



Super-California
by Patrick W. Deegan

"Supersonic," June 12-Aug. 21, 2004, at Art Center College of Design, 950 South Raymond Avenue, Pasadena, Calif. 91105

"1 Wind Tunnel, 8 Schools, 120 Artists" reads the crescendoing subtitle of "Supersonic," the summer survey of works by MFA students from eight Southern California art schools that inaugurates the new "Wind Tunnel" exhibition space of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. A former WWII-era aircraft aerodynamics test site, the Wind Tunnel is a massive space, some 16,000 square feet, that is similar in feel to L.A. MOCA's Geffen Contemporary.

It's too appropriate, then, that this sizable group of young artists -- students from UC Irvine, UC San Diego, UCLA, Art Center, Otis, Claremont, USC and CalArts -- should be "tested" in such a cavernous space, effectively reproducing the vibrant variety of styles and mediums that find a home in Southern California.

The exhibition both accentuates the unique character each school and demonstrates the range of regional influences shared by much of the work. The show was also marked by the inaugural event of a new Southern California Consortium of Art Schools (SoCCAS) -- a symposium on art in Southern California from the 1990s to the present.

Opening night at "Supersonic" was probably unlike any MFA show ever seen in Southern California. Every alcove and gallery of the space was crowded with people, and even the parking lot was teeming with animated art lovers, ranging from the students themselves to So-Cal art glitterati. MFA exhibitions tend to be amorphous hodgepodes put together with a general sentiment of "Thank god, we've graduated." In "Supersonic," the curators -- a committee of representatives of each school -- gave careful attention to making the installation seem both cohesive and diverse.

A number of remarkable pieces are worth singling out here. Installed near the exhibition entrance is Claudia Bucher's *Kinocognophore* (2003), a visceral convolution of sculpted forms that winds through the space like some kind of cyber-organic form. The sculpture is complemented by eerie videos that cast dim and constantly changing shadows of colored light

around the darkened room. The dis/embodiment of motion and space through sculpture and video is a reoccurring theme in "Supersonic," and Bucher's piece is among the pithiest.

The malleability of space is a familiar theme in Southern California art practice; both urban and rural California terrain lend themselves easily to a sense of vast openness (remember Baudrillard's shock in his America), and yet that terrain is being constantly redeveloped, resurfaced and redefined, resembling in many ways the constantly undulating waves that are emblematic of California. This plasticity -- the instability of what is represented as authentic or real -- is further echoed in the superficial glitz and glamour of the silver screen. These qualities are represented in the painting, *Total Portrait with No Ambition* by (2004) by Christiane Lyons, as well as in Monica Furmanksi's *Land and Sea* (2004), which blends surface and horizon without distinction, in a way that is reminiscent of Vija Celmins' work.

In a more flatfooted but not uninteresting sense, Jill Miller's *Les Grand Odalisques* (2004) remediates art history through the plasticity of video. On a pair of video screens facing each other, Miller has a series of live models pose, constantly shifting, moving and staring at each other across the narrow passage that the viewers traverse. The effect is a dramatic update of T.J. Clark's well-known critique of Manet's Olympia.

Alternatively, Kevin Wingate sublimates a convention of marketing esthetics in his vaguely Orientalist abstract paintings, titled *are you sure Hank did it this way? (untitled)* (2004). Wingate's paintings evoke a wide range of historical references, from Venturi and Scott Brown's analysis of popular signage in L.A.-inspired Las Vegas to the Low Rider customizations of the Mexican artist Rubén Ortiz-Torres. Sitting on the floor nearby is a plastic cooler, emphasizing the better parts of glamour's low-brow hedonism (and filled with cheap beer opening night).

Likewise, Derrick Eady in *Silence #8* (2004) and Christine Nguyen in *Dusty Climate Sound Soft Rocketiers* (2004) achieve a kind of luminosity similar to the Light and Space artists of yore, but with the digital allusions that UC Irvine has become noted for. Whitney Stollich's *Landuse #1-3* (2004) renders the land plastic itself in a series of three diorama-like R-prints.

Finally, a notable and progressive example of the dioramic plasticity of space may be found in an installation by Terry Chatkupt titled *The Ozoner* (2004). Here, a Sugimoto-esque miniature drive-in theater is complemented

by a video apparently shot from a moving car. The theater's "screen" is made from a single monitor (which, like Sugimoto's screens, does not reflect a projector's light but glows and radiates by itself). In this self-referential drive-in, the viewer watches driving while ostensibly parked, rendering the two-dimensional proscenium installation reflexively ironic. Chatkupt's piece is hauntingly effective, especially considering its performative relationship to the California movie industry: we are watching ourselves project, and straining to act ourselves out.

Another sculpture toying with theme of space is Matt Hope's loud, obnoxious *Horn Massive* (2004). Perhaps the most prominent work in the show, *Horn Massive*'s explosive sound invisibly sculpted the space around it on opening night. Made of steel, aluminum and a few choice electrical components, and standing over 13 feet tall and almost as wide, the work is a super-efficient sound chamber, capable of projecting its audio dominance with very little (electrical) effort. *Horn Massive* was developed from the idea of massives -- large gatherings commonly associated with rave culture -- in order to create a semi-portable system (the sculpture has barely functional casters) for these sonic events.

The massive horn also looks imposing, with its bristling structural steel fins and the industrial DJ platform complete with mixing tables, an input array and amplifiers. However, the artistic intersection of loosely self-organized rave networks and the madness of propaganda rallies is belied here. Unfortunately, the subtler points of military technology and sonic coercion seemed lost in the deafening noise, creating yet one more example of how repackaging for consumers makes dubious ideas seem acceptable.

Still, there's more than superifice and noise. Patrick Marcoux and Ryan Taber's large diorama is a testament to work that digs below the surface. Raised up on its own platform, *Orange Grove in Sepia; Grampa Joad's Daydream* (2004) reconstructs in railroad miniature a few acres of the formerly ubiquitous California orange grove. Viewers may lift up segments of the installation via a system of ropes and pulleys, unearthing a cross-section of social interactions beneath the grove's horizontal façade (i.e., the Southern California landscape).

The raised sections show draftsmen, miners and even what appears to be an enraged foreman. Metaphorically deep, Marcoux and Taber's work intelligently counterpoints numerous historical rhizomes (and their fictions) with a present "reality" that mushrooms with plasticity.

Amid the glamour and the noise, the subtle and quiet pieces in "Supersonic" were among the most effective. With the crowds of hipsters adding to the commotion and hubbub of a happening, a few works became havens for thought.

Christopher Russell's masterful installation, *Untitled (Becalmed)* (2002-04), intelligently mounted photographs adjacent to his well-composed wallpaper, returning the viewer to the pleasure of the Beaux Arts salon and the flaneur. Still, the disconcerting naiveté of the photographs encouraged a deeper reading through literally examining the wallpaper's miniature texts. The loosely joined sentences offered only clues and now answers: "It didn't matter. I knew what he had written. I could hear the sounds."

Similarly, David Dahl Khang's mesmerizing *Bleeding Book/ Linea Lingua* video (2004) attracted viewers with its images of china ink diffusing through water that are beautifully reflected in a large pool on the floor. The installation includes two small monitors that show a man painting or writing in Chinese calligraphic style with a giant brush held in his mouth (making his whole body an extension of the implement). As beautiful and meditative as this was, it provided no quick conclusions: Khang's black pool was both surface and bottomless wellspring.

Lastly, the works by John Richey and Jed Lind were differently intriguing. Richey's animation and installation, *everything under control* (2003-04) is perhaps the most effective use of space in the show. A colorful stack of small pillows lends static color to monochromatic line-drawing animations of people in car accidents. This juxtaposition of innocence, play and disaster provides an environment in which scenes of estheticized trauma are surrounded by colorful abstractions of playfully padded sculpture.

Lind's *Limelight* (2004) is nearly the opposite: situated upstairs in a small black room, the double projections accompanied by a truly captivating and hypnotic musical score lacked immediate draw, but a more sustained experience made the piece magical and whimsical, nearly dreamlike. According to the projection's narration, the "limelight" in question is a synthetic light so strong that it can pierce the obfuscating mists of England and France, acting as beacon. In short, it is the recreation of the sun, as well as the projection of the synthetic (a similar light is used to create special effects for cinema).

A fair number of other pieces help make the show well worth seeing, including the obtuse but playful geodes in Melanie Nakaue's *The History of Creation as Conceived through a Thunder Egg* (2004), Myung Hwan Lim's

meaningful explorations of social identity in *Drifting into Korea Town* (2004), Yoko Iida's thoughtful *Tea House Project* (2004) and Jonathan Phillips and Neil Stuber's collaborative publication *Scale*. Overall, "Supersonic" demonstrates that new wave of L.A. art is vibrant, intelligent and artful.

Art Center's vast Wind Tunnel exhibition space provides an apt summation of the pieces it houses for this show. Beneath the massive structure originally designed in the 1940s to test military equipment -- an epoch where super-sizes and super-technologies captured the national imagination -- "Supersonic" reintroduces a California still vibrant in dreams, culture and international presence.

What's more, the scale of the collaboration among the numerous participants in the already well-established Southern California art scene is an unprecedented event. The temptation to find parallel meaning in collaboration, given the state and country's current political climate, is not difficult; at the very least "Supersonic" clearly demonstrates that here the art scene is thriving. Whether or not "Supersonic" will become an annual event remains to be seen, but certainly such a gathering of art schools and artists serves everybody's interests.

PATRICK W. DEEGAN lives in Southern California and writes about art.