



Art in America

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HERE IS ELSEWHERE

BY CHRIS KRAUS



The Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood, Los Angeles.

IN NOVEMBER 2010, Yann Perreau opened his gallery *Here is Elsewhere* at the Pacific Design Center (PDC) in Los Angeles. His inaugural exhibition, “*Venice from Then to Now*,” traced the history of Venice Beach from the bohemian 1960s to the less-than-illustrious present. As Perreau noted in the press release, “Forty years after its pioneer time, Venice is now often seen as *passé* or cliché.” But art thrives on decline. His Venice show evoked an oceanside neighborhood replete with creative possibilities. In 2010, Perreau had just finished a two-year stint serving the French government as deputy cultural attaché to Southern California. Declining a post in another city, he decamped for L.A., intent on starting a gallery that would probe the hidden history that links artists from L.A.’s amorphous “here” to art movements “elsewhere.”

Like other gallerists and artists housed at PDC, Perreau had been lucky to meet New York-based art advisor and curator Helen Varola. Varola was hired in 2009 by art patron and real-estate developer Charles S. Cohen to create *Design Loves Art*, a program housed in PDC, which by

then was a lavish 1.2-million-square-foot complex. Located on a 14-acre campus at the western edge of West Hollywood and designed by architect Cesar Pelli, PDC had opened in 1975 as the ultimate mega-mart for high-end interior design merchandise. After Cohen’s consortium acquired the complex in 1999, they improved it with a fitness center, a state-of-the-art movie theater, two Wolfgang Puck restaurants and a conference center. A decade later, in the wake of the financial crisis, tens of thousands of its square feet lay empty. Construction had already begun on a 400,000-square-foot addition, but the luxury mecca was in danger of becoming a ghost town.

A legendarily bold developer, Cohen is also a renowned art collector who serves on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Rather than fill PDC’s space by cutting commercial rents, Cohen chose to offer subsidized leases to art world locals. This would be real art, not decor-friendly upholstery-matched paintings. Under Varola’s direction, *Design Loves Art* became the home of some of L.A.’s most innovative, ambitious young galleries.

In November 2010, Annie Wharton moved her eponymous gallery from a 450-square-foot Chinatown space into a lavish series of rooms at PDC spanning 3,800 square feet. As she told me, “I was seeking a larger arena for my work. Everyone was leaving Chinatown for Culver City—the wave I’d moved with in 2006 was over. I was inspired by the architecture of the PDC space, the quirkiness of it.” Wharton now represents cutting-edge L.A. artists like Brian Butler, Davida Nermeroff (herself the curator of Highland Park’s storefront *Night Gallery*) and Eli Langer.

Viewing an exhibition at PDC is an adventure in dislocation. Entering through the parking structure, you approach a concierge desk area that looks like an aerospace traffic control center. A series of escalators scales the atrium. En route to the galleries, you pass elaborate wallpaper and vacuum cleaner displays. Inside Wharton’s gallery, the channel abruptly changes. “*The Gateway*,” Brian Butler’s fall 2011 exhibition, reflected his abundant research into L.A.’s history of satanic magic. A former assistant to the filmmaker



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Kenneth Anger, Butler has written about the mythic life of Pasadena rocket designer Jack Parsons (1914-1952), who held coven-salons in his Orange Grove mansion during the 1940s. Parsons was an acolyte of the occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). “The Gateway” featured Butler’s gorgeous and haunting *The Dove and the Serpent* (2011), a video loop and stills inspired by Crowley.

In November 2011, the artist Alex Israel was offered a PDC project space to create *As It Lays*, his new video work that premiered in March at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York. (It is on view through Apr. 8.) Behind the space’s glass walls, Israel constructed a set and videotaped interviews with celebrity icons like Cheryl Tiegs, Larry Flynt and Vidal Sassoon, posing questions like, “Are you good with chopsticks?” Seductive and eerie, Israel’s portraits are at once familiar and distanced. As he told me,

I wanted to use the idea of the talk show to create portraits. The talk show is the contemporary form that is arguably closest to classic portraiture. Helen gave me a one-year lease, and the PDC couldn’t have been more perfect for what I wanted to do. The PDC itself is a Los Angeles icon, as were the people I was going to interview. Watching Oprah Winfrey every day to learn how she operated, I was thinking about how I could use her format but gear it more toward capturing each subject’s likeness. I needed to remove the hot-button questions and product promotion. I needed to create a system for questioning and documenting that was closer to classic portraiture.

AT PERREAU’S Here is Elsewhere, “Niki de Saint Phalle and the West Coast” (Jan. 26-Mar. 23) featured

Above, Alex Israel working on his video *As It Lays*, 2012, at a PDC project space. Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin, and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York. Photo Joshua White.

Right, view of Noah and Karon Davis’s performance/installation *Boys in the Hoods*, 2012, after the shooting event “Tirs: Reloaded.” Photo Zac Prange, Pine Flat Studios. Courtesy LA><ART.



new de Saint Phalle-inspired works by contemporary L.A. artists such as Noah Davis, Henry Taylor, Liz Craft and the writer Percival Everett. Some of these works were completed on Jan. 22 during “Tirs: Reloaded,” an event that invoked the series of “Shooting Paintings” that de Saint Phalle famously created during a 1962 sojourn in Los Angeles. At high noon at the Angeles Crest Shooting Range that winter Sunday, the “Tirs: Reloaded” artists, or their surrogates, used firearms to shoot bladders of paint onto various supports. Davis’s *Boys in the Hoods* was by far the event’s standout work. During the shooting, the artist’s life-size figurative sculpture of three white-robed Klansmen was gloriously defiled with bursts of red paint discharged from a rifle by his wife, the filmmaker Karon Davis.

Atlas is a rotating series of columns, with writers from Los Angeles, Berlin and Asia.

CHRIS KRAUS is a writer and art critic based in L.A.

In a sense, Perreau’s “Venice from Then to Now” show proved prophetic. Arriving on the West Coast from New York last November, art dealer Esther Kim Varet shunned Culver City in favor of Venice. Her new gallery, Various Small Fires, is located on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the district’s main thoroughfare. Various Small Fires debuted with an exhibition of New Zealand-born L.A. artist Fiona Connor. Three months later, Varet unveiled Alex Israel’s *Abbot Kinney Mural* (2012), a stunning work that covers a stretch of more than 100 feet on the building’s facade. Overcoming east side residents’ resistance to driving the jammed I-10 freeway to Venice, Varet cleverly chooses to stage her openings as Sunday brunches. “You come from New York,” Varet told me, “and here everything’s very laid back and small. You can go full force. Everything feels like a possibility.” ○