

INTERSTITIAL





An interstitial space or interstice is the area between structures or objects. It falls outside of, rather than within, the familiar boundaries of how accepted terms of understanding are construed. It is comprised of the things we do not look at directly or focus on, and often, it even fades into the background.

This group exhibition showcases contemporary, Los Angeles-based object makers who transit between the worlds of everyday objects and a variety of artistic genres to explore the transformations these fragments of daily life (often from the domestic sphere) undergo when they are wrested into territories where their standard functions are suspended. The artworks forge new meanings and reside in the interstitial space: in between the memory of objects' conventional uses and their sudden and unpredictable presences in thought-provoking artworks in the Museum.

Interstitial is an invitation to look again, more slowly and more attentively, at the oft disregarded, to distinguish between the quotidian and the exceptional, a figure and a ground, an entity defined by a recollection and a new experience with a crafted object.

Fine and Decorative Art

Until recent times, historical hierarchies separated fine and decorative art. Fine art was regarded for its visual value, and while decorative art could also have visual value, functional attributes were its primary requisite. Thus lines were drawn between art and craft, between high art and design. Composition, drawing, and color were exalted in painting and sculpture, and ornament was allowed to embellish utility, but each was appreciated in an entirely distinct mode, with different rules and premises.

Since the early twentieth century, emerging art forms, such as collage; assemblage; readymades; performance, installations, and happenings; and photomontage and video art, all embedded in the context of the commonplace, challenged the residuals of the traditional hierarchy. As the full significance of the *-isms* of modern art took firm hold in the visual arts and as the twentieth century progressed, artists continued in much less predictable and less conventional directions.

The sense that one could distinguish an artwork from its high or popular origins, ended with Cubist collages; ran through Dada, Pop, and New Realism; and transmuted contemporary art. Artists could create significant works by extracting things from their ordinary settings in everyday life and then transforming them entirely through processes such as volumetric adaptation, structural alterations, functional disarticulations, and even surface embellishment. But most important was a passionate modification of the originating objects' connotations and subsequent denotations. Pragmatic values and market reasons can still be assigned to the categorical separations between fine and decorative art, but in terms of a viewer looking at either, the overlaps overshadow any schisms.

The artists in *Interstitial* defy artistic hierarchies by challenging conventional associations: they take objects that have, through their roles in routine existence, become invisible; remove them from their ordinary settings; and then through modifications, disassembly/ reassembly, or imitative fabrication, both create new meanings and cause viewers to consider the way meaning is ascribed.

Still Life (*Natura Morta*)

Another touchstone for this exhibition is grounded in the exploration of how the still life genre moved from a more formal representation of objects into an archaeology of the multiple meanings of these objects and their contradictory personal and societal symbolic inferences (their semantic halos). In the hierarchy of art genres established by the Académie Française in the seventeenth century, still life was ranked



at the very bottom—fifth after history painting, portraiture, genre painting (scenes of everyday life), and landscape. It was probably this lower ranking, coupled with the lack of figuration, that helped make the still life and landscape genres such interesting areas in which modern art could experiment.

Historically still life was most often two-dimensional and considered lacking in virtuosity. With its roots in the objects of everyday activity, such as food, table settings, and items found in the home and office, still life seemed to have little space for heroism. Generally, depictions were either realistic, related to some theory of morality, or an ostentatious display of class. With Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in early sixteenth-century Rome, rendering of these ancillary elements took on the same technical importance as the figures portrayed. The genre evolved but always maintained a relationship to the objects found in the world of useful things. Even loosely abstracted by early modernists, such as Marsden Hartley and



Georgia O'Keefe, or formally modified by the Precisionists, such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth, the recognizability of the objects was essential to a viewer's understanding of the artist's intent. The interstitial space is forged in that dual citizenship between the world of abstract forms and recognizable ones.

Vanitas and Nostalgia

Still life paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are best known for introducing vanitas as a symbolic category within the genre. Derived from the Latin adjective *vanus*, meaning empty, the vanitas elements in these artworks alluded to the fleeting nature of life with respect to the afterlife. They reminded viewers that these objects and the lives of those who lived with them were temporary. Common visual motifs included skulls, rotting or rotten fruit and flowers, hourglasses, and musical instruments.

For a relationship to a more contemporary practice, one can look at elements that introduce nostalgia. Almost every object has a historical span, and the moment that span is conscientiously terminated, nostalgia begins to operate as wistfulness for the moment in which the thing was still part of the viewer's life. Because of nostalgia, abstraction tends to disavow historical anchors in favor of a perceptual detachment; without nostalgia the experience of the artwork is unmoored from any historical



circumscription. In the interstitial space, however, nostalgia is placed in a contradictory, tautological relationship to its historical origin in the viewer's memory. It is both nostalgic for and indifferent to its origins; it both recalls the use of the object and finds new ways of seeing it.

Exhibition Design in the Interstices

Whether it was first Ad Reinhardt who quipped, "Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting," or Barnett Newman, who is quoted as saying, "Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting," a reinterpretation of old categorical hierarchies re-appears in these statements, ranking paintings above

sculptures and walls above empty gallery spaces. As this exhibition questions how—and where—the viewer normally sees and even overlooks, the process of designing this exhibition insinuates the use of interstitial space.

Usually a viewer walks through a gallery, ignoring the open space in favor of the walls—or sometimes pedestals—and the art situated there. The floors, the ceiling, exposed or internal wiring, and even the pedestals, if present, are not supposed to be noticed. In fact, architects often refer to the space above the ceiling of one level but below the floor of the next as interstitial space. This space is neither inside any room nor outside the building and is frequently covered and left unseen.

With this exhibition, the physical parameters of the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA) and its unique, exposed ceiling, or interstitial space, are brought into the foreground, taken out of the realm of the unseen, and noted for the intrinsically fascinating relationship of crosshatching and overlapping. Some of the artworks hang from the exposed grid of tubes and pipes, others rest directly on the ground, and only two are slightly raised off the floor, but none are secured to a wall. Thus, the literal interstitial space drops down to the floor, consuming the entire exhibition space. This confrontation with the unfamiliar, this inability to overlook requires the viewer to ask: Where are the lines of demarcation now? What is it that separates art from life and one genre from the next? What controls perception and enables a viewer to determine the modes of interpreting the art in this exhibition? As viewers circulate around objects within the PMCA, they are poised to raise questions about what type of relationship to have with everything they see and how to assess the objects and artworks. They must investigate and consider, and in doing so they find the interstitial space.

—John David O'Brien, Guest Curator

I N T E R S T I T I A L

Artists in Exhibition

Jeff Colson

Renée Lotenero

Kristen Morgin

Joel Otterson

Rebecca Ripple

Aili Schmeltz

Shirley Tse

IMAGES: Installation view, *Interstitial*, March 5–August 6, 2017, Pasadena Museum of California Art, photo © 2017 Don Milici

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