



**Love at the End
of the Tunnel,
or the Beginning of
a Smart New Day**

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Doug Hammett *Taming the Bull* from the *Ox Herding Pictures: 10 Bulls*, 1997
fondant cake icing, foam, wood, glass

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Marilu Knode

Welcome to our smart new world, balancing on the end of a tunnel, or a bomb, feeding us brain food of absolute toxicity and New Age cream. In this smart new megalopolis are objects that live for the future without dressing in its high-tech promises, objects that know about global commerce but do business in their own garage, objects that forage in the forest of the past but live on the brink of Never-Never Land.¹

What *is* smart about handcrafted objects in a mass-market culture? This work is about reexamining our physical world in the place of hyper-materialism; it's about "old" materials in the land of the new; it's about mid-century LA affecting late-century global culture. This new smartness is about the objects you make and eat, the life you lead, and the world you will live in.

By attacking with a cultural mythos that no longer worries about reconciling inconsistencies, the artists in *Love at the End of the Tunnel* use a variety of prefuturistic, elegantly resistant materials to establish their relationship to the cultural and social zones of contemporary pop'd life. The LA-nurtured artists flaunt certain commonalities—material sophistication rooted in assemblage, and a wish to dematerialize objects through delicate and fleeting materials. There is also a fascination with the serial, the repetitive, the knock-off industrial culture and high modernism that seeps into daily life. The works are content-driven; the artists show their generational self-consciousness in their interests and references. They integrate the high and low of human life and reflect it in their high and low works.²

This not-quite-misunderstood place (LA) is the perfect setting for art that revels in a misapprehended historical sense of what art is. The new,

confused ageonomics of technology holds no utopian hope for the future. This group of artists, living at the end of the tunnel, cohabit in this acultural cultural place, the place other cultural centers deny, the one place where *Blade Runner* and *Clueless* coexist. This smart work embraces Hollywood's fantasy by being its own brand. It is inevitable—every place has its colloquialisms, its solipsisms, and given the generative quality of this oxygen-rich, school-fed site, why wouldn't you find such a group of artists defining a late-century moment?

So, then, let's just say this new work feeds new brains new messages about this culture.

Cultural Tour

To your left, note the smart objects that use dumb materials, and to the right are sincere things, with mock-irony oozing from their fragile and fleeting handcrafted wounds. We'll see the pre-preppie, '50s-inspired/'70s-retired house filled with Japanese-induced design objects. The exoticism of postwar design—adopted from Frank Lloyd Wright by Europeans, repackaged in American plastics (who in Europe could fight copyright infringement after the war?)—trickled down into the home via Charles and Ray Eames, architects and artists fleeing from the Old World to the New.

Pae White's fluttering mobiles, of film gels and black leather stitched with good granny's red thread, continue White's representation of modernist objects with their ideologies on a stick. These mobiles, traced back to an American (Alexander Calder) in Paris, continue their gravity-defying efforts to fly like Buck Rogers, with White's twist into a quirky, sensual, or sexual cocktail haven. Although often effacing her artistic self in those of other artists³ or fashion designers, White's choices are always very particular: whether the playful baubles of sexual conquest or modernist rip-offs common to designer showrooms near you, she plays with the graphics, colors, and forms of her parents' brave new world.

In his “starter” set of intimate household objects—dressed fashionably in tulle and “made up” with delicate watercolor washes—George Stoll reinterprets the domestic objects that made yesterday’s homes so warm, so appealing. Picking his sculptural forebears carefully—pans as sculpture, container and contained with manufactured negative and positive spaces—Stoll finds high-end design and American pragmatism in these practical objects. His Tupperware series in cast beeswax eulogizes the American home; his toilet rolls are the dirty side of the 1950s, when women were wedged back into the postwar nest to make room on the factory floor for the guys. As he dresses up his dolls, perhaps Stoll resists this undeniable gendered fascism the way extravagant Parisian fashion toiled during the ‘40s in the face of murderous (and anti-silk) war.

Coming from a psychedelic take on the color exercises of Josef Albers or the serial narratives of Sunday comics, Michael Gonzalez’s plastic nuclear motifs belong in our retro/futuristic SoCal home.⁴ Scrapped together from found plastic bags—including Wonder Bread wrappings and the cheap blue sacks from janitorial haven Smart & Final Iris—Gonzalez tries to make concrete the flimsy plastic of local industry. Like Hollywood and rocket scientists, he makes a bold new world from spun celluloid. His Wonder Bread series mimicked nineteenth century awe of landscape while belittling America’s homogenization of bread in the 1950s, and his *Theme Sampler* series riffs on corporate logos submerging street-smart life.

Doug Hammett uses sugar in all its sweet manifestations to expunge sculptural form and our addictive selves. Thinking that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, Hammett’s architectural “zips” of chocolate, strawberry, or coconut icing sweetened our constructed physical shell; a sandbox of turbinado sugar and sugary-glass bottles are like “psychotherapy” (digging in the dirt); his table accumulations of fortune cookies search for feng shui and a place in your Western home.⁵ His current bas relief cycle is based on a mythological tale—of a Buddhist monk who finds a bull and thus transcendence—and uses a creamy, viscous, high-end patisserie icing, the

most unnatural material, to describe the search for abstract spiritual meaning. Zen and nihilism coexist in this American psyche.

When did the world become smaller and Americans more urbane?—why, after the war, when Wallace Berman could reinvent the Torah through a transistor radio. Joyce Lightbody's travelogues of stamp pulp, musical notations, and concrete poetry are rhyming-dense markers of the exploded human life. Her LSD maps—three-dimensional like the bumps on your head—evoke a Cubist pictorial illusion of text/image of LA's overloaded media landscape. Lightbody's light-fantastic novellas wander and amuse; they read like hieroglyphs of the cultural unconscious.

Michael Pierzynski's ceramic travel souvenirs have a definite Trader Vic's feel to them. He recasts thrift store ceramic figures—bad '50s kitsch and fish-amusing aquarium figures ripped from gilded Rococo figurines or Lladro kitsch—into bonsai *nature mortes* or still lifes, dead lives. Pierzynski airbrushes their miniature tableaux surfaces, as if they were surfboards, with a powdery and arid dusting. Their narratives are skewed; history is constrained and murdered. His retro, Asian-influenced works prove his open-ended cultural accumulation of fact, gathered from around the globe and mixed into an unearthly landscape glow.⁶

Out and About

Maura Bendett is the first to admit to her progenitors: television, her parents redecorating with flower power or plastic blow-up furniture, and Odilon Redon (note the floral motif, the deathly yellows, and the transparent psychological distress). In *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, influenced by late-nineteenth-century Danish children's book illustrator Kay Nielsen, Bendett's artificial gardens of acetate and string try to kick their painting habit dead by popping out from the wall in scattered accumulations of craft-store materials. Describing our artificial turf as much as pushing it to a logical conclusion, Bendett's are designer wallpapers gone mad, the rowdy antidote to the cool of Pae White's princess mobiles.

There is always a crowd in this crazy cultural scene—at chic boutiques and antique swap meets. The crowd, whether observing or participating, has *become* the spectacle; “people watching” is hardly noticed as a scopophilic disease. Andrea Bower’s darkened installation of fleeting images of crowds melting into one another—from concerts to sporting events past and present—looks for evidence without proof.⁷ Clear seduction—rabid fans become insensible to their illusory participation in the cultural scene. Looking for the middle-American counterpart to Nan Goldin’s slide shows of urban habitué, these crowded fans are chimeras, our conscience, our modern-day recall from the hyper activity of the design of the new.

Inside Out

Bubbles—kid toys, astronaut boys, biosphere ploys—that’s where Terri Friedman lives and breathes. She squirts long waterfalls through veiny plastic tendrils, pumping life through the materials that save lives—a better life through plastic. How does she get a spiritual thrill from this aerospace bauble? By animating her pumping bodies, becoming more body conscious, by showing that you are what you eat—Friedman gives us smart ingestions. Think of Hans Haacke’s early water works, Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke’s body blasts, Warhol’s gurgling mud bath, and Bob Flanagan’s medicinal masochism—here is another alchemical transformation using viscous liquids before DNA, and less controversial, too.

Modestly vicious, Kenneth Riddle’s sculptural narratives crossbreed California assemblage of the late 1950s, Fisher-Price toys on acid, and social critique of monster movies (What is Godzilla about, anyway? The social scourge of nuclear war? American fear of the other? Capitalism staving off communism?). Riddle’s works are loud—struggling from the murk of industrial cool and middle-class climb. Sure, this is the noir underbelly to a sleek surface. But this is not the opposed pole to proper politeness; this is a material assay testing the expressive possibilities of all these manufactured materials—of shit bricks and flowery liqueurs, of banned weapons and cheerful Prozac.

Marcel Duchamp hid—so does Chris Finley, in his potted vehicles, plastic projects, and puzzled prizes. Finley's elaborate constructions are petrochemical journeys into the fantasy spreads of your kitchen. The building blocks of this playful social experiment include our plastic home landscape, emporiums like Pic 'n Save and Target, and our wish to set things right. Finley equates meaning with physical contact: he builds it, you break it; you try to put it back together and around the ring we go again. Alongside their Disneyesque scale (big images small and vice versa), Finley's ultimate success resides in his ability to scare you into engaging with his objects.

Actually, Carlos Mollura embodies invisibility—the invisibility (or virtual extinction) of heavy industry in the southern region and the ubiquitous invisibility of high technology. Or, perhaps, he is just shedding light on the invisibility of SoCal's cultural influences: California Light and Space objects, blanched beach balls, delicately spun plastic parts that replace heart valves (talk about your cyberpunk). In a sculptural world, Mollura encases clean air, makes a solid of a gas. His paintings are more destructive—they blow hot air into the modernist discourse of abstraction.

Likewise, Sally Elesby's clamoring, rangy "paintings" kick at the edges of painting. Their sticky surfaces (poured coats of glue tricked out with shifting tone-on-tone of opaque glamour) and broken, skewed grids cling to the edges of walls and the abyss. As seekers of the fourth dimension (science fiction or Internet, it matters not),⁸ Elesby's metaphoric associations look for a quick exit to the nearest planet. These are motivated works, pressing out, sucking in, passing the time between the Rococo and Clement Greenberg.

Inasmuch as Pae White's mobiles are prissy and elegant, Patrick Nickell's equally resistant sculptural paintings/painterly sculptures are hardworking dudes in cardboard and crumpled paper with loose strings attached. Capturing a moment between recycling and filling volumes, Nickell prefers David Smith and Richard Tuttle over Peterbilt and Tool Time. Not aestheticized machines, not bodily

space-brokers. This is art on the artist's drafting table, extemporaneous and real.

Figure It Out

The artists in *Love at the End of the Tunnel, or the Beginning of a Smart New Day* were mostly born into a world where a smart, decrepit, racy and worn-out LA represented a dreamland, perfect because it was unfulfilled, undercapitalized, and on the brink of tomorrow. All the aesthetic, and ascetic, forms in *Love at the End of the Tunnel* know the art lingo—1970s bodywork, the fetishism of obsessive work, anti-materialism—as well as the 1980s shtick—hypermateralism, egomania, cool Neo-Geo, inescapable consumerism. Everywhere is the imprint of a historical freedom, a bonus climate of experimentation and absolution. The work is small; the ideas are big.

Why, exactly, would the vocabulary of design modernism, sci-fi utopia/dystopia, and formal funk reappear in late-twentieth-century art from the city at the end, and the beginning, of the new world? All this degraded modernism, this landscape morphed into portraiture and narrative skewed into figuration, what good can it lead to? We can see the political and social limits of our shrinking world. Is repositioning self and material an act of nostalgia? Or survival? ⁹

1. The discussion on smart is prompted by Andrew Ross "The New Smartness," from *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* p. 329–341. Ed. Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckery. Seattle: Bay Press, 1994.
2. The 1985 exhibition *Precious*, organized by Thomas W. Sokolowski at the Grey Art Gallery, New York, included a group of artists dealing flamboyantly and decoratively with intimate and even religious issues largely as a response to Neo-Geo and Neo-Expressionism. The work in *Love at the End of the Tunnel* is less an aesthetic reaction than a growing sense of connection, of formal possibilities, and of looking for a recognizable language. In addition, the bulk of the work in *Precious* worked with painting as its formal source; in this show, sculpture, interior design, and global culture are evident.
3. David Pagel review, "Jorge Pardo and Pae White," *Art Issues*. November/December 1995, p. 44.
4. Conversation with the artist, 19 July 1997.

5. Conversation with the artist, 21 April 1997.
6. In his article "Entering a New Dimension," critic David Pagel describes a new genre of work in LA—sculptural landscape—and mentions artists Michael Pierzynski and Chris Finley, tracing the genesis of this style to Chris Burden. See article in the *Los Angeles Times* Calendar, Sunday, August 25, 1996, pp. 7 & 89.
7. Bowers chose her title from Jean Baudrillard's *Cool Memories*: "You never know what it is that seduces you. What you are sure of is that this was meant for you. There is no other feeling that brings with it such a sense of clear self-evidence. Something has your name on it, irrevocable and at a single stroke—you have the chance to dispense with the abominable psychological labour to which we are condemned even more surely than we are condemned to social labour, and to enter total absolution." From note to the author from the artist, 29 July 1997.
8. Conversation with the artist, 21 April 1997.
9. See Avital Ronnell, "Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principal," from *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* p. 280. Ed. Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckery. Seattle: Bay Press, 1994.