



rated with floating toys, forms the horizontal screen onto which was projected a video of a woman sucking a lemon in a desert landscape. There were towels placed nearby for anyone who cared to wade in. Its irony, though not devoid of emotion, unfolds without melodrama. A kind of Sisyphus of the mind, Barnett points out the absurdity of L.A.'s geographic situation as well as the giddy joy of living in a place carved out of sheer will and optimism. Toby Heys's escapist sculptural fantasy

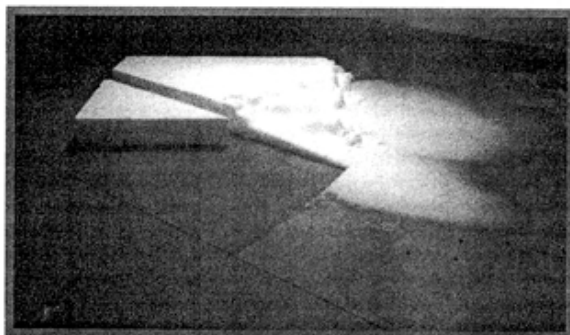
'H₂O' at the Sam Francis Gallery, Crossroads School

Los Angeles is a desert. But it is also a greater-metropolitan area. It is improbable, as cities go, and as a dream, even more elusive than most.

For curator Lothar Schmitz, the particular confluence of the region's many contradictions is best expressed through the metaphorical prism of water; the story of its presence, absence, symbolic significance, usages and value being intimately tied to the character of the place itself. *H₂O* functioned as an attempt to shift the paradigm of perceiving water into new, more specific contexts. Its currency was a certain fluidity of concept and space, as water does lend itself to an array of literal and figurative interpretations.

Ubiquitous yet intimate, global yet personal, water represents power, life and even, in psychoanalytic terms, the subconscious mind. The artists selected for this exhibition pause over such things; in a variety of media they ponder the relationship between civilized society and its manipulation of natural resources.

Eva Castrangius is interested in artificiality. Her crisp, deadpan photographs express water's functionality through a political and economic prism, rather than an environmental one. Clean, bright, straight-shot imagery of bridges and dams pull back to reveal majestic landscape elements such as ranges of mountains whose cloying monumentality frames even the most banal aqueduct, like postcards of tourist attractions in an alternate universe. The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) is an institution dedicated to the examination of how America uses its land. Its particular brand



From top: Jeremy Kidd, *Lava Lake*, 1997, archival print, aluminum panel, plaster, acrylic, 12" x 40"; Adam Belt, *Schism*, 2002, salt, water, 6' x 8' x 6"; Center for Land Use Interpretation, *View of Mississippi River Model*, Jackson, Mississippi; S. E. Barnett, *Pucker*, 2002, 8' x 6' x 2', at the Sam Francis Gallery, Crossroads School for Arts and Science, Santa Monica.

of low-intensity surrealism requires very little beyond the documentation of an already off-kilter reality, *View of Mississippi River Model* being a solid example. Outside of Jackson, Mississippi, there exists a 1:2000 scale hydrologic model of the entire Mississippi River basin, constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study flood control plans. It now lies abandoned. CLUI's pictures of it embrace an organizational principle that blurs the line between art and science, perhaps irrevocably.

Miles Coolidge redesigns reality to be more in line with concepts of spatial harmonics, generating manipulated images that approach perfection and are more

"true" than the everyday world, albeit a different kind of truth. In squaring the perspectival trapezoid one views from, say, the driver's seat while waiting for a drawbridge to be lowered, Coolidge is very specific with his iconography. But whatever familiarity there may be with the original, he improves on it, giving it the symmetry it could never achieve on its own by simply straightening its edges in post-production. Drawbridges are in fact a utile metaphor for the entire *H₂O* undertak-

ing—they express the inconvenient yet poetic situation of natural resources in an urban environment, the perseverance of antiquated technologies, the persistence of memory and the impulse to sustain the grid. Like Castrangius and CLUI, Coolidge's work is not so much beautiful as it is balanced.

The imagery captures a settlement between structure and fluidity, clarity and obfuscation, polemic and aesthetic.

Perhaps the most theatrical of the works was the installation *Pucker* by S.E. Barnett. A child's pool, filled with water and deco-

Joyriding held a similar sense of an unintended Utopia, also riffing on the psychological definition of projection, the reflective quality of the surface of water, and the idea of seeing oneself therein.

Adam Belt's floor installation *Schism* is a sculpture made of salt from which the water has evaporated at will. The process has a complex conceptual provenance, incorporating the role of chance, the power of absence and other tropes of modern art, as well as referencing the lost wax technique of early renaissance sculptors. And, in all this, it is more than a little ironic. Belt's process captures water's metamorphic quality on a human scale, creating an abstraction that reveals the history of its own creation. Work like this was integral to the exhibition's gestalt, as it toes the line between art and science, like a tiny little earthwork.

Manfred Menz provided another narrative about removal, but *Paris-Seine embankment in absence of river Seine and Notre Dame Cathedral* was far more deliberate and evinced a much more heavy-handed conception of civilization than did Belt. Menz manifestly eradicates all evidence of human endeavor, leaving only elements of nature intact in his jaunty, nearly abstract images. Laura Parker also deals with missing information. Subjects assert themselves in her work through absence, as she takes out selected passages of her photographs, provoking the viewer to fill in the blanks. Both of these artists seem to see water in the urban context as a wild thing that has been taken out of its element and patched back together. Fittingly, both pieces thus address the fragmentary nature of memo-

