

ARTFORUM

"Collective Pleasures." Travis Jeppesen on Made in L.A.
January 2024

<https://www.artforum.com/columns/travis-jeppesen-made-in-la-2023-544885/>

ON SITE

COLLECTIVE PLEASURES • Travis Jeppesen on Made in L.A.



From left: View of Made in L.A.: "Acts of Living," 2023, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From left: Teresa Baker, *Passage*, 2023; Teresa Baker, *Expanse*, 2023; Teresa Baker, *Track*, 2023. Photo: Joshua White. View of Made in L.A.: "Acts of Living," 2023, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From left: Victor Estrada, *Red-Highway*, 1990-2023; Victor Estrada, *Pink Landscape/La Mariposa Rosa*, 2023; Victor Estrada, *Candy Mountain*, 2023; Victor Estrada, *Pink, Brown, Yellow*, aka: (8/3/2019), 2022. Photo: Charles White.

THE LATEST INCARNATION of Made in L.A. borrowed its title from a sentence once uttered by the legendary local assemblage artist Noah Purifoy: "Creativity can be an act of living, a way of life, and a formula for doing the right thing." In an era of political grandstanding and melodramatic acts of virtue signaling that often seem ready-made for some future parodist of this era, "Acts of Living," as both a title and an overarching exhibition concept, is almost startling in its restraint and modesty—it promises a return to an offline world of the quotidian in which the vast majority of us, for worse or likely better, actually dwell. Even more startling, the show's curators—Diana Nawi and Pablo José Ramírez with Ashton Cooper—took us back to the now-taboo realm of the aesthetic, which is, perhaps ashamedly in most cases these days, what the vast majority of us were drawn to in the first place in taking up the cause of art.

The beginning for me—depending on which wing of the Hammer you chose to enter first—was a confrontation with Teresa Baker's sublime abstract wall pieces, which from a distance appeared as tapestries, but were actually made of dyed artificial turf: that most LA of topographical artifacts, especially for those of us who actually leave our cars and wander the city's neighborhoods by foot. Pieces such as *Track*, 2023, seemed to meld the visual language of Abstract Expressionism (in particular, I was reminded of the unwieldy formal shape-shifting of Robert Motherwell's monumental canvases) with the intricate geometry of Native American weavings. The works were influenced by the spiritual and

narrative traditions of the artist's upbringing as a member of the Mandan and Hidatsa Nations.

Many have bemoaned the near-total neglect of video in the exhibition. I actually found it a ballsy and refreshing curatorial move, considering the countless biennials in which I found myself utterly depleted after sitting through hours of moving-image work, only to realize I would still need twenty more to see the rest of the show. Those working in the medium will likely despise me because of it, but I would rather spend that time with the paintings and sculptures of Victor Estrada—which, in my estimation, are anything but static in their abstract impastoed horny goodness, clearly conceived in the classic LA bad-boy tradition of Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Raymond Pettibon. Estrada's mixed-media painting *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 2017, was a sublime assortment of smeary pastels goaded into bloblike shapes floating up into the ether above a slanted plateau, upon which an oversize crow dips its beak into a lake. A similar kind of raw punk energy emanated from the fucked-up figurative drawings of Jibz Cameron, better known as Dynasty Handbag. In *Me*, 2021, the artist reimagines herself as a giant girthy pink dick with green arms, orange tits, and a blue head, atop which is a yellow wig: a manifestation of the eruptive and unpredictable weirdness that characterizes her performance work, long beloved by Angelenos bent toward perversity and black humor.

Tough call, but it was probably the three-dimensional work that most powerfully brought the show's bricolage approach to the fore. The selection of assemblages from Teresa Tolliver's 2003–2005 "Wild Things" series was

a revelation: Utilizing a commercially manufactured lion form, the artist went about attaching all kinds of found freaky accoutrements to the creatures' bodies, othering them into a realm of sweet and stunning hapticity. They were also Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's claw-foot stanc grasping crystalline orbs—the sort of furnishings on might expect to encounter in the home of some eccentric witchy millionaire recluse. Or the ceramics of Lu Bermúdez, with their updated riffs on Mesoamerica iconography; the talismanic *Table Offering*, 2004, for instance, featured a smooth white bowl presented upon a base that seems molded out of Aztec deity sculpture.

Los Angeles itself can be viewed as a vast, eccentric tapestry of cultural traditions wrought out of disorder and disruption—save, perhaps, for the dream factory of Hollywood, which in this exhibition is all but ignored in favor of the city's glorious peripheries. More often than not, those margins are defined by a certain craftiness that is frequently relegated to the category of *a brut*, as Simon Rodia's LA landmark Watts Tower identified by the curators as the guiding light of the exhibition, prominently signify. If the polarized society of social media indignation can offer any real accomplishment, it won't be in the reductive tokenizing "representation," but in the eradication of boundaries between the so-called "high" and "low." In this sense, Made in L.A. offered a much-needed template for a type of show that is not only of this time but is, even more crucially, of this world. □

TRAVIS JEPPESEN IS A WRITER AND ARTIST WHOSE LATEST NOVEL, *SETTLERS LANDING*, WAS PUBLISHED THIS YEAR BY ITINA PRESS.