

Bhuiya, Hannah, "L.A. is the Concrete Frontier," SSENSE, May, 3, 2017

**SSENSE**

# L.A. is the Concrete Frontier

The Crushed Cars and Broken  
Phones Inside an L.A. Gallery

Text: Hannah Bhuiya

Images: Courtesy of VENUS, New York and Los Angeles

"Far from being the youngest, Los Angeles was the oldest city of the twentieth century, the Troy of its collective imagination. The ground courses of our deepest dreams were layered into its past among the filling stations and freeways."

— J. G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women*

In 1987, author J. G. Ballard came to Los Angeles to attend the premiere of Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*, a movie adapted from Ballard's semi-autobiographical memoir. The writer immediately saw the City of Angels for what it was, and is: a place both paradisiac and paranoiac, an obsidian city of insidious dreams, a shimmering multi-mirage. "I loved every inch of it, and felt instantly at home," he records. Finally winding over the great grey highways of this—the far edge of the vast continent—was a man who had long been transfixed by the fatal glamour of American car culture. In 1970 Ballard had exhibited real crushed cars—still marred by the blood and debris of their demise—as a provocative art statement, and in 1973 produced the shock-novel *Crash*, fetishizing the seductive violence of the road (later, immortalized by David Cronenberg). *Concrete Island* followed in 1974; a post-modern *Robinson Crusoe* story of a man who finds himself marooned off the Westway flyover in central London. Coming to like his new life off-piste, he sheds his cultivated layers to transform from slick architect into a torn-suited layabout drinking wine from a broken bottle beside a burnt-out Jaguar.



Max Hooper Schneider's sculpture *Shopping Cart* hangs in the entrance like a bitumen-dipped jaw-bone. In Hooper Schneider's hands, a commonplace street object—an abandoned Target trolley—is completely transmogrified. Deformed by an incendiary act, it was encountered by the artist in a stroke of fate: "This molten, disarticulated shopping cart was poached from a fire on the Fairfax exit on the I-10 Freeway," he says. "Smoke and plastic gases were wafting from my car windows as I made my escape, but I knew I had caught a 'white whale,' so to speak."

# VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

And so we ride up onto the curb of the year 2017, to stop at 601 South Anderson Street, DTLA, where a compelling interpretation of the 'Concrete Island' trope presents itself in a new group show at Venus Los Angeles. 28 of its 30 artists are based in L.A. "What I am interested in," says curator and gallery director Aaron Moulton, "is that this goes from being a show about a book by J. G. Ballard to actually being a work of speculative reality. We do not say in the press release 'This is an exhibition,' we say 'Welcome to Concrete Island.'"



Cars are king in this county, but if so, it's the tires that do all the work. When their tour-of-duty is over, the near indestructible objects end up piled up in yards everywhere across the city (except, maybe, Bel Air). Jon Pylypchuk brings a few of them inside the gallery space with his work *We find this closeness and this distance insufferable*, anthropomorphically adjusting a stack of tires into two buddies by giving them cute lightbulb faces; one even smokes a cigarette.



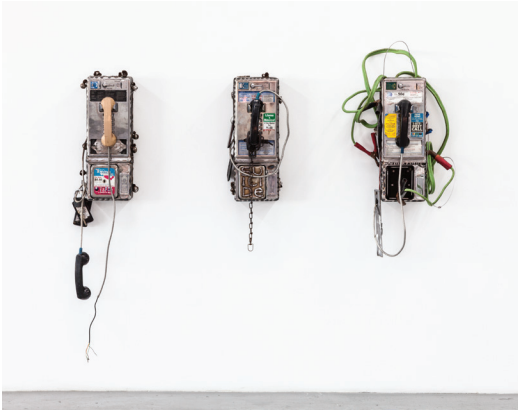
The physical threshold of "Concrete Island" is Ruben Ochoa's *Pinky Swear*—two arcs of metal frozen overhead in a twisting dance. These galvanized steel posts have their "feet" mired in blocks of poured concrete—the meta-material of this city. Concrete is to L.A. what marble is to Rome.



In the room's center, Lazaros' *Wingless Bird*. Here, a tree root is refigured into an avian creature. Lazaros (formerly practicing as Jason Metcalf) often draws on the utopian dogma of his traditional Mormon upbringing in Utah, with his work referencing and reworking superstitions, and parallel histories that might-have-been. This is an archive piece borrowed from the *Historical Society of Deseret*, housed at the Center for Land Use Interpretation in Wendover, Utah. Dusted off and brought out into the bright light of L.A., the odd form takes on a new skin. A secular rebirth.

# VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES



Created specifically for the exhibition, Jason Matthew Lee's trio of messed-up public telephones are adorned with piercings, earrings, raised scars, and graffiti tattoos. Lee, sometimes called a hacker, is part of a post-internet group who look with a critical eye at digital culture. In our upgrade-frantic era, the uselessness of these once ubiquitous instruments highlights the frightening obsolescence of human communication systems.



Art-schooled alt-rock star Kim Gordon's *Not Yet Titled (Glitter Stick)* is a staff of gold glitter and glue dangling a pair of tan pantyhose. Leaning subtly against a back corner, it's a glimmering wizard's staff for your walk on the wild side. Walking on the pavement is still a rarified activity in Los Angeles. If you do it, you will see guerrilla plants struggling to survive adjacent to verges fat with lush cacti.

Each piece in "Concrete Island" has been selected to explore a not-immediately-obvious aspect of the Los Angeles experience. "It made sense to me to present an anthropological mirror of aesthetic culture of L.A. that is different to the standard traps about cultural production from Los Angeles," Moulton explains. We have instead a microcosmic tour of L.A.'s shadow world, the liminal spaces between the famous landmarks, the interstitial zones that all must pass through, but are described, if at all, as 'stuck in traffic.' The artists here, like seers, like spies, clock the activity seething just under the surface, drawing forth 'treasure' from the city's cycles of entropy.



We encounter the art version of these in sculptor Tony Matelli's hyper-real bronzes. Budding flower stalks and leaf fronds—titled *Weed #334* and *Weed #374* and *Weed #365*—which, complete with pollution dust, sprout boldly from betwixt wall and floor.



# VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES



Sam Falls' *Untitled (Absence of Evidence is Evidence of Absence)* supplies "Concrete Island" with something absolutely socially essential in here: a dog. A meandering video showing a lost dog is an exercise in pure *dérive*. To get out of the house for a while, Falls would drive in a random direction for an hour or so, and then document the area where he ended up with a roll of Super 8, later splicing them together into short films. An infinite loop of a segment of a Spiritualized song is our lonesome animal's soundtrack, and the effect is both melancholic and transcendental.



After his painstaking excavation in Santa Barbara of the faux-Egyptian artifacts that were originally made back in 1923 for the classic film *The Ten Commandments*, Daniel R. Small is now the go-to gonzo archeologist of his generation. His *A Petrified Past* took a laptop, a router, and an Xbox to a mystical, mineral-rich well in Yorkshire, England. There, the water naturally petrifies anything dipped in it. This effect was formerly ascribed to the powers of Mother Shipton, a 15th century witch. For us, they become relics of a future folklore, pre-embalming the material legacy of our technological culture, which with each day becomes more and more vestigial.

**But what, who, or where is the real Los Angeles? After a visit to "Concrete Island" you will never see the city in the same way again. You'll understand that each iconic symbol has a dark shadow, present in its very origin. The Hollywood sign, an ambitious ad campaign to attract homeowners to build on precipitous hills. The brass stars on the Boulevard, an attempt to stave off the further urban decay of a street well-past its golden days. The baroque street life of Venice Beach, now only a vestige of a truly counter-culture era. The glamorous hotels of the Chateau Marmont and Sunset Tower, not so long ago run-down dives where actors took overdoses. The surfers of the cresting Malibu waves—tech millionaires now, not hippies. The L.A. river is long-gone, "paved" over with concrete in 1938, and there hasn't been any actual water in the (poisonous) Silver Lake Reservoir for years. Even the colors of the sunsets are not natural, but caused by the refraction of the chemicals in the haze of pollution. After leaving the gallery, complete your tour by driving up near the bust of James Dean at Griffith Park Observatory. Watch the sun fall away and the incandescent breadth of L.A. rise before you in a grid of electric lights, its boulevards and avenues now long lines carved out in blinking traffic signals; an entire Concrete City.**