

When people talk about Los Angeles as an important art center rivaling New York and Berlin, I usually just smile and nod. They're right in a sense -- LA is the quintessential postmodern city, and therefore the ultimate postmodern art center. I'm not usually one to use the P-word, but in this case it actually means something. Modernism itself, as an expression of a utopian endgame, directly correlates with the European westward expansion, and faces the same dilemma -- what comes next when you've reached the end? Frank Lloyd Wright nailed it when he commented "It's as if someone tilted the continent to the west and everything loose slid into Los Angeles." Los Angeles is the terminal point of western culture, a dysfunctional hive whose creative profile has accrued from wave upon wave upon wave of pilgrims drawn by the myth of the west, hoping to squeeze a last few moments of revelation or revelry before the sun sinks forever.

Los Angeles is the last place I ever thought I would live, and art criticism the last job I could have imagined myself doing. As I wrote in one of my earliest pieces of critical writing (one I imagined would be one of the last) "Criticism is a closed circuit of unintelligibility formed by the fear of looking stupid or unfit for one's job" That was written at the Banff Center for the Arts, high in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, while participating in a summer residency program alongside Cathy Ward and Eric Wright who teamed up there. At the end of the summer we all headed back east, more or less. Yet within a couple of years here I was in LA, and in another 5 or so, actually earning a living producing those very same closed circuits of unintelligibility. Ironic no doubt, but the fact is that in spite of its being a postmodern art center, the LA "art world" continues to model itself on 19th and early 20th century ideas of planned obsolescence and addictive consumerism, hustling furiously as if there were some place left to go. The truly postmodern LA art scene, as exemplified by such endeavors as the Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Center for Land Use Interpretation, overlaps only occasionally and uneasily with the marketplace.

Ward and Wright are exemplary of the first generation of artists who came of age after the end of Modernism, a movement that equated the quasi-narrative arc described by the constant redefinition of "art" with the spiritual and socio-political evolution of our species -- a classic mistaking-the-map-for-the-territory error that, like the even more literally cartographic hubris of confusing America's wagon-train gluttony with the triumph of anti-imperialism, sowed the seeds of its own destruction. So it was with no small pleasure and anticipation that I first heard of Ward and Wright's plan to recreate the doomed trek of the Donner Party -- that great dark myth of the journey to the promised land inexorably mutating into the ultimate consumerist act -- and that it would bring them to Los Angeles and the auspices of the Center for Land Use Interpretation.

As long as you are following a road (or any linear narrative construction for that matter), your attention is focused on the immediate future, the next curve, the horizon. But once the trip is completed, you can look up, and back, and consider your journey as a totality or a gestalt; you can see the big picture. In terms of postmodern art practice, this means one (or two or many) can realize one's vision from a simultaneity of any number of points along what was previously perceived as an unbreakable chain of cause-and-effect events. In their previous Transromantik collaborations, Ward and Wright collapsed the Baroque with post-punk rock decadence, Germanic nature-fetishism with biker tattoo aesthetics, Rousseauian Romanticism with carny sleaze, disrupting the received meanings and hierarchical status of each of the isolated elements, as well as the rationales by which they were subsequently dismissed as historically passé. This plunderscopic strategy continues in the array of strategies put in service of the Destiny Manifest corpus -- from the

gorgeous and evocative romantic landscape pastiche of the *Destiny Manifest -Eden's End* canvas to the looped video sequence of Purgatory which finds our protagonists trudging endlessly across the great salt flats of Utah, a Beckett-like loop of transcendent futility that only hints at the performative and earthwork aspects of this mule-train Gesamtkunstwerk.

Beckett is an important reference point – an artist who recognized the end of the world as we know it before almost anyone, and thought it was funny. I have refrained from articulating the implicit socio-political critique in Ward and Wright's oeuvre partly because it is a pretty clear and available reading, but mostly because it isn't really the big picture. To critics still entrenched in Modernism's diminishing cannibalistic returns, Beckett seems 'absurdist' and 'nihilistic.' For artists like Ward and Wright, the line drawn by the Donner Party is absurd, yes. Tragic, yes. A powerful metaphor, yes. But it is only one of a nearly infinite number of possible lines connecting a series of points to create a generative mythic engine from which a cornucopia of vividly sensual psychic nourishment spills forth. Uncontained by the linear chains of Modernism, or America, they stand outside history with one foot propping the door open, inviting us into a bleak and barren landscape paradoxically seething with a dense saturation of creative possibility. It's a new frontier, baby. Better stake your claim!

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Since graduating with an MFA in painting from UCLA in 1994, Doug Harvey has written extensively about the Los Angeles and International art scenes and other aspects of popular culture, primarily as the art critic for LA WEEKLY (www.laweekly.com).

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