

Missionary Positions – Malik Gaines

The Santa Anas are early this year. By summer's last day, those infamous, eerie warm winds have blown across Southern California a full month before their usual time of arrival. One imagines nature as the immovable star by which a shifting culture may set its course, but these days, don't count on it. Recent disruptions in temperature are changing migratory patterns and mating seasons and natural habitats at an alarming rate. One considers the endless Caribbean hurricanes or California's gentler, early Santa Ana Winds in the light of the Bush Administration's insistence that there is no consensus on global warming and one wonders: has anyone asked the other plants and animals? The tree outside my window that never dropped its brown leaves in last winter's warmth seems to know better than Bush.

And yet nature remains indifferent, unable to apply the values of environmentalism or pro-business or apocalypse to its own cataclysm. Of the species that populate this sphere, we seem to be the one most imbedded in contradiction. A glance at Todd Gray's large sculpture calls to mind some of the instruments of our ambivalence: taxidermy and photography, two means of preserving life in the throes of death. To study, to understand, to appreciate, to value: each of these acts requires radical intervention in the real, up to and including the natural. But just as wind currents in one hemisphere effect flora and fauna in another, no intervention is isolated to its own integrity. A stuffed indigenous bison is a totem to all colonial histories. The image of a California Mission is a reduction of transcendence and genocide into a two-dimensional plane. The combination of the two is a striking architectural moment, one that folds these histories together, creating a multi-dimensional space where the connections are finally laid bare.

Gray, a Californian, began this investigation in Europe, where he became interested in these impossible combinations of images. As with his large photographs that tease perception through unusual arrangements of space, or the photographic collages that present one mysterious image followed syntactically by another as if to make an unusual language, this interest appears to be a structural pursuit as much as, if not more than, a political one. Gray, who is primarily a photographer, became engaged with the images of historic ports,

such as in Brussels, where Europe once set sail. From such ports, empires expanded, trade routes for humans and other commercial goods began, and ideologies were exported, only to return laden in gold. The image of such an architectural space as this Belgian port is powerful for its historic resonance and continued political presence, as well as the beautiful, tattered style and structure of its form. For a Californian, Europe's melancholy architecture can be overwhelming. A sense of cultural past is embodied there that is nearly unfathomable. After all, before the 19th century, California was populated by plants, animals, and Native Americans who, by Continental standards, were fairly unsophisticated. They made no enduring architecture. It wasn't until Spanish missionaries marched up the coast in their black robes that colonial monument-making began.

Public School kids in California study the mission system in the fourth grade. In my day, there was no complex political discussion attached to this unit, certainly no rue or regret, just a pleasant acknowledgment of point A in California history and perhaps a nod to how difficult things were back then. In my class, we each were assigned a specific mission on which to write a report and of which to construct a model. Some of the missions were grander than others (as one can see for oneself by visiting Carmel or Santa Barbara or San Diego, where the charming structures are still well-maintained). I was assigned the decidedly unglamorous La Purisima Concepción, near the small town of Lompoc, which is currently known for its large prison. This mission was the site of famine, fire, earthquakes, and subsumed Indian revolts, and the mission had to be constructed more than once. It was a depressing history for sure, met by a meager little complex of buildings; not much fun to reconstruct at all. Interestingly, this is the site where Gray discovered a remarkable old tree, which became the photographic intervention for one of his powerful assemblages. After dealing with the idea of European colonialism, specifically of Africa, and knowing he wanted to use indigenous animals in his experiments, Gray wondered where he could explore this issue closer to home. The missions became the site of his study, as he traveled the state taking photographs. While the journey is long and the route circuitous, there are curvilinear lines that connect the port of Brussels to these Spanish anomalies of the early California landscape. The histories are intertwined.

While Gray's arc of animals are each intercepted by these mission photographs like cleavers slicing endangered meat, it is perhaps the structure of wood supports that reveals the most in this work. Here we see an old-fashioned means of construction used in a Modern way: to prop up a dubious structure while revealing its own pressure points. The apparatus is exposed once a viewer moves behind the image, and the partial animal loses its own body in a man-made ordering system. While fur and light and history and religious design and phantom organs struggle for balance, it is nothing but a series of straight lines that keep them in their imposed order. As Gray demonstrates, the real is only precariously balanced by our own cantilevers.

Emerging on the other end of this investigation are Gray's shamanistic photographs, in which he performs what appears to be a physical ritual, covering himself with a foaming cream. The most striking of these is a large photograph which has a large boar's head placed over Gray's own face, as if the artist has become a spirit guide attempting to traverse the contemporary terrain he himself has mapped. Returning to the indigenous notions that were so thoroughly thwarted by the expansions that elsewhere intrigue Gray, here he becomes an agent of super-cultural change, like the Santa Ana winds themselves, disrupting the order of things with a forgotten natural heat.