

No World Order



Joel Morrison//
Alligator Shoes/George
 Lucas, 2006//
 cat. no. 76//



**Zen fascists will control you
 100% natural
 You will jog for the master race
 And always wear the happy face**

**Close your eyes, can't happen here
 Big Bro' on white horse is near
 The hippies won't come back you say
 Mellow out or you will pay
 Mellow out or you will pay!**

Jello Biafra and John Greenway,
 "California Uber Alles," 1979¹

**I'm baby oil and Kennedy
 A half-robot firmed peck remedy
 soon I will be president . . .
 Bush power will soon go away
 and I will be Führer one day
 I will Commando all of you**

**Kalifornia über Alles
 Über alles Kalifornia**

Joel Morrison, "Kalifornia Über Alles," 2006

Left//Karl Haendel//
*Mapplethorpe is
 dead, Helms is out,
 Schwarzenegger is
 governor*, 2004//pencil
 on paper//78 x 44
 in.//collection of the
 Orange County Museum
 of Art; Museum
 purchase with funds
 provided through
 prior gift of Lois
 Outerbridge//

Biennial artist Joel Morrison's update of the Dead Kennedys' "California Uber Alles" recycles the venom of the original punk classic while spoofing the utter peculiarity of the celebrity-obsessed moment in which we live. While the lyricists of the original version, Jello Biafra and John Greenway, condemned the harsh mellow of then-governor Jerry Brown's selling out of progressive politics, Morrison takes on both the steroid overdrive of movie star politics and the macho overdrive of punk. In essence, his remake mirrors the unlikely of an Austrian immigrant landing in the sunshine of Muscle Beach, marrying a Kennedy, playing a robot, and having a go at the governor's seat.

Karl Haendel's upside-down portrait of the "Governator," *Mapplethorpe is dead, Helms is out, Schwarzenegger is governor* (2004), included in the 2004 California Biennial, epitomized the topsy-turvy conditions of that election year and was one of the most overtly political works in the exhibition. And now, two years later, the churning combination of irreverence, sullen disbelief, euphoria, and formal

spectacle in Morrison's update of the Dead Kennedys' lyrics is shared by the other artists in the *2006 California Biennial*. Rather than presenting a specific snapshot of current artistic production in California, the work in the exhibition reflects the sense of chaos and intensity within the much larger cultural, social, and political context: the state of no world order.

Long characterized as culturally isolated, young artists working in Northern or Southern California are no more or less disconnected from one another than they are from either the rest of the country or the rest of the world. Many come here from other states or countries to attend one of California's outstanding art schools or universities and stay on after graduation because of the abundant opportunities. In this climate of burgeoning commercial galleries, thriving nonprofit organizations, and cultural exchanges between California institutions and national or international partners, their first exhibitions may just as easily take place in Berlin or London as in San Francisco or Los Angeles.

The artworks in the *2006 California Biennial* range from traditional paintings to conceptual practices, taking the form of objects, actions, and texts, presented in the galleries, in the museum's nongallery spaces, or in the public realm. Many of those represented in the exhibition have hybrid practices, assuming multiple roles as artist, archivist, anthropologist, critic, curator, performer, and social activist. Given the plurality of expression, diversity of artists, and expanded opportunities in contemporary art, how would we approach the specificity of a California biennial? While initially we wanted to steer clear of an overarching curatorial premise, after casting a wide net, we identified six prominent themes, which we call fantasy verité, historical and archival consciousness, social interaction, urban ecologies, adaptive identities, and extreme object making. While these categories are necessarily broad and fluid, and many artists make works that fall into more than one of them, they reflect what we consider to be the most significant tendencies in contemporary art made in California.



My Barbarian//set photo
from *Pagan Rights*,
2006//

Fantasy Verité

Inserting the terms *fantasy*, *California*, and *politics* into a Google search brought up a site for California secession, a dream called "just the blue of us."² This dream of a California republic harks back to the earliest ideas of California as utopia, but it is also an indicator of the extreme bifurcation of this country. While the red state/blue state polarity deepens, artists find numerous ways to express political dissent. After all, fantasy and politics commingle in California in myriad formations. Just think of the curious Californian figures who shape our views of politics and popular culture: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Gore Vidal, Arianna Huffington, Rob Reiner, and even the multicultural cast of *Lost*.³

A number of artists represented in the show are proving that the terrain of fantasy and the social and political realms are not mutually exclusive. As exhibitions like the *2006 Whitney Biennial* and *Uncertain States of America* have shown, contemporary artists in the United States are agitated by the political climate and responding to it in both traditional and atypical ways.⁴ Science fiction



Scoli Acosta // . . . *Day Was to Fall as Night Was to Break . . .*, 2006 (detail)//installation view, Daniel Reich Gallery, New York//courtesy of the artist and Daniel Reich Gallery, New York//

and fantasy have often provided the allegories with which to critique power structures and to take dark political scenarios to extreme conclusions. Fantasy verité gets at the free exchange between ways of shaping stories and ways of shaping objects. In some ways, the artists discussed here abuse the boundaries between fantastic narrative conventions and quasi-scientific ways of ordering knowledge. Sociological, anthropological, and photojournalistic traditions are used in concert with the absurd, profane, and grotesque.

The mix of political rage and flights of fancy that permeates the work of performance collective My Barbarian is typical of fantasy verité artists. Its core members—Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade—freely sample the history of performance art, twentieth-century music, and agitprop to create a genre that they call "show-core," a combination of mainstream show tunes and hardcore, an invocation of a more demonic energy in rock and punk. The subject matter of their performance scripts reflects their wide-ranging interests: Arthurian legends, Disneyana, class warfare, Bob Fosse, and ecotourism through time travel.

Nicolau Vergueiro invests materials with magical qualities while excavating images and icons from U.S. and Brazilian popular culture. He choreographs extreme polarities within his work—high and low references, hard and soft materials. Equally interested in conflation of extremes, Pearl C. Hsiung makes paintings and installations that seem to reflect the instability of California's psychic and physical landscapes. Her gurgling, erupting geological forms provoke inescapable associations with the most abject of human experiences. Eschewing traditional notions of landscape as a locus of the sublime and transcendental, Hsiung's works instead suggest the sexiness and absurdity of the wild gone wild.

The installations and drawings of Scoli Acosta conflate dreamscapes with historically resonant landscapes, from Parisian monuments to the Badlands of South Dakota. A recent installation at Daniel Reich Gallery took Terrence Malick's film *Badlands* (1973) as the starting point in an excursion that involved Maxfield Parrish's *Daybreak* (a print of which appears in the film), a moonshine distillery, and an altered clip from the film that meditates on the eyes of Sissy Spacek. Acosta's work falls in that twilight space somewhere

between the verité aesthetic of Malick and the proto-psychedelic hues of Parrish.

Expanding narrative cinematic codes into the gallery, Marie Jager overlays literary and cinematic references onto real locations, and since her move to Los Angeles in 2000, she has been especially interested in using the city as the site of her reimaginings of early science fiction narratives. Jager's most recent project adapts the 1901 science fiction novel *The Purple Cloud* by British writer M. P. Shiel, relocating this "last man" narrative to the Southland. Guided by a similar interest in materializing fictive worlds, Andy Alexander has reworked minimalist objects into science fiction props. Think of the resemblance of the monolith from Stanley Kubrick's *2001* to John McCracken's planks, and then enter the space of Alexander's works. His drawings of architectural forms with mechanized entrails have provided a new way to convey the seemingly unbounded arena of fantasy yet also relate to the artist's interests in the themed environments and scripted spaces that play an increasingly large part in our daily experience.

Brian Fahlstrom's recent paintings are fantastic, dramatic, and surreal, exuding an internal energy propelled by swirling gestures, intense colors, and sinuous lines. Hovering between abstraction and representation, his pastoral pastiches recall aspects of Renaissance painting, Japanese woodblocks, and the late work of Willem de Kooning. Fahlstrom's dreamlike paintings evoke an ambiguous, unconscious sense of place as they consciously comment on the process and history of painting.

Shana Lutker's ongoing projects (involving drawings, bookmaking, and sculptures) take the methodologies of the archive and apply them to dream logic. While her use of dream material allies her with fellow L.A. artist Jim Shaw, Lutker's approach is to find exacting ways to collate and disseminate this content. While tracking the unconscious, her diaristic narrations comment on the blurring of fact and fiction in the media, on the Internet, and at the highest levels of government.

Historical and Archival Consciousness

Just as cinematic spaces and modernist discourses have been reread through a sobering awareness of journalistic and documentary techniques, so too have the methodologies of history's fabrication and archiving been a source for artists to defamiliarize. A body of criticism has developed on the influence of documentary praxis and the aesthetics of cinema verité on contemporary art. Artists such as Walid Raad and the Atlas Group, Omer Fast, Kutlug Ataman, Tacita Dean, and Matthew Buckingham have taken up where experimental ethnographers such as Chris Marker, Jonas Mekas, Chantal Akerman, and Isaac Julien have left off.⁵ A number of artists in the 2006 *California Biennial* dialogue with this mobilized consciousness of the static archive and make Borgesian spins on the factual.

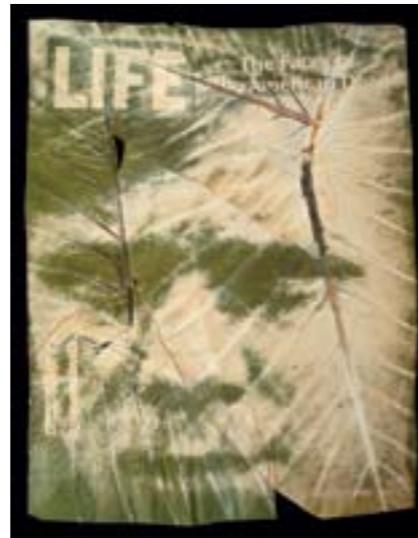
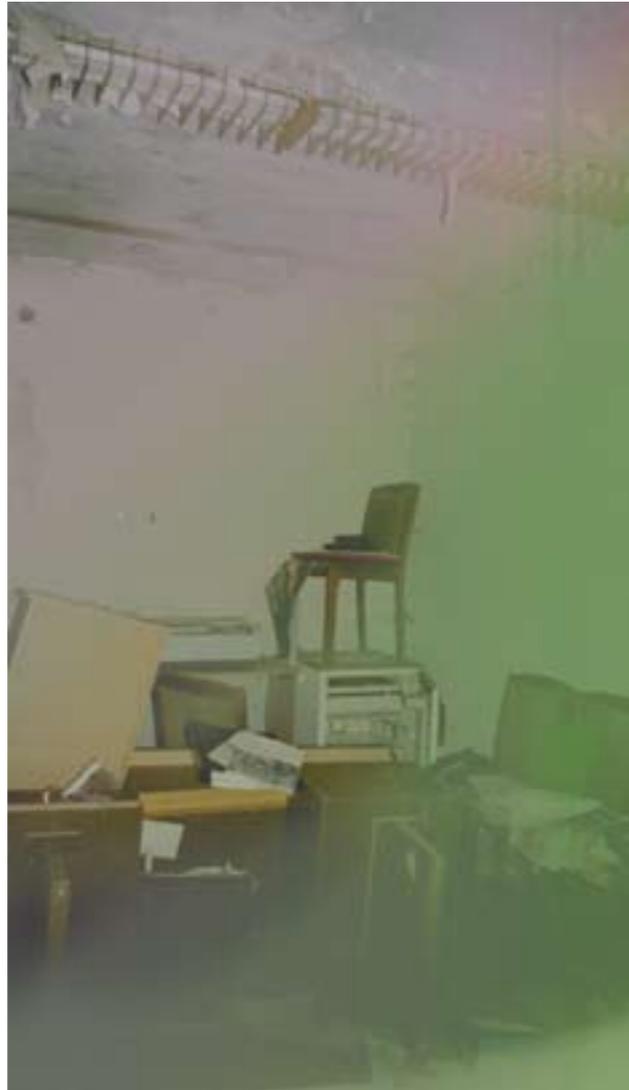
Perhaps the suppression of images in Iraq has further challenged artists not so much to visualize the invisible but to visualize the networks of power that are responsible for withholding. The Speculative Archive, the collective made up of Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, has worked with declassified material to construct videos that are part dossier and part meditation on imaging apparatus. The Speculative Archive has spent the last year collaborating with actors and filmmakers in Syria. The project is culminating in a video installation about the political stakes of free speech at this pivotal moment in Syrian history. In his 2006 project for the Hammer Museum, Walead Beshty also delved into the recent history of dispossessed archival images, creating a muted white-walled waiting room and displaying blown-up photographs of the abandoned Iraqi diplomatic mission in the former East Germany. Through his own writings as well as projects like the installation at the Hammer, Beshty has explored the seemingly at-odds escalation in the creation of both monuments and ruins in the twentieth century.

Like Beshty, Binh Danh engages with the history of photography and in particular looks at the photo-object's role as retainer of memory—as souvenir and amulet. Danh works with a photosynthetic process that allows him to print images directly onto leaves. He has recuperated images from the Vietnam War but has more recently extended his interest to the current military engagement in Iraq. While Danh plays with the erosion of historical images in his transposition of photojournalistic

images to organic materials, Hank Willis Thomas appropriates the most blatant and ubiquitous images of American material culture to comment on the commodification of race and culture. Thomas co-opts commercial advertisements in both his *Branded* and *Unbranded* photographic series. In *Branded*, he places the logo as wound directly on the body, quite literally representing the concept of targeted ads. *Unbranded* serves as an emporium of images whose corporate identifiers have been removed, leaving a hollowed-out history of the uses of race in advertising.

Painter Martin McMurray also unleashes ubiquitous images of national identity but draws them from a seemingly boundless inventory of fallen political leaders and military machinery. McMurray uses an almost anachronistic and flattening painterly technique to ruminate on the tragicomic cast of global history.

Walead Beshty// *Travel Picture (meadow)*, 2006//C-print, film, and X ray//81 x 47 in.//courtesy of the artist; China Art Objects, Los Angeles; and Wallspace, New York//



Binh Danh// *Life*, 2006, from the *One Week's Dead Series*//chlorophyll print and resin//25 x 20 1/2 in.//courtesy of the artist and Cheryl Haines Gallery, San Francisco//

Social Interaction

Rather than mining the archive or deconstructing histories, other biennial artists produce work that encourages social interaction and direct engagement with audiences. With art historical roots in Fluxus as well as happenings and other forms of early performance art, their work intervenes into public space and social spheres, inviting audience participation. In the 1990s French critic Nicolas Bourriaud theorized "relational aesthetics" to describe the artistic practices emphasizing human communication and social interaction that he observed in works by Angela Bulloch, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Christine Hill, Jorge Pardo, Andrea Zittel, and others.⁶ In a similar vein, Kianga Ford, Kate Pocrass, Sergio De La Torre, and Mario Ybarra Jr. produce works that employ social methods of exchange, forge a relationship with the onlooker, and use communication processes as tools to connect human beings, as they engage viewers to interact in spaces inside or outside the museum. Their accessible yet multilayered projects capture aspects of everyday life, popular culture, and social codes in specific urban sites.

Kianga Ford and Mario Ybarra Jr. both collect snippets of urban culture that they remix into interdisciplinary installations. In Ford's *Urban Revival* (2005), museum visitors can sit on inviting red couches and listen to an ambient sound track sampled and remixed from various cultural spaces in Los Angeles, ranging from yoga studios and karaoke bars to gospel church services. Even though the sounds are familiar to some and foreign to others, the process of sitting and listening creates a collective experience that promotes social interaction. Mario Ybarra also sampled culture in his *Promoganda* campaign for the 2006 *California Biennial*, visiting bridal shops, old motels, movie theaters, and swap meets in search of overheard phrases that reflect stereotypes about Orange County. These phrases will appear in sculptural word bubbles installed in the museum's café. Ybarra will also collect do-it-yourself (DIY) ephemera from the public and then disseminate it at clubs, malls, and the museum to create a two-way distribution and exchange system that attempts to deconstruct stereotypes by allowing ideas to rise through the DIY process.

Sergio De La Torre's media projects also function as intermediaries, incorporating actual dialogues and social interactions. De La Torre's works are fundamentally collaborative in spirit and practice, including *Maquillapolis* (2006), a

documentary film done in collaboration with Vicky Funari and feminist worker groups from Tijuana, as well as the alternative art space Lui Velasquez, a site for developing cross-border, interdisciplinary projects.

Like Ybarra, Kate Pocrass chose to delve deep into Orange County to create her *Mundane Journeys*, a series of site-specific itineraries that encourage museum-goers to experience public space. Pocrass is identifying destinations and creating tours that will take participants to easily overlooked places throughout Orange County, diverting them from its omnipresent culture of consumption. Using her hand-drawn maps or a telephone hotline to find out about unique destinations, visitors can take part in social interactions in the gallery or travel together to track down uncanny, unnoticed locales.

Kate Pocrass// *Mundane Journeys New York—Rather Than a Place to Put Your Car*, 2006//courtesy of the artist//



WALK, BIKE OR PUBLIC TRANSIT TO 134 58TH STREET BETWEEN 6TH & 7TH. LOOK UP THE ROAD TOWARDS 6TH. ACROSS THE STREET YOU WILL SEE THE WORD 'PARK' ON THE SIDE OF A GRAY BUILDING. I LIKE TO THINK THAT THIS WORD IS CALLING ATTENTION TO THE TREE AND ACCOMPANYING RAINBOW ABOVE IT RATHER THAN A PLACE TO PUT YOUR CAR.

Urban Ecologies

Pocrass's maps, with their attention to seemingly mundane places as newly considered sites of wonder, are just one example of contemporary artistic commentary on our relationship to the natural and man-made landscape. The interest in the environment or in architecture (or in their interrelationship, as observed by Reyner Banham⁷) has fueled some of the most important art in recent decades. In the 1960s earth artists such as Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Robert Smithson responded to the receding natural landscape by embedding monumental earthworks in it that explored the troubled interrelationship among humankind, art, and nature. The New Topographics photographers of the 1970s, such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz, focused attention on the overdevelopment of the landscape through the proliferation of industrial parks, strip malls, and suburban subdivisions. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as commercial development further displaced natural habitats and environmental mismanagement became increasingly evident, artists such as Joel Sternfeld and Richard Misrach echoed these concerns in photographs that could have served as illustrations for Mike Davis's 1998 *Ecology of Fear*, a biting critique of the sociocultural dysfunction that allowed for the obliteration of nature by developers. Today, as the dire effects of global warming are borne out, the environment has only taken on renewed urgency.

As Robert Smithson wrote in 1968, "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion."⁸ Leslie Shows's large-scale collage paintings, in which representation seems to dissolve into abstraction, play with the idea of geological and cerebral decomposition. Despite their fantastic appearance, her paintings of apocalyptic landscapes, composed of hundreds of tiny scraps of paper collaged onto their surfaces, are based on real photographs of man-made and natural ruins. Lordy Rodriguez shares Show's interest in representing different topographies, creating map drawings that manipulate the abstract language of cartography. Using the vocabulary and methodologies of mapmakers, he displaces their scalar and geographic logic to create inventive reorderings of space as well as regional and national boundaries.

Amir Zaki has employed photography to explore a similar interest in illusionism and the landscape. The built landscape of Los Angeles, with its hybridized structures and blatant artifice, provides an endless



Leslie Shows // *Salt Mine Storage Facility—Afghans*, 2006 // cat. no. 98 //



Shannon Ebner // *The Folding Up*, 2003 // cat. no. 33 //

Chris Ballantyne // *Untitled, Plaza*, 2006 // acrylic and graphite on panel // 48 x 36 in. // courtesy of the artist and Peres Projects, Los Angeles and Berlin //



source for the illusion. He sometimes plays with the postproduction effects of digital photography, transforming modernist hilltop homes into hallucinatory sci-fi-like structures floating precariously overhead. At other times, buildings that appear to have been altered by the artist turn out to be straight documentation—testimony to the impurity of postmodern Los Angeles architecture.

Chris Ballantyne is interested in monuments of an entirely different kind—the anonymous structures and empty spaces that characterize the suburban landscape. In his spare, surreal paintings on wood panels and in room-size installations, he focuses on similar subjects in the California landscape. The sources of his paintings are sites one might see amid the endless sprawl of development between the city and the country: swimming pools and ranch houses; parking lots and golf courses; and marshes, grasses, and other vestiges of the natural environment. In his installations Ballantyne transforms these anonymous structures and empty spaces into inadvertent monuments. Bull.Miletic, the collaborative team of Synne Bull and Dragan Miletic, makes installations of historical monuments, given form through the pair's subtle and skillful employment of video and sound. Their video installations, studies of temporal and spatial consciousness, reveal the poetic but ominous sense of place that one finds at landmarks such as the infamous prison of Alcatraz or the abandoned base-station gun installations at Fort Barry in the Marin Headlands, specific sites that evoke the California coast's chilling military history.

Shannon Ebner's landmarks are homemade, temporary "meta-monuments" created from flimsy, six-foot-high cardboard letters that she erected and photographed on location in and around Los Angeles. The artist is intrigued by the forlorn nature of abandoned monuments—once-glorified public sculptures that have lost their significance over time in the contemporary landscape. Ebner's *Dead Democracy Letters* series takes its cue from the famous Hollywood sign, another emblem laden with false promises. The series' title—combined with the words spelled out in each panoramic photograph, including *nausea*, hovering on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and *landscape incarceration*, temporarily mounted in the high desert—reflects the current state of fragility and toxicity of our environmental and political climate.