



REVIEW - 17 JUN 2016

Pentti Monkkonen

Jenny's, Los Angeles, USA

BY TRAVIS DIEHL

Like Los Angeles, the city that is its subject, Pentti Monkkonen's 'Mur Murs' wears its purpose on the outside. Hung in an enclosed walkway leading to the gallery entrance is the painting *Gentrifiers Rebuked* (all works 2016): a horizontal rectangle, 'stuccoed' with sand and slathered in vomit-hued smears and drips of paint. Its surface is sculpted like the side of a little shop, complete with vents and a terracotta 'roof'. Nearby, is the gallery's window; hanging

inside, visible through its muntins and transoms, is the likewise cruciform stretcher of a canvas (*Hair Nails (pink)*), which itself bears a small window, inset in the cloth, painted with the kind of manicured hand that might appear on a beauty-salon sign. In a seemingly banal but charged coincidence of art and site, the two windows overlap enough to allow passers-by a glimpse of the show within. Monkkonen's work wraps the insular pretensions of fine art in an homage to the beauticians of the street, lending a sharply sweet Angeleno flavour to the staid dichotomy between high and vernacular culture.



Pentti Monkkonen, *Hair Nails (pink)*, 2016, wood, sand, acrylic, aluminium and plexiglass on canvas, 1.2 x 2.2 m. All images courtesy: the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles; photographs: Jeff McLane

The walls of LA buildings, after all, are not virginal white, but a more or less arbitrary palimpsest of grime, graffiti and house paint. (The chunky purple façade of Jenny's own low-slung office suite is no exception). In five identically sized works, building-shaped canvases rephrase the tension between urban decay and renewal as an aesthetic problem; the ubiquitous alley-facing wall becomes a form sarcastically emptied of function (that is, of people). Within this model, it's possible to propose an uneasy congruency between two of the city's main 'mural districts': the lysergic pastel vibes of

Venice Beach inform *T.R.E.A.M.*, a mural of Death in a drug rug, holding life in an hourglass like so much Pacific sand. Over on LA's east side is Estrada Courts, a housing project in Boyle Heights known for its murals, from which Monkkonen draws the faithfully miniaturized *Honeycomb Light* by Charles Felix. Partly shading *T.R.E.A.M.* is *Billboard (Shot on iPhone 6)*, a tattered, small-scale replica of a giant ad; it's still possible to make out, in a photo of a hipster posing on a red brick wall, a hi-res cliché of urbanity. Venice, once a slum, has long been recolonized; Boyle Heights is the new front of gentrification.



Pentti
Monkkonen,
Billboard (Shot
on iPhone 6),
2016, acrylic
and inkjet print
on plywood,
aluminium,
galvanized steel
and concrete,
241 x 193 x 51 cm

The paintings' building-like format insists on another painterly dialectic – between abstraction and representation, escape and engagement. If Monkkonen's 'murals' seem stylized and abstract, the works' materiality cites a world exterior to the discourse of modernist art. *Armchair Socialism* is patterned with vines and birds from wallpaper designed by the 19th-century socialist William Morris. Here, the abstract politics of betterment-by-design feel far indeed from the dire stakes of gang tags. *50 Shades of Mauve* depicts a wall patchily painted and repainted as if to cover graffiti; yet, the piece manages to be as compositionally and chromatically seductive as any abstract painting. Where many have failed, Monkkonen successfully transplants a particular element of found aesthetics – the graffiti cover-ups that deck Los Angeles like bristly, mismatched Mark Rothko paintings – into a formalized, white-walled setting. This works by keeping his citations

firmly in context, confining a post-painterly preoccupation with surface to funny, wall-shaped canvases. This, he seems to say with a wink, is maybe the best art can do. And why try to cheat the world out of what the world does better? It's enough, Monkkonen suggests, for art to have its model city, its toy urbanism, its problem of painting – which, if 'Mur Murs' doesn't exactly 'solve', it comes pretty close to naming.

TRAVIS DIEHL

Travis Diehl is a writer based in Los Angeles, USA, and is a recipient of the Creative Capital / Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant.

London
1 Montclare
Street
London
E2 7EU, UK
+44 (0)203

New York
247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY
10013
+1 212 463

Berlin
Zehdenicker
Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362