



EVENTS

“WHAT HAPPENED TO THE AMERICAN SCENE? REALISM AFTER 1980”

Lecture by Robert Storr, Quattlebaum Artist-in-Residence
Thursday, September 14, 7:00 PM, Recital Hall, Simons Center for the Arts
Free and open to the public

ARTIST TALK: MARC TRUJILLO IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT STORR, QUATTLEBAUM ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

Saturday, September 16, 2:00 PM
Free and open to the public

CURATOR-LED EXHIBITION TOUR FOR MEMBERS

Thursday, October 5, 6:00 PM
Open to all members

Inside cover: 6351 Sepulveda Boulevard, 2012. Top cover: 14103 Ventura Boulevard, 2007. Bottom cover: 6333 Commerce Boulevard, 2006.

LOCATION:

The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
College of Charleston
161 Calhoun Street, Charleston, SC 29401
halsey.cofc.edu

PARKING:

Available in the St. Philip St. and George St. garages

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Free Admission

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MISSION:

The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

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#MarcTrujillo



Marc Trujillo is originally from Albuquerque, NM and currently resides in Los Angeles. He received his B.A. from the University of Texas at Austin and his M.F.A. from the Yale University School of Art, where he received the Ely Harwood Schless Memorial Fund Prize as well as the Ellen Battell Stoeckel Trust Fellowship. In 2001, Trujillo received the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, and in 2008 he received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has been featured in exhibitions around the United States and currently shows with Hirschl + Adler Modern in New York and Chris Winfield Gallery in Carmel, CA. His work is in numerous public and private collections including the Long Beach Museum, Long Beach, CA; and the New Britain Museum of Art, New Britain, CT.



Marc Trujillo:
American Purgatory
August 25 – October 7, 2017



TWILIGHT LIFE IN AISLE 4

By Robert Storr, Brooklyn, 2017

In the 1930s the adherents of American Scene painting claimed to show the public America as it really was, although the differences between what artists with brushes in hand and those carrying cameras did at the same time under a different aegis made it obvious how selective the vision of painters was compared to that of documentary photographers. The latter gave us a stark account of economic deprivation and human resilience during the Great Depression. As befits patronage from a Federal government agency called the Farm Security Administration (FSA), many of these images—notably those of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Ben Shahn—concentrated on the bleakness of rural life during an era of drought, bankruptcy, and forced migration from the Dust Bowl. The end of the rainbow for these displaced agrarian workers was usually California. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* was a vivid and heroic fictional version of their grueling odyssey and John Ford's eponymous film, based on the novel, was heavily influenced by pictures taken by the FSA photographers listed above. By contrast, painters of the period like Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry consistently romanticized the agricultural communities of mid-America, with Grant Wood's satirical portraits and vignettes such as *American Gothic* and *Daughters of Revolution* being welcome but largely incidental exceptions to that rule. Of the artists from this period, only Edward Hopper was able to look hard at America and Americans without displaying sentimentality or presenting ideological axes to grind.

Of course nostalgia for the heartland is with us still. Indeed, it has if anything intensified, making it more than ever a matter of pure myth combined with wishful thinking. Meanwhile the American landscape has changed so radically and so irrevocably that glimpses of that lost Eden are hard to come by. The Land of Milk and Honey that farmers and small-town folk fleeing provincial poverty more than seventy years ago found at the end of the rainbow is today littered with shopping malls and car lots, flashing neon-lit exteriors and buzzing fluorescent-lit grocery and convenience stores, fast-food restaurants and gas stations. In short, "progress" in the shape of "the strip" has sundered "main street," and Southern California—from San Diego to Los Angeles and similar sprawl cities on up through Bakersfield and Fresno—has risen, just barely, from the flat terrain where Tom Joad and his kin came to rest.

In the 1970s a new generation of American photographers made their mark by turning their eyes away from ordinary people of the kind that so fascinated their FSA precursors toward the places those absent Everymen and Everywomen once inhabited. Thus Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and Joe Deal trained their cameras on housing developments and the infrastructure of suburbia.



6356 Bellingham Avenue, 2006

For their part, Photorealists painters of the 1960s briefly addressed aspects of the transition from a destitute, desolate country to a gaudy and absurdly prosperous one but, like their Pop Art cousins, they focused on the vulgar energy of vernacular and commercial culture, especially those aspects that had already become dated and precociously quaint. By comparison, in the 1970s the Observational Realists—also known as Eyeball Realists—cast a much less indulgent gaze on what postwar America and Americans had become. It was a "Just the facts, Ma'am!" approach that reprised aspects of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, of the 1930s but without any overt or covert political agendas. Philip Pearlstein paved the way for figurative painters, and, although a generation younger, Rackstraw Downes did the same for landscape painters. Eschewing any penchant for bucolic romanticism even when depicting forest, field, or farm, Downes has specialized in topographic descriptions of America from which the sublime has already been removed by the hands of humankind. Thus the locations of the majority of his perspectively complex "eyeball" panoramas are urban: views of New York City, where he lives, at the margins or in interstitial areas of that metropolis; the landfills and industrial "no man's lands" of New Jersey and Staten Island; and the outer reaches of the "empty quarters" of the American Far West where oil and mineral wealth is still being exploited but where relatively few people actually live or even tend the infrastructure that services that exploitation. As a rule, Downes's unblinking views of these bleak realities are sunbathed and lovingly rendered, bespeaking an underlying ambivalence toward what such places tell us about the current state and probable future of America the Beautiful.

The winner of a host of honors, including Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships—the latter popularly known as a "genius" award—Downes has reopened artistic territory long deemed off-limits for forward-looking painters



1052 West Burbank Boulevard, 2006

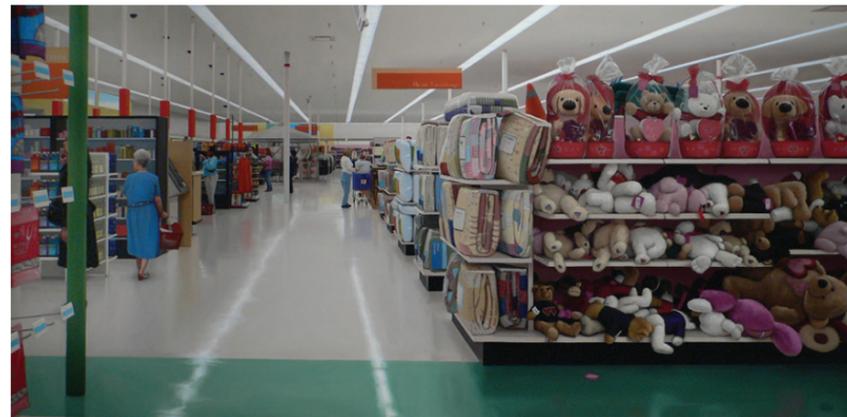
inssofar as no one before him, not even the enormously gifted but conceptually unchallenging Richard Estes, had found a way of redeploying traditional realist techniques to depict the unbeautiful environments in which so many of us in fact live out our daily lives. Before Downes in his bold but meticulous canvases began to detail what had become of the American landscape, few visual artists besides Adams and other New Topographical photographers cited earlier in this essay took notice of the way forward, or, at least, the way back to "real" reality seemed blocked.

Now all that has changed, and Marc Trujillo, an early mid-career painter who boasts his own honors—Guggenheim and Tiffany Foundation fellowships as well as a purchase prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters—is among those artists who are rebuilding the American landscape tradition on the foundation Downes has laid—warts and all—for the twenty-first century.

Naturally a living tradition is characterized more by the dissimilarities of the works that contribute to it than by their resemblances, given that the common ground that defines them, is as a rule, more a matter of a basic problem and possible approaches to that problem than of a "style" or "look" per se. Indeed, that Trujillo is an independent contemporary of Downes and not a disciple is instantly obvious from a comparison of the most readily apparent traits—in other words, precisely the "style" and "look"—of their respective bodies of work. For starters, Trujillo is not a plein air painter in the way that Downes most emphatically is. That is to say, Downes actually paints on the site depicted, to which he returns as often feasible, when basic circumstances match those in which he first chose his vantage point, the season of the year, and the time of day in which he wanted to capture its essence. Trujillo, however, has of necessity chosen to paint places where one could not set up an easel day in and day out—or to be more exact in his case, night in and night out—as required by the level of accuracy his aesthetic and subject matter demand; instead, he works from notes and photographic documentation.

Meanwhile, Trujillo reserves his sharpest focus for aspects of the all-American anti-sublime that Downes has seldom lingered over, much less dwelled on. His is the netherworld of filling stations, chain stores, and food franchises, of modern capitalism's twenty-four-hour outposts visited during the graveyard shift, when poorly paid employees frequently outnumber paying customers. Moreover, Trujillo brings to this Nowhereland the attentive eye of a native. Born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, educated at the University of Texas, Austin, and currently a resident of Los Angeles, Trujillo is purely a product of the places he portrays, whereas Downes, who was born in England, is more of an Anglo-Saxon Tocqueville, closely observing the curious ways of a country and a culture to which he is in many respects foreign. (For what it is worth, so too was the German-born nineteenth-century painter Albert Bierstadt, who carried Romanticism in his cultural baggage and infused it into the American landscape painting of his era.)

There is nothing whatsoever romantic about Trujillo's renditions of the decidedly mixed blessings of national heritage, but neither is he particularly censorious, except insofar as he has given the works in this exhibition the collective title *American Purgatory*. Purgatory is a temporal interlude and a spatial parenthesis between physical death and the Last Judgment, a breathless breathing space where existence and the fate of the soul hang in suspension. That the zones Trujillo paints dangle us between Heaven and Hell should be all too familiar to anyone unfortunate enough to have to spend many hours in them, but then, of course, many millions do each day of every month of every year. Malls and strips are places we hurry toward or away from yet where life is on hold so long as we are there. Trujillo knows this



1000 San Fernando Road, 2006

down to his fingertips. The people caged in the glass booths of the drive-thru windows of fast-food restaurants are captives every bit as much as if they were in low-security lockups. In *6182 Sepulveda Boulevard*, 2008; *3816 S. Sepulveda Boulevard*, 2008; *3562 La Cienega*, 2009; and *1603 S. La Brea*, 2009, we see this plainly while in *5138 Laurel Canyon*, 2008, we witness a similar transaction taking place face-to-face across a counter that clients share with workers.

The majority of the other paintings are interiors in which the artist and the viewer take greater distance from those within the pictorial frame who roam the aisles or cluster at the checkout. These images are quite literally uncanny—things we know well that have suddenly, unaccountably been alienated from us. So evocative are these banal, denuded settings that we reflexively provide missing elements that complete the gestalt suggested by the pictures: the remote rattle of rolling carts, the subdued scuff of shoes on linoleum, the faint hum and buzz of electric fixtures. Doubling back to one of the close-ups mentioned above, also uncanny is the floating taco mirrored in the glass in *1603 S. La Brea*. It is as if René Magritte or James Rosenquist had stepped in to give Trujillo a hand by lending realism a surreal twist via disorienting jumps in scale and displacements of forms. Especially Magritte-like, moreover, is *3800 Barham Boulevard*, 2011, which uses the reflection of clouds in the glass facade of an office building—a frequently observed phenomenon in contemporary architecture—to all but dissolve the distinction between illusion and reality within a painting, which is, all things considered, fundamentally an illusion of reality.

In both paintings the mirror image upon which Trujillo fastened is an optical "readymade." That the artist not only remains constantly on the lookout for such anomalies but assiduously plans their realization can be inferred from the grisaille, or gray-scale, studies he has made for several works in this exhibition. To call them "studies" implies that they are incomplete versions of their chromatically complete alter egos, yet, when encountered on their own, they are just as satisfying in their leached-out fashion as their full-color companion pieces; they are more purgatorial, even. Furthermore they remind one not only of tonal magazine illustrations by the likes of Frederick Remington—who as fate would have it was a graduate of Yale University, like both Downes and Trujillo—but also of the wondrously elaborate and resolved gray panels on the backs of Northern European Renaissance altarpieces by artists such as Hans Memling and Jan van Eyck.



1603 S. La Brea, 2009

As the reader will doubtless appreciate, work that evokes a chain of associations that can, in a few brief paragraphs, range from Modernists such as Rosenquist and Magritte and the venerated Old Masters just mentioned must belong to an inherently rich genre. Indeed it does, and Trujillo expertly and shrewdly mines that wealth.

In the final analysis, however, the purpose of these works is not to map art-historical archipelagos, although they do accomplish that with understated erudition and skill, but rather to immerse us in situations in which we will never be at ease no matter how at "at home" we may feel due to the ordinariness of the scene that surrounds us. Yet despite the implicit or explicit negations involved in Trujillo's pictorial practice, there is room in his work for natural beauty as well, or, as the case may be, for unnatural beauty. Take the two versions of Trujillo's rendition of Carl's Jr., the burger joint at 6457 Sepulveda Boulevard. The dramatically cloudy sunset sky above the neon lights of this small oasis almost give the scene the aspect of a cinematic Whistler nocturne or of a contemporary reprise of Hopper's *The Nighthawks*. Thanks to Trujillo's artful *mise-en-scène*, viewers will feel drawn to those lights and hungry and thirsty for whatever is on the menu. But then comes the nagging recollection of what any news-savvy American also knows about the chain to which this vision of comfort and safety, for it cannot be an accident in Trujillo's choice of subject that Carl's Jr. is, along with Chick-fil-A, among the fiercest promoters of so-called fundamentalist Christian values, and as such is among the most bigoted of businesses with regard to the employment rights of those seeking abortions or recognition as self-identified members of the LGBTQ community and equal citizens under the law. American Purgatory indeed! So, delight in these paintings as vigorous revitalizations of a deep current of the American aesthetic tradition, but also study them carefully for the existential reality to which they critically direct our attention—and dream at your own risk.

* For his 2013 installation at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) of an exhibition devoted to Magritte and his impact on contemporary art, John Baldessari turned the world inside-out and upside-down by covering the floor with fluffy cartoonish clouds. Although Trujillo's canvas is undated, he must certainly have seen that exhibition either before or after he painted 3800 Barham Boulevard.

Robert Storr is an artist, critic, and curator based in New York and New Haven, CT.