



Meet Norm Laich: The LA Art World's Gun for Hire

The artist's retrospective, curated by John Baldessari and Meg Cranston at ICA LA, shows how thin the line is between artist and art worker

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BY [TRAVIS DIEHL](#) IN [PROFILES](#) | 05 JUL 18

John Baldessari, co-curator of 'Norm Laich: This Brush for Hire' at ICA LA, remarked recently of his chosen exhibition title, 'I think I probably said that because I watch a lot of Westerns.' Anyone can chart their way through history by the big names, but for a more rewarding degree of rigour, try following the sidemen. Artist Norm Laich is the dexterous Slim Pickins to the flashier

Jack Nicholsons and Clint Eastwoods of the Los Angeles art scene. Since the early 1990s, he has been the go-to guy to realize artworks requiring the precision of a classically-trained sign painter. Hence this show of nearly 20 pieces executed by Laich, including works from Amanda Ross-Ho, Karen Carson, Mike Kelley, Alexis Smith, Lawrence Weiner, and the show's curators, Baldessari and Meg Cranston. Laich has worked with more than 50 others, among them Kathryn Andrews, Brian Bress, Barbara Kruger, Liz Larner and Lari Pittman.



'This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich & Many Other Artists', 2018, installation view, ICA LA. Courtesy: ICA, LA

Two works on the prominent back wall are arranged as if to demonstrate Laich's range: on the left, *Wasteland* (2013) by Alexis Smith, a dustpan made of a license plate stuck to a thrift-store painting of a desert. 'WASTELAND,' it reads in the bottom right corner, in a light serif font as crisp and dry as Smith's joke. And on the right, a rendition of Scott Grieger's *United States of Anxiety* (1995), writ large – the titular text rendered like chalk dashed onto a 12-foot tall chalkboard shaped like the US. It is a retrospective, indeed, but a mid-career one. As if to prove he's still got it, Laich has executed a newly commissioned work by Arturo Herrera in the ICA's parking lot, a blue-on-blue mural of a rooster's sideways shadow over what could be scribbled-out graffiti (*Park and Ride*, 2018). And though he wields a brush like an old master, he easily adapts to new techniques: inside the museum is a 2015 piece by Ross-Ho, *A Very Very Very Rough Proposal*, comprising the work's title, seemingly handwritten on the wall, but actually cut from vinyl. Another highlight is a mind-altering warren of offices, the walls covered in blown-up NSFW Xeroxes. (To name just one: 'IF ASSHOLES COULD FLY, THIS PLACE WOULD BE AN AIRPORT.') It's Mike Kelly's large-scale *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Room (With Copy Room) of an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry* (1991-2), a 1:1 model of the offices of Chiat Day, designed by Gehry Partners. The piece appeared in the quintessentially LA show 'Helter Skelter' (1990) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and only one other time since.



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In a short documentary directed by Pauline Stella Sanchez, Laich and the curators pay social calls to a few of his many clients. There's Stephen Prina who, the filmmakers point out, was the first to realize that a survey of Laich's freelancing would expose a major cross-section of contemporary art. Talking with Cranston and Baldessari in the latter's studio, they raise the subject of Baldessari's *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* (1966–68), a pivotal piece of California conceptualism. The work consists of a number of canvases lettered with the dates and locations of each time it has been exhibited, up to and including its current showing. The last few, presumably, are in Laich's hand – not least, the most recent entry: THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES. An image of the painting's many panels fades in and covers the bottom half of the frame, leaving Baldessari and company talking over it like a trio of severed heads. Sanchez employs a manic, cascading style reminiscent of curled-up plans unrolled on a table, one on top of the other. Pictures pop into the picture, layering and superimposing, a mish-mashed focus that invokes Laich's style of collaboration, and the interplay of artist, artists and artworks.



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Laich tells the story of some text he once wrote for Alexis Smith. He made a spelling error, and she liked it; the slip up made the final piece. It's a good illustration of how fluid authorship can be. Who's got the brains and who's got the hands isn't always plain. Laich is more than a fabricator; call him a technical consultant, whom artists value for his painterly eye as much as for his expertise in laying down paint. For the show at the ICA, too, where so many elaborate works had to be executed in a short time, Laich oversaw a small team of painters. (Even the curators lent their brushes.) 'He's the idea man,' says Grieger in the documentary. 'I don't think of him as an assistant at all. I think of him as another artist I work with.'



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They're not just being polite. Norm Laich is an artist in his own right (he showed with the former artists's clubhouse Paradise Garage), producing a sort of contemporary Pop art that renders an LA's semiotic sprawl with a sign painter's aplomb and an electric Neo Geo pallet. Which is why, as far as that goes, this exhibition's premise risks missing the mark, like showing the mop and bucket of the janitor who paints. Only one of Laich's own artworks is here: a green blot-shaped board painted in a warping font with menu items from In-N-Out Burger, another LA institution. To fill the gap, a selection of Laich's own work opens at AWHRHVAR, an artist-run space in Highland Park, on 5 July. It's a fitting venue: since the gallery opened in April 2017, an original Laich mural has adorned its salmon pink storefront: the lanky, leaning silhouette of a cowboy.

'This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich & Many Other Artists' runs at the ICA LA until 2 September.

Join frieze editors at the ICA LA on 18 July for a **discussion** with artists T. Kelly Mason, Fay Ray, Monique Van Genderen & Chris Wilder, all who have worked as assistants to other artists in 'This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich & Many Other Artists'. You can RSVP **[here](#)**.



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