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Current Shows

Eric Wesley

Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples, Italy

Courtesy Fondazione Morra Greco, Napoli. Photo: Gennaro Navarra

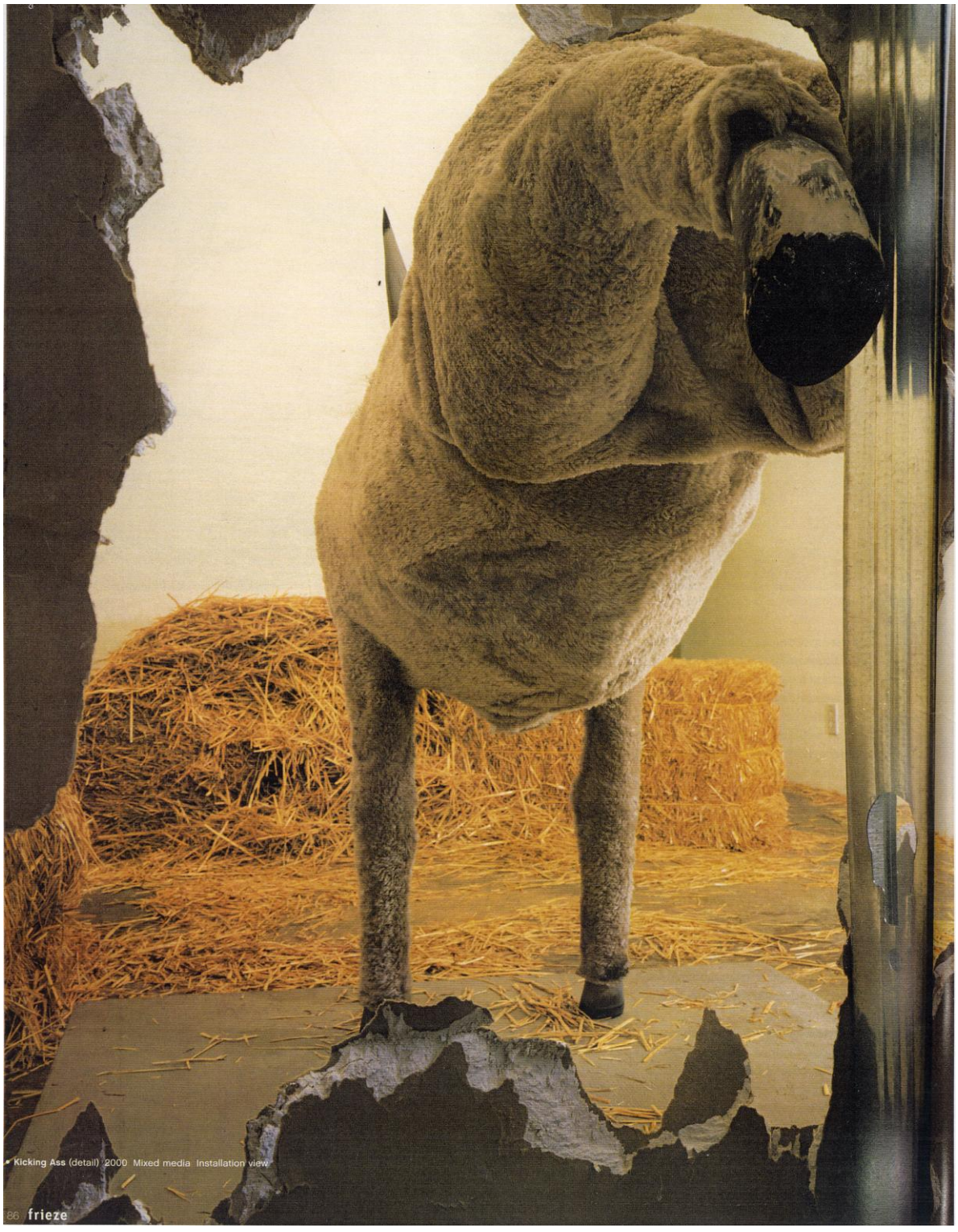
Eric Wesley's *Spa fice* (2007) is a multi-sensory experience, an interactive installation expressly designed for Naples' new project space, the Fondazione Morra Greco. A steep stairwell leads to a cellar carved from volcanic sandstone. The sweet smell of gas permeates the clammy atmosphere. Natural light creeps through small windows, but the principal sources of illumination are glowing screensavers projected onto the walls. Arguing neighbours and whizzing scooters from the streets above the cellar play background accompaniment to the sounds of the installation's protagonists: a humming gas heater and the rhythmic slapping of water in a large wading pool. Established as emblematic of the 'Art of Idleness' by sightseers on the late-18th-century Grand Tour, Naples is the perfect location for *Spa fice*, Wesley's exploration of the age-old concepts *otium* and *negotium* (Latin for leisure and business). 'Everyone knows the story of the traveller in Naples who saw 12 beggars lying in the sun and offered a lira to the laziest,' Bertrand Russell begins his 1932 essay 'In Praise of Idleness', '11 of them jumped up to claim it, so he gave it to the twelfth. This traveller was on the right lines.' *Spa fice* nods to Russell and winks at Tom Hodgkinson's recent *How to be Idle* (2004), rendering homage to socialist activist Paul Lafargue's belief that technology was the 'God' to liberate men from wage-labour, rewarding them with idleness and freedom.

Wesley fuses sculpture, installation and architecture to create his combination Spa-Office. A changing room complete with robes and cotton shorts initiates visitors who the artist hopes will disrobe and participate in his work. Nearby, a laptop with wifi sits on a table surfaced with white tiles: all of the installation's environments are created using variations on this same minimalist furniture design. In the

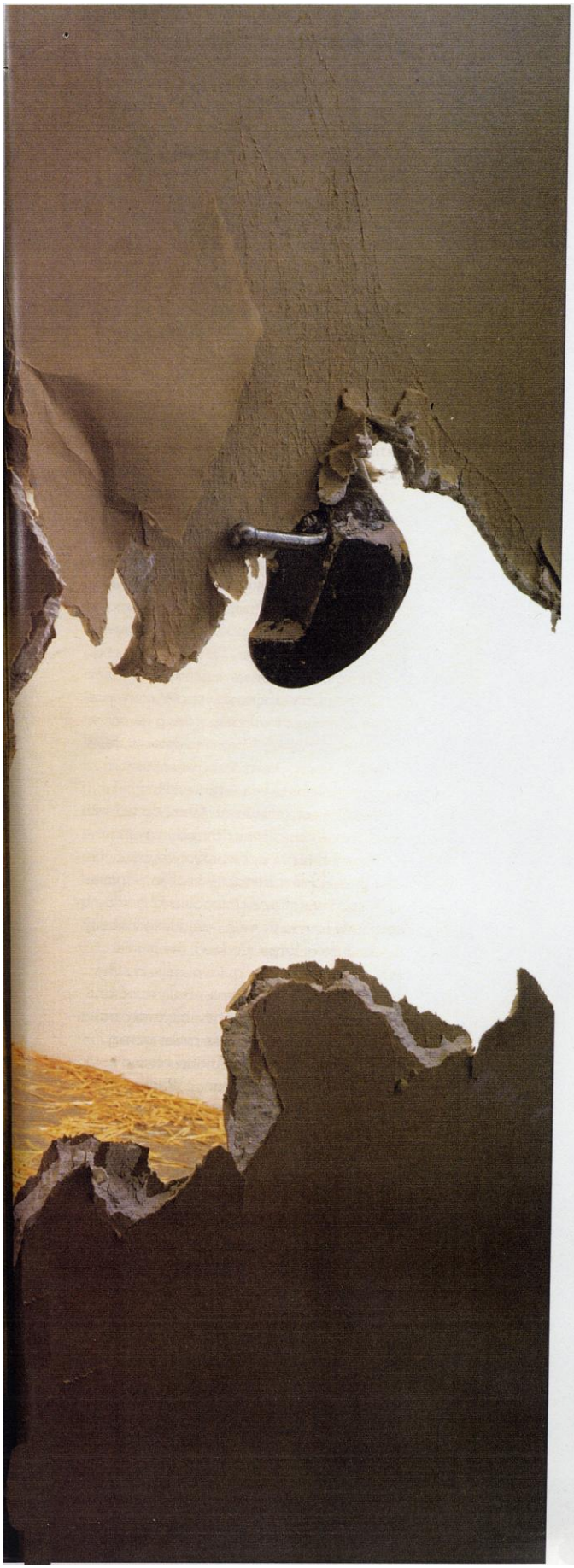
sauna, pool, and studio, a table-auger assemblage repeatedly appears: two large holes are born through a low table directly into the cellar floor, an auger is left resting at a diagonal in one hole, while the element protruding from the second varies in each environment. In the sauna, a large cylindrical gas heater is planted in the table's second hole; in the pool, a stream of water spits from the second hole to the pool's opposite end. These assemblages suggest that Spa fice is self-sufficient, that its gas and water derive from sources directly below the exhibition space (which is of course not the case). A precarious walkway of furniture lined up across the pool's centre invites visitors to pass under the arch of water to an artist's studio. Punctured bags of gesso and cement are posed among funnels, cement puddles and gesso-filled plastic bottles, a composition that recalls Wesley's training as a sculptor. In the studio, the table-auger assemblage is again repeated but its second hole is empty.

The Internet is a constant presence in *Spa fice*. In Wesley's world, as in that of Lafargue's, the computer is the omnipresent, all-knowing force offering us the freedom to skip from work to play effortlessly, our salvation from the 'Right to Work'. 'Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish,' scolds Russell at the end of his essay, 'but there is no reason to go on being foolish for ever.'

Emily Verla Bovino



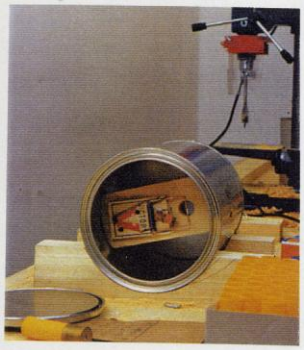
Kicking Ass (detail) 2000 Mixed media Installation view



Julian Myers on Eric Wesley

Just for kicks

A recent photograph of Eric Wesley shows the artist on the corner of Pico Boulevard, near his studio in Los Angeles. He stands in the indefinite pose of the dealer: wary, attentive, non-committal, simultaneously open and defensive.



• **Ouchi** 2002 Installation view

urb Servin (detail) 2002 Mixed media Installation view

Ready to run, ready to sell. But sell what? Drugs? Contraband? Or art? Picture Daniel Buren selling rock instead of painting stripes.

Or – and this comparison seems closer to home – David Hammons hawking snowballs on Cooper Square in New York City (*Bliz-AARD Ball Sale*, 1983). Wesley's recent work seems to owe a great deal to Hammons, from its proclivity for literalizing slang – compare Hammons' *Pissed Off* (1981) with Wesley's *Kicking Ass* (2000) – to the hilarious negativity of its institutional critique. Wesley's work is often straight-faced, serious in its intent but also deeply funny in its off-centre imagining of what an artist does and how he occupies himself. He shoplifts and schemes. He is a dysfunctional bootlegger and a failed conman. The 'drug dealer' photograph is one such case: Wesley's performance is just faintly out of tune with his role, his face on the edge of cracking up at his own half-arsed enactment of the drug dealer stereotype. And doesn't the shifty pose of the dealer seem uncomfortably familiar? It's a little too close to the solicitations of an artist working the collectors at an opening. The subtle subtext of desperation: 'Buy my shit, *please*'.

ntitled (Mug Shot #3) 2002 C-type print 130×100 cm

Wesley's recent installations have taken a similar tack, though their methods and imagery vary from place to place. In each Wesley has transformed the gallery into the scene of a parasitic, dysfunctional sub-economy – one that echoes that of the gallery itself. The idea seems to have originated with Wesley's contribution to the 'Snapshot' exhibition (2001) at the Hammer Museum at UCLA (named after Armand Hammer, who made his money through the Occidental Oil Corporation). The artist initially proposed installing a Jiffy Lube (the American oil-change franchise) in the museum's car park: Wesley designed working hydraulics to pump the dirty engine oil from his car through the museum offices and into the galleries, using the existing water pipes as their host. The museum, unsurprisingly, did not go for it. Instead Wesley made them a 'proper' oil painting, with unaesthetic splodges of used oil from his car. In reproductions the work seems to ventriloquize a certain convention of abstraction – Vija Celmins, maybe? But up close the painting was grimy and reeking, oil painting at its (literally) crudest extreme.

Another installation, at Galleria Franco Noero in Turin, posed as a custom paint shop called Ouchi (a bastardized version of Gucci), which sold only red and black paint. Behind the scenes, however, visible beyond the unoccupied sales counter, was a disorganized workshop that exposed Ouchi's true function: the paint cans were actually weapons – primitive grenades. Installed in each was a bomb made of a mousetrap and a shotgun cartridge, and the shop was thus revealed to be a front for a low-level arms manufacturer. Conceivably, the paint cans were functional explosives, though the crumpled cigarette packets and open beers scattered around the terrorist workshop suggested something more muddled than dangerous.

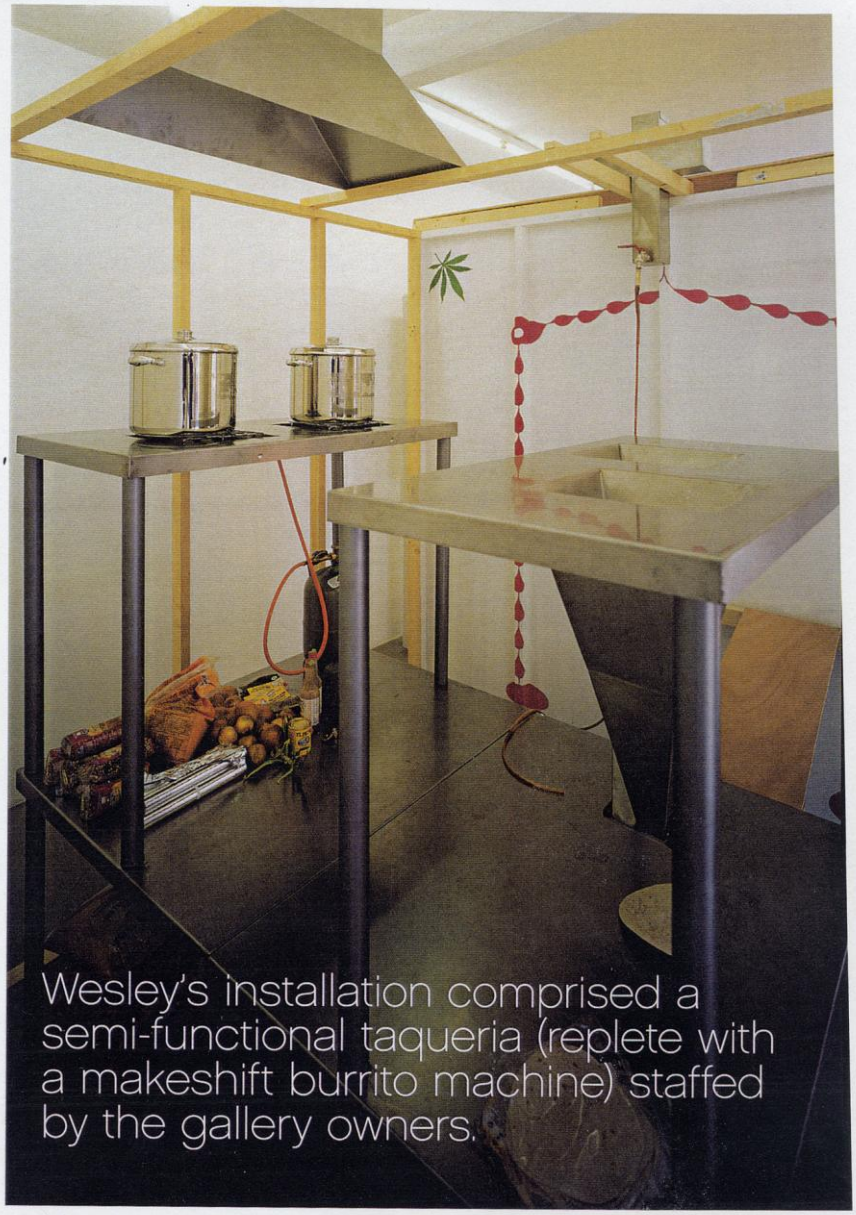
These installations are not merely reflexive – the gallery posing as a paint store posing as a terrorist workshop posing as an innocent art gallery. They also refer to the secretive, quasi-parasitic businesses that are everywhere in Los Angeles. Pico Boulevard is crowded with them, dotted with ramshackle car-refitting shops, scavenger and second-hand stores, taco vans and the like, the kind of unregulated sub-economies and weird, vaguely legal modes of getting by that have little to do with – and little visibility in – culture at large. (Indeed, the whole Pico/Crenshaw area, quite a large neighbourhood wedged between Hollywood and downtown LA, is apparently, bizarrely, nameless.) How do these places make money? Who are their patrons? And what else is going on behind the scenes? What are they a front for? What are they really making in there? They don't really sell artworks in those galleries, do they?

It is this concept – the gallery as a front for more grimy or suspicious production – that has structured Wesley's most recent installations. In his 2002 exhibition at Meyer Riegger Gallery, Karlsruhe, Wesley installed a surreal, semi-functional taqueria staffed by the gallery's owners, replete with a makeshift machine that actually assembled the burritos and a hollow cross full of Tapatio hot sauce suspended from the rafters. The actual workspace of the taqueria was invisible on entering the galleries – the completed

burrito emerged from the makeshift kitchen through an odd hole in a minimalist façade. It was only by ignoring the façade and going behind the scenes that one witnessed the hidden work area: rice cookers, puddles of Tapatio, gallerists in hairnets, mesh bags of onions and six feet of faecal burrito spread out on tin foil. They made burritos once, tasted the wares and then left the uneaten leftovers and unwashed workspace there for the duration of the exhibition. The installation evokes Paul McCarthy's squalid, ketchup-covered performance scenes, but the comparison ends there – these are leftovers of labour, of production, not a tantrum. They really made burritos and ate them. For that day the gallery was a functioning taqueria.

In his landmark polemic *The Tourist* (1976) the writer and geographer Dean MacCannell argues that an anxiety about authenticity structures modern social life.[1] Ironically, he claims, authenticity is increasingly something that needs to be performed or faked. Historically, social establishments have been divided into front and back (dining-room and kitchen, reception and offices, showroom and factory), a division constructed to conceal those props and activities that might discredit the performance up front. Now, though, as large-scale production becomes more and more invisible in the West, those props and activities are often made visible strategically to dispel the inauthenticity of the commercial façade, and thereby endow the performance with a powerful reality effect. Examples of this are common today – guided tours of factories, for instance, or restaurants that stage the preparation of food in the dining-room. Something similar could be said about Janet Cardiff's video tours through the off-limits areas of museums.

Wesley's installations are a fabric of such false fronts and off-stage settings, though the moment of their authenticity is always incomplete, compromised, giving way to even more submerged layers of meaning. Take, for instance, his December 2002 exhibition at Metro Pictures, New York. There his plan centred on the production, transfer and sale of tobacco, with minimalist hothouses, a hand-welded trailer for illegally trafficking cigarettes, and secret rooms filled with stockpiles of custom-repackaged Marlboro Lights available for sale at competitive prices. The exhibition worked on many levels – as a cynical riff on Philip Morris' sponsorship of cutting-edge art, maybe – but most of all as a pirate economy operating semi-legally on the gallery's premises. Again the work is profoundly funny in what it imagines a gallery doing – here it is cast as an unregulated cigarette distributor, and the gallerist as a bootleg tobacconist. An art gallery, for Wesley, is a system of exchange, in the image of the market but also beneath it, more primitive, more spurious. And if it is at its base an economic system, then it can traffic tobacco or burritos as easily as art.



Wesley's installation comprised a semi-functional taqueria (replete with a makeshift burrito machine) staffed by the gallery owners.

• **Untitled** 2002 Wood, stainless steel, burner, gas clyinder, food, acrylic paint, plaster 320×410×350 cm

The façades and false back rooms in the Metro Pictures installation never quite produce a reality effect in MacCannell's sense. Wesley's parasitic economies are always real in some sense or other, of course: you can eat the burritos; the paint-can grenades might actually explode; you can smoke the cigarettes. They work. The engine of the work sputters to life at least once. But there's always another purpose, another layer of privacy just out of sight. Letters – ZBS – secretly built into the trailer's frame. More back rooms to discover. Cigarettes concealed in the walls, in the ceiling panels. Wesley's work is deeply attuned to the pleasures of this kind of secrecy – the underground economy, the secret hand signal, the complex sign language of the drug dealer's body. Keep your secrets, he seems to say; they're all you've got.

1. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

The New York Times
Art in Review
FRIDAY, MAY 21, 2010

*Image not printed in The New York Times

Eric Wesley

'D'Carts Blanche and New Paintings'

Bortolami
510 West 25th Street
Chelsea
Through June 19

Meta art — art about art — is pretty tired by now. There is not much about Modernism and the art system that it hasn't demystified. Nevertheless, Eric Wesley's exhibition cleverly invokes some of the basic preoccupations of this narrow, conceptualist genre.

To satirize the myth of the authentic gesture, there are Abstract Expressionist-size, snowy-white canvases, each bearing a wide, brushy, diagonal swath of blue, a drippy blob of yellow and an explosive splatter of red.

On the floor are three mostly white vehicles resembling diminutive golf carts that a big-time art producer might use in his factory-studio. Punning on the name of René Descartes, they are called "D'Carts." One is upright, one lying on its side and one lifted high by an inner extension mechanism. These positions represent the coordinates of the Cartesian grid, Modernist art's favorite armature. Placed here and there to further metaphorically mark out the boundaries of modern creativity are small traffic cones made of stainless steel and painted glossy primary and secondary colors. Finally, there is this grace note: a slot has been cut into the top of the doorway leading to the rear gallery to allow passage of the biggest paintings and to debunk the fantasy of the gallery as a sacrosanct temple.

The exhibition title, "D'Carts Blanche and New Paintings," hints at the big meaning: we are imprisoned by an all-pervasive Cartesian grid, a vast, technological web wherein our most soulfully expressive gestures are like the struggles of captured flies. So, Mr. Wesley, how do we escape and where to?

KEN JOHNSON

Los Angeles Times
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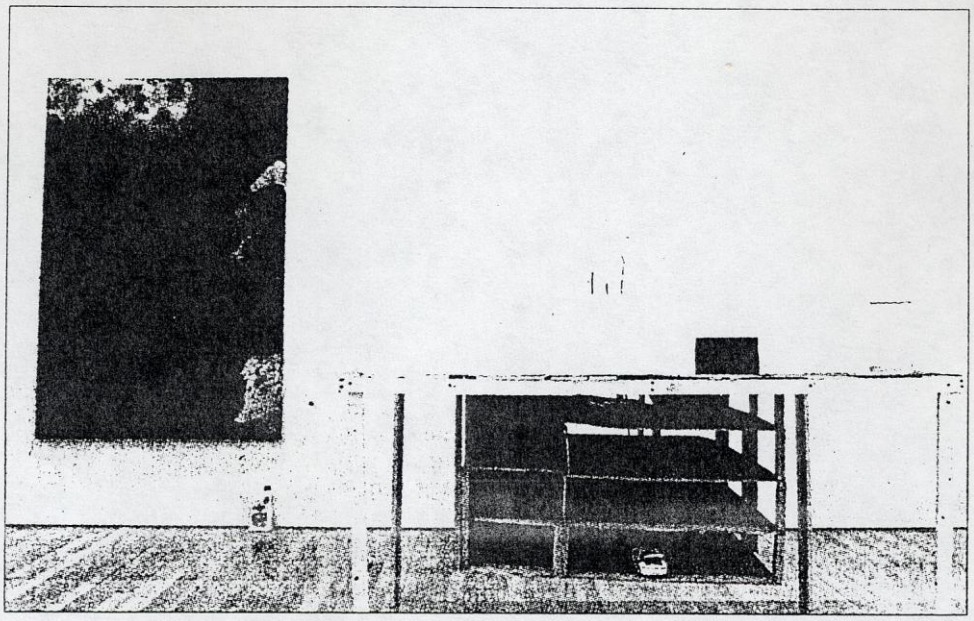
ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Eric Wesley's sculpture is a kind of engine that both produces and explains his painting.

A 'Snapshot' of L.A. Artists

Exhibit at UCLA Hammer Museum captures thoughtful creations from the burgeoning, diverse Southland scene.

Art Review

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

Covering several bases all at once, Eric Wesley has contributed a drawing, a painting and a sculpture to "Snapshot: New Art from Los Angeles," the much-anticipated showcase of work by 25 mostly young, mostly unknown artists that opened Sunday at the UCLA Hammer Museum. Wesley's drawing is a conceptual plan for the sculpture, while the sculpture is a kind of engine that produces and explains his painting.

The foam core and cardboard sculpture is a roughhewn model of the Hammer museum's building, the Occidental Petroleum office tower to which the Westwood museum is attached and the hidden, six-story underground parking structure that serves them both. Down on the bottom level of the parking garage a model car is shown undergoing an oil change.

The used motor oil gets pumped up through the building in plastic tubing to the art museum—rising from a hellish underground, as it were, to a heavenly space above—where the push of a button on the model causes it to spurt as if

Please see Knight, F4

Knight, Christopher, "A 'Snapshot' of L.A. Artists", *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2001, pp F1, F4
(continued)

Knight: 'Snapshot' of Thoughtful Creations

Continued from F1

from a tiny oil derrick. Hanging on the gallery wall nearby, a large stretched canvas is stained with dirty brown splotches of motor oil.

Wesley's wryly funny work considers the production of an oil painting for an art museum that was founded as an extension of the corporate headquarters of an L.A. oil company (Occidental was once headed by the museum's notorious namesake, the late Armand Hammer). Art inevitably participates in the complex economy of society's power, this savvy ensemble suggests, while faith that an artist might somehow stand outside the system on an uncorrupted pedestal is misplaced. How art participates is what counts.

"Snapshot" is aptly titled. The show doesn't mean to be a comprehensive survey. How could it, when L.A. is now producing more worthwhile new artists than perhaps any other city?

Nor does it propose a theme or manufacture a trend. Instead, it means to participate thoughtfully in the burgeoning scene, which is fueled by multiple factors: the region's much remarked abundance of important art schools; its rarely acknowledged plethora of art galleries; its sizable and expanding number of regularly published critics; its recent eruption of weekend exhibition spaces, from Venice to Chinatown; and more. In the Olden Days—which is to say, before the art scene exploded in the 1980s—there wouldn't have been much need.

And although some of the artists do have gallery representation—painter Thomas Eggerer, sculptor Christie Fields, mixed-media artist Katie Grinnan, etc.—the fact that most are wholly unknown quantities lends welcome freshness to the enterprise.

A few other surprises also emerge. Photography and video are barely present here—and very uneven. Painting and sculpture form the bulk of the show.

Installation art is frequently a hybrid form, which draws heavily on traditional painting and sculpture. Wesley's painting-sculpture-drawing installation is a case in point. So is Mari Eastman's group of wistful, ruminative paintings and works on paper, which are scattered across adjoining walls like leaves on an autumn lawn.

Yunhee Min, in her strongest and most ambitious piece to date, applies oddly colored house paints in wide, flat bands to a 36-foot-long plane of drywall that angles out from the supporting gallery wall. Painting meshes with sculpture to create a perceptual conundrum in architectural space.

Monique van Genderen uses vinyl films and pale enamels in a lovely, free-form abstraction, which seems poised to evaporate like mist on a mirror. An immense mural, its visually ephemeral quality is the opposite of the didactic declarations one expects from a wall painting.

Lisa Lapinski's installation is made from materials that might be more commonly associated with the genre—plaster, linoleum, cement and clay—together with cans, bottles and boxes of food representative of diverse nationalities. These materials are clustered and dispersed on the floor and against the walls, creating a strangely evocative sense of a shifting urban landscape that seems distinctly Southern Californian.

Mark Bradford's big, delicate, abstract collages are made by layering thousands of wrapping papers—the kind hairdressers use to give a permanent wave—onto unstretched canvas. The collages' transparent color comes from hair dye. In these organic grids, which shimmer like stained glass, high style collides with social style.

Hair turns up elsewhere in the show—for good and ill. Linda Kim's rather pointless video records in excruciating, even gruesome close-up a pair of tweezers plucking a square patch of human hair, one strand at a time, from an unidentified person's scalp, idly reversing a common plastic surgery procedure.

More productively, Kori Newkirk threads multicolored beads on long strands of artificial hair, then suspends them like a beaded curtain from a metal bracket. The work adapts a hip-hop fashion into surprisingly nuanced, daydreamy pictures showing sky glimpsed over tree tops and suburban houses.

Jonathan Pylypchuck's mixed-media collages assemble an unusually poignant cast of innocent, stick-figure characters, who are buffeted about in desolate landscapes. Their fragility is underscored by the bits of wood, string, paper and cloth from which they've been cobbled together, and the environments of sand and glitter in which they reside.

Design of a more traditional type emerges in Robert Stone's achingly hip, mid-century modern architectural model of an elaborate luxury motel, wrapped around a swimming pool. The dazzling design, meant as an actual proposal for Palm Springs, is sheathed in shimmery and translucent gold panels. The deluxe motel creates a One Night Stand Utopia for a mobile recreational society.

The strongest photographs in this otherwise photo-poor show are Florian Maier-Aichen's glossy pictures, which have the slick allure of travel posters. Yet, in one image his commercial jet doesn't seem to fly through space, as much as it feels ominously suspended in a gray void amid gathering clouds. In another, a sleek factory or office building, shown beside a greensward, appears reflected in a river or pond; but the building's watery reflection is blurred, while its surroundings are crisp and clear. Maier-Aichen injects quiet dread into commercial images of desire.

Ronald Santos' beguiling "Lovers" is a simple, sly juxtaposition of two abstract video projections. Two pulsing rings of color (each looks sort of like an esophagus photographed from the inside) quiver in sync with an audio track of moaning and yelping sounds. The one-minute loop manages to encompass all the ups and downs, pleasures and hurts that chronicle an entire relationship.

Some of the work in "Snapshot" is derivative or thin. Bea Schlingelhoff's hand-rendered drawings of the resumés of all the show's participating artists' put an Expressionist spin on Dave Muller's well-known drawings of artists' exhibition announcements. Alex Slade's forlorn photographs of global urban architecture are generic examples of a common post-Conceptual genre. (His quirky sculptures of linear aluminum, whose curving horizontal shapes are based on airplane flight paths, have more potential). Deb Lacusta shows exceptional acting skills in her video performance, where she's repeatedly slapped across the face by an unseen hand; but the piece feels like an unfinished sketch.

Still, the exhibition as a whole emphasizes individual curatorial enthusiasms on the part of knowledgeable observers—its curatorial team of Hammer director Ann Philbin, chief curator Russell Ferguson, projects curator James Elaine and assistant curator Claudine Isé. Simply call it a service show—not flashy or grandiloquent, but pleasurable and useful.

• *UCLA Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood, (310) 443-7020, through Sept. 2. Closed Monday.*