

# ArtNews

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## 'Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art'

SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

Seattle

According to the curators from Vancouver, San Francisco, San Diego, and Seattle who organized this show, art made on the West Coast of North America "has never before been the subject of a major survey exhibition." Perhaps it's because there is a flaw in the premise. Is there really something generically "West Coast" about visual art made in that region?

The curators—Daina Augaitis, Lisa Corrin, Matthew Higgs, Tony Kamps, and Ralph Rugoff—want to say yes: artists absorb their social and topographical landscape into their art, and the social landscape of the West Coast has a distinctive identity. It is nagged by the legacy of manifest destiny, fractured by dramatic conjunctions of urban and natural settings, and energized by a frontier ethos of innovation. It's also a locus of youth culture. To make this point, the show opened with a pop music-style video by Delia Brown. This vaguely parodic vehicle for a tune about relationships sets the tone for most of what follows.

Even if their generalizations about the West Coast only applied to an imaginary landscape, the curators were on solid ground when they observed that much of the work in the show has an "off-kilter flatness, at times even seeming to flirt with banality." Kota Ezawa replayed the not-guilty verdict in the O. J. Simpson murder trial as a *South Park*-style digitally animated cartoon; Brian Calvin dumbed down David Hockney's 1970s deadpan paintings of Los Angeles; Evan Holloway added a stick of incense to the kind of generic, Möbius-strip abstract sculpture produced a few decades ago for corporate interiors; Steven Shearer collected images of guys posing with their electric guitars on eBay; Michele O'Marah juxtaposed a restaged 1970 interview with Elizabeth Taylor and a pastiche of fake scenes from Hollywood Vietnam War films; and so on.

The curators saw rigorous, low-key conceptualism here, but experienced contemporary-art viewers were likely to have suffered a bad case of been-there-seen-that. Connections proposed between the content of this work and a distinctive West Coast social landscape were

The exhibition did, however, provide trenchant and stimulating lessons about the West Coast's natural and built environment. Perhaps the strongest argument for the show's basis was the photo essay by Matthew Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, in the exhibition catalogue. This California nonprofit performance group organizes tours and exhibitions highlighting the convergence of global capitalism, military power, class conflict, and border anxiety in specific geographic settings. A few lines of text under an innocuous photograph of the Bangor, Washington, submarine base, for example, tells us that the base manages the third-largest collection of nuclear weapons in the country and that Puget Sound and San Diego are the most militarized areas on the West Coast. Another image documents the final stretch of the border fence between Mexico and the United States, where the ugly barrier plunges into the sea. Made from surplus Vietnam War-era military landing mats, the fence is 15 feet high and vigorously guarded by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Much of the work is forgettable because it flirts with banality and delivers very little. The Land Use Interpretation project, like the show's other highlight, Stan Douglas's photograph of *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001), redeems banality as a snare, setting us up for a nuanced revelation. Had the backbone of the show been works like these, it really might have been a landmark exhibition.

—Patricia Failing

*The exhibition is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, through May 16, the Vancouver Art Gallery from June 5 to September 6, and the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco from October 6 to January 10, 2005.*