

# ARTILLERY

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# Shape Shifting

## ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF TIMES PAST

BY JOHN DAVID O'BRIEN



➤➤ After I received my MFA in the early '90s, this country was in the midst of a serious economic downturn and alternative gallery spaces were beginning to crop up here and there. They opened in garages, storefronts and artists' homes. They were places where artists could showcase their art even when no one was buying. Viewed as an alternative to the diminishing commercial gallery scene, in hindsight it seemed like they were fueled by the overarching need for artists to show their art and talk about it, with or without a functioning art market.

Ken Riddle, who is now the art teacher at The Waverly School, ran Bliss in Pasadena from 1987 to 1996, and Max Presneill—currently the director and curator of the Torrance Art Museum—started RAID Projects in Santa Ana in 1998; and in 1997, I set up the Brewery Project in downtown LA. Recently I checked in with Riddle and Presneill to discuss the history of our spaces and what we perceive as their successes and shortcomings.

Riddle stated that his motivation for setting up Bliss in his craftsman-style bungalow home on North Michigan Avenue and partnering with fellow students on shows was “about community, getting out and continuing with our art, presenting what we were working on in our art studios.” What really surprised him about the success of Bliss was “the amount of people who would come out to see the shows, show their appreciation for the art and even get an understanding of the setting for art in Pasadena.” Though Riddle added that there were some disagreements with artists (often fellow students) about what they thought exhibiting meant and what his role was—whether he was supposed to be a dealer or somebody who could find collectors for them.

For me, the worst part of running the Brewery Project was being among the first people that had to deal with artists as they experienced the difficulties of changing roles and mindsets; they could oscillate wildly between responsible empowerment and infantile relapses; and I was not particularly

Above, left to right: Jennifer Steinkamp, *Gender Specific*, 1989, installation at Bliss; The Brewery Project, “A Simple Complex” Redux, Organized by Wendy Adest and John David O'Brien, Artists included: Wendy Adest, Maura Bendett, Christie Frields, Nicholas Kersulis, Daniel Marlos, Lester Monzon, Jenene Nagy, John David O'Brien, Tim Quinn, Rebecca Ripple, Steve Roden, Shirley Tse, Telemachus Studio; John David O'Brien, 2013, photo by Todd Gray.



fond of the after-midnight phone calls and long messages left on my answering machine.

RAID Projects was an exhibition and curatorial organization originally founded in 1998 by Presneill in Santa Ana. RAID moved to LA later, where it hosted projects of its own, as well as for spaces in the U.S. and globally. Presneill explained, "It was about having alternatives to the few commercial galleries around and, even more importantly, bringing an international perspective to LA." He elaborated, "Many artists I met became long-term friends. I am still working with quite a few; we travel to see each other, to talk about art and then exhibit it." Presneill's caveats were pretty much the same as Riddle's and mine: the hassles that come with dealing with entitled artists. Presneill added, "Like they felt it was your responsibility to get them success, instead of treating you like a partner and peer." In retrospect, however, all of us felt the process and duration of running an exhibition space had more positive outcomes than negative ones.

Our consensus was that the term "alternative spaces" was never really accurate since most of these places never became any real alternative to the market. Artwork hardly sold,

and the alternative gallery model didn't propose any new or specific business ideas. These exhibitions were undoubtedly better than not having any exhibition opportunities at all, but they took on many different forms in their expression of specific needs. They were not the least bit homogeneous and, moreover, didn't actually have any discernible patterns of evolution. Episodic, occurring and recurring whenever there was a perceived abundance of artists and a lack of exhibition opportunities, these ad hoc venues would crop up and quickly disappear when a downturn occurred, morph into a traditional commercial enterprise when possible or at other times simply vanish. There is no sense of any current projects that are historically connected to the anti-materialistic ideological constructs of the 1960s.

We all agreed that we should probably understand those occurrences as something interesting and significant, and accord them value for being a slice of the larger spectrum. It was June Wayne who said that we need to explore the entire ecology of the art world, not just propagate the ideas we like most. Now that would be a meaningful evolution. ■

## PHYLLIS GREEN

LAM GALLERY

BY JOHN DAVID O'BRIEN

Phyllis Green's "Walking the Walk" consists of sculptural works that also function as garments and performance props. Their use as such is documented by photographs by Ave Pildas with the artist posing and modeling each of the artworks. Toying with the idea of a high modern reductivist style the artist plays that off of a physical interpretation of the Mundaka Upanishad decree that advises initiates that the first step toward enlightenment is for individuals to approach a guru, or learned teacher, with wood (fuel) on their heads. Expressing a slightly comic but highly vulnerable sensibility, Green continues her exploration of craft, the body and ideas about the feminine without recourse to her preferred ceramic techniques.

In *Red Hat* (2015), a slender metal wire frame that proportionally matches Green's own body is surmounted by a red bowl-like head piece over which a tidy set of cast fiberglass logs is placed. Fitted with wheels and two oversized pockets, the sculpture is depicted in photo with the artist looking out at the viewer, holding a walking stick and ready to begin her trek to spiritual awakening.

Inspired by her travels to India, Green has created artworks that function as symbolic vehicles for the devotional rituals associated with the one Upanishad directive as though her art-making itself were a sort of protracted meditation on that same verse. The objects themselves have constrictions not unlike those of vessels in the ceramic tradition but they bend away from their functional usage, becoming carriers of a broader significance and metaphorical value. These sculptures become vehicles for rituals

REVIEWS

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and meditation, merging humor and religious thought, presented with the necessary awkwardness of such a fusion in contemporary art practice.

Concurrent and complementary to the works at LAM, the Craft & Folk Art Museum is presenting the monumental figurative sculpture by the artist, titled *Fall 12: Autobiography—Considering Charles Ray's Fall '91* (2012). The first work from this overall series of artworks, *Fall 12* appropriates Charles Ray's iconic towering female figure *Fall '91*, and turns it into a self-portrait informed by Green's understanding of the Vedic principles of knowledge, service, meditation and devotion. At 97 inches in height the viewer feels much like they do in the presence of Ray's scaled-up stereotype of a 20th-century career woman: they relive the upward gaze of a small child. By substituting her own features for the impassive face of a mannequin and by draping its shoulder with a length of orange silk, a sari symbolizing fire and religion, Green turns the statue from being primarily a study in scale and posture to being a meditation on the role figuration can still have, even in an age where historical representation has been handed off to digital mediums. Captivated by the figures she saw in Hindu temples, the artist engages us in a query regarding the sense of statuary today, tweaking it just like she does with ceramics and that craft based tradition.

(This page) Phyllis Green, *Red Hat*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and LAM Gallery, photo by Ave Pildas



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(This page, left to right) Phyllis Green, *Red Hat*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and LAM Gallery, photo by Ave Pildas; Gail Tarantino, *From Dim to Bright-Henrietta*, 2015. (Opposite page, left to right) Reza Aramesh, *Action 143-21*, 2015, courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York; Julia von Eichel, *Untitled (collapsing)*, 2014, photo by Adam Reich.

## SAN FRANCISCO GAIL TARANTINO

FOULADI PROJECTS  
BY BARBARA MORRIS

Harkening to the grace of bygone days when those who wished to communicate with one another would do so by putting pen to paper, East Bay-based artist Gail Tarantino's "Hand Written" draws content from letters written by the artist to astronomers, naturalists and scientists whose discoveries captured her imagination. These missives were then encoded into a system of colored dots, which the artist then composed into a series of poetic works in acrylic ink on linen and paper.

Geometry and patterning are at the heart of these works, the rectangular format of the paper or canvas housing arrangements of small, irregular circles carefully laid out along light lines ruled with pencil. Some of these employ a very restricted palette, such as tints and hues of blue, while others offer a full range of colors, in muted tones. As a system of dots that in a sense codify language, the works also evoke the structure of braille; it may come as no surprise that Tarantino created an earlier body of work in which she translated words to braille, inspired by a conversation between sighted and blind siblings.

With much text-based art, the challenge is often to discover the relationship between word and image. Here one is spared, or deprived, of that task, as there is no direct code by which one could even attempt to decipher content—Tarantino electing for this to remain a mystery.



*Numerical Blue-Dear Horace* (all works 2015) adds the device of a large circle, approximately 12 inches in diameter, inscribed with pencil slightly above the center of the vertically-oriented rectangle. Stray arcs along the edges suggest trial and error; like many small but significant indications of the mark of the human hand, these engage us in the work in an intimate way. Hues of cobalt blue, phthalo, ultramarine and Prussian are appropriate for a work inspired by Horace-Bénédicte de Saussure and Alexander von Humbolt, the inventors of the cyanometer, a device for measuring the blueness of the sky. *From Dim to Bright-Henrietta*, rather oddly displayed lying on its back in the gallery window, commemorates the work of astronomer Henrietta Leavitt who, at Harvard Observatory around the turn of the 20th century discovered more than 2,400 variable stars of fluctuating intensity.

Damien Hirst's ubiquitous spot paintings, strewn across the globe a few years back, may spring to mind when viewing these, as they share a vocabulary of shape and format, yet where Hirst's dots are often aggressive, punchy and ironic in tone, Tarantino's are meditative, with subtly nuanced hues and a sensitive application of paint that retains the feel of language, and an inner logic resonating beyond the formal. Her painterly schematic evokes the pulsing pace of reading, with objects scaled to and created by the human body. When language and writing become subject to the vicissitudes of monitor calibration or the viewer's font selection, the long-standing dialogue between thought and lexical expression loses the magic of the mark, the fragile construct of "handwriting."

## NEW YORK REZA ARAMESH

LEILA HELLER GALLERY  
BY BANSIE VASVANI

A trio of sepia-toned photographs, displayed at the entrance of the Leila Heller Gallery, documenting four naked men followed by Western soldiers in a rundown village instantly evokes the horrors of Abu Ghraib.

The jarring scene—American soldiers humiliating local Iraqis for stealing—captured happenstance by two Norwegian journalists in Iraq serves as the back story to Iranian artist Reza Aramesh's first solo exhibition of photomontages and sculpture (all 2015) at the gallery. Kindled by the impact and relevance