



EMERGING ARTISTS

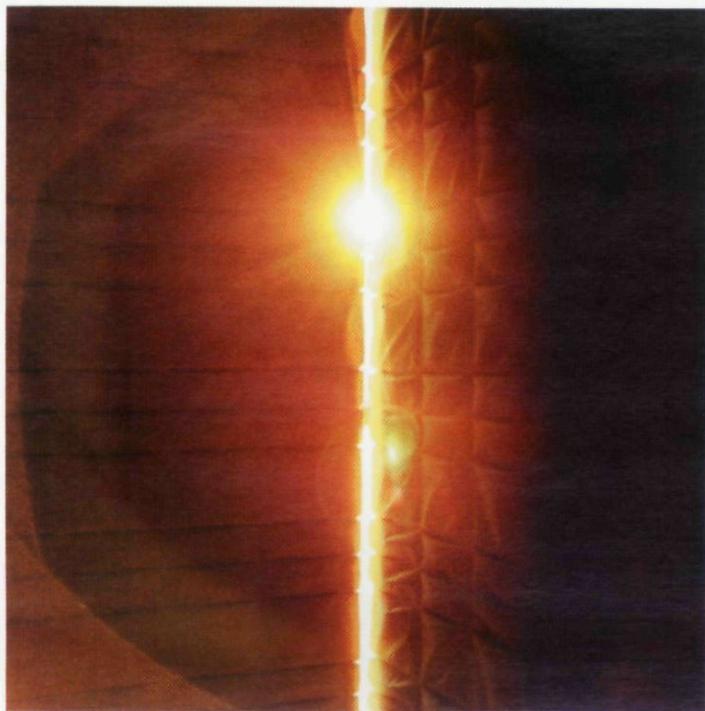
ZOE CROSHER

Jonathan Gilmore trips the light fantastic

One of the enduring provocations Los Angeles has offered artists is its resistance to being fixed or captured in some essential principle. Writers who try to ascend to some high plateau from which to survey the city, often end up in thin air with nothing but reductive generalities about commodification or bland conformity. Norman Mailer, for instance, dismissed LA as 'a playground for mass men' animated by 'the spirit of the supermarket' while Bertolt Brecht noted in his journal that, in LA, 'you are constantly either a buyer or a seller, you sell your piss, as it were, to the urinal'. Other writers, aspiring to expose the city's genuine core but recognizing the futility of that endeavour, fall back, coyly, on only ironic formulations, as in Umberto Eco's positing of the 'hyperreal' – the stimulation of the desire for mocked-up or ersatz experience – as a local-born national condition.

However, painters and photographers, exploiting the open-endedness that visual representations allow, have been able at times to discover approaches that, often tentative and oblique, avoid the two extremes of either falsifying declarative summary or capitulation to lack of fixedness. Zoe Crosher belongs to this tradition – one that includes Ed Ruscha's photos of gas stations, Catherine Opie's prosaic, documentary-style representations of mini-malls

and shopping strips, and John Baldessari's windshield views of National City – pursuing a photographic practice that is conceptual in orientation yet bound to vernacular representation. *Out the Window (LAX)* (2001–4) is comprised of a series of 27 photographs taken from just as many hotels surrounding the Los Angeles airport. Each image, roughly window-sized, records, with a casual, seemingly snapshot artlessness, a plane landing and taking off as seen from the room. Recognizing the challenge of representing what she has described as 'a place that moves in shifts and perpetual motion, with no real centre, no point of concentration', Crosher, whose mother was a flight attendant, documents one of the sites of those transitions, registering in the less-focused foreground the regulation faux-bois air conditioner, polyester drapes, stain-resistant rugs, clock radios and tidy beds. These photos set up a relation between the plane, as an icon of untethered movement, escape and arrival, and the cheap hotel room, as a fixed, marginal site that never serves as a destination, but as a place one passes through. Crosher would stay for the night in each of the hotels, a programme which suggests that the systematic structure of the experience is more significant than the recorded experience itself. While LAX is the ostensible subject, Crosher uses the airport and its surrounds as a figure by



which to understand Los Angeles itself, a strategy shared by those who embraced such things as its freeway system, not as a cause or symptom of the city's elusiveness but as a key to its identity: an 'autopia' for British critic Reyner Banham, who wrote that, just like earlier generations of intellectuals 'who taught themselves Italian to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original'.

Crosher continues this indirect approach to Los Angeles in *LA-LIKE*, a series of photographs begun in 2004 that record the city's abundant light, an element often taken as a standing metaphor for the place, alternately, of spiritual transcendence, vacant pleasure, natural plenitude or sunbaked narcissism. Images of the rising and setting sun as seen through nearly closed curtains or shutters, garden gates, palm trees and foliage, as well as of bright white skies and what appear to be moonlit nights, the prints are sometimes developed as so dark as to be nearly unreadable or as so light as to withhold any significant differentiation. They suggest that, just as light cannot be perceived in itself but only through its effects on the objects that it illuminates, so Los Angeles, whose ineffability frustrates any direct encounter, can be seen only in a sidelong glance.

Facing page from left
Zoe Crosher, 2005

Zoe Crosher and Leslie Grant *The Cindy-Shermanesque (but she's the real thing)*, 2005, inkjet prints from the Michelle Dubois archive, 12 panels, 3 images: 36 x 28 cm and 9 images: 28 x 36 cm

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Acapulco Gold, 2004, C-print on aluminium, 23 x 23 cm

LAX Embassy Suites, 2003, lightjet print, 69 x 69 cm

ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND D'AMELIO TERRAS, NEW YORK

A third kind of work, created in collaboration with fellow artist Leslie Grant, is *The Michelle du Bois Project*, constituted of various installations and exhibitions of photographs drawn from a collection of pictures belonging to a woman who worked as a prostitute throughout Asia during the 1970s and 80s. Often adopting conventional calendar pinup poses, du Bois appears in some photographs as if on-site in elaborate costumes of a kitsch-exotic equivalent of traditional, ritual Asian dress. In others, the context is far from an exotic locale: in images that form part of an installation at D'Amelio Terras, she poses in a cheesy 'gypsy' get-up, all glitter and veils, in a cheap wood-panelled suburban kitchen. Drawing from what is described as the personal archive of a white, Western woman travelling in Asia as a prostitute, the project necessarily touches on questions of self-fashioning and self-representation. But it also reflects on photographic practice itself: with their crude, vernacular style and wilful self-assertiveness, the images have at once a pathos and an authority that is prior to any high-art manipulation of the images as ready-mades. Here, as in Crosher's ever-mediated attempts to register the essence of LA, we see the self-reflexivity of photographic depiction – in which the object of representation makes salient features of the practice and practitioner of representation itself.

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