La-la band
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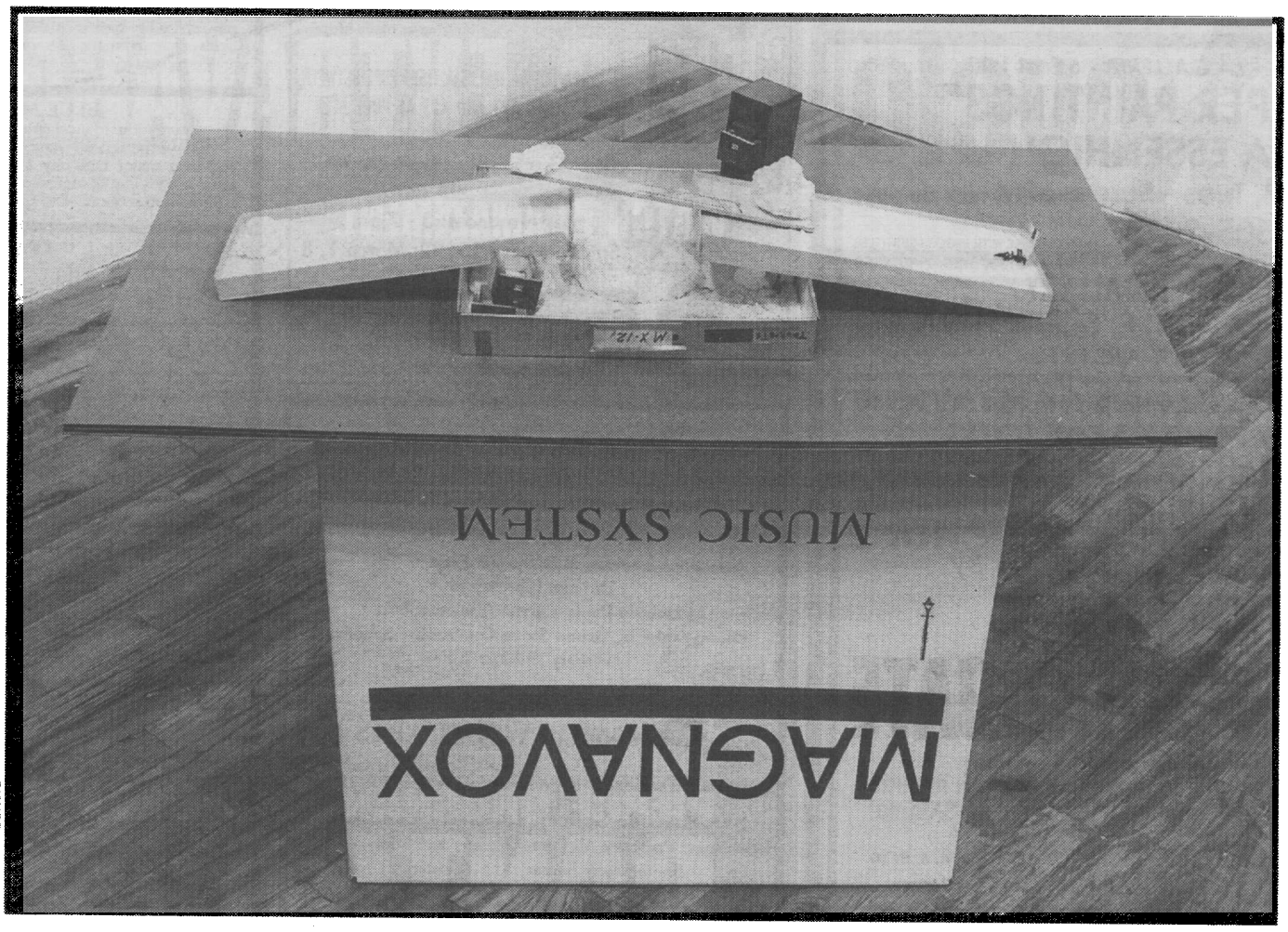
La-la Band

'Hot Coffee'
Artists Space
38 Greene Street
Through March 15

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

At this in-jokey, almost aggressively mild, sneakily compelling little group show of tyro Los Angeles avant-gardists—not exactly "hot" young artists, more aptly "warm" or even "tepid-with-a-certain-something" young artists—start with the scruffiest item, a video projection by Marina Rosenfeld. Set askew on the floor, the projector beams into a darkened corner a small image of the shadow of a woman playing air guitar. The shadow flails with slovenly frenzy in a room with red-flocked yellow wallpaper. The ineffably cheesy vision swiftly generates and then sustains, like a slight headache, an impression of fragile beauty and gritty aesthetic smarts.

I never heard of Rosenfeld before. I'm told that she mounts more or less feminist performances, such as one that I missed at this show's opening: nine women with cheap portable record players doing synchronized scratching of Rod Stewart LPs. Her video projection is titled *The Lingering Afterglow of Repetitive Longing*. I detect a content of girl attitudes toward rock-'n'-roll boy jollies, but something tells me it's only the tip of Rosenfeld's iceberg. The rest is the secret of a dashing self-possession that she shares with her four peers in this show of California Institute of the Arts alumni, ages 24 to 32.



ROBIN HOLLAND

Conceptualist art vernaculars as well-worn as a Valley Girl lilt: Julie Becker's *Tourists: London* (1995)

In New York, we haven't been hearing much from the legendary cutting-edge think tank of Cal Arts—or from its present dean, former New York painter and editor of *Real Life* magazine Thomas Lawson, who curated this show. Come to that, we haven't heard a lot from Los Angeles or, for heaven's sake, about young American artists anywhere in coherent groups marked by shared ambitions and special practices. These are strange days culturally, notoriously awash in "information" but without focus: no big ideas, no ruling styles, no novel controversies. Those who hated art-world hype in the 1980s must be happy now. Except (for some persistently obscure reason) in merrie olde England, the late-1990s art world drifts in a cosmic hype vacuum.

The present art world feels like a typical afternoon in Los Angeles, maybe: endless and aimless, bright, vaguely troubled, not unpleasantly stupefied. Lawson gives this show an ideally atmospheric non-theme by linking it to a 1937 Edward Weston photograph of a forlorn, battered sign in the Mojave Desert: a giant cup and saucer imprinted HOT COFFEE. Lawson writes of "the struggling, hopeless optimism" caught by the photographer—"a weirdly hypnotic combination of confidence and delusion" that feels pretty widely germane to present culture. These L.A. kids are steeped in that chronic spirit and in Conceptualist art vernaculars as appropriately well-worn as a Valley Girl lilt. Think of the vernaculars as Calonics.

Once associated with sensuous, feel-good formalism, Southern California art style is more-lately famous for Mike Kelley–esque tones of sad-sack abjection, a connoisseurship of the lumpen that was dubbed "Just Pathetic" by L.A. critic Ralph Rugoff. Those old and new qualities are joined in one-stop shopping by Kent Young, who arrays tragic fabrics—bits of what look like faded child blankets, exhausted washcloths, a profoundly soiled hospital napkin, and other less specific but likewise poignant swatches—in geometric murals as exquisitely considered in composition and color as the decor of a 1920s Dutch-modernist café.

Julie Becker, the youngest artist here, presents photographs of lugubriously pathetic model rooms she has constructed. And, on a cardboard box, she mounts a doll-sized environment that incorporates a film canister, wooden trays, sugar cubes, clumps of confectioner's sugar, a miniature file cabinet, a teeny microscope, and, well, other stuff. I confess to being at sea with Becker, which I surmise is exactly, for the moment, where she wants me.

I'm confused, too, by Laura Owens's big painting, but in ways that feel targeted. Owens tersely limns a fictive interior space in bewildering perspective with laconic passages of drawn line, puddled stain, and juicy impasto, as if to amplify her own and the viewer's self-consciousness to some verge of panic. She seems intent on making paintings that are as uncomfortable to look at as possible. I look forward to figuring out why when, in April, Owens has her New York solo debut at Gavin Brown.

Andrea Bowers is into spectators. On two video monitors, she screens compilations of tapes she made at public events: baseball and basketball games, a crowd scene in Las Vegas before the Tyson-Holyfield fight, and last month's Rose Bowl parade. And she singles out certain faces for scrutiny in tiny colored-pencil drawings on vast, empty grounds. Why do I find so simple an idea so exciting? Maybe because the condition of spectatorship has lately struck me as the overwhelming fact of present cultural life, where the identity of audiences regularly seems very much more powerfully mysterious than whatever they attend. My heart salutes Bowers as a companion soul and possible guide in my own perplexity.

From what I'm told, Dave Muller is the main figure on the "Hot Coffee" scene, the current young L.A. artist's young L.A. artist. This helps me take on faith the cogency of works that display a high quotient of you-gotta-be-there arcana. Muller's pieces here are handmade mock-ups, in materials ranging from drawing on folded paper to painting on aluminum, of found and fanciful gallery announcements and exhibition posters. Contemplating it, for me, is like listening to a sprightly, almost certainly delightful conversation in a foreign language. I feel myself standing around smiling dopily at jokes I don't get, half humiliated but loath to tear myself away. These guys are just so cool.

Part of the considerable charm of "Hot Coffee" is the present rarity of its insouciant group dynamic in New York. The Darwinian brutalities of the local scene obviate such gemütlich synergy, treating postgraduate art-kid cohorts rather as a windshield wiper treats rain. If this were a group manifestation of young New Yorkers, it would reek of the competitive, now-or-never, do-or-die aura of our hard town. So the dose of Cal-Artsy cavalier attitude proves refreshing, at least, for its reminder that art is long, and from time to time has even been deemed fun. ❖

Process Art

Louise Lawler
Metro Pictures
519 West 24th Street
Through March 15

Like much of the academic conceptualism that arose in the 1980s, Louise Lawler's work comments on the framing—both literal and figurative—of art, in her case using photographs and text to reveal how art functions in the world of commerce. Lawler's newest show, and Metro Pictures' first in its new Chelsea space, includes documentary photos of the gallery when it was a raw construction site. Lawler gives these large glossies jokey titles—like *Red (Circle)*, an expanse of red-painted concrete with an old tire propped against it—that refer both to the industrial walls that were later covered up or torn down, as well as to color-field painting. Titled "Paint, Wall, Pictures: Something Always Follows Something Else," this body of work is an allusion, perhaps, to the insidious cycle of replacing one edifice with yet another. Then again, it could be an anemic paean to the lost crustiness of the now rarefied space.

The circular logic and brittle humor of today's academic art has roots in the more robust conceptualism of the late 1960s and '70s. Those days are long gone, but Lawler's show and the burgeoning Chelsea art scene provide a fortuitous confluence. So after studying Metro's offerings, run as fast as you can a few long blocks south, to 535 West 20th Street, a half-finished building with galleries on the top floors. Ask one of the guys lounging in the open-air "lobby" to take you up in the freight elevator; see the entrepreneurial gleam in his eye when you mention espresso. After you get off, take the long route down: via the newly built stairwell, deliriously redolent of cement (and creepily dark—bring a friend). Exit through the garage, clomping down a rickety ramp and into the bustle of cab drivers screaming at each other in Hindi.

Something's *happening*. But the state of flux can't last forever. Go now, before reality sets in. —DAVID A. GREENE

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