

Gray, Emma, "L.A. Confidential", ARTNET, July-August 2006.



Among the more interesting summer shows in Los Angeles was Ken Brecher's installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Bergamot Station, May 13-Aug. 19, 2006. Titled "The Little Room of Epiphanies," the installation was done in the style of an artist's curio shop, the walls lined with a meticulously organized array of glass bottles (labeled and filled with dirt, rocks or other naturalist souvenirs), U.S. flags and assorted other patriotic ephemera, framed newspaper clippings, printed matter found in airplane seat-back pockets, postcards and more, along with taxidermy animals posed in various states of action. A lizard, for instance, ascends a wooden ladder to nowhere.

All this material, it turns out, was collected by Brecher during his travels. At first blush, it looks like a repetitive recycling of mundane and underappreciated objects. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Brecher travels through life with his eyes wide open, drinking in each moment lest he forget the finer details. He is compelled to take samples -- dirt, water, air or whatever is available -- to catalogue the occasion. Each object acts as a personal Post-it note anchoring a specific memory to a specific time and place.

Brecher is at once generous and intimate. "Epiphanies" included a bottle containing the ashes of his father and one labeled as the gathered tears of children who cried upon discovering their grandfather had died. The artist goes to some lengths for his material -- this is a man, after all, who proposed to his wife atop a burial mound for plague victims in England, dropping to his knee a second time to take a sample of the earth in order to record the moment. Obsessives like Brecher are often unconventional, amateur and sometimes "outsider" artists, but this pack rat is no garden gnome. He's in fact a former Rhodes Scholar who is a director at the Sundance Institute and the Children's Museum in Boston.

Just a few doors down, in a group show at Mark Moore Gallery titled "Ultrasonic International," July 8-Aug. 19, 2006 the London-based artist Kim Rugg showed work that also hits that obsessive-compulsive note. A Royal College of Art grad, Rugg takes the front pages of top newspapers on especially historical days and cuts out every single letter and then re-arranges them alphabetically -- turning important news into curiously well-ordered gobbledygook. The New York Times, for example, becomes eehikmNorsTTwY. Rugg's front pages include the Financial Times from Sept. 12, 2001, whose headline originally declared "Attack on America," and the issue of the New York Times that reported on "The Coronation of George W. Bush."

As for the pictures, Rugg cuts photographic images into tiny pixels and rearranges them by color, resulting in a fuzzy image that could be static or a strange digital landscape. I like to think that Rugg is changing the world, if only in her imagination, alchemically blasting the news out of existence by snipping it up into a million little pieces. The works were priced at \$1,800, framed.

At Jack Hanley Gallery in Chinatown, the San Francisco-based artist Shaun O'Dell paid homage to sun worship -- the old fashioned kind, not California tanning -- in an exhibition titled "Skull Pile High to the Sun," July 8-Aug. 9, 2006. With line drawings that vaguely resemble chemical diagrams, instructional graphics and Yellow Submarine, O'Dell renders strangely evocative scenes of pyramids and obelisks, landscapes and constellations, figures and abstract insignia, all filtered through a sensibility dosed with Druid, pre-Columbian and Egyptian sun culture. One sculpture had a literal link to the sun -- a solar panel outside the gallery powered a video camera that taped a plaster bust of a man with a large black dot on his brow, feeding the image to a video monitor inside. It seemed very Californian, and one wonders why other galleries haven't thought of the same idea. Beneath it all, O'Dell hit a sinister environmental note. The show was accompanied by a booklet that reflects on the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, nuclear storage facilities and the cosmic origins of Uranium. The drawings ranged in price from around \$1,100 to \$2,000.

In Culver City, Kim Light's LightBOX gallery also explored an environmental theme with "Ecolux," July 22-Aug. 19, 2006, an exhibition with 10 percent of any sale proceeds earmarked for www.stopglobalwarming.org, a company set up by Laurie David (wife of Curb Your Enthusiasm star Larry David, and a producer and environmentalist of note). Among the artworks were a sculpture of an iceberg by Maya Lin and a video by artist Joel Tauber, a Silver Lake-based artist who literally buried himself in the earth in seven different California locations in order to get closer to god and nature.

A few blocks South on La Cienega at Blum & Poe, Slater Bradley organized a show of works by 17 artists titled "The Monty Hall Problem," a title that seemed to have something to do with the vicissitudes of choice -- remember, in the television game show Let's Make a Deal, contestants had to choose one of three doors for their prize. In any case, the show included works by artists ranging from Alexander Calder to James Welling, Banks Violette and Mark Grotjahn.

My favorite work was Jay Battle's Cutting Out the Middleman (Amstel Version) 2003-06 -- a flush toilet mounted upon a low plinth, the tank positioned high above, with a beer tap on the tank, open so that beer poured directly into the toilet bowl below. I saw the show when the World Cup was hot and heavy, and the installation served as sore reminder of England's hopes going down the pisser! Anyone who has downed more than a couple of lagers in quick succession knows about the relationship between beer and lavatories -- perhaps none more than an English football fan. Ah, well, there's always 2008.

At Daniel Weinberg Gallery is "Block Party," a highly energized drawing show including works by Richard Artschwager, Lee Bontecou, Sol LeWitt, James Siena and others. There were two paintings by Louise Belcourt -- simple, 3D curved abstract shapes that suggest stones or cathode ray tubes -- that I would like to own (they're \$2,200 and \$4,000) and a great ink drawing by Brad Kahlhamer called Affiliated Tribes of the Southwest (2005), which is \$8,500. Kahlhamer opened a show at Kantor Feuer on Aug. 16 -- from those of us still at work, he gets a prize.

In other news, Honor Fraser is no longer the lone contemporary art outpost on Abbot Kinney Boulevard. Collector and landscape designer Sean Knibb has opened 1522, debuting with works by Kevin Hanley. . . . At the House of Campari, where Simon Watson and Craig Hensala have put together a new-talent show titled "25 Bold Moves," one standout was L.A. based sculptor Nathan Mabry. His Conversation Piece (Jackin, Stackin' and Crackin') is a giant terracotta llama head with gold grills on its teeth, a combination of classic technique with street culture and a cheeky sense of humor.