



Slangue
(see *Made in L.A.*)
Untitled, 2012. Courtesy the artist
and LAXART, Los Angeles



Patricia Fernández
(see *Made in L.A.*)
Installation view, Hammer
Museum, Los Angeles.
Photo: Brian Forrest

In the weeks since opening, *Made in L.A.*, the Hammer Museum's first biennial of Los Angeles-based artists, has been heralded by local press as a 'winner' and a 'success', insofar as a solid third of quality work, for one reporter, does a successful biennial make. Leave it to the broadsheets to pump aesthetic judgement full of competitive juice, though in the case of this biennial, those terms prove worryingly apt.

The exhibition spans five curators, three venues and, for a weekend, the Venice Beach boardwalk. The Hammer takes on the lion's share of the artists, while modest nonprofit LAXART smartly concentrates on a ten-year survey of the Slanguage collective. The Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery also turns itself over, ostensibly as a nod to the east side of town, where most artists hold and talk shop, providing the extra real-estate needed to scale up the Hammer's modest 'invitationals' to a show that fields a whopping 60 artists. Even then the larger venues present anaemic allotments. Audiovisuals are the usual casualties of such close quarters, but all throughout the cacophony, viewers may come to experience a comparable loss – of sensory bearing, yes, and also of any confidence that the themeless biennial endeavours to be more than a futures market, or that the curators aren't just speculating so *prolifically* to ensure that, with one artist or another, they'll end up on the right side of history.

Even in the smallest biennial, eclecticism attends to the form. If *Made in L.A.* could be described as having more soft edges than left feet, some credit must go to the consensus structure adopted by curators Anne Ellegood, Lauri Firstenberg, Malik Gaines, Cesar Garcia and Ali Subotnick. Several years after the New Museum's *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* attempted a decentralised, networked model of curating as a timely response to social media, only to suffer from the plurality that such a network can (and often does) yield, the *Made in L.A.* curators seem to draw from recent attempts at consensus-based organising, such as the Occupy movement's General Assemblies. Yet the efficacy of five curators entering into consensus remains in question, particularly when the ethic belies both a \$100,000 prize competition and the unequal allocation of production support across participating artists.

Made in L.A. purports to feature 'emerging, under-recognised' artists and partially skews against ageist assumptions. The more established of the older flock, including Meg Cranston, Thomas Lawson, Simone Forti and Morgan Fisher, appear as both artistic and pedagogical touchstones, having taught many of the names in the biennial's youth-heavy roster. In a wry deflation of biennial hype, Cranston has painted one of the Hammer's lobby walls with a standing army of BIC lighters, each sporting a colour from the fashion and design community's spring/summer 2012 trend forecasts. Lawson's paintings share a corner with those of his former student

MADE IN L.A.

Made in L.A.

**Hammer Museum, LAXART,
Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery
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Alex Olson, a brilliant young artist who scratches and scrapes out a negative *écriture*, indexing the painterly mark in relief.

The biennial's catalogue unpacks the 'counterarchaeological exercise' at the centre of the curatorial process, 'an investigation with no preconceived end result' that echoes the methods of participants like Olson. The weakest among these stop short at the studio (as with the pedestals Dashiell Manley built from his floor) or mine self-made narratives, like that of Dan Finsel's mixed-media 'reverse Oedipus complex' with Farrah Fawcett, that seem to take the zany and the fanciful as ends in themselves. Patricia Fernández gets far more from excavating her family history, in *A Record of Succession* (2012), building a patterned walnut armature, following the techniques of her woodcarver grandfather, to present the clothing buttons that once belonged to various relations. And Liz Glynn's express engagement with the field, through the manufacture of 'imperfect copies' of trafficked Egyptian artefacts and goods, fails to match the political urgency of Michael Rakowitz's ongoing replication of the looted objects from the National

Museum of Iraq (*The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2006–).

This failure is not Glynn's alone. Los Angeles residents would be forgiven for not recognising the biennial's *L.A.* as their own, or for taking the 'optimism' that circulates freely across didactics and catalogue – and, often, the work – as an opiate for, and not a reflection of, local and global affairs. In the performance that emerged from Ashley Hunt's prison activism in post-Katrina New Orleans, or Michelle Dizon's three-channel interpolation of the Rodney King beating with the 2005 Paris riots, the biennial makes important concessions to the critical value of anger, melancholy, pessimism and even shame. Among other participants, Slanguage's educational and communitarian work, and Zackary Drucker's intergenerational collaboration with Vaginal Davis, Holly Woodlawn and Mother Flawless Sabrina, give evidence that Los Angeles is more than a studio-artist's town. Here's hoping that the Hammer's next outing does more to dispel this myth.

Lingering behind these quibbles is a dumber, more troubling question that extends, as well, to *Pacific Standard Time*, the past year's 60-plus-venue survey of postwar LA art. The question can't but tug at the contradiction in Los Angeles's self-styled exceptionalism, whereby a geographic frontier produces a discursive horizon that supposedly voids accountability to the cultural mainstays, only to get offered up, in the Getty-organised initiative, to rectify misconceptions about the city's parochial ways. Yet instead of sending forth latter-day boosters to those colder climates of the artworld, the city keeps the exhibitions largely to itself. As Getty Research Institute deputy director Andrew Perchuk told the *Los Angeles Times*, 'What I know is that at a high level we decided that travelling was not a major goal with *Pacific Standard Time*. We didn't make a policy about it, but we didn't seek to encourage it through grants, for example.'

Insularity aside, *PST* offered an expansive platform for many artists, collectives and alternative institutions to receive long-deserved curatorial and scholarly attention. But is the vitality of the city's contemporary art scene anywhere in debate? Was 2008's 'best coast' Whitney Biennial not sufficient proof (cocurator Shamim M. Momin defected West shortly thereafter...)? Or could a page be taken from recent transplant Dan Cameron's decision to build out the Orange County Museum of Art's nearly-30-year statewide biennial to a triennial covering the Pacific Rim? 'With the heavy emphasis on this region, and all these shows, with the combined institutional weight, exhibitions, research and catalogues,' Cameron told an *Orange County Register* reporter, 'I began wondering, "Do we need another California Biennial?" It would start to seem provincial.' Indeed.

TYLER COBURN