



AGAINST THE GRAIN

GROUP EXHIBITION

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE)
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ENDING DECADENCE

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY

You want to feel artwork before you think about it, to feel guilty, uncomfortable, elated, seduced, or even perplexed. Then you want to kick your brain into gear, to figure why you feel what you feel, what dormant nerve the work has struck. Those situations in which your brain can't decipher your emotional reaction are initially disappointing but ultimately unmemorable. The times when the feeling doesn't strike at all and you have to do brain work first can be rewarding though, especially if the emotional connection grows slowly, like latent love reawakened. The worst is when even excessive thinking leads nowhere, and you can't figure out why anyone felt compelled to bring a certain object or image into the world.

The work in *Against the Grain*, LACE's anticipated summer exhibition, falls somewhere between awakening latent affection and provoking the sort of thinking that putters around in indefinite circles. It's the kind of show that seems too good, too precisely relevant, to be true. And it doesn't quite come off because it aims for something unreachable.

The title of J.K. Huysmans' achingly sensuous 1884 novel, *A Rebours*, has been translated two ways: *Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*. Twenty years ago at LACE, Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper chose the latter, more epically sensational translation for the name of their co-curated exhibition. *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men* probed the self-indulgence, pessimism, and the pained beauty of art by a marginalized group of Aids crisis era artists. According to those who saw it, *Against Nature* was a show that made you feel, and it apparently made you think even harder because it's kept the LA art world thinking for two decades.

Now, *Against the Grain* adopts the headier translation of Huysmans' title, purporting to once again deal with decadence and decay, two of the most visually visceral themes available, but in a historically informed manner, taking a moment in the 1980s and interpreting its current relevance.

Entering LACE, you're immediately confronted by Ryan Taber's cold slab of concrete, steel and debris. Then you see Julian Hoeber's photographic chorus of four obscured faces in seas of sequins. Although confusion is a feeling, it's not one you want to engage right now. If you're like me, you'll move into the next room, making a mental note to come back later, at which point you may realize that the contrast between Hoeber's controlled effiteness and Taber's carefully intellectualized ruin encapsulates the show's opacity as much as anything else in the gallery.

As you walk through subsequent rooms, you'll be struck by symbolism that indulges in itself, cynically nostalgic for its own history even though it knows its history did it no good—Cheyenne Weaver's linguistic witch hunt caricatures do this, as do Wendell Gladstone's heavy acrylic paintings of ceremonies and debaucheries. You may also be struck by how even the loquacious titles on the wall labels fail to make these internalized symbols pertinent to you, the viewer.

The cropped, headless red and orange tinted figures in Brian Kennon's *More Decapitation Zine* are romantically succinct, suggesting never-quite-occurring, never-ending violence. But the Bruce Hainley Artforum review that Kennon has photographed and hung on the wall asks too much—if you read it, you'd rather read it on your own time, not while standing uncomfortably in the gallery. Still, the introduction of Hainley seems a stroke of genius, since his critically generous prose never forgot the sexiness of decadence, yet decided to favor simple cultural referencing over overwrought rehashing of history.

So what do the contemporary traces of *Against Nature* look like? Nothing in the show answers this question legibly, not the haunting installation by Brian Bress nor the nerdily poetic video by Kelly Sears that probes perpetual psychological unrest. But maybe no answer is the best answer. What the show clearly communicates is the fact that today's artists care about yesteryear's indulgences.

When Huysmans wrote another novel after *A Rebours* certain critics felt his work had lost its satirical, sensual edge. It had become too intellectual, too boring. Something similar could be said about LACE's *Against the Grain*, yet calling the show a failure would be a gross misunderstanding. It does its job quite well. It shows us that decadence and decay were never meant to have a future.

-Catherine Wagley

(Images from top to bottom: Poster image, Kelly Sears video stills; Ryan Taber, Pompey's Follie: replica of a Yellowstone river fragment with signature carved by Captain William Clark, July 25, 1806, scaled to reveal fossilized material and slab problem on large crimps, 2008, Concrete, steel, construction debris, polyurethane, 13 1/2 x 8 x 12 feet, Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery; Brian Bress, Disaster Family, 2007, Disaster blankets, wood, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist)

Posted by Catherine Wagley on 8/24/08

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