

LAXART

Postcommodity: Some Reach While Others Clap
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Built in 1929, this building has a simple post and lintel frame made from steel H-beams. At that time, the H-beam was a relatively new technology. It was a significant improvement over its predecessor, the I-beam. Instead of being welded or riveted, the H-beam was rolled, meaning it was wrought as one piece of steel. As a result, the metal could be distributed in a more effective manner for a stronger, more versatile beam that was significantly cheaper to produce.

There are five exposed H-beams situated around the gallery. Although the “bones” of the gallery are always within view, they are rarely looked at insofar as they register as structural elements. For all the work they do holding up the joint, the H-beams are nonetheless invisible. In this respect, they are ideal candidates for Institutional Critique, a genre of art calling attention to heretofore unexamined social, political, and material conditions that govern our definition of art.

The goal of Institutional Critique was to radicalize consciousness beginning with the underpinnings of the arts experience itself. Under the rubric of Institutional Critique all aspects of the museum/gallery establishment were fair game for examination, from an institution’s board of directors to a physical or historical aspect of the site itself. Predicated on the here and now, Institutional Critique was nothing if not literal.

The artist collaborative Postcommodity (Kade Twist, b. 1971, r. Los Angeles, and Cristobal Martinez, b. 1974, r. San Francisco) was formed in 2007. As their name suggests, their work examines the global political economy. The perspective, however, is through “a shared Indigenous lens,” meaning one that acknowledges an overlap between Latino and Native American cultures, an overlap whose greatest area of concordance within modernity is colonialism. Under these circumstances, the “Post” in Postcommodity just as readily refers to postcolonialism, a designation in which imperial power could be said to have effervesced into the “invisible hand” of supply and demand. The global political economy is hopelessly heterogeneous, an uneven mixture of means and modes of production. Furthermore, it is impossible to narrate without the attendant discourses of immigration and inequality.

Not surprisingly, Postcommodity addressed the two H-beams at the gallery's entrance from a pointedly metaphorical rather than literal position. For them, the load bearing, yet invisible structural foundation of the gallery is analogous to the Latino labor force upon which this city's economy rests. Of greater importance, the H-beams gave them the opportunity to fulfill a longstanding desire, namely to work with a custom car shop. (Martinez is a native of Espanola, New Mexico, the self-proclaimed lowrider capital of the world.) For this project they worked with Edgar Hernandez, the owner of Starlite Rod and Kustom, a Harbor City-based shop that does the full gamut of custom car work including lowriders.

The project began in a relatively straightforward manner. After interviewing a few shops, Postcommodity asked Hernandez to paint the H-beams in the gallery's entrance in the fashion of a custom lowrider, a paint job referred to as "candyng." It was not without skepticism that Hernandez agreed. Not only is the prepping and priming labor intensive, it's permanent. You might paint over a car, but you don't unpaint a car. This raised the question of the work's fate. Rather than remove the work, Postcommodity had Hernandez fabricate covers for each column. Having the work be a permanent part of the site put LAXART in the position of stewardship. This in turn raised the question of future unveilings. Postcommodity is deeply invested in questions of art's spiritual dimension. They would like to consider future unveilings as ritual in bearing, a ritual that overtime will invest the work with a spiritual significance. In that regard, they think of the cases as medicine boxes. Medicine boxes, like their siblings, medicine balls, bundles or bags, are containers for objects thought to protect or give powers to the owner. These objects could include herbs, rattles, animal bones or teeth, fur, feathers or special stones. But the cases' most immediate spiritual reference is to the end all and be all of death as the upholstery, whose function is to protect the H-beam from scratches, recalls that of a coffin.

When it came to the paint design, Postcommodity gave Hernandez a few simple directives. Postcommodity was drawn to these two beams specifically because they are paired. They asked Hernandez to make them stylistically distinct and referenced spirituality by way of yin and yang as well as gender in the sense that as man and woman they would reference the forces of procreation as an allegory for creation in general, artistic and otherwise. Hernandez translated this into period and palette choices with the fuchsia and blue-green beams respectively serving as prototypical examples of 1980s and 1970s lowrider design. Whereas Hernandez's shop handled the many layers of primers, silver flake and clear coating, the pattern painting was done by Hernandez' longtime collaborator Manuel Cisneros, Jr.

Paradoxically, giving a custom car painter a flat, rectilinear surface to work within is something of a curve ball, minus the curves. As for making it a challenge, instead of a plan, Cisneros chose to improvise based on a repertoire of signature designs and simple shapes. Symmetry is everything for a pinstriper, as these painters are often called. Before starting, Cisneros placed a thin tape line down the center of the surface. He then began drawing with tapes of varying width while his teenage

daughter Elsie, a huge Smith's fan, DJ'd as Cisneros finds it unbearable to work without music. The patterning of the beams was done in two long, late night sessions.

Lowrider culture is no stranger to contemporary art museums. This is one in a list of exhibitions to signify a robust subculture that, as its aged over the decades, is now relatively mainstream. Its mainstreaming was further assisted by a mandate for diversity, which would have us read this exhibition as yet another gesture of cultural affirmation. While it is certainly that, it is also a critique of Institutional Critique. With its drive toward disclosure, much of Institutional Critique, particularly as it was practiced by a figure such as Michael Asher, was based on removal or subtraction. This placed it in line with Minimalism, the zenith of modernism. This severe brand of abstraction was a strict purging of figuration and along with it the themes of history, memory, and biography. Ideologically, this would be an anathema to those (women and artists of color) who had yet to find adequate representation politically and socially, let alone culturally. In this respect, it would be easy to righteously dismiss Institutional Critique, or even worse to submit it to a form of postmodern irony. What Postcommodity has chosen to do instead is to acknowledge Institutional Critique with the utmost integrity by having all the beams stripped to their bare metal surface, which is something Hernandez had to do to the two he painted. This would cast Institutional Critique as anything but an end in itself. In Postcommodity's hands, institutional critique is rendered a beginning, one that is built upon one layer of primer and lacquer at a time as the paradigm has shifted from subtraction to a necessary and very critical addition often referred to as inclusion.