

Kasper Kovitz at another year in LA

Up until the early twentieth century, American art had remained largely provincial, borrowing from European nineteenth-century genres, especially landscape-not surprising given our abundance of it, untamed and uninhabited. Together with the moral force of Manifest Destiny, natural landscape became imbued with virtue and symbolism, both expressed by the tenants of European romanticism. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the tables turned. Northern European tourists began to pour into the American West, fascinated by the stark surrealism of Death Valley, Yellowstone Park and Route 66 in the Southwest. Currently there are very active groups in Germany who collect American Indian artifacts and replicate Native American ceremonies.

Enter Kasper Kovitz, and his exhibition, valley girls, at the gallery another year in LA. Kovitz who was born and has exhibited in Austria until he moved to the American southwest in the mid-1990s, also seems mesmerized by the American West, and in particular by the over-used and manipulated icons that have come to represent it. The show's tour-de-force piece, valley girls, is a wall-sized hanging that depicts two young girls off to the side, gazing out into a vast, uninhabited landscape, where rugged mountains ring an empty valley. Other works explore fishing in the woods, the campfire, the log cabin and even autumn in Vermont.

What profit could further exploration of these empty symbols possibly yield?

Nineteenth-century European romanticism in painting incorporated illusions of unreality and distance, envisioned by means of time and space. The idealism of a Caspar David Friedrich or John Constable was encased in dreamy and soft illuminations of light and atmosphere. Paint could express tones of mystery and reverence. Here is where Kovitz makes his departure, for there is no trace of paint in any of his artworks. Instead, they are "painted" with strawberry, blueberry, blackberry and other fruit jams on canvas or paper. This creates a soft impressionist almost pointillist look, and the images only resolve into focus as one steps away from the canvas.

Other materials, even more ephemeral, such as pinesap, aging varnish, apricot juice and white glue, all on unframed paper, make the images difficult to see at any range. The two log cabin "paintings" of pinesap on paper begin to portray the actual pioneers who built them and the rituals they brought with them from Europe, but they require the viewer to squint and search for these frail remnants of a bygone era. Whereas European romantics grounded their illusions in a firm earthly presence, the subjects of Kovitz's works recede into far into oblivion, both in time and distance.

And so, are these delicate and fragile works primarily nostalgic? Are they paeans to me pioneers, to me "Russian girl," to me "ruitjuice daddy," two of the portrait subjects in the exhibit? All of these characters are fading both literally and figuratively, as is the innocent West they came to inhabit. The two vaporous "valley girls" of today look out onto the valley of a hundred years ago, now vanished into concrete and mini-malls. These artworks could be an elegy for the land and the romantic ideas that it stirred.

But this is old news, and so is not enough. Does Kovitz, by using such pathetic art materials mean to debunk the kitsch and continuing prevalence of tourist trivia and travel postcards that still pervade culture today? Does he mean to turn the tables on the very act of painting itself, as a means to represent the sublime? Does he mean a critique of Western idealization and romanticizing of the landscape? One thing for sure, he has reduced the much hyped monumentality of the West into a mere whisper. As such, the work hovers somewhere between the elegiac and the ironic, and is at risk itself, but of being caught somewhere in the middle between sincerity and spoof. Perhaps he means them to be as enigmatic as the West itself, forever holding its secrets from us as it goes to its demise by our own hand; perhaps they are just humorous parodies. At best, they are both.

-Victoria Martin

Kasper Kovitz: valley girls closed June 15 at another year in LA, Los Angeles.

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