of an artist going to art school to pursue a dream. The protagonist is taken aback when art that is lousier than his is celebrated. We see people turn against him as he speaks out against mediocrity. All the while a sub-plot about a serial murder investigation begins to draw him in as a suspect. One small character, Bardo, near the film's beginning does a lot of the narrative's heavy lifting. He sidles up to the protagonist in drawing class and points out how every student there fulfills a cliché, from the dumb hippie to the angry feminist. Thus prompted, we then see every student and faculty character living up to a preconceived notion, the assumption being that there is the same set of characters at the art school across town, at each art school in the country and throughout the art world outside of the educational context. After having just viewed a museum exhibit that refused to conform, here was a film with a world-view bent on shackling everyone to an easily defined and inescapable stereotype.



"Art School Confidential" film poster.



Carlee Fernandez, "Self Portrait: Portrait of My Father, Manuel Fernandez," 2006, C-print, 2 prints each 18 x 12". Photo courtesy Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles.



Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios, "Rigor Motors," 2004-06, wood, speaker box fabric, car jack, coffin handles, 78 x 96 x 96". Photo: Kristine Thompson.

The paradox that "Art School Confidential" seems to have too painfully revealed is this: the art world today attempts to either defeat or exploit cliché, but stumbles in becoming a stereotype itself. Exploiting is easy when the irony can be poured on like a thick maple syrup over bland pancakes. Defeating the predictable is the far greater challenge to artists today. Once the art audience "learns the lesson" of what is being challenged, this very challenge itself becomes a static, definable entity. This is not germane to the art world. To the tenured professor or long-time school administrator, students at a university critiquing conformity in outlandish dress are easily dumped into the mental box of conformity-critics. So much art today

strives to contain an "out" to separate itself from the perception of being easily-defined. To define an artwork, an artist, an art approach, is to control it, to possess it without paying for it. Definition destroys. Vague propositions are the norm, the "out" by which so much art attempts to escape the prison of certainty. It is vague except when it is clever, trying to get "out" of your assumptions by emulating the punch line of stand up comedy or the mass-circulation awe of a Ripley's "Believe it or Not" headline. Outside of the clever, we are left with so much ambiguous artwork. The pathetic side of this is the apologetic nature of the artists authoring so much of this work. They are truly sorry the art world demands conformity to the ambiguous in lieu of being understood.

The artists in "Phantom Sightings" share a heritage that Hollywood would just as well sum up with "The Milagro Beanfield War;" a heritage that political demographers would just as well sum up as too loyal to vote Republican, too traditional to vote Obama; a heritage that the art world expects to be a mural under a decade of graffiti. Defeating cliché in expression is not some romantic battle for these artists. Nor is it a laborsome struggle, pobresita. It is layers of life under one skin of many meanings. Years back, visiting ASCO member Gronk, I saw a sign for Brooklyn Avenue hanging in his live/work space downtown. This was a main drag in Boyle Heights dating back from when it was a Jewish neighborhood. The street was renamed for Cesar Chavez in 1994. Gronk had "acquired" the sign at that time. Some might see a tacky decoration in the corner of his loft, others a sentimental memento with an underscored passion in how it got there, some might see a broad-minded defiance to forced politicized identity; others though, would understand this sign as the phantom sighting (of what once was) that it is.

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