

AND I STOP
AND I TURN
AND I GO FOR A RIDE

In conversation with artists Liz Craft and Stanya Kahn, Anna Gritz probes the legacy of the exhibition *Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s* in Los Angeles today. Almost twenty-five years later, Craft and Kahn's work continue to reveal the darkness and pleasures of West Coast banality, while urging the political potential of the abject as both subject and strategy.



Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s installation view at The Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, January 26–April 26, 1992. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Paula Goldman

The severity of some consequences can take us by surprise. Rita Valencia's protagonist in her short story, "Indecency," knows right away that something irreversibly had occurred when she erroneously uses the word "bag" in place of the word "back," an error that is actually what she calls "a leak of rotten soul juice" and that condemns her to live her slip of the pen.

"Bag—back—back—bag. It was impossible to escape the unbearable significance of the transposition. My back would henceforth be a bag."¹ Left with a weak, thin, malleable, leaking receptacle in place of what had provided her with strength and support, burden has become her backbone.

Valencia's painful story about disintegration, disgust, and uselessness speaks to the tenor that lies at the heart of Paul Schimmel's iconic exhibition and accompanying catalogue, *Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s*. Staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) in early 1992, it was a time turned rough by the release of the footage of Rodney King being excessively beaten by the L.A. police, and pregnant with the tensions of the impending riots resulting from the acquittal of the police officers in question.

For his first exhibition at MOCA, Schimmel assembled sixteen Californian artists from the past three decades, such as Chris Burden, Lynn Foulkes, Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Charles Ray, Nancy Rubin, and Manuel Ocampo; alongside a collection of fiction and poetry in the catalogue by ten L.A. underground writers, amongst them Charles Bukowski, Michelle T. Clinton, Dennis Cooper, Harry Gamboa Jr., Amy Gerstler, Rita Valencia, and Benjamin Weissman.

Provocatively conjuring the Manson murders in the title, for Schimmel, it was also about so much more that the title could convey: "a dominant myth of L.A. as a haven for cultism of all kinds, the dark underside of the standard image of L.A. as a sunny mecca of hedonism, populated by vacuous characters."² For him, the work in the show exposed the angst-ridden disorder of the modern soul in a *fin de siècle* Los Angeles, and a conscious countermovement to the "finish fetish" and "light and space" movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In this maelstrom, he recognizes a group of original L.A. voices independent from European trends or the markets of the east coast. Recognized values and styles appear irrelevant—taste up for debate and themes from everyday, working class, and corporate America "en vogue."

Through allowing space for the cheap thrills, kitsch, folksy aesthetics, violent transgressions, and new age narratives commonly associated with low or outsider culture, the work offers an implicated perspective on the space where irony and sincerity meet. Gritz talks to Liz Craft and Stanya Kahn about social abjection through the guise of class culture and the potential resurrection of these tropes as tools to challenge established cultural norms.

Anna Gritz is the curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin where she organized exhibitions with Paul Elliman, Nicholas Mangan, Margaret Honda and Lucy Skaer. Previously she held curatorial positions at the South London Gallery (SLG) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, where she curated film, performance, and exhibitions and commissioned new works by artists including Juliette Blightman, Michael E. Smith, Kapwani Kiwanga, Bonnie Camplin, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, and Lis Rhodes, as well as the group exhibitions *Last Seen Entering the Biltmore*, 2014 and independently *Duh – Art and Stupidity* (co-curated with Paul Clinton) at Focal Point Gallery, 2015. Her writing has been included in *Art Monthly*; *Art Agenda*; *frieze*; *frieze d/e*; *Mousse* and *Cura*, exhibition catalogues and books. She is currently working on an exhibition with Judith Hopf, scheduled to open at KW in February 2018.

- 1 Valencia, Rita: "Indecency," *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Catherine Gudis, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 153.
- 2 Schimmel, Paul: "Into the Maelstrom: L.A. Art at the End of the Century," *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Catherine Gudis, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 19.

STANYA KAHN IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA GRITZ

ANNA GRITZ

In many of your films we encounter settings on the outposts of societal organization: never-inhabited model homes, seaside wastelands, parking lots, highway rest stops, fast food chains, gas stations. What is your relationship to these sites?

STANYA KAHN

Here in southern California there is a lot of infrastructural excess, a trail of corporate detritus, a glut of architectural expressions of power and also of mediocrity, boredom, and waste. These are good spaces for me to inhabit as an artist who makes work about distress, disorientation, and agency, or the lack thereof, and with a spirit of resistance to a suffocating status quo.

I suppose anxiety and depression are at the core of everything I make, but here, we get to deal with it outside—in dirt and gravel and sand and dead grass, under an overbearing sun. These "outposts of societal organization" in my work are part sci-fi (*War of the Worlds* had a big impact as a kid); part punk (a DIY ethos of inhabiting the abandoned and making new use of spaces, whether squats, skate spots, or fly-by-night clubs); part postapocalyptic genre (which of course is hashed via Hollywood—from *Planet of the Apes* to *Terminator*, the desert, sprawl, and dirty aqueducts have all been used as post-sites or to signify the onset of ruin). Los Angeles happens to have a lot of

Stanya Kahn, *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (still), 2014.
© Stanya Kahn. Courtesy: the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City





Above - Stanya Kahn, *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (stills), 2014. © Stanya Kahn. Courtesy: the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City

excess space for an urban area, interstitial zones whose immediate use or ownership is not always clear.

Ironically, the abandoned newly built homes in *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014) are actually in Kansas City, Missouri. The issue is a nationwide one. I found newly built homes in L.A. that had been left empty after the 2008 economic collapse. I broke in and started preliminary shooting. Some had carpets, marble countertops, stainless-steel refrigerators. And had been empty for four years. One had a kitchen full of dead bees. Similar to the way in which precarious locales like the Salton Sea mirrored the tenuous relationship to life in *It's Cool, I'm Good*, I wanted the housing/building/waste crisis to saturate *Don't Go Back to Sleep* as subconscious content. It's never mentioned directly in the film.

As someone who's grown up in cities and neighborhoods that have experienced unprecedented gentrification and expansion (San Francisco's Mission, Brooklyn's Williamsburg, Los Angeles's Highland Park), I'm acutely aware of all kinds of displacement, "development," and whitewashing that give rise to another kind of unease (to put it lightly) that I haven't faced head-on in the work yet. There's almost a sliver of morbid satisfaction in watching this influx of big real estate money to L.A. in the fact that fifteen years from now the rising temperatures and lack of water will grow acute, and in thirty years it will be unlivable. Hot dry death. That will be so abject. (This would be funny if it weren't for the fact that the poorest and most vulnerable will suffer the most. Are suffering now.)



Above and opposite - Stanya Kahn, *It's Cool, I'm Good* (stills), 2010. © Stanya Kahn. Courtesy: the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City

AG

I am interested in how these physical sites and their associations with distance, boundaries, flight, and ostracism relate to the themes of shock and disgust that recur in your films, as both physical and moral reactions to a given situation. When for example your protagonist in *It's Cool, I'm Good* (2010) sits with a hospital gown, crutches, and bandages by the water and flies congregate on her back, her physical state as much as the suggested neglect evoke a complicated set of reactions.

In her book *Revolting Subjects, Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (2013), Imogen Tyler references disgust as an "urgent, guttural, and aversive emotion," something that is physically experienced in the gut but also remains guided by very specific socially dependent stigmas and values. To what degree do these various forms of disgust come together in your work as indicators of the changeability of what is deemed abject and its dependency on political and social norms?

SK

I suppose the fact that they are even there, these "disgusting" scenes and people, signals the presence of a purposely disruptive force. And then on top of that, the characters who are "disgusting" get to have language, expertise, land, or all three. Where "disgusting" in neo-liberalism means other, outside of the norm, ill, damaged, not profitable, et cetera, most of the people in the work are "a problem" to the status quo in some way. While I generally view the characters in the videos as more allegorical than "real," they have a core humanity. They are making selves at the edge of abyss, where logic, appropriateness and safety have been disturbed. For me, making images in which death is near or damage is unhidden is a way to acknowledge proximity to trauma—to bring us (maker and audience) closer to that which is hard to face or understand.

I haven't read Tyler's book, but from the title I gather she might be referring to a certain social disgust with, say, poor people, people of color, women, immigrants, workers, radicals, subalterns, et cetera, a repulsion that neoliberalism relies on to reproduce itself and its policies (policies that in the end only serve to protect private wealth and property and a status quo of power and thinking). If we wander away from Julia Kristeva's corpse, her psychoanalytic abject, and toward a more politicized abject, a "revolting subject," the visuals of deterioration and/or death in the videos can be read as both an externalization of the toxicity and exhaustion of exclusion and a threat to the smooth surface of power.



In terms of changeability and dependence on social norms, I suppose that's the ultimate dialectic. One needs to be included in order to survive, but in order to break the system, one has to also stay outside of it, not capitulate to its normalization.

AG Beyond formal references, you also pursue the abject through methodologies that disturb perceived order through improvisation, collapse of perspective, and narrative; prevent the possibility of a coherent identity; and challenge what is considered intact and valuable. Can you speak more about improvisation in your work?

SK Maybe when it's functioning at its best, improvisation escapes categorization even as a strategy. But it is, or can be, a strategy with technical aspects that turn it into a practice. It speeds thinking and response times and shortens the space between listening and comprehending. It allows you to be simultaneously in the moment and also aware of the big picture, the meta data. Improvisation is powerful and also spooky. Sometimes it's my most incisive tool and sometimes the most problematic. As an artist, my hope is to make useful texts even while improvising, and that is not easy. And the risk with improvising is that sometimes it doesn't work. When it does, it's potent. I appreciate it as a process for generating material, a key toward more fluid performance, a magical state of mind and as a model for being in the world. Maybe it's a useful tool for seeing our way out of strict binaries and to vision more multiplicity, less hierarchy. It's hard not to hold on to dogma when we're scared. I do it, we all do it. Improvisation helps me stay flexible and quick, more open and able to process difference, hear "language" I don't at first understand. Can I hear around it? Can I hear what isn't being said?

AG It sounds like you consider improvisation to be a practice that needs developing over time to then be called upon in the moment. That reminds me of Far Eastern martial arts practices. How do you practice it, and how do you imagine its potential as a habitual mode for everyday interactions?

SK Of course we are all improvising every day. Once we become conscious of that, we can listen more intently, become aware of impulses, try different approaches. Formally speaking, of course there are all kinds of training one can engage in. For years I studied improvisation in theater, dance, comedy. As a direct-action activist you *have* to be able to improvise because you never know exactly what the police are going to do. Conflict resolution and nonviolent communication offer tools for listening, communicating, and acting in order to deescalate. In behavioral psychology, there are practices like mindfulness to deescalate re-traumatization, to bring consciousness out of memory and into the body in the present moment.



Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s installation views at The Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, January 26–April 26, 1992. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Paula Goldman





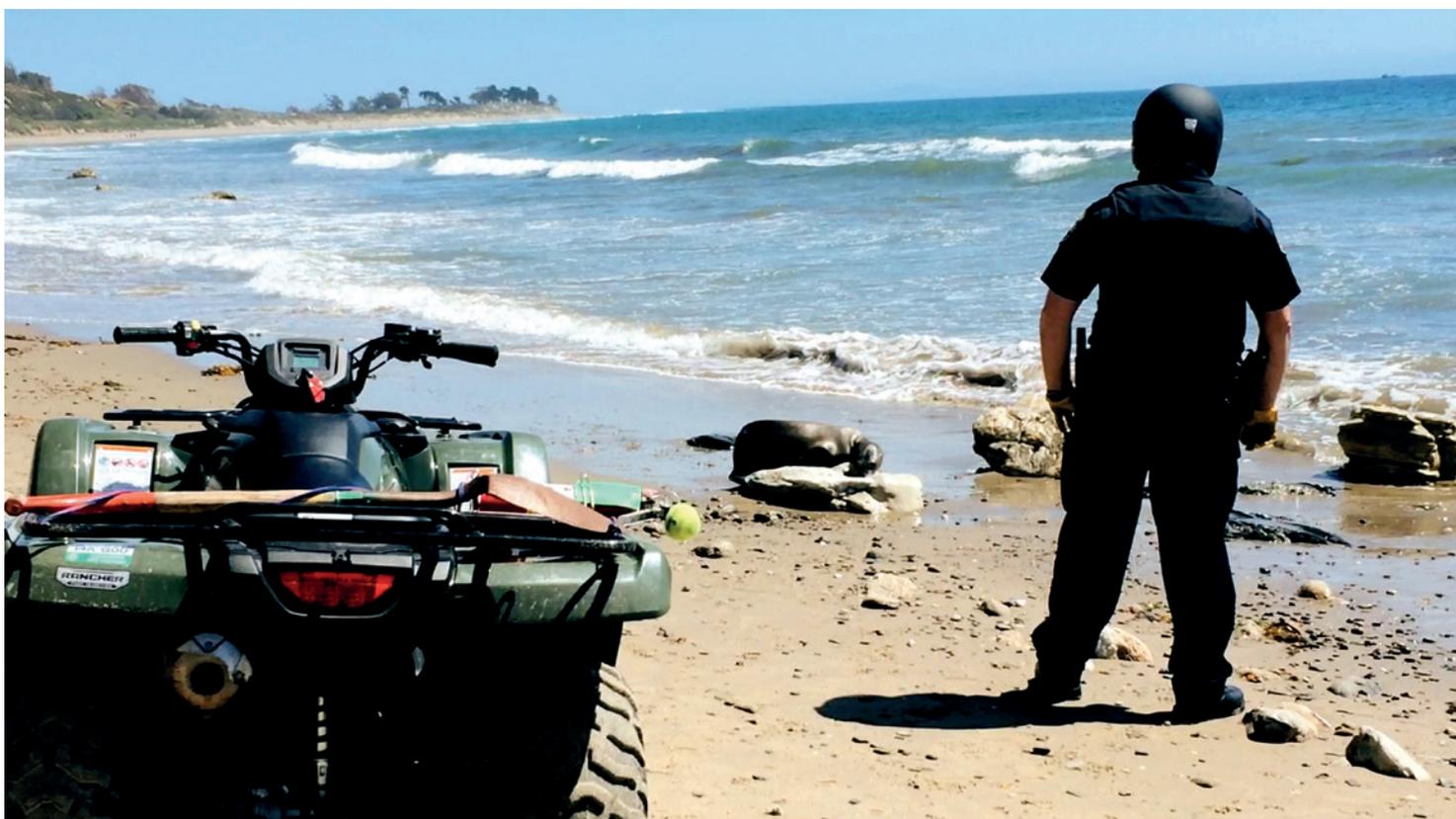
Above - Stanya Kahn and Llyn Foulkes, *Happy Song for You* (still), 2012. © Stanya Kahn. Courtesy: the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City

Below - Stanya Kahn, *Stand in the Stream* (still), 2017. © Stanya Kahn. Courtesy: the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City

AG Can you give an example of improvisation in one of your films?

SK In *Don't Go Back to Sleep* it was core to the whole narrative and the ways in which the process of making reflected the core themes of agency. I was figuring out how to generate content and dialogue improvisationally with an ensemble, as a director-writer instead of a performer. In a piece that is in many ways about the broad dilemmas facing human survival, mundane moments like a character on a phone call with customer service ended up creating perfect texts without being didactic or head-on: "We're just going around in circles. I hear the problem but I don't hear you offering solutions."

On our second day of shooting and in a brand-new location, I had the performers do fake stress phone calls for hours while I filmed continuously. And the whole time, this really patient young woman was in the bathtub, bandaged and covered in fake blood. I said, "You're dying, but no one can do much for you now." Every now and then the camera could pan from a pacing person on the phone to her bloody feet through the open bathroom door. I couldn't have written that. But if I set up a detailed scenario, I can let action unplanned unfold and gather cues from the situation and let a story emerge.



AG Your most recent film, *Stand in the Stream* (2011-2017), currently on view at MoMA PS1, was made continuously over the last six years. It draws an intimate portrait of your immediate family interspersed with the extreme impact of recent political events in the United States. I wonder how this internalized improvisational technique came into practice here?

SK The shots came from so much looking at and listening intently to the world. Verité-style camera work is full of improvisational acuity, since it involves noticing what's happening in a moment and deciding what and how to shoot. Even more so with this piece, which took so long, the editing was the zone in which a lot of flux and change occurred. I could not have predicted turns of events and so kept accumulating footage in order to find out what the piece was supposed to do. I kept shooting up until the week before the opening, sliding a few last clips into the final timeline. One of the goals with editing, for me anyway, is to make something that feels alive, breathing and dynamic. I had so many cuts of this film over the years. Each time it started feel stuck or dead I stopped, shot more, edited more, shot more. Where *Don't Go Back to Sleep* was an intense experiment in creating a narrative based on improvisations on set, *Stand in the Stream* was an epic experiment in finding narrative over years of watching the world through cameras.

AG I am especially curious about the reappearance of the monster characters in various guises in the film, especially in the online chat rooms.

SK I think that while oppression and injustice are overwhelming—stemming from power run amok, which is generally stupid and unreasonable—they are also the things that are easiest to see, to understand. My hope was to make a film in which the viewer can perceive a clear, intelligible reflection of complexity, albeit poetically. My hope is to offer a vision full of layers that will seem both uncanny and familiar to the contemporary viewer, that they might feel, "Yes, exactly, that is how it is to live, to be conscious of struggle, engaged with desire for resistance, not always sure of how to proceed, confused and troubled but sure of love and justice." Something like that. And that the viewer comes to this by their own agency, an active search for meaning that creates meaning

in itself. Aside from allowing me anonymity, the monster-mask characters are stand-ins for part of our psyches, maybe a state in which we are both unformed and deformed, both makers of meaning and consumers of meanings. Similar to the rat-bear character in *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, maybe these half-humans are embodiments of the abject, where abjection can mean that which isn't easily metabolized or defined. Which in a sense is a contemporary state of being. We are no longer separate from capital, technology, and consumerism, even in our most intimate moments. The smart phone is interlocked with daily interactions in contemporary western life. I think these characters also hold open the dream space, the in-between worlds space, maybe a view from outside... or they represent the fantasy that there is an "outside." I'm not sure we can get "outside" the system, but I still reach for such a space, psychologically anyway, because without the idea of it, it's harder to think when feeling claustrophobically stuck inside. *Stand in the Stream* is about flowing inside of systems and also finding and making ruptures.

AG Would you say that seeking out the abject as representative of the issues, people, and concerns of a society that are cast away as painful and uncomfortable is a strategy in your work that allows you to find the ruptures that you describe? Ruptures as potential gateways to a dream space?

SK I tend to start from rupture (in myself, in community, in politics). When trauma is ground zero, and even becomes normalized (which is often a source of joking in the work—being accustomed to shittiness!), dream space is a close next step. *Stand in the Stream* is different, though, from most everything else I've made. Since most of the footage is real life and not performance, the editing and sound play an even bigger role than usual in creating the psychic material. Where abjection and rupture in other works stem more closely from a damaged or traumatized body, *Stand in the Stream* does more of what Tyler maybe suggests—illuminates that which has been deemed abject by a status quo. The film refutes that positioning and, I hope, reverses that taxonomy so that in fact we see the status quo as deadly and perverse.

AG I recently revisited the catalogue of Paul Schimmel's iconic 1992 exhibition *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*. The image of the dark underbelly of L.A. that the show set out to portray sits side by side with its sunny, superficial, hedonist companion. Did you see *Helter Skelter*?

SK I didn't. I was living in San Francisco, had finished undergrad and was working as a case manager with homeless adults, making performances and doing activism. Of course I knew some of the work in the show and was a fan of Mike Kelley in particular. When I moved to L.A. I became friends with some of the artists and writers

who were in *Helter Skelter* (including Mike, who was a real genius) and did come to know a particular scene that was dealing with sex and death, the occult, subcultures, abjection and humor. (In 2012 I made a video with Llyn Foulkes, a tremendous experience for me. We shared a lot of morbid joking and discomfort with the world.) I think there are artists dealing with similar issues everywhere; I'm not sure it's an L.A. thing per se. *Helter Skelter* pulled from a predominantly white, male art scene, and so the subjectivities/voices were limited in part to a very particular relationship to the body, to sexual repression, desire, depression, oppression, etc. It's interesting to note that the tape of Rodney King being beaten went public the year before *Helter Skelter* opened. The uprising, or riot, that erupted after the verdict acquitting all of the officers who beat King, came just three days after *Helter Skelter* closed. One has to wonder about demographics of the show's participants even as its theme was how "alienation, dispossession, perversity, sex and violence either dominate the landscape or form disruptive undercurrents."

AG How do you think the notion of an abject California has changed over the years?

SK California is huge, and Northern California is very different from Southern California. In a general sense, in terms of art, I think there's a lot more inclusivity in terms of diversity and representation and so with that, the discourse around what constitutes abjection in California art necessarily changes. In the big picture, things are getting more abject by the minute now that we have a psycho neofascist in the White House. We are closer than ever to the corpse, to disgust and actual danger. ICE clampdowns, police brutality, gentrification, and climate change are already making the Sunshine State a hot hell pit. Everyone's rattled on a daily basis, nervous, exhausted, experiencing new kinds of anxiety. I think art will change in relation to this.

Stanya Kahn is an interdisciplinary artist who works primarily in video with a practice that includes performance, sound, drawing, painting and sculpture. Humor, pathos and the uncanny emerge as central modes in a hybrid media practice that seeks to re-work relationships between fiction and document, narrative time and the synchronic time of impulse. Recent solo exhibitions include MoMA PS1 (New York), Susanne Vielmetter (Los Angeles), Marlborough Chelsea (New York), Cornerhouse/HOME (Manchester), Weiss Berlin (Berlin), the New Museum (New York) among others. Select group exhibitions include the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), MOCA (San Diego), Fernley Astrup (Oslo), The California Biennial. Her collaborative work with Harry Dodge has shown at Elizabeth Dee Gallery (New York), the Whitney Biennial (08), Sundance Film Festival, MOCA (Los Angeles), MoMA (New York), ZKM (Karlsruhe), among others. She was a contributing writer and actor in feature film *By Hook or By Crook*. Her writings and drawings appear in multiple publications including *Die Laughing* (2nd Cannons), *It's Cool, I'm Good* (Cornerhouse), and *Abstract Video* (UC Press.) Kahn was a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow in Film/Video.

LIZ CRAFT IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA GRITZ

ANNA GRITZ
Helter Skelter, Paul Schimmel's 1992 exhibition, conjured the dark side of L.A. through visions of wasteland, violence, gore, and trauma, while posing a distinct alternative to work from the "light and space" or "finish fetish" movements. It presented a messier, more complicated, and handcrafted vision of Los Angeles art that drew on local curiosities and popular-culture phenomena such as fringe politics, B movies, cartoons, hard rock, and psychedelia. Works of yours like *The Pony* (2004), *Dancing Skeletons* (2008), and *Venice Witch* (2003) have often been associated with a similar low- or counterculture aesthetic that recalls the tropes of outsider communities of drifters, shamans, and dropouts, and the crafty, new age, kitsch, and souvenir production that supports their existence. Or as Bruce Hainley called it, "the groovy, laid-back macramé sandpainted hand made seashells ah tray magic mushroom drift wood love beads patchouli scented surf wax tytan lined stoner mother earth guitar playing acid trip love in." Where do you find your subjects, and to what degree would you say they speak to a Californian culture at large?

LIZ CRAFT
L.A. was definitely a different place back then. It was rougher. These early works were inspired by visiting Europe around 1999 or 2000 and then reflecting back onto things I would



Liz Craft, *Mi Vida Loca*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and Jenny's,
Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane





Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s installation view at The Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, January 26–April 26, 1992. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Paula Goldman





see around L.A. or California, maybe in a Disney-esque sort of way. This body of work had a lot of clichés and stereotypes about the Wild West and Americana. The first piece that was part of the series you're talking about was *Death Rider*, started in 2001. I was thinking it would be interesting to turn a low-culture or American counter-culture image into a monumental, traditional European sculpture. This is strange now (it was up at the Hammer Museum in L.A. six months ago, after I hadn't seen it in fifteen years) because it feels like "low culture" and "alternative cultures" have been swallowed up by the mainstream.

The pony was inspired by this mural that used to be in L.A. on Sunset Boulevard, "My Little Pony," and formal abstract sculpture. The skeletons are from the Three Graces mixed with Grateful

Dead, Pirates of the Caribbean, reliquaries, the Vienna Secession roof. I gather images from things I see around, collect at thrift stores, or have as memories, or from fantasizing or dreaming. Sometimes they're art historical or formal references. Then I collage them together. I guess the subject matter of this early work is really taken from the landscape and idea of what California is. My California upbringing combined with my education (many of my professors were in *Helter Skelter*) had an influence on me.

AG In what way would you say that alternative cultures have been swallowed up, and what was strange about seeing *Death Rider* again after so long?

LC I thought about it more and realized that this always happens—something that is fringe at some point can get pulled into the mainstream and become something else. I guess when I saw my motorcycle piece at the Hammer right after Trump was elected, I thought, eek, this seems like a pro-America kind of artwork and it scares me. When I made it in 2001 it felt really different—it was a response to Europe and history and was kind of making fun of America. It was also allowing myself to use things I knew about.



Above, from top - Liz Craft, *Dirty Laundry*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane; *Dancing Skeletons*, 2008. Courtesy: the artist

Below - *Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection: Liz Craft* installation view at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2017. © Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest



AG Works like your *Mountain Mamas* (2003)—formless, obese, matte brown blobs, half-women half-mountains—bring together Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection as something fluid and formless, neither object nor subject, with a type of social abjection—bodies that do not function in a societally accepted way, deemed unproductive and cast away as disgusting. In that way they speak to an underbelly of society that has been deemed excludable and how social forces shape our sensations of disgust. Some of your *Mamas* are snow-capped mountains. What role does humor play here to deal with the abject?

LC That piece was actually inspired by a person I saw while driving. She was sitting on the sidewalk under a freeway bridge, maybe homeless. I thought she looked beautiful and amazing sitting there like a mountain, but I also felt sad for her. She reminded me of the mountains on the way to my parents' house. And I like the idea of mixing a figure and a background. I didn't really think of this piece as funny; it was more about a person in a landscape. Or person as landscape. Or the sublime.

AG Your work occupies an uncertain terrain between adoration and disgust, everyday banality and fantastical dream space. It is often not clear to me if we are encountering the objects in their native fantastical surrounding or in the lived-in banality of their circulation as folkloric motives and talismans. Maybe it is none of the above. What is their relationship to your everyday life?

LC Yes, that's maybe true in many of the works. I think everyday life is complicated, and I try and show this. I feel like with language we try and tidy things up and put them in categories or simple forms so we can deal with them. We have to—otherwise the world would

be too overwhelming. But in the arts I think it's possible to show the multidimensional qualities of life.

AG The sweetness and the easy pleasure that kitsch promises is generally considered counter to what is deemed high art today. Its seductive qualities are rejected and cast to the realms of the taste of the uneducated, the lower classes, or the nouveau riche. Its appreciation demands an ignorance or rejection of established cultural traditions and values. Do you see a transgressive potential in subject matter that recalls kitsch? What can we learn from what has been deemed kitsch or abject in society?

LC I guess the wrongness of kitsch is what makes it seem so right. It's tricky, though—I guess just like anything else in art. Context and timing are so important. Yes, of course there is potential still to be transgressive and use kitsch. I think when artists use materials, images, or ideas that others are fearful of or didn't think of using, that's when it gets interesting. It doesn't necessarily have to be kitsch, though.

AG Did you see *Helter Skelter* back in the day? If yes, what was your reaction?

LC Yes, of course I went to the opening. The show was great and there was a punk-ish band playing outside, I was twenty-one and thought the whole thing was super cool. It was a big deal for the young art students. Seeing all that work was liberating, it made art seem current and worthwhile. You could do something totally messed up and twisted and it could be in a museum. Art felt like the place to be. It was as interesting as what we were studying in books, but it was in our own town happening at that time. Almost all of the artists and writers who were in it had been my teachers at some point, or I worked for them, or my friends worked for them. This of course was part of the glory of L.A. in the earlier days. All the best people taught and it was a smaller scene.

AG *Living Edge* (1997-1998), an early work by you, stages tropes of the L.A. urban grid, scenery, and architecture as a Garden of Eden. How does this portrait hold up today? And how has the idea of an abject California changed over the years, in your eyes?

LC I made that piece in a cinematic or video game sort of way. I took pieces of "landscape" and spliced or jammed them together in a loop. And you never could be in the landscape—you were always outside of it, looking in. It was from driving a lot around L.A. I don't know if L.A. physically changes too much. This was a very early work where I just chose landscape as subject and let the rest follow. I had previously been thinking about interior space, and that led to landscape.

This is something Pentti Monkkonen and I often discuss, how L.A. kind of fell apart. Got washed out. More money and more artists came, and art as business began to happen. I'm sure it was always there, but I didn't know about it, and there wasn't as much money before. In my opinion a lot of people stopped making art for other artists and began making work for collectors. Of course there is still plenty of good art being made in L.A., and a lot of cool people that I respect, but maybe new "abject" or things that are not as market friendly started being made elsewhere, like Europe. Maybe part of it back then was the good schools being here or the right teachers or the right students or the right time—there are many factors. It's only natural that things change. If they stayed the same it would be weird. There are people who are still making work that has this quality, but I don't think they get as much attention. L.A. is a nice place to make work and live, but you have to have a broader view in order to keep it interesting for yourself. I think this is probably true for anyplace.

AG Your more recent and ongoing series of ceramic speech bubbles suggest a bastardized form of vernacular digital communication that relies on the emanation of symbols, phrases, and gestures. How do you consolidate the immediacy of the messages with the handcrafted, labored surface of the tiled ceramic grid?

LC The clay material is actually very immediate. It takes preparation (not much) and some technical support after, but the action and art part is very quick, like a text or a joke or an automatic drawing or a doodle. I like this aspect, that they go together very easily for me. Also there isn't too much pressure that it has to be some great idea, since it's just a fragment. And also it's part of the space, so it could really be blank because that also is true: sometimes you don't have any ideas or anything to say.

AG There is a certain pleasure in the disturbance of a coherent identity or form in these speech bubbles. Do you think of abjection as a strategy in your work?

LC I do take pleasure in putting things together that don't seem like they should. I would like to think I'm loosening up structures, ideas or images are slipping into each other, and meaning can fall apart. I guess this is a surreal or possibly abject quality. I'm not consciously employing strategies; I like to think of it more like a game or a puzzle. Although I guess that is a strategy.

AG Images, objects, and words stand side by side in these associative communiqués. How do you see them relating to each other, and to what degree are they generated in a process of making such as texting?

LC I think I use associations among images, words, and objects to make an object dense. I let them relate however seems natural to the situation. I don't think it's a back-and-forth; it's more of a spiral.

3 Bruce Hainley, *Sane American with a Dreamin Liz Craft: Fantasy Architecture*, ed. Bettina Steinbrügge (Lüneburg, Germany: Halle für Kunst, 2006), 19.

Liz Craft (Los Angeles, 1970). Craft received her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and her BA from Otis Parsons. Her work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions worldwide, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg; Migros Museum, Zurich, among many others. Her work is part of public collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and the Whitney Museum of American Art. She currently lives and works in New York.