

notes on looking

Contemporary Art from Los Angeles

Touchy Feely at Human Resources – Peter Harkawik curates



Fawn Krieger, 2006, Planes of Development 1, 9.75 x 11.75" acrylic paint on inkjet print

Architect and critic Kenneth Frampton's 1983 essay [Towards a Critical Regionalism](#) provided the starting point for artist Peter Harkawik's curatorial debut in Los Angeles. Harkawik's statement makes this clear. [Link to Frampton's essay](#). [Link to Harkawik's statement](#). [All Frampton quotes are from the essay linked. The nice people at Human Resources (Devin McNulty and Eric Kim) emailed to me content from their announcement, I have pasted Harkawik's statement and the announcement images at the close of this post.]

I understand Frampton to be making a case for an architecture that builds from the site, rather than upon it. I got the sense that in the author's mind Western or 'Universal' architecture fails due to the West's faith that ours is the correct and ultimate future of all cultures. It could be said that Modern architecture has colonized space – only partly addressing the needs of its inhabitants because its other agenda is to enforce a rationalist or 'cleansed' manner of living. Frampton writes eloquently of the dangers of Populism:

*“In contradistinction to Critical Regionalism, the primary vehicle of Populism is the **communicative or instrumental** sign. (Italics in the original.) Such a sign seeks to evoke not a critical perception of reality, but rather the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information. Its tactic is to attain, as economically as possible, a preconceived level of gratification in behavioristic terms. In this respect, the strong affinity of Populism for the rhetorical techniques and imagery of advertising is hardly accidental. Unless one guards against such a convergence, one will confuse the resistant capacity of a critical practice with the demagogic tendencies of Populism.”*

Frampton closes his essay with a plea for the tactile in a built environment:

“In this way (by including tactile and other sensory perceptions), Critical Regionalism seeks to complement our normative visual experience by readdressing the tactile range of human perception. In so doing, it endeavors to balance the priority accorded to the image and to counter the Western tendency to interpret the environment as exclusively perspectival terms. According to its etymology, perspective means rationalized sight or clear seeing, and as such it presupposes a conscious suppression of the senses of smell, hearing and taste, and a consequent distancing from a more direct experience of the environment.”

Harkawik, in his curatorial statement, takes issue with the notion of a **“Master Builder,”** or new professional, who can **“honor the human propensity to experience space via a melange of sensory perceptions.”**

Let me state unequivocally that Harkawik's exhibition is subtle and deft, and that the works he has chosen to explore his problematizing of Frampton's 1983 thesis are beautiful and challenging. That the exhibition closed two weeks ago breaks my heart, because I only got to visit the show twice near the closing date, and unless you happened by Human Resources you will not now have a chance to see work that will not return to this city soon, if at all.

With that said, I want to make clear my sense that the curator reads the classical phrase for architect: 'master builder' in terms appropriate to art, which is subjective in nature, rather than to architecture, which – while it may have an 'artistic' quality - is essentially science and engineering. It does take a trained elite to design a building.



Sam Anderson, 2011, *Snowflake* (detail), Fishtank, snowflake eel, PVC pipe, ziplock bag, peppermint candies, rock, sand, steel frame, paint, acrylic paint, ratchet straps, cardboard angles, water pump, miniatures, speakers, freeze dried krill, audio recording (2m3s) 40" x 61.5 x 48"

Sam Anderson's *Snowflake* included a fish tank housing a snowflake eel, a recorded oral reminiscence of a former California women's prison inmate, and a tiny tableau representing a prison yard visiting center. I think it must have mattered to the artist that during the reception, and continuing throughout the run of the exhibition the prison visiting yard received many kicks and stomps from unsuspecting gallery visitors – the story recited by an actress detailed the mindless, bureaucratic nature of prison officials' brutality and this casual carelessness of art enthusiasts resonated with me. Yes, the eel came out to play, yes it (he or she remains unknown to me) was cute and yes, Anderson is cognizant that her use of live creatures presents a problem. I think she left the problem in my lap, or rather in any viewers lap, as she did not offer any explanation. Nicely done.