



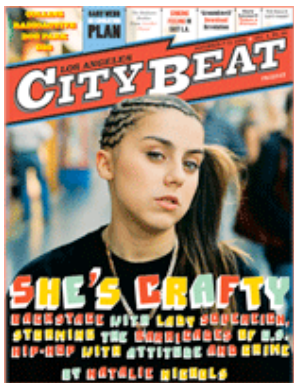


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# For Your Social Consideration

Two collectively conscious exhibitions are only blocks away, yet miles apart

~ By REBECCA EPSTEIN ~



Installation view of *Consider This ...*

**I**n October, L.A.'s Craft and Folk Art Museum held a reception for the exhibition *Street Signs and Solar Ovens: Socialcraft in Los Angeles*, and it looked like an entire neighborhood had moved in. With bike punks, Latino farmers, pie bakers, and witty T-shirt makers, the third-floor gallery and courtyard below teemed with a community solidarity and personal pride that far surpassed the buoyancy of a typical opening.

Many weeks later, the cheers still echo.

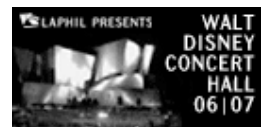
This lively collection of functional objects, protest signs, quirky inventions, agricultural endeavors, apparel, and fine-art creations reveals



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Two collectively conscious exhibitions are only blocks away, yet miles apart

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the broad range of craft-based social activism currently taking place in Los Angeles. Brothers Marc and Robert Herbst – local educators, artists, and co-editors with Cara Baldwin and Christina Ulke of the tidy-yet-weighty *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* – served as curators. The works they've amassed, whether physical or conceptual, each manage the pain of modern-day oppression, alienation, and/or environmental destruction with the promise of personal action.

The result is a group show that's exceptionally eclectic, often unnerving, yet gloriously optimistic.

The curators put it together in only a few months, using as a guide Gregory G. Sholette's essay "Dark Matter: Activist Art and Counter-Public Sphere" (published in the journal in 2004), which discusses everyday activities that tend to go unrecognized as legitimate artistic, cultural, and social practices. Selections were made according to an expansive definition of politically-based craft.

"We wanted to show the crafts that activists do to maintain and support how they live, whether in direct-action protest or living alternatively," Robert Herbst says. Conversely, also included are works by artists with a "craft-based" practice – whether using craft in their art in a politicized manner, or crafting dialogue between individuals or among groups.

As you might expect with a swath this thick, many items don't fit neat categories. But the emphasis on "lifestyle" manages to umbrella them all. "Whether for public display or personal use," the brothers declare in the wall text, "all of these works dream towards a more just, peaceful and livable community."

Behold, therefore, a map from the collective Fallen Fruit, showing where to freely gather produce from city-owned trees; a call to use naturally energy-saving clotheslines, plus a bike-powered blender, from the family who comprises Path to Freedom; and survivalist artist Christopher Nyerges's MacGyver-like beer-can lanterns and solar ovens made from pizza boxes and tin foil.

Mixed in with these grassroots creations are objects by noted L.A. fine artists. Evan Holloway's *Free Space Meter Boot* (2000) is a lock-box for parking meters and a "small utopian gesture" to buck the law and spare you time and tickets, while Sam Durant's *Tell It Like It Is* (2002) reworks a 1969 Berkeley student protest sign in vinyl on a huge light box. Tell boldly relocates a historical activist moment in a gallery setting, but, in this context, it also functions beautifully as a 21st-century call to actively speak the truth.

Not surprisingly, the protest sign, perhaps the oldest and most widely used activist craft, is everywhere, even hanging from the ceiling. But not all signage is attached to a stick – alterknitter Lisa Anne Auerbach rages with text-heavy sweaters, capes, and a spectacular blushing American flag imploring us to "take back" the color red, now associated with red states and the perils of the Bush administration. Even the text-free felt vegetable costumes retrieved from the South Central Farm uprising – the show dedicates a room to those activists' efforts – expand our notion of protest language and visual signs.

Here, "socialcraft" refers not only to objects but to the making of societies, however small or subcultural. Group-based activism is happening all over our city, the show proclaims. However, sometimes a peek behind the scenes reveals more than an artist making pie in your kitchen and tapping whiskey from a backyard still (both represented



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**BEAT****The Cheese Stands Alone**

Cube's decadent, educational 'Maker Night' features loads of the divine stuff

here). Sheila Pinkel's laminated wall chart of commercial furniture made by California state prisoners exposes a craft-making society that is in fact completely alienated, and devoid of agency and choice.

One especially intriguing group is the collective Gaian Mind. Bearing ties to a disbanded aggressive anarchist group in Long Beach, members now preach nonviolence, and support themselves by recycling cardboard for weekly paper-making parties. They also make modest but sustainable children's toys from paper and seeds, such as the airplane and ball exhibited here. When kids tire of them, the toys can be buried and watered to yield new soil and plant matter. Try doing that with an Xbox.

High above the ground, but only blocks away, is *Consider This ...*, a group show from the County Museum's experimental arm LACMALab, curated by pioneering text-and-image artist Barbara Kruger. The show, up since April, is wrapped in noisy signs of its own: Kruger-designed one-word invocations that announce our most human but potentially obfuscating emotions. "Greed," "envy," "pleasure," "memory," shout huge white capitals on kelly green backgrounds. The effect is bright and commanding, but brilliantly non-hostile.

"Consider This ... In violence we forget who we are," reads the building's marquee, based on a quote from author Mary McCarthy. And indeed, between Kruger's signage and the commissioned installations inside, we are asked to consider, not quotidian actions, but rather our social points of view.

Celebrated fine artists Mark Bradford, Dorit Cypis, Margaret Honda, Philip Rantzer, Mario Ybarra Jr., and Bruce Yonemoto each created enormous works to fit the cavernous space. And, upon entering, the earthbound appeals for social change from Street Signs already feel a million miles away.

In Yonemoto's floor-to-ceiling video projection *Birthday Party*, what one assumes will be easy viewing becomes surprisingly grotesque and claustrophobic as teenagers eat, laugh, dance, and sweat in supremely close quarters, close-up, and with the film speed occasionally tweaked to slow motion.

Margaret Honda's *Hide Out* startles in another way. An extensive fort wrapped in patchworked fabric, it's punched randomly with peepholes. When you innocently look inside, a taxidermed animal stares back. It's a disruptive, jolting experience, as each creature's positioning seems to animate them with fear, fury, and the capability of threatening us as we do them.

Other works rely on historical narrative – Ybarra Jr., for example, maps the story of L.A.'s Belmont Tunnel in a circular, walk-through structure that includes museum artifacts from area native tribes, train-travel ephemera such as timetables and souvenir models, and documentary footage of modern-day graffiti artists who tag on the tunnel's shell.

Ybarra Jr.'s piece invites visitors to grab a marker and make their own contributions; so does Rantzer's riddle-based *Five Continents*. Opening night, the empowered crowd gleefully scribbled on and alongside the commissioned works. But the inclusive gesture didn't quite go as planned – in an ironic effort to control, not to mention protest, visitors' free expression, signs around the platform of Rantzer's work plead with viewers to address the written questions his installation poses. You may love Joey, but please draw it elsewhere.

Fortunately, you can – in a separate DIY area, where inspired patrons can make and display collages from old magazines and green construction paper. In some respects, this is the show's most compelling part, presenting an unpredictable, constantly changing field. But segregating visitors' artmaking is disappointing, given the socially attentive theme, and it also mirrors the exhibition's ultimately disparate and surprisingly distant tone. Here, artworks call only upon the intellect, not the active body.

Kruger and the Herbst brothers seem to agree that modern human existence and interactions demand exposure, reconsideration, and refashioning. *Consider This ...* presents ideas in grand physical forms and through rigorous intellectual exercises. But in the current political moment, when suffering and strife are everywhere we look, it's far more impressive to see what we can *do*.



*Consider This .... LACMA West, Fairfax Ave. and Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 857-6000. Closes Jan. 15. Lacma.org.*

*Street Signs and Solar Ovens: Socialcraft in Los Angeles. Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 937-4230. Closes Dec. 31. Cafam.org.*

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