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ART TALK



Art Makes Nothing Happen

TUE JUN 17, 2008

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Gasoline prices be damned, I spent last week crisscrossing the cultural landscape of southern California, driving to Santa Barbara, to Ojai, to Long Beach, to Altadena. But on Saturday, I gave myself a break and spent the whole afternoon roaming for art close to home -- in downtown LA, to be precise.

Morono Kiang Gallery had a panel discussion about the importance of the preservation of Los Angeles murals and graffiti art, both representing the city's spirit, both shaping perceptions of LA in the eyes of the world. Later that afternoon, the Japanese American National Museum had an opening for the unusual exhibition juxtaposing the traditional art of ikebana with the works of contemporary photographers, painters, and sculptors.



All the above served as a warm-up for my going to MOCA's Geffen Contemporary to see the traveling retrospective of Lawrence Weiner's work, a major figure responsible for the emergence of conceptual art, which since

the 1960's has held sway over the contemporary art scene. For forty years, the artist has been creating idiosyncratic artwork, using language as a material object. The trademarks of his art are the short phrases painted -- or to be more precise, printed -- on the gallery wall, on the floor, and even on the building's exterior. These phrases come across sometimes as Japanese haiku and sometimes as open-ended pronouncements from the beatnik era or the Summer of Love.

From the very beginning, conceptual artists rebelled against the primacy of painting and sculpture as the major form of artistic expression. Seeing Lawrence Weiner's 'art phrases' on the walls of MOCA, I marveled at his ingenuity: they are stenciled in various fonts, mostly in straight lines, sometimes in a semi-circle. On occasion, they form a diagonal line descending to the floor. The artwork which gives the exhibition its name reads as follows:



AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE. Hmm...definitely makes you think. Obviously it's up to you, the viewer, to come up with various interpretations. Until now, I had never seen more than one work of Lawrence Weiner's at a time, but at this exhibition, with dozens of his trademark 'signs' vying

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Host
 Edward Goldman
 Edward Goldman is the fearless art critic who speaks truth to the art world's power -- a must-listen for culture mavens.

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for attention, I felt overwhelmed by this cacophony to the point of exhaustion. With all due respect, it seems to me that the artistic revolution Weiner initiated forty years ago has already run its course, and at this point, his art starts to come across as verbal and visual acrobatics, a bit arched and too self-conscious.



To end my day on a more energetic note, I drove to nearby Chinatown to check out the galleries along Chung King Road. I trust you've been there and remember its exotic claustrophobia of color, texture, sound, and smell. Commercial signs occupy virtually every inch of space;

they are in your face, screaming, vulgar and...full of intoxicating vitality. I didn't plan it this way, but in the battle between the museum art and the street signage, Chinatown was the winner.

The best exhibition of the day turned out to be the very last -- the one I saw at [Chung King Project](#): medium-size color photographs by Dutch artist Jasper de Beijer, who likes to tell tall tales set in the Victorian era. He makes elaborately produced models of dark interiors and moody street scenes, where Jekyll and Hyde would feel right at home. After photographing these models, the artist destroys them, and thus, the artwork is born: full of irony and longing and fascination.



Living Flowers: Ikebana and Contemporary Art at the [Japanese American National Museum](#)

On view through September 7

Lawrence Weiner: As Far As the Eye Can See at the [Geffen Contemporary](#)

On view through July 14

Jasper de Beijer: The Riveted Kingdom at [Chung King Project](#)

On view through July 19

Banner image: Lawrence Weiner's *As Far As the Eye Can See*, installation view

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