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Supersonic Review; original text

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Supersonic, the eight institution collective MFA show, demonstrates in practice something silently observed: that while each of the participating colleges and universities is unique in its program strengths, Southern California is a rhizomatic community with a good deal of cooperation and interaction. *Supersonic* capitalizes on this fact, while pointing to a future that fosters these interactions. The exhibition also accentuates the range of related influences that artists share regionally, while still demonstrating the unique character each program is renowned for. The exhibition was also held in tandem with the Southern California Consortium of Art Schools' (SoCCAS) inaugural event: a symposium on art in Southern California from the nineties to present. The same schools that organized *Supersonic* are also founding members of SoCCAS. The impressive exhibition of art accompanied by equally progressive discourse offers an excellent example of Southern California's vibrant scene.

Supersonic joins together for the first time eight regional colleges and universities (UC Irvine, San Diego, and Los Angeles; Art Center; Otis; Claremont; USC; and CalArts) in a truly impressive display of talents. Strangely, UC Santa Barbara was missing from this line up. The show is held in Pasadena at Art Center's new Wind Tunnel, the site of a former WWII-era aircraft aerodynamics test site – a massive space (16k square feet) that is similar in feel to LA's MoCA-Geffen. Here in this cavernous building, the artists' works intermingle, showing little regard for school-affiliation, and effectively reproducing the vibrant variety of styles and mediums that call Southern California a home.

Opening night at *Supersonic* was probably unlike any MFA show ever seen in Southern California. Normally with little or no curation, MFA shows tend to be an amorphous hodgepodge of student work, accompanied by a general sentiment of 'thank god, we've graduated'. While *Supersonic* did include only graduating MFA work, it seemed like careful attention was given by the MFA organizers to the works' installation as a cohesive body, instead of an assortment of random pieces. What came through from their collective efforts was a show with diverse thematic range, but with an effort to work with these differences: even if an individual piece seemed lackluster, the show was exciting because there was no telling what piece would come next (the walls and rooms gave some vague indication, but nothing beyond that). Having said this, there were a number of remarkable pieces that deserve mention, a few of which are noted in this review.

Entering the exhibition space it is immediately evident that there is a lot to see. Among the first pieces is an installation by Claudia Bucher (*Kinocognophore*, 2003; Art Center). The dis/embodiment of motion and space through sculpture and video is a reoccurring theme at *Supersonic*, and Bucher's piece is among the pithiest. In its visceral convolution of sculpted forms with fiber optic fissures, Bucher's work is vaguely reminiscent of Deborah Ascheim's sculptural installation. Bucher's eerie video installations

complement the cyber-organic forms, casting dim and constantly changing hues of colored light around the darkened room.

Space and the plasticity of its (and our) embodiment are familiar themes in Southern California art practice; both the urban and rural terrain seem to lend themselves easily to the vastness of open space (remember Baudrillard's shock in his *America*), and yet that terrain is being constantly redeveloped, resurfaced, and redefined, resembling in many ways the constantly undulating waves that are emblematic of California. This plasticity – the instability of what is represented as authentic or real – is carried further still through the silver screen's superficial glitz and glamour. That awkward plasticity of California society is represented in the painting *Total portrait with no ambition* by Christiane Lyons (2004; UCLA), and in Monica Furmanksi's *Land and Sea* (2004; CGU), where surface and horizon blend without distinction, reminiscent of Vija Celmins' work. In a more flatfooted but not uninteresting sense, Jill Miller's *Les Grand Odalisques* (2004; UCLA) remediates art history through the plasticity of video. Here Miller's two opposing framed screens displaying Ingres-like Odalisques that updating T.J. Clark's well known critique of Manet's *Olympia*. Miller's sets a series of live models in that famed pose, constantly shifting, moving, and staring at each other across the narrow passage that the viewer must walk between. Alternatively, Kevin Wingate sublimates a convention of marketing aesthetics and plasticity in his paintings, *are you sure Hank did it this way?* (untitled) (2004; UCSD), with a cooler nearby emphasizing the better parts of glamour's low brow hedonism (and filled with cheap beer opening night). Wingate's paintings evoke a wide range of historical references, from Venturi and Scott Brown's analysis of popular signage in L.A. inspired Las Vegas to the low rider customizations to Rubén Ortiz-Torres. Likewise Derrick Eady (*Silence #8*, 2004; UCI), and Christine Nguyen (*dusty climate sound soft rocketiers*, 2004; UCI) achieve a kind of luminosity similar to Light and Space artists of yore, but with the digital allusions that UCI has become noted for; while Whitney Stollich (*Landuse #1-3*, 2004; OtisCAD) renders the land plastic itself in a series of three diorama-like R-prints. Finally, a notable and progressive example of the dioramic plasticity of space may be found in an installation by Terry Chatkupt (*The Ozoneer*, 2004; CalArts): here a Sugimoto-esque miniature drive-in theater is complemented by a video apparently taken through the windows of a car driving. The theater's 'screen' is made from a single monitor that like Sugimoto's screens does not reflect a projector's light but glows and radiates by itself. This doubling of a drive-in theater watching driving (while ostensibly parked) renders the almost two dimensional proscenium installation reflexively ironic. Chatkupt's piece is hauntingly effective, especially considering its performative relationship to the silver screen of Southern California: we are watching ourselves projecting and straining to act ourselves out.

Among the other sculptures toying with themes of space is Matt Hope's loud, and possibly obnoxious *Horn Massive* (2004; UCSD). Perhaps the most prominent sculpture at the show, *Horn Massive*'s explosive sound invisibly sculpted the space around it on opening night. Made of steel, aluminum, and a few choice electrical components, and standing over 13 feet tall and almost as wide, the horn is a super-efficient sound chamber, capable of projecting its audio dominance with very little (electrical) effort. *Horn Massive* was developed from the idea of massives – large gatherings commonly

associated with rave culture – in order to create a semi-portable solution (the sculpture has barely functional casters) for these sonic events. The massive horn also looks imposing with its bristling structural steel fins, and the industrial DJ platform complete with mixing tables, an input array, and amplifiers. However, the artistic intersection between loosely self-organized networks and the madness of propaganda rallies is belied here. Unfortunately, the subtler points of military technology and sonic coercion seemed lost in the deafening noise, creating yet one more example of how repackaging for consumers makes dubious ideas seem acceptable.

Still, there's more than superfluous and noise. Patrick Marcoux and Ryan Taber's poignant and humorous (interactive!) dioramic installation is a testament to work that digs far beyond the surface. *Orange Grove in Sepia; Grampa Joad's Daydream* (2004; CalArts) ostensibly reconstructs in railroad miniature a few acres of the formerly ubiquitous California oranges grove. Raised up on its own platform, viewers climb a few stairs to gaze down at the goings on of the installation, and at the other people milling about the exhibition. Three pulleys are provided for viewers to lift up segments of the installation, unearthing a cross section of social interactions present beneath the grove's horizontal façade (the Southern California landscape). The raised sections show draftsmen, miners, and even what appears to be an enraged foreman; these characters are exhumed to the level of the grove, almost enabling the figures to walk out into the fresh air.

Metaphorically deep, Marcoux and Taber intelligently counterpoint numerous historical rhizomes (and their fictions) with a present 'reality' that actually pops-up, lending a physical parallel to the metaphoric 'mushrooming' plasticity.

Amidst the glamour and the noise, the subtle and quiet pieces were among the most effective. Perhaps it was because the crowds of hipsters preferred the commotion and hubbub of a happening leaving some places as havens for thought; for whatever reason, this amplified a number of excellent (yet silent) pieces. Christopher Russell's masterful installation, *Untitled (Becalmed)* (2002-2004; ArtCenter) intelligently mounted photographs adjacent to his well-composed wallpaper, returning the viewer to the pleasure of the beaux arts salon and the flaneur. Still, the disconcerting naiveté of the photographs encouraged a deeper reading through literally examining the wallpaper's miniature texts. Here in the loosely joined sentences there were only more clues and no answers: "It didn't matter. I knew what he had written. I could hear the sounds."

Similarly, David Dahl Khang's mesmerizing *Bleeding Book/ Linea Lingua* (2004; UCI) attracted viewers through his videos of china ink diffusing through water that were beautifully reflected in a large pool on the floor. This reflection was joined by two small monitors on either side that depicted a man painting/writing with a giant brush held in his mouth (making his whole body the handle extension of the brush) in Chinese calligraphic style. As beautiful and meditative as this was, it did not provide any quick conclusions: Khang's black pool was both a metaphoric surface and bottomless wellspring. Lastly, the works by John Richey (UCSD) and Jed Lind (CalArts) were differently intriguing. Richey's animation and installation, *everything under control* (2003-2004) was perhaps the most effective use of space in the show. A colorful stack of small pillows lent static color to monochromatic line-drawing animations of people in car accidents. This juxtaposition of innocence, play, and disaster created an environment balancing scenes of

aestheticized trauma surrounded by the colorful abstractions of playfully padded sculpture. Lind's *Limelight* (2004) was nearly the opposite: situated upstairs in a small black room, the double projections accompanied by a truly captivating and hypnotic musical score lacked immediate draw, but a more sustained experience made the piece magical and whimsical, nearly dreamlike. The limelight that the projection narrates concerns a synthetic light so strong that it can pierce the obfuscating mists of England and France, acting as beacon; in short, it is the recreation of the sun, as well as the projection of the synthetic (a similar light is used to recreate special effects for cinema).

A fair number of other pieces well worth seeing exist, including the obtuse but playful geodes in Melanie Nakaue's *The History of Creation as Conceived Through a Thunder Egg* (2004; CalArts), Myung Hwan Lim's meaningful explorations of social identity in *Drifting into Korea Town* (2004; CalArts), Yoko Iida's thoughtful *Tea House Project* (2004; USC), and Jonathan Phillips and Neil Stuber's collaborative publication *Scale* (UCSD). Of course, as with all shows, there are some less than perfect pieces. Yet these sour apples may make the show successful as a whole, since they act as a constant reminder for how vibrant, intelligent, and artful the next wave of artists is.

Art Center's vast Wind Tunnel exhibition space provides an apt summation of the pieces it houses for this show. Beneath the massive structure originally designed in the Forties to test military equipment – an epoch where super-sizes and super-technologies captured the national imagination – *Supersonic* reintroduces a California still vibrant in dreams, culture, and international presence. The scale of collaboration among the numerous participants in the already well-known Southern California art scene is an unprecedented event. The temptation to find parallel meaning in collaboration, given the state and country's current political climate, is not difficult; at the very least *Supersonic* clearly demonstrates that here the art scene is alive, thriving, and in fact, quite good. Whether or not *Supersonic* will become an annual event remains to be seen, but certainly such a gathering of art schools and artists serves everybody's interests. This show will not soon be forgotten as a momentous occasion in Southern California's art history.

Supersonic is open daily from 11am to 8pm, and runs through August 21st.
<http://www.artcenter.edu/supersonic/index.html>