

M+B

Art in America

MATTHEW BRANDT

LOS ANGELES,
at M+B

March 27, 2014
by Jennifer S. Li



Matthew Brandt: GAP 2A, 2013
hair dye on five layers of bubble wrap in LED lightbox
57 x 45 inches; at M+B.

Matthew Brandt's hands-on experiments in the darkroom transcend sheer novelty and contend with the nature of photography as described by Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, the photograph becomes indistinguishable from (and confused with) its pictorial referent. Brandt often combines photographs and physical elements of their depicted subjects to produce his works. While pursuing his MFA at UCLA in 2006-08 (under the tutelage of James Welling), for instance, he shot portraits of friends and mixed their shed tears into the printing solutions he used to develop the images; and in 2012 he processed his "Lakes and Reservoirs" series with liquid collected from the bodies of water portrayed. For his recent exhibition at M+B, Brandt, whose studio is in Hollywood, took his artistic process into new territory, offering a selection of compelling works (all 2013) that focus on the image of Los Angeles.

In the "Burnout" series, photographs showing the stylishly clothed torsos of Brandt's friends and studio assistants are printed on lush, white silk velvet using a burnout process—a technique popular in fashion design in which acid is applied to fabric to "burn out" fibers and produce areas of semitransparency. Thus, in printing photographs of clothing using a technique commonly found on garments, Brandt has unified subject and medium (if less literally so than in his earlier works). The monochromatic sepia washes, bleached-out fields of white and areas of burnt brown, however, belie the au courant medium and contemporary imagery, evoking albumen prints by Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge. The title of the series not only refers to the process used, but also slyly connotes celebrities whose stars have faded and who have become racked with addiction.

"GAP," a series of eight LED lightboxes, offers an unusual perspective on the famed Hollywood sign, showing only fragments of the letters and

focusing instead on the overgrown spaces between them. Each lightbox contains five layers of bubble wrap: four are printed monochromatically, with cyan, magenta, yellow and black hair dye, while the fifth is printed with the full-color image (the sheet's inflated cells creating the effect of benday dots). Composed with bubble wrap, the artwork is made of air and plastic-materials often associated with Los Angeles. The lightboxes may shine brightly, but they can easily be unplugged or, to take the title of the aforementioned series, burn out.

The show concluded with Night Sky NGC 3372, a large composition that appears to be celestial nebulae and radiating stars swirling together against a dark, infinite sky. In smog-covered L.A., actual cosmic phenomena are often not visible, but the population itself is certainly star-studded. The scenic starscapes are in fact rendered in cocaine—the drug of choice in Tinseltown—silkscreened on black velvet. For Brandt, artistic materials are not just supporting actors—they take on a leading role.