

Pastan, Rachel, "Out of Hollywood: Bennett Simpson on William Leavitt and Kathryn Andrews on Herself," *ICAphila.org/miranda*, February 10, 2012



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A west wind has been blowing through ICA lately, carrying with it art and artists from California. A recent program "Pictures and Props" (occasioned by ICA's current exhibition of the work of Jennifer Bolande,) explored the work of West Coast artists working on the fringes of Hollywood. I suppose that's no more surprising than artists in Alaska making art about snow, but it does seem slipperier, if only because Hollywood is such a slippery place. Questions of masquerade and authenticity, of surface and illusion, come with the territory.

Curator Bennett Simpson, who started his career at ICA and is now at MOCA, talked about the artist William Leavitt whose first museum retrospective, *William Leavitt: Theater Objects*, Bennett curated last summer. Leavitt grew up in the Midwest and went to L.A. to finish his National Guard service, which turned out to be conducted on the back lot of a Hollywood studio. In the year of the Watts riots, combat training was done using the studio's props and sets. Leavitt stayed on in Hollywood, building sets and making props, and also making paintings and writing plays. Many of his paintings were made to serve as props on the sets of those plays.

There is a weird, quiet menace sometimes, and other times a human poignancy, in Leavitt's art. You don't see people, but the animals, plants, and objects you do see often seem human, for instance the pair of lawn recliners at dusk which seem almost to be communicating. And there are curtains—especially red velvet ones—about which Bennett says, "There's never anything behind the curtain, it's our imagination that allows us to think there is."



Installation view of William Leavitt: Theater Objects at MOCA Grand Avenue, March 13, 2011–July 3, 2012, photo by Brian Forrest

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Leavitt also makes installations: fake palm trees stuck in cement with a boom box twittering birdsong; a recreation of a California patio. Nothing's happening in these places, but Leavitt creates a haunting sense that something might happen soon. The play is always about to begin, or maybe it has always just ended, as in a dream where we are always arriving too late and everyone has gone.



Installation view of William Leavitt: Theater Objects at MOCA Grand Avenue, March 13, 2011–July 3, 2012, photo by Brian Forrest

Kathryn Andrews, an artist whose work will be part of ICA's upcoming exhibition *First Among Equals*, also makes art that explores what it means for something to be real. "After art school I spent seven years making and destroying objects," she says. "At the end of the day, I was always left with a pile of debris."

After that, she gave up making art for a while. To try something new, she organized a show of other artists. But then, something unexpected happened. Kathryn found herself making works for that show, works which inhabited a kind of liminal territory, visibly part of the exhibition, yet unsigned and unattributed. Functionally, they enhanced the other work in the show—for instance, a kind of sculptural line separating two works on a wall.



On right, Stephanie Taylor, "Landscape of Geometry," 2007, photo-collage, 12 x 12 inches (each). On left, Benjamin Lord, "Broken Instrument," 2007, 21.5 x 26 inches, Epson Pigment Print on paper.

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As Kathryn moved back into making art, this interest in responding to the work of others remained with her. She started renting props from L.A.'s copious prop shops, first making work in response to them, and later incorporating the props into her sculptures and installations. "Gift Cart," for example, consists of a shiny stainless steel cart holding bright but battered wrapped gifts that Kathryn rented (these days she goes for 99-year leases). Why rent wrapped gifts, she wondered, when it would be faster and cheaper to wrap empty boxes yourself? It was a Hollywood puzzle.



Kathryn Andrews, "Gift Cart," 2011.
Stainless steel, rented props, 60 x 30 x 24 inches.

Paradox interests both Kathryn Andrews and William Leavitt. As Bennett Simpson says, "The prop is like the rematerialization of conceptual art's idea." The prop is an object—but it's also the idea of the object: a stand-in.

"In L.A. I've started calling it the new medium," Kathryn jokes. "Like, Oh, I'm a sculptor. Oh, I'm a prop artist!" She says, "One of the things I'm trying to do is remove the sign of my hand from the work."

In Leavitt's work, by contrast, the hand of the artist is very present. "It's old-fashioned work in some ways," Bennett says. "It's about creating an atmosphere, a mood."

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William Leavitt, "Jaguar (from The Tropics)," 1974.
Oil on canvas. 34.25 x 44.25 inches (87 x 112.4 cm).

Still, if you make paintings that you think of as props, certain old-fashioned art values—for instance the value of conservation—may not apply. Toward the end of the evening, Bennett tells a story about installing Leavitt's show at MOCA. One day the registrar came over to Bennett, very concerned. They had found a hole in the painting "Jaguar (from The Tropics)."

Bennett called Leavitt to break the news.

Leavitt was blasé. "Oh, yeah," he said. "I made that hole a long time ago. It doesn't make any difference."

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