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The Edge of a New Frontier

By Peter Plagens

On a late winter afternoon in Los Angeles there's a kind of shadowless gray glare that's both heavy in mood and bright on the eyes. It's warm, but you can feel a damp coolness starting to settle in for the evening. At the intersection of La Cienega Boulevard and Washington Boulevard, where Los Angeles ends and Culver City begins, the effect is exacerbated by the low buildings and wide streets. Los Angeles is my hometown, but I left it decades ago for a denser, vertical place—New York. Fading sunshine and that creeping "marine layer" always rouse in me a bit of wistfulness but, because this particular borderland is Los Angeles's new gallery neighborhood, I feel a little pulse of anticipation, too.

"You're here for the early rounds," says Whitney Carter, whose small gallery, Carter & Citizen, opened last September. "Tonight there are lots of openings at the galleries because this is kind of the start of the second half of the season."

In Los Angeles, gallery location is a lot about automobiles: How quickly can you get there in them and where can you park? Bergamot Station on the eastern edge of Santa Monica—long ago a railroad-car storage yard—became Los Angeles's instant Chelsea in the mid-1990s. It boasts a couple of dozen galleries arranged around a huge parking lot. But Bergamot isn't all that close to a freeway, and seems slightly prefabricated. Some gallery owners prefer a less gated-community feel. And there's always the search for bigger, cheaper spaces.

Early in the new millennium, art galleries started to migrate into, and adjacent to, Culver City, taking over storefronts and warehouses and slicking them up with de rigueur tall white walls, elegant track lighting and smooth concrete floors. The new gallery neighborhood amounts to a horizontal version of New York's former gallery central, SoHo. Last June's Sixth Annual "Art Walk Culver City" brochure listed about 40 galleries. And, judging from my brief recent sampling, there's proportionately more variety, and less self-congratulatory exhibitionism, than in New York's Chelsea.

The centripetal abstract sculptures in David McDonald's "Self Portraits" (Carter & Citizen Gallery, 2648 La Cienega Ave., 213-359-2504, through Feb. 18) sit on the floor. They are agglomerations, about a yard tall, of unglamorous materials (cement, scrap wood, rebar, wire) with a vertical—dare we say phallic?—core. You look down at them as you would at friendly dogs. Good, concise sculpture is relatively rare these days, and Mr. McDonald succeeds by taking a risk with physical

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Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton.

modesty. His pieces aren't flashy, but are astutely assembled and intriguing in their confined manner. But are these "self portraits" really, as the gallery claims, his "most personal" works? He deserves the benefit of the doubt.

The best thing about Brian Bress's "Under Performing" (Cherry and Martin Gallery, 2712 S. La Cienega Blvd., 310-559-0100, through Feb. 25)—and I'm not being snide here—is the title of this show. A 20-minute video—a kind of "Drive, She Said" movie with a Kathy Bates lookalike reciting snippets of wisdom from the writings of the late minimalist painter Agnes Martin—plays in the front gallery. In the rear, eight flat-screen monitors display digital portraits of grotesque cyberguppets that move very, very slightly. So, does "underperforming" imply that Mr. Bress isn't doing his best, or that he is doing his best in depicting somebody else underperforming, or that his art should fall "under" the heading of "performing"? I'd choose the middle possibility, but I'm unsure enough to have taken three turns through the show to try to make up my mind. And I more or less enjoyed doing so.

For Adam Ross's "In an Indeterminate Place" (Angles Gallery (2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., 310-396-5019, through Feb. 18), the artist makes semigeometric abstract paintings in which spatial ambiguity—trickery—is the subject. On bright, primary-color canvas-over-panel formats, he superimposes tilting, illusionistic white framing bars over a dark mottling—somewhere between the looks of Clyfford Still and Gerhard Richter—in the bright red, yellow or blue grounds. The effect is arresting, but little more than that. Mr. Ross's good work is brainy in a moderately beautiful way, but it would be better if it were really beautiful in a more moderately brainy way.

Italian-born Gusmano Cesaretti (Roberts & Tilton Gallery (5801 Washington Blvd., 323-549-0223, through Feb. 18) photographed Latino residents of East Los Angeles in the 1970s. While his black-and-white pictures—more flattering than Diane Arbus's work, less glamorizing than Richard Avedon's—might seem a little tame in an age when it's hard to avoid photographic celebrations of plucky graffitists, defiant gang-bangers and regular folk who live around them, they had a real edge back then. Come to think of it, they still do.

There's still a species of figurative painter who travels to exotic locales and rather accurately depicts what he sees there in architectonically sturdy urban compositions, muted colors and cautious brushstrokes. Kenny Harris's most recent such paintings are the result of a seven-week swing through China (and Hong Kong and Taiwan) with a friend whose job as a State Department interpreter got them off the usual tourist trails. But Mr. Harris couldn't take along anything but

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pencil and paper. "China" (Koplin Del Rio Gallery 6031 Washington Blvd., 310-836-9055, through Feb. 18), somewhat capitalizes on this by showing sketches and even journal snippets to augment Mr. Harris's skillful oils—painted back in the U.S.—of unpopulated interiors and alleyways. If select visual reporting embellished with a bit of gracefulness is enough for you, then these pictures are really pretty good.

Ingrid Calame is one of Los Angeles's most important midcareer artists, yet it's been a decade since she had a solo show in town. Her trademark procedure—it's more profound than a shtick—is to trace found spills and stains and then carefully render them, often on aluminum, in flat, bright color. In "From the L.A. River to Lackawanna" (Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 6006 Washington Blvd., 310-837-2117, through Feb. 11), she ups the ante—especially in the exhibition's centerpiece, a 14-by-50-foot wall drawing traced, her dealer says, from the largest continuous graffiti tag on the cement walls of the Los Angeles River. Assistants made the tracings, and Ms. Calame turned them into a rainbow-tinted mural via the Renaissance technique of a "pounce pattern." (A pizza-cutter-size spiked wheel courses over the tracing, taped to the wall, followed by a big powder puff applying the color through the resultant holes.) Other similarly produced works include huge framed drawings whose configurations were lifted from an abandoned wading pool near Buffalo, N.Y.

It's hard to figure what it all means—Ms. Calame lives in the city where her river flows, and her father worked in a steel mill in upstate N.Y.—but it is gorgeous.