

# M + B



LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

## A Note on the Contemporary Canon: Public Fiction's Show at MOCA Los Angeles

By Paloma Checa-Gismero  
June 17, 2016

HIP-HEIGHT ON THE RIGHT inside edge of the window frame, perpendicular to me are three captions on a concrete wall. Two point to works inside the gallery, and one to an address far up in the Hollywood Hills. I am outside Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art, standing across the glass from storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and the missing, the most recent exhibition by the independent art platform Public Fiction.

Storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and the missing is a two-show project occupying the anteroom of The Marcia Simon Weisman Works on Paper Study Center, on the plaza level of MOCA on Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. Curated by Public Fiction's leading soul, Lauren Mackler, it has brought to the space works by artists Nathaniel Mackey, Nevine Mahmoud, and Lynne Tillman (between March 19 and April 25, 2016), and Nancy Lupo, Litia Perta, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya (between May 2 and June 19, 2016).



Complementing the shows was the missing, a screening on May 5 that included Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993), Alfred Leslie and Frank O'Hara's *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964), Maha Maamoun's *Domestic Tourism II* (2009), and an installation of Mungo Thomson's 2002 video *The American Desert* (for Chuck Jones). Lastly, the cycle will close with Stanya Kahn-directed performance *A Fugitive Thought* on June 2.

Watered iced coffee in my left hand. It is a Tuesday and the museum is closed. I stand outside the storefront in the empty plaza that is also a roof for an underground contemporary art mausoleum. Below my feet, silent, is Helen Molesworth's show *The Art of Our Time*. MOCA is closed for the day, but the storefront is a storefront. Across its full wall, glass captions are still white with text printed on black non-serif type. Name of the artist, date, and place of birth. Name of piece, date, a short narrative, information on materials and technique. The first caption from the top reads "Paul Mpagi Sepuya." The San Bernardino-born, Los Angeles-based artist brings three pieces to the show: *Study with Five Figures* (3009) (2016), *Figures/Ground Studies* (2016), and *Study with Four Figures* (3001) (2016), three sets of inkjet prints mounted on wood bracings, where mirrors, cameras, tripods, and bodies denote the game of gaze reciprocities that seem to fill the exhibition space. This triangle expands on Sepuya's long exploration of the intimate space of an artist's studio and the relationships that occur within it. Such interest is now transplanted to the art gallery, following curator Mackler's interest in investigating the spaces of in-betweenness that exist within art exhibition spaces.

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For almost three months, storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and the missing runs parallel to *The Art of Our Time*, MOCA's redrawing of postwar art's conventional chronologies. A big reframing of the museum's contemporary art collection, *The Art of Our Time* emphasizes the affinities among artists, told in relation to their shared institutional affiliations, their art schools and galleries, and major historical events. *The Art of Our Time* decenters the canonical sense of New York as contemporary art's cradle, and revisits instead the importance of schools like Black Mountain College in the articulation of shared generational conversations and formal developments. It also explores the tightknit interactions between postwar architecture and avant-garde art, revisiting the structural concerns of installation and object-based artists on both coasts. MOCA's show centers desire, sexuality, and the body as major transgenerational concerns, and reconsiders art trends in light of changing modes of production, especially for the post-industrial US-based art collected by MOCA. A Western avant-garde-centric rewriting of history, in other words, proves inadequate for understanding a city whose indebtedness to foreign influences has long been acknowledged.

Discursive gaps are inherent to curating. They exist in most exhibitions, sometimes as substantial conceptual lacks, sometimes as loci where affinity threads weave between pieces, exhibitions, and the visitor's experience. Mackler's concept for *Public Fiction*'s residence at MOCA was to explore these gaps as points of entry to *The Art of Our Time*. Thus storefront: *The Public and the Critic*, and the missing acts like a set of captions, comments to the main narrative of that exhibit, and interventions in MOCA's new institutionalized account of the contemporary avant-garde. In a conversation, Mackler remarked on the footnote-like nature of its insertion in MOCA's structure. Slight, subtle additions to the museum's proposal remind one of scribbled notes on a book's margins. The art of our time is, Mackler's counter-exhibit argues, art made today by the young and mid-career artists with a solid presence in the circuit of alternative exhibition spaces like *Public Fiction* and others. These are notes to the contemporary canon from actual young practitioners situated in the city of Los Angeles.

The last of the captions points to Nancy Lupo's *Bench 2016 (2016)*: "Bench 2016, on view in a white Dodge Caravan, license plate 7KAA008 parked near 2130-2178 Castilian Drive, Los Angeles CA 90068." I go back to my car, miraculously parked on one of MOCA's side streets, sip the rest of that iced coffee, mostly melted now, and type the address on my phone. Out of downtown, onto the freeway, off the freeway, into Hollywood, up the hills, past the park, up and up, past apartment buildings, houses, and then mansions overlooking the mussed metropolis. To my right there's a steep cliff with cacti. On my left I spot the white van. As at MOCA's storefront, I lean against the windows to get glimpses of a long pine bench in the back of the vehicle. Thousands of yards of dental floss weave through the bench's scaffolding. Hundreds of little branches of spray millet hang from the structure. This is Nancy Lupo's piece, a workbench that is also a garden, inside a van.

*Public Fiction*'s vitrine-like gallery is spatially equivalent to the museum's gift shop, across the square, on street level. This mirroring pays homage to *Public Fiction*'s original emplacement: a storefront in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, where Mackler started her independent project in 2010. After five years of working in that East Los Angeles suburb, *Public Fiction* is now a nomadic gallery. Property value escalated in Highland Park since she started, a gentrification that occurred partly due to the presence of alternative art and music venues like hers, as well as other services targeting the young, creative, middle-class Angelenos displacing the Latin@ community from the area. As is often the case, art got caught in the middle of complex processes of value transformation. *Public Fiction* got expelled from its Highland Park storefront by the very processes that enabled it and that it helped set in motion.

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What has remained stable, however, is Public Fiction's dual nature as a publication and an exhibition project. Both, in Mackler's words, "accumulate content and layers of sense." The show makes evident how Mackler builds the layered articulation of meanings: works and words are located on the gallery's walls, on its windows, freestanding within it, and outside. Some are activated in a projection room — "like a movie theater," she has said — and others inside the museum's main galleries and hallways. The related publication can be accessed at [publicfiction.moca.org](http://publicfiction.moca.org), which gathers installation shots, pictures taken at the artists' studios, stills from the screened films, fragments from the text-based pieces, and texts by Corrine Fitzpatrick and Quinn Latimer. "Together," as Chris Kraus wrote in *Where Art Belongs*, her monograph on alternative art practice in Los Angeles, "the writing and the visual work form a system in which (as in life) meaning occurs through accretion."

Earlier this spring, the first exhibition of the twofold storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and *the missing*, featured *Song of the Andoumboulou: 148 & Sweet Safronia's Wave Unwoven* (2016) by renowned poet, novelist, and critic Nathaniel Mackey. Mackey's poetry was fixed on the window inside frames that remind one of computer screens, boxes that make one want to scroll down his stanzas, a gesture that curator Mackler had already initiated in the online publication accompanying the project. "Long since in some room reminiscing, long on / something said said again. A symphonette / of beaks, bits of wood scrap, wheese what / there / was of it left ..." Mackey writes, referring to the lit gallery behind his vinyl words. "We knew it wasn't up to us. / We knew it was a game. We enjoyed it / High chiming strings way back in the mix / re- / buffed us, a remote broadcast it seemed." One picture shows the morning party sunrays on a misty chilly porch.

Also in storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and *the missing*'s opening show were works by artist Nevine Mahmoud and award-winning novelist and essay writer Lynne Tillman. Mahmoud's *Fluid mechanics/ objective parts* (2016), focuses on the material aspects of her creations, sexy emulations that exude self-referentiality and intimacy as well as contention. Their forms speak of fluidity, self-contradiction, change, morphing. As if they traced the formal extortion suffered by points in space, printed on shiny, velvety, pink plastic. A perfect counterbalance to Mahmoud's figures are Lynne Tillman's words. Her *Ode to DCW (Dining Chair Wood)* (2016) appears inside a light box on the gallery wall, and reads: "Made of wood, like the Eames chairs, covered in hard foam rubber that didn't show traces of bodies pressed upon them," responding to the materiality of Mahmoud's work and the underground pieces of our time's new canon. Tillman's words pose the unavoidable question: where do each of us position ourselves amid this contention?

Despite *The Art of Our Time*'s welcome revisiting of the canonical stories of recent art history, the exhibit remains strongly faithful to the autonomy of art and its exceptionality. It engages with its local and tourist audiences through traditional didactic captions, explanatory texts, and short videos hosted on the institution's website. However, by hosting a rotating selection of smaller exhibitions such as storefront: *The Poet and the Critic*, and *the missing*, MOCA allows its audience to profit from the exploratory character of independent curatorial practice, as well. With their informality, platforms such as Public Fiction are raw fresh winds that help invigorate the museum's more constrained institutional agenda. Conversely, Public Fiction benefits from the legitimization of inhabiting MOCA for three months. It expands its audience, it receives a budget, it is able to commission new works and engage in fair trade with its artists. Lauren Mackler's vision is backed by one key piece of the national art establishment, and artists become gatekeepers in the translation between the canon and the varied art production that a megalopolis like Los Angeles generates — the symbiotic relationship between more established and smaller institutions is mirrored by that of the writers to the objects in the exhibit. As Corrine Fitzpatrick writes: "Poets use words to mine mysteries and thus can provide language — the wardrobe of reason — to objects existing in space," and Mackler's show helps mine the mysteries of MOCA's attempt to redraw the canon within the milieu of art production in 2016 Los Angeles.

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