

# Natural History: Anthony Lepore and Mark Hagen

By Andrew Berardini

published: June 16, 2011

Courtesy of Francois Ghebaly Gallery



Anthony Lepore's *New Wilderness* mimics a national park visitor center.

Courtesy of Francois Ghebaly Gallery and M+B



Anthony Lepore's *Forest Light*

Courtesy of Francois Ghebaly Gallery and M+B

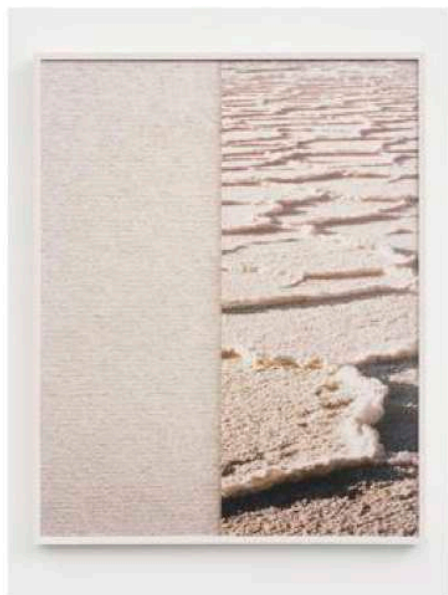
**To make a landscape is to tame nature.**

We think of it as a picture of the land, painted or photographed, carefully framed on four sides, more or less flaccidly hanging on the wall. Landscapes were appreciated first by Renaissance bourgeois ramblers and open-air painters as scenery, as they were at the point in history when nature wasn't about to eat or crush or leave them to die, starving and naked to the vultures.

Nature still does this sometimes, but as in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, there's some element of collective dumb surprise when a modern man who frolics with wild bears gets eaten by one, as if nature hadn't got the memo we'd already beaten it. A classroom nature film from *The Simpsons* sums it up best: *Man Versus Nature: The Road to Victory*.

The landscape has become less a document of whatever scene, and more a document of how we place ourselves in relationship to it: We're looking at ourselves looking at nature. In a remarkable exhibition at a duo of galleries, François Ghebaly on La Cienega and M+B in West Hollywood, artist Anthony Lepore photographs visitor centers at national and state parks. While the photographs at first appear to be of nature itself, Lepore uses some subtle element in the photograph to reveal that the natural scene is actually fake — merely a depiction of the centers' educational interior decorating.

In *Forest Light*, for example, the majestic forest gives itself away as wallpaper when we see the light switches in the wall. In *Salt Carpet*, the ripples of sand and dust in the salt flats are of a similar texture and shade of beige to the carpeted wall on which the photograph hangs in the visitor center, making the

Anthony Lepore's *Salt Carpet*

Courtesy of China Art Objects Galleries

Mark Hagen's *To Be Titled (Subtractive and Additive Sculpture #6)*

Courtesy of China Art Objects Galleries



viewer blink a few times to figure out the difference. Sometimes these simulations even take on a strangely tender character, as in *Stray*, where a branch reaches out gently from the diorama that contains it.

These photographs are as much about depiction as redeption. The frames are carefully selected to play with colors in the image and are smartly placed in the gallery about where the photo's subject would be in a visitor center. Some are in photographic sculptures that play with the elements of re-presentation, including *Slot Canyon*, a light box that mimics the soda machine it's capturing. At Ghebaly, Lepore has crafted a topographical map platform with a staircase leading up to it, blocked off with a bit of chain to unauthorized personnel, as it were. These photographs aren't just images, but objects attempting to impact the gallery space.

It's not all postmodernist smoke-and-mirrors — there's something peculiarly felt in these photographs. The raw grandeur of nature still holds some kind of physical and spiritual power even as Lepore shows how much those feelings are built on how we think we're supposed to view nature.

Still, it's hard to go to Yosemite and not see it all through the filter of Ansel Adams' camera or the guidebook you brought along in your rucksack or all the somewhat goofy exhibits one finds with their drab Eisenhower-era special effects. As a child I found them altogether creepy, like a bedridden grandparent bathed in pine-scented sanitizer, but as an adult, I find the exhibits have an antiquarian charm, and I feel weirdly impressed — along with Lepore, it seems — with their outdoorsy, civic-minded earnestness.

Our artists haven't always been looking at us looking at nature. Well after the pictorial grandiosity of Adams, artists a couple of generations ago were attempting to bring art out of the gallery and into the landscape itself. The so-called "land" artists, like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and, later, James Turrell — all of whom likely will be featured in MOCA's exhibition on the movement in 2012 — did rather macho interventions with landscape, mirroring in many ways heavy industry's fast-and-loose use of land, not to mention the sign outside U.S. National Forests: "Land of Many Uses." Land art often is enshrined in quasi-spiritual tourist pilgrimages, and its heyday has mercifully passed, as very few artists since feel the compulsion to dramatically alter the landscape for the sake of sculpture.

Around the corner from Lepore's exhibition at Ghebaly, at

Shot of Mark Hagen's show "TBA" at China Art Objects Galleries

China Art Objects Galleries, artist Mark Hagen in his solo gallery debut, entitled "TBA," has found another way to deal with nature, working with it in a collaborative process to make

his show of sculptures, photographs and paintings.

In the series "Additive Paintings," the California sun first tans the burlap canvases. Hagen then pours paint onto the burlap in symmetrical geometric patterns, the pooling paint drying into a layered skin making the surfaces look almost like the topographic maps that Lepore photographed. They're placed in the same gallery as "Additive Sculpture," an 8-foot-tall, 48-foot-long wall composed of concrete molded from consumer packaging such as plastic bottles and cardboard boxes, with remnants still clinging to the concrete.

In the series "Subtractive Sculptures," Hagen attempts to impose form on the amorphous structure of obsidian stacked onto roughly welded steel plinths. The minimalists, an art movement hand-in-glove with land art, sought perfect simple forms, often using new industrial materials like plywood and plastics. Hagen's obsidian blocks, naturally impossible to make into a cube, make fun of how minimalists' drive to purity was a wholly synthetic and industrial gesture. To Hagen, nature defines its own forms.

In the third gallery, Hagen presents a series of "Directionless Field" photographs capturing mirrors, lenses, diffraction films, prisms and other optical glass pieces. They're shot as still lifes; the light bends and bounces and becomes both the pure subject of the photograph and its true shaper, more than the photographer.

In each series, Hagen's process allows for nature — in the form of gravity, light and material — to define what the finished product looks like. Such processes mimic the kind of conceptualism that Sol Lewitt outlined in *Sentences on Conceptual Art*: "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically." But Hagen's material manifestation is wholly his own. Each of the works in the exhibition blurs the boundary between nature-made and man-made. The process returns again and again to what the artist calls "authorial disorientations" — moments where the art makes itself.

Humankind exerts such a strong effect on nature that scientists give us our own geologic era, the anthropocene, which is to say the whole idea of "Man Versus Nature" isn't quite true anymore. But these two artists show that nature is as much part of us as we are of it. Despite all the ways we've successfully tamed and framed it, there's still something strange and powerful in letting nature run its course.

**ANTHONY LEPORE: NEW WILDERNESS** | François Ghebaly Gallery | 2600 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A. | Through July 1 | M+B | 612 N. Almont Drive, L.A. | Through June 30

**MARK HAGEN: TBA** | China Art Objects Galleries | 6086 Comey Ave., L.A. | Through June 25



Mark Hagen has a slightly geeky fixation with the pedigree of his raw materials. This transpires when he waxes lyrical about the naturally occurring volcanic glass, obsidian. "Obsidian was once indispensable to human culture," he explains. "For tens of thousands of years into prehistory it was fractured, like flint, to produce tools and weapons for humans all over the world. The cultures of ancient Meso-America saw obsidian as the Earth's dried blood." He furrows his brow and groans: "But now all it's used for is New Age trinkets and stuff."

Hagen, 38, received his MFA in Fine Arts in 2002 from CalArts, still California's most fertile ground for artistic talent. "The people I paid particular attention to while I was there," says Hagen, clearly warming to the subject, "were Thomas Lawson, Martin Kersels, Darcy Huebler, Christine Wertheim, Michael Asher and Sam Durant. But perhaps my most heated dialogues at school were with Tom [Lawson] and Michael [Asher]."

Once school was up, however, it was with multimedia artist Sam Durant that Hagen chose to pursue the dialogue, serving as his studio assistant from early 2003 to the summer of 2004. "One crucial aspect of Sam's work that rubbed off on me during my time in his studio," explains Hagen, with evident relish, "was his distaste for 'fetish finish' – the attempt to remove the hand from

fabrication and ape a machine-like aesthetic." For many years, the "fetish finish" school of minimalism was indeed a defining characteristic of LA art, from the smooth, glossy surfaces of John McCracken's fiberglass planks to the buffed sheen of Larry Bell's sculptures-cum-installations. "But once you go down that road, that's all you pay attention to, which can be terribly distracting for an artist," says Hagen.

Durant's aversion to "fetish finish" was never more clearly stated than in his series of 1995 collages, in which he defaced Julius Shulman's slick photographs of Southern California's modernist Case Study Houses by pasting on images of stoners chilling out by the pool. In the same year, Durant also developed a series of foam-core models of the very same houses before subjecting them to all manner of indignity, including graffiti, bullets and arson. "Sam's early works were very important to me," Hagen says, "because of their pathos."

The pathos that Hagen sees in Durant's depiction of the downfall of the utopian modernist dream has a deep history of its own in art. New York-based land artist Robert Smithson, a guiding influence on Durant and Hagen and a self-confessed archaeology geek himself, made a point of dampening the technological positivism that was rampant at the time in the work of his

West Coast contemporaries. Evidently, leading LA artists of the 60s such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell were indifferent to the dystopia caused by advances in technology – hardly surprising given how the very fabric of the city they called home was itself shaped around the technologies of the automobile and the film industry. Where Irwin and Turrell would produce high-tech flares and iridescent fairy lights, Smithson would bleakly document the banks of New Jersey's Passaic River, scarred by industrialisation. In 1971, Smithson openly broke ranks with the technological trend when he snubbed an invitation to take part in the game-changing *Art and Technology* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"The *Art and Technology* show played really large for my tutors in LA, particularly Michael Asher," says Hagen. "But for corporate America to lay its grubby paws on contemporary art in such a heavy-handed way – providing financial and technical support to artists to coerce them into incorporating new technologies into their work – was questionable to say the least," he says, widening his eyes in disbelief.

Hagen's own first important exhibition in the city was held in 2007 at the Mandrake Bar in Culver City. The centrepiece was a quietly invasive acoustic-tile ceiling dotted with the kind of migraine-inducing fluorescent lights more commonly found in corporate headquarters.

Leakage stains, and other assorted indexes of technology's breakdown found in the more dilapidated examples of this ubiquitous corporate aesthetic, were rendered in Technicolor-bright ink. "I think of these stains as authorless, process-derived abstractions," says Hagen. "I wanted to freeze a moment of inner psychological conflict," he continues, "a moment between our attempt at controlling the inevitable – though sometimes imperceptible – leakage that occurs in things." Instead of a broken down technology being documented in a deadpan style or subjected to further ruin *à la* Smithson or Durant, Hagen identifies its moments of failure in order to then intensify them.

A series of large obsidian boulders that Hagen refers to as "subtractive sculptures" were a striking part of the artist's exhibition at China Art Projects in April of last year. "I impose a geometry on them which is antithetical to their nature, because obsidian is known as a homogeneous yet amorphous solid with a rigid crystalline-like structure whose molecules are disordered like water," he says. The rigid geometries of the sculptures were carved then chipped away at by hand, fracturing the stone into conical fissures. These are technically referred to as "con-choi-dal fractures," explains Hagen, over-enunciating the adjective like a child in a speech lesson.

Hagen carefully sources his obsidian supply. "Some I've gotten from out in Utah, and some from here in Malibu," he shrugs.

"The only reason it's in Malibu is because there was a mineral shop that used to sell it for people to make trinkets. But the shop closed down when the owner stopped paying his mortgage and bivouacked himself in his house in preparation for the fallout that was predicted at the turn into the new Millennium."

Hagen also has an ongoing series of paintings on burlap, exhibited at China Art Projects last year, and being fabricated for his forthcoming show at the gallery this May. He explains how he wanted to work on "paintings that were an antidote to the controlled oils on canvas" he had produced up until then. Hagen's epiphany came to him while visiting a hardware store near his home in East LA. Outside the store he saw a burlap bag, forlornly flapping in the wind on the sidewalk. "It was pathetic and it had this beautiful dilapidated quality caused by being left out in the sun," he remembers. Upon further inspection, Hagen began to think about how, historically, burlap was a vital precursor to canvas, with its coarse texture and large weave pattern. "I mean, you can still see its material origins – that it's made up of plant fibres," he gleefully explains.

The techniques used to achieve these paintings are complex. Individual sheets of burlap are cut, creased, folded and stacked before being left to bleach in the sun. Each sheet leaves a record of itself in the form of a dark shadow on the layer beneath. The burlap is then laid face down on plastic sheeting, which is also creased and folded into irregular patterns. Acrylic paint is then poured through the back of the sheets into imperfect geometric shapes.

The shapes dividing the surfaces of the paintings – a patchwork of squares, circles, rhombuses, and stretched hexagons – convey layers of illusionary space which are refuted through the insistent materiality of the burlap and the arbitrary nature of their composition.

Running alongside the paintings are a series of architectural screens, also to be included in the forthcoming show. Made from the layering of concrete blocks and columns, the screens divide space while also becoming visually entangled with their surroundings. "I wanted to make a sculpture that was non-hierarchical in its build and that existed in a sort of in-between state, being both wall and sculpture, opaque and transparent, allowing and impairing vision."

"What has remained a constant in my work since school is the presence of things that cause a disorientation of your perception – what I call a cognitive dissonance." And with that characteristically cryptic parting shot, this rare glimpse into the complex mind of one of LA's most byzantine contemporary artists comes to a close.

ALEX COLES

