

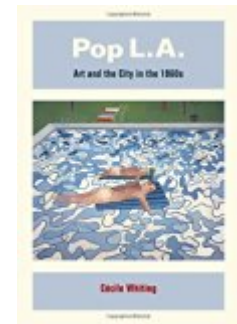
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cécile Whiting. *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. xi + 268 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24460-3.

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Surf, Fires, and Acrylic Paint

Justly declaring from the outset that this is not merely a study of Pop, but a study of art in “the Pop city” (p. 9), Cécile Whiting’s impressive new book, *Pop L.A.*, traces artmaking in Los Angeles across the 1960s. As Whiting points out, this was a pivotal decade, the moment at which Los Angeles claimed its status as the second center for contemporary art in the United States. The book considers art not usually grouped together, including such works as Ed Ruscha’s conceptual photograph books, David Hockney’s swimming pool paintings, and “Womb Room,” Faith Wilding’s crocheted environment for the collaborative Womanhouse project. *Pop L.A.* also trains careful attention on artists often relegated to the art-historical margins, including such figures as Lynn Foulkes, Noah Purifoy (it would have been helpful to see more of his work), and Vija Celmins (maker of richly dense drawings of the quotidian). In one chapter, Whiting traces the interesting place that Watts Towers, built by the Italian-American artist Simon Rodia, came to hold in the African American artistic community after the violence of August 1965.

Whiting, a professor of art history at the University of California, Irvine, writes in a vivid style, and her book will be valuable for undergraduate courses on Los Angeles and indispensable for courses on California art. The book calls masterfully upon the many meanings and identities of Los Angeles. The revolt in Watts shares space here with surf culture, the modernist mansions of Beverly Hills, the seedy flavor of Pershing Square at night, and the renewal of Bunker Hill. Whiting lingers

especially on the glistening, sexualized novelty of Los Angeles, the possibilities proposed by its radiant sunshine and planar glassy architecture. After reading chapter 1, I found myself unable to resist the temptation to play “Catch a Wave” (1963) on my stereo. Indeed, Whiting calls on the Beach Boys, and on filmic and literary representations of Southern California, too, from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970) to Alison Lurie’s *The Nowhere City* and John Rechy’s *City of Night*.^[1] She is interested in the popular notion that Los Angeles is a hedonistic and vacuous place, and she uncovers artists simultaneously working against this notion and indulging it.

Although *Pop L.A.* does not match the rigorous use of archival and primary sources in Whiting’s last book, it does offer some refreshingly intensive visual analyses of individual works of art.^[2] Whiting patiently looks at Foulkes’s odd paintings, for example, holding side-by-side their references to Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, amateur photography, nineteenth-century landscape painting, and contemporary road signs. In one of the book’s best passages, the author compares Ruscha’s dispassionate 1962 photograph book, *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, to Robert Frank’s 1955 photograph of five anthropomorphic fuel pumps isolated on a dusty roadside in New Mexico. The cold documentary quality of Ruscha’s project contrasts sharply with the rich and muted loneliness of Frank’s image, demonstrating just how far the sensibility of art photography had traveled in a few short years. This kind of specific formal attention is important, coming at

a time when much contemporary art history stands at an impoverishing (if well intentioned) distance from the complicated visual facts of art works themselves.

The implicit gambit of Whiting's book is that L.A.'s art—if looked at closely—can uniquely reveal its city to us, both as a lived place and as a fantasy. But this hope is a lofty one. The best accounts of art and cities (Whiting acknowledges the influence of T. J. Clark and Lynda Nead, among others) uncover aspects of their cities that we had not previously seen or fully understood.[3] Such studies look closely at visual art because it can teach us, far better than textual accounts do, about the nature of visibility in a city, or about the material texture of life there. *Pop L.A.*, too, often holds out promise of showing us Los Angeles afresh. It at least diagnoses common and complicated interests in car culture, in the social place of the human body, and in the persistent appearance (in Los Angeles) of surfaces and superficiality. This last theme is especially interesting: Hockney's flat acrylics and unmodulated limbs, Whiting points out, share an essential quality with the prefabricated walls and paved surfaces in Ruscha's photographs, and with the quotation of signs in Purifoy's and Dennis Hopper's works. Whiting, however, declines to push this topic further, which seems to me an opportunity missed, since I suspect that this art really can teach us new something about the planarity of Los Angeles, about an ironic *depth* in Southern California's then-ascendant deadpan sensibility. I would venture to say, for example, that Ruscha's studied coldness is expressive—although of what, we have yet to discover. And what about Celmins's remarkable drawings? What does it do to received models of surface and profundity to see her meticulously executed oil painting copied from the most banal of high-speed freeway snapshots?

Sometimes the book's structure, too, ends up blunting the possibility for fresh understandings of Los Angeles. For example, Whiting groups performances together as a chapter, a strategy that leaves her in the awkward position of mounting an argument that can accommodate

both Claes Oldenburg's Neo-Dada parking lot maneuvers and the feminist installations at Womanhouse. It is no surprise, then, that Allan Kaprow's temporary ice buildings, treated in the same chapter, are left rather vaguely "resist[ing] the functionality of urban planning and the uniformity of tract housing" (p. 184). General conclusions such as these do not add much to the now-canonical accounts—by Mike Davis, Edward Soja, and others—of the Southern California landscape.[4]

Pop L.A. will be more rewarding to art historians than to urban theorists or historians of Los Angeles. If it does not give us a new way to understand the complexity of Los Angeles, the book does very ably situate the heterogeneous art of the 1960s within the city's rich contradictions. "In the art of the 1960s," Whiting aptly concludes, "Los Angeles hovers between the urban nightmare of rationalization—sameness, sprawl, isolation, emptiness—and the utopia of delirium and difference" (p. 209).

Notes

[1]. Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966); and John Rechy, *City of the Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

[2]. Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[3]. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Lynda Nead *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[4]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, reprint (New York: Vintage, 1992); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

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