

William Leavitt, Allen Ruppersberg, and Mungo Thomson

Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
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When an established art gallery pairs works by artists of an older generation with work by an artist thirty years younger, it might be asked for what purpose—to bring credence to the newcomer and new excitement and life to the work of the veterans? If this is the stratagem behind the exhibition of solo works by Los Angeles artists William Leavitt, Allen Ruppersberg, and Mungo Thomson at the Margo Leavin Gallery (14 July–18 August 2007), it works. All three artists are represented by Margo Leavin, so this falls under the standard category of the summer group show. However, while each work is created in a different decade spanning a thirty-year period, resonances across the whole made me imagine a slightly different and larger exhibition, one that lurks here anyway.

All three works on view are tableaux, each an amalgam of American vernacular culture and hard to categorize. William Leavitt and Allen Ruppersberg are contemporaries, and each in his own way is informed through issues raised by the institutionalization of Minimalism and Pop Art. Like other artists working in Los Angeles in the early '70s (Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Bas Jan Alder, Guy de Cointet, and William Wegman), they distinguished their work from most melancholic Minimal/Conceptual art made in New York and Europe by using deadpan humor, slapstick comedy and the cliché as a way to, as Baldessari put it, "take conceptual art off of its pedestal, so to speak." They both work in multiple media, are interested in a filmic narrative, and have an ambivalence towards the nature or definition of certain works, blurring the boundaries of what constitutes sculpture or film or a theater set or a book. But most important is that they share an affinity with what is ordinary or "particular to everyone."²

According to Leavitt, he and Ruppersberg began a correspondence after Ruppersberg published *23 Pieces* (1968), *24 Pieces* (1970), and *25 Pieces* (1971), three spiral-bound books

of snapshot-style photographs that appeared to be of very ordinary, empty rooms with vestiges of recent inhabitants: an unopened newspaper left on a perfectly made bed, a stone placed on an otherwise undisturbed desk, or a picture removed from a wall. Leavitt was making work at the time that was related to his interest in what he calls the "theater of the ordinary"—something that is obviously not high drama, but deals with conventional things in a dramatic way. In his 1970 tableaux, *Forest Sound* (reconstructed for this exhibition), Leavitt creates an atmosphere almost wholly artificial: a "forest" of artificial trees, dirt, flood lights, and a sound component of live recorded bird sounds that in an analogue remix are made to sound more artificial by removing the ambient background noise with its traffic sounds, etc. and layering in a synthesized abstract soundtrack.³ The sound component, like all the other components in *Forest Sound*, functions like a prop. The work exists in a state of being in-between a work of art and a somewhat functional object, like a prop or theater set, presented out of context. What I mean by "somewhat functional" is that a prop alone, however interesting it may appear, is "dumb" and incomplete until it is activated by the entire production, whether it be a play, film or advertisement. Props, stage sets, costumes and sounds are a support for the necessary suspension of disbelief that narrative theatre and its related forms require, but they are all background, unable to carry, as here, the foreground.

Forest Sound relies on the viewers' recognition of the artifice of the work, an approach that is phenomenological in nature, dealing with the means of appearance by which physical things are presented to our consciousness. Los Angeles has played a significant role in Leavitt's interest in the edge between reality and illusion. While visiting the back lots of film and television studios, he discovered that the surface appearance of a setting created for the production of a film or TV show is dependent on the commingling of cheap craft and the art of photographic fakery. By repeating this setting in a different context, Leavitt removes the "frame"—the narrative—and with it, the illusion. It is as if Leavitt uses the mise-en-scène of a B-Movie or soap

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1. Interview with John Baldessari for the Getty Research Institute, March 16, 2007.
2. I viewed the exhibition with Leavitt, during which he shared his interests and influences and how he and Ruppersberg first met. In the brochure accompanying his MOCA exhibition *Allen Ruppersberg: The Secret of Life and Death* (13 February–26 May, 1985), Ruppersberg writes, "My art is about what is common and particular to everyone."
3. I thought about David Tudor's *Rain Forest* (a sound piece with four versions, created for performance and installation, from 1968–73) that in its second version used oscillators that made animal and bird-like sounds. In 1967, Leavitt saw a performance by David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, and John Cage, which greatly affected him but did not consciously inspire this work that was made before the installation of the *Rain Forest IV* sound environment at CalArts in 1973.



opera. His installation work has the look of a variety show set from the Golden Age of Television, like *Texaco Star Theater* with Milton Berle, *Red Skelton* or *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. The use of simple props and theatrical displays in those shows were taken directly from the entertainment traditions of comedy in Catskill hotels and vaudevillian theater. They move right on to TV studio sets, serving as scenic backdrops for the comedy skit or the "spoof."⁴ William Leavitt's vaudeville was daytime television with its soap operas and commercials crossed with the fictional novels of French author Alain Robbe-Grillet, with their unconventional composition of random events from everyday life, made strange by formal description.

While Leavitt provides viewers with the set and props on which to project their memories of television and film narratives, Ruppberg uses books, magazines, posters and films to create new narratives for both the form and content of his work. Artist Allan McCollum wrote about his friend's work, "Ruppberg developed an appreciation for a specific kind of photograph: the kind of 'neutral' picture one finds on a postcard, on a calendar, or in a stock photo. He was fascinated by the stillness, emptiness, and virtual absence of authorial subjectivity in these images, which, for him, were taken for anybody by nobody."⁵ In a related series to 23, 24, and 25 *Pieces*, Ruppberg produced what he simply called *Drawings*. The title might suggest the intimacy of an artist's touch, but he created these "drawings" by placing three found postcards together in a simple horizontal row. It demonstrated that any sequence of images can be read as a story, with a logic all its own—or, perhaps, that a logic would be projected onto any sequence of images by their viewer. These works suggested that the public and private co-exist as a collective history and memory with a socially agreed-upon narrative structure to hold all events together.

Drawings and another piece, *The New Five Foot Shelf* (2001), to which Ruppberg refers as "a great biographical work," are the antecedents for the work on display at Margo Leavin, *Wondrous Remains* (2007). Here, Ruppberg creates a *kunstkammer*

(cabinet of art) tableau, a display shelf holding overlapping framed silkscreens, photographs and drawings, arranged as if a collection one might see in a contemporary home.⁶ The shelf is hung at the level one might hang a mirror, as if to look at Ruppberg's arrangement is a reveal of sorts, a self-portrait. While seemingly personal, the shelf is littered with generic popular culture references remade to allow for existential uncertainties. For example, there is a "book jacket" that has a 1930s style illustration of the face of a pretty girl with the title *Beauty Analysis, Box 596, Manhasset, NY* and on the spine is *Name Unknown*. The back cover has a photograph from the '40s or '50s of the back of the head of a wavy haired girl, with the title *By Madam X*. I thought this humorous as I knew Ruppberg was born and raised in Brecksville, Ohio and I immediately thought of Breck Shampoo illustrations that ran as advertisements in every major magazine I read growing up. But is this a correct read as a portrait of him, or is it a reflection of my projected experiences as the viewer, or both? Our relationship to the ephemera we hold on to and keep is profoundly personal, but in Ruppberg's works this relationship is never a direct or simple one.

The *Remains* in the title refers to "remainders," as in a table of remaindered books, and to the media (the novel, sculpture, film) that is deconstructed to create the work. The work is aleatory, as all of the elements are combined and read differently with each viewing of the piece. Further destabilizing any fixed read, some of the elements on the shelf are taken from an earlier work titled *Remainders: Novel, Sculpture, Film* (1991), which consisted of a library table, 128 books (eight examples each of 16 titles) and the five numbered and lettered shipping cartons they came in. Several of the same book covers appear in *Wondrous Remains* as flat art, placed on the shelf as art rather than books. The text printed on those book jackets came from Ruppberg's collection of American instructional films from the '30s to the '60s. It was written in the style of an educational film narrated by three voices: a man taking LSD, someone having an acid trip flashback, and the drug itself, as if the revelatory experience

4. As an interesting aside, while Internet surfing I discovered that one of the first shown to use the term vaudeville, (claiming it originated from the French *vau de ville*, "worth of the city," or "worthy of the city's patronage") was named M.B. Leavitt, and is possibly a distant relative. He provided variety amusements to the growing middle class after the civil war and created one of the first burlesque troupes, Rentz-Santley Novelty and Burlesque Company, in 1870.
5. Allan McCollum, "Allen Ruppberg: What One Loves about Life Are the Things That Fade," originally published in *All Ruppberg: Books, Inc.* (France: Frac Limousin, 2001).
6. Ruppberg is a collector himself. His love for images and text has led him to amass thousands of books, postcards, photographs, magazines, slides, posters and a large collection of industrial and educational film from 1931–1967, which he uses as an archive for ideas in his work.





TOP: WILLIAM LEAVITT, *Forest Sound*, 1970-2007. ARTIFICIAL TREES, DIRT, FLOOD LIGHT, RECORDED BIRD SOUNDS, SPEAKERS. CURRENT INSTALLATION: 82 X 109 X 120 INCHES. PHOTO: BRIAN FOREST. COURTESY MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

BOTTOM: ALLEN RUPPERSBERG, *Wondrous Remains*, 2007. PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS, SILKSCREENS, AND BOOK DUST JACKETS. INSTALLATION DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. PHOTO: BRIAN FOREST. COURTESY MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

of taking LSD mirrors the experience of “taking in” the work. Viewers/readers can enter in the text at any point and complete the narrative with their own version. The publisher on all of the “remains” is The Vital Line, which, for me, is the lineage between the media and the remains of the art that came before. A preoccupation with themes of life and death is evidenced in the titles he uses, reflecting his sense of mourning of what is lost in generational migration, the collapse of the personal and the private, the forgetting of histories and the stories left untold.

Of the three artists, Mungo Thomson is the new kid on the block, with a work that fills the largest gallery to capacity—a custom-made, inflatable vinyl “bounce” house, fully expanded and kept “alive” by a mechanized air blower, accompanied with its ubiquitous hum. *Skyspace Bouncehouse* is bulbous and luminous as if designed to be a comic book rendition of a log cabin for the Michelin man, and the title refers, in part, to those brightly colored, inflatable structures one might see in an urban front yard, waiting for kids to climb inside and jump until they lose their birthday cake. Thomson first created customized “bouncehouses” for the Frieze Art Fair Sculpture Park in Regent’s Park, London in 2002, where the public could freely enter and bounce. When installed inside a gallery, the bouncehouse becomes more of an auratic object. The *Skyspace* in the title refers to an open roof that is aligned with the gallery’s skylight and is a nod to James Turrell’s *Skyspace* pavilions, the most spectacular being the Live Oak Friends Meeting in Houston, Texas. Turrell, a practicing Quaker, consciously created a simple design for a meeting room with natural light that is akin to the sky-lit Rothko Chapel in the same town; both designs are reverent and overtly aestheticised spaces (as I guess most spiritual places are purported to be). Thomson’s pavilion has a meeting room presence, its sole interior bench seamlessly designed in the round, but the buoyancy of the material defeats the purpose of sitting solemn. It could also be said that it resembles a Shaker’s Cabin. In silent meditation like the Quakers, Shaker men and women sat facing each other separated by a distance of 5 feet, and when

"moved by the Spirit," would begin to tremble, shake, spin, and dance to shake the devil out. I couldn't help but recall Dan Graham's video *Rock My Religion* (1982-84), his theoretical "spin" on the Shaker's religion with its ecstatic dancing as a precursor to rock and punk music.⁷ By adding the opportunity to bounce and jump in the *Skyspace*, Thomson provides a way to exorcise the demons within us—and if you bring your iPod with a downloaded Black Flag track, you can rock your world, in deep contrast to the pious quiet and pacifist underpinnings of the Turrell Quaker pavilions.

While visiting the exhibition I did witness an adult viewer take off his shoes, enter Thomson's sculpture and proceed to bounce as high as he could, with the glee of a child reveler. With this in mind, *Skyspace Bouncehouse* could be viewed less as an appropriated prop, as in Leavitt's work, used to create the setting for an implied narrative, or as a formal display in which a narrative is created out of the remains of other media, as in Ruppertsberg's work, but as "on display" like an interactive Pop Art piece. Thomson's *Bouncehouse* recalls Claes Oldenburg's soft vinyl sculptures of domestic objects with their dual purpose of being irreverent art and usable props in those late '50s-early '60s Happenings with Jim Dine and Robert Rauschenberg. The Oldenburg sculptures (which he also sold in a store of his creation rather than a gallery) gave permission to the next generation of artists to be irreverent without much thought and to engage in the determination of value of the art that they were making. Ruppertsberg cites as his influences the three Marcel's: Proust, Duchamp, and Broodthaers. And Thomson? Thomson's work certainly shares a sense of play with that of Leavitt and Ruppertsberg, with its revelatory mixing of the mainstream and subversive aspects of American culture, particularly the exploration of Americana, spirituality, popular music, and folk culture. But he seems to take the radical attitudes of his predecessors as a given, having been taught by the next generation of artists influenced by them.

For his graduate thesis at UCLA, Thomson created a publication with drawings and text which appropriated the look of a "Chick Tract," a small evangelical Christian

brochure, made by Fundamentalist Jack T. Chick in cartoon style and distributed for free as a proselytizing tool. In *Everything Has Been Recorded* (2000), which was also distributed for free in public places, Thomson used the writings of his studio journal with its self-doubts and art world melodramas, underscoring the way they approached a faith-based language, with back and forth condemnation and affirmation ("I know what to do—I just don't know if I'm doing it. Everything is a hypothetical question never answered..."). In my imaginary exhibition, I would have this work exhibited with *Skyspace Bouncehouse*, perhaps even have the brochures lying inside on the bench to underscore the rearticulation of Turrell's skyspace. It might also have been interesting to exhibit Leavitt's *Forest Sound* with another of Thomson's works, *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest* (2005). The work has three components: a 16mm film projector, a 16mm silent film of a tree falling in the forest, and a large color photograph of an Oregon Power Chainsaw resting on the camera's tripod as if it were a pedestal and the saw, an art object. The only sound is the sound of the film moving through the projector as it is being projected on the gallery wall. In passing, I mentioned this to Leavitt and he wondered if Thomson's work was an homage to Bas Jan Ader, an artist with whom Leavitt exhibited several times in 1972 and 1973, and collaborated with on the "critical" journal *Landslide*. The two works that Leavitt referred to were ones that Bas Jan Ader made in 1971—*Sawing*, a black and white photograph of a circular table saw cutting another saw in half, and *Untitled, Sweden*, two slide projections, one of Ader standing in a pine forest alone and another where he is fallen amongst felled trees. As Jan Tumlir wrote of Ader, but might also lay the groundwork for Thomson, "...The existential urgency of the idea is substantially undercut by its flat-footed, almost slapstick execution. But at the same time, he never completely abandons the romantic part of it either, and continues to hold out to the end for an art of passionate communion or exchange between oneself and one's audience."⁸ A screening of Alain Resnais and Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year at Marienbad* along with Allen Ruppertsberg's 23

7. In the video, Patti Smith (punk's poet and Graham's muse) explains that violence and rock must coexist in what Graham feels is the first manifestation of punk. When interviewed by Graham on videotape, Smith says, "I think it is real important that us as Americans recognize the fact that we have a lot of violence inherent in us, you know, like it's part of our culture and part of our art—the '50s, the great artists like Pollock and deKooning—and we should like work now that the wars are over to not be ashamed to put violence in our art—I have violence in my art."
8. Jan Tumlir, "Bas Jan Ader: Artist and Time Traveler," *Bas Jan Ader* (catalog), Edited by Brad Spence (Irvine: Regents of the University of California and The Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1999), p. 25.

Pictures, 24 Pictures, 25 Pictures would make my imaginary exhibition complete by providing the hotel interior shots that would compliment Ruppertsberg's spiral books.

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