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## EAST IN EDEN

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## Living in Eden

Chris Michno

This summer, the UCLA Hammer Museum showcased 15 Los Angeles Artists in *Eden's Edge*. In a brashly conceived counterpoint, *East in Eden* at Cal Poly Pomona turns the metropole inside out. Eden is here.

Patrick Merrill, the Gallery Director and Curator at Cal Poly Pomona, envisioned and organized this exhibit, inviting 29 artists who have lived and worked in the Pomona Valley for a significant portion of their careers to participate. Most of the work was created specifically for this show. Merrill's ambition for the exhibit is to evince a sense of place through the work of these artists. Landscape crops up in a significant portion of the work, often with concerns of sustainability, suburban sprawl and environmental degradation. Several artists address the role of the railroad in bringing economic development and people to the region. Autos and freeways appear as the railroad's contemporary counterpart in commerce and the movement of labor. Many of the works discuss the valley with immediacy and intimacy.

The railroad figures prominently in the engaging paintings of Tom Skelly, whose work addresses current ideas of composition and craft. As a group, the paintings are alternately disquieting, melancholy and mysterious. The kinetic frenzy of *Race at Kellogg Hill* spills into the cerulean blue passages of *Coming to Town*. Skelly paints with an accomplished and confident hand; at the same time, his use of spray paint aligns the work with graffiti. *Coming to Town* incorporates Skelly's own photos of graffiti, taken from trains in the Pomona Valley and Los Angeles and transferred to canvas. Graffiti becomes both the subject of his work and his mode of expression, and, in taking photos of graffiti that others have created, Skelly both appropriates their images and authors his own, creating a subtle tension in his work.

The question of the urban center and its periphery comes up in the show repeatedly. Skelly's work bears on this issue, but no one takes it on as extensively as Capparelli and Willey. Rail provides the bookends for *Invisible trajectories*, a collaborative series of 30 mixed media works on paper by Deena Capparelli and Claude Willey. Whimsical, yet dead serious, this modern parable of oil depletion and post-apocalyptic renewal offers a critique of the model economic growth for the Inland Empire and beyond. Impressive and compelling is the artist statement which approaches the scale of an environmental manifesto.

Gary Keith has claimed a stretch of freeway at the 10/57 interchange as the Valley's gateway. In *Cathedral*, Keith celebrates civil engineering and commerce, building his image with light brushwork, paint drips and semi-transparent scumbles. In contrast to Keith's personalized version of the 10/57 interchange, the freeway homogenizes southern California, and his painting of this complex of layered ramps, merge lanes and exits spanning the valley floor east of Kellogg Hill could represent any number of similar superstructures in the region.

If you drive to Claremont from Cal Poly on surface streets, you can see nearly half of the business signs Paul Knoll has meticulously executed as ceramic sculpture. Drive a bit further; you can see the rest. Simply fantastic, Knoll's ceramic signage provides striking specificity, naming places as emblems of the past. Color intensity and miniaturization crystallize these signs into ideas.

Paul Knoll's signs are as iconic as the array of eight paintings and lithographs by Michael Woodcock. This work is invested with craft and intention; however, I often feel I am looking at a private narrative and missing a critical piece of information. The spare compositions, usually a single image, visually centered, and a line of text, have a strong presence; they act as personal shrines, as if Woodcock is preserving some

idea or event in his memory.

In a bit of strut and humor, Rolo Castillo appropriates the story of Remus and Romulus and the founding of Rome for the Pomona Valley in *One Flew over the bitches nest*. Feral children, wolves, and murder are in our bloodlines, he seems to say. His painting, which is executed on a door, includes the figure of a multi-breasted woman. It is possible that she is Artemis, who famously killed a number of Greek not-quite heroes. Perhaps this is why he prefers to remain unstated, as mentioned in his statement.

A group of similarly themed paintings by Steve Comba and Jim Fuller, and a solvent transfer from Michael Woodcock amount to paradise lost. Suburban Claremont's most visible symbols in the fight to preserve wilderness areas in the foothills – Johnson's Pasture and Potato Hill – are the subject of these works. Fuller's juxtaposed views of Potato Hill, *Claremont Foothills*, 1990, and *Current Foothills*, 2007, show the creeping advance of suburban sprawl. Fuller's paintings create a sense of gravity in the earth tones and heft of his hills. To the right of Fuller is Woodcock's *Orange Potato Mountain*. In the foreground, a swathe of grass gives a hint of wind driven motion, and the predominant orange hue suggests the glaze of memory. Steve Comba's trio of paintings depicts Johnson's Pasture a few miles west of Potato Hill in the Claremont foothills. The idealization of the landscape in Comba's paintings gives a sense of having been expelled from the garden. This sense is heightened by *Grand Prix*, named after the 2003 wildfire which charred the hills and claimed numerous homes in Claremont.

Tom Herberg's two drawings, *Se Fué* and *Se Fué (Ghost trees)*, provide an elegant memento mori. The staccato rhythm of the grease pencil marks on paper and the reversal of figure and ground from one drawing to the next reveal a fleeting paradise.

Eileen Senner steals the show. Her work is sensuous and beautiful, emotionally charged and subtle. She reveals a light touch leaving a sumptuous, velvety surface. The two paintings here, both untitled, feel intensely personal. The earthquake fault lines Senner uses as her point of departure are a metaphor for personal tumult. Her work requires time. There is a slumbering tension beneath the surface; it is the moment of weightlessness when you are perfectly poised before a catastrophe.

Liz Fuller's cotton organdy confections influenced by Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* are an invitation to play. The cerulean blue *City Scape* has a light touch accompanied by a complex geometry. I'm really drawn to the idea of invented space. Liz Fuller's constructions seem like places where fantasies are played out. This work reminds me of building models out of cardboard and drawing paper as a child and creating narratives in my head about the occupants.

The dreamlike quality of Joyce Hesselgrave's lovely drawings celebrates places that "don't really exist anymore." This work plays nicely off the fragility of Karen Sullivan's porcelain *Witness*, some of which has cracked like sun baked mud; the photos baked into the surface of the porcelain seem like transitory memories.

Gary Geraths' large scale drawings – they put the viewer right in the middle of the scene – create a tension between stasis and motion. Each drawing 'captures' a landscape where certain elements are fixed while other small parts of the drawing seem to move. This effect is enhanced by the combination of drawing materials Gary employs in his work. His statement speaks of a "collision of elements [and] textures:" the landscape is completely alive to him, and the drawings reflect this.

The spreading grounds in Claremont, occupying a swath of land in the low foothills beneath Potato Hill and the San Antonio Dam where water is channeled to feed underground aquifers, are the subject of Rebecca Hamm's large scale watercolors. In her statement, Hamm suggests that her use of paper – a material that degrades over time – imbues her work with an ephemeral quality. There is some uncertainty about whether the spreading grounds will be developed for other use, which lends weight to Hamm's metaphor. In her statement, Hamm also asserts the work as autobiographical metaphor. Yet there is no hint of this in the painting, and it is confusing that she provides no further explanation in her statement. This could lead to speculation, but this kind of symbolism should creep into the work at some level.

There are some gracefully painted passages in the work of Chris Toovey. He takes great care with the bone forms in his canvasses; these passages seem to be invested with feeling. However, a number of things detract from his work. The geometric shapes which recede into an illusion of space – perhaps they represent walls, perhaps AstroTurf; whatever he means them to be, they amount to visual dead ends. Nor is there any functional reason for cutting the canvas from its stretcher bars to hang like tapestry. The resulting stray canvas threads give the work a slipshod feel. Toovey's installation of astroTurf and sun-bleached deer bones arranged on a Webber kettle grille in the *Call of the Wild Reduced to a Hobby*, suggests the remains of a suburban barbeque in which a hunter's kill has been eaten. The larger metaphor is that the

careless lifestyle of consumption and unchecked development amounts to the squandering of natural resources for nothing more than our own amusement. This could be a powerful installation. The themes are compelling, but it feels a bit thin.

Chick's comics – doctrinaire tracts which proclaim a jingoistic imperial version of Christianity – appear tacked to the wall in the shape of a cross in John Cullen's bombastic anti-religious installation, *Jesus Saves at the 99 cent Store*. It amounts to a straw-man. Cullen's is not the only installation in this exhibit which fails to satisfy. Keith Crockett's installation, *Urban Cargo*, dominated by a delicately balanced pile of scrapped concrete and wood pikes, offers few cues to decoding its content. Without the help of the statement, it is much too ambiguous.

Dan Van Clapp's assemblages of the detritus of the military and aerospace contractors located in the Pomona Valley are anchored in the region's history. The assemblages have a certain poetry and internal logic. The torpedo shapes refer to sensuous organic forms like seed pods and sleek shark torsos as much as they do to bombs and fuselages. The 1950's era chairs and other accoutrements create a sense of nostalgia. However as anti-war statements, they are tiresome and repetitive. Each of these artists has fertile ground to explore; what the installations lack is specificity and nuance. What they provide is archeology.

*East in Eden*, curated by Patrick Merrill, is at Cal Poly's W. Keith and Janet Kellogg University Art Gallery from November 15, 2007 to December 15, 2007. The artists in the show are Deena Capparelli & Claude Willey, Rolo Castillo, Steve Comba, Keith Crockett, John Cullen, Jim & Liz Fuller, Gary Geraths, Rebecca Hamm, Tom Herberg, Joyce Hesselgrave, Kim Kaufman, Gary Keith, Paul Knoll, Gilbert Lujan, Annie Marquis, Penny McElroy, Fr. Bill Moore, Eileen Senner, Tom Skelly, Jeanne Steffan, Karen Sullivan, Juan Thorp, Chris Toovey, Dan Van Clapp, Ahlene Welsh, Michael Woodcock, and Marco Zamora.