

WORKPLACE

Art in America
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'ALT LA LA: DIY ART SPACES IN LOS ANGELES'
By Travis Diehl

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Joel Kyack: Superclogger, 2010, C-print, 18 3/4 by 27 3/4 inches. COURTESY FRANÇOIS GHEBALY GALLERY

You won't see Ryan Gosling or Emma Stone dance across the Los Angeles gridlock, as they did in the 2016 musical *La La Land*. Stranded in the LA art scene, you're more likely to see a version of the 1993 drama *Falling Down*, in which Michael Douglas abandons his car in traffic and treks to the ocean on foot. LA nurtures a kind of angst, for which the exasperating freeways become an easy metaphor. If the SoCal light playing on airplanes and cars informed the Finish Fetish of the 1960s, today's Angelino artists find inspiration in the frustration of trying to "make it." In a packed metropolis where there are too few mid-tier galleries willing to take a chance on untested experimental work, while blue-chip institutions remain stacked with proven winners, innovation is born of necessity. As a result, many emerging artists and curators must create their own spaces to show their work or that of their friends. These venues are as idiosyncratic as they are resourceful. In the summer of 2010, for instance, Friday commuters stuck in LA County's notorious snarl could happen upon "Superclogger" by Joel Kayak, a series of puppet shows acted out in back of a Mazda SUV to soundtracks broadcasted to nearby cars on FM radio. When we're all stuck together in the synthesis of art and life, almost any flat surface can become a stage.

But forget Hollywood. Los Angeles is defined by its many neighborhoods, which outsiders seldom see but where some of the city's more experimental art is on display. Often the invite comes by text or email, the address given by request. Like an underground rave skirting the rules and vetting the mob, many of LA's many alternative artist-run spaces function like clubhouses. One long-running project, Arturo Bandini, staged group shows on every wall of a shed in the middle of a parking lot adjacent to a studio building in Lincoln Heights. Although both big and small names contributed, what was shown felt less important than who showed up. This regular kind of tailgate, fueled by "artist-curated" cocktails and mixed beers, is what serves in the Southland as a salon. Over the summer of 2020, despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the industrial township of Vernon, just south of LA, offered a makeshift drive-in hosted by studio-cum-gallery Vernon Gardens. Patrons could park their cars on the blacktop, angling them toward a projection on a warehouse wall, or spread out their blankets on the gravel to see context-appropriate fare like *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, a concert film about the 1958 Newport Jazz festival, hosted by artist Alexandra Noel. Pandemic protocols were in effect, at least at first, although the after-show receptions tended to devolve into keggers for a scene woefully deprived of socialization.



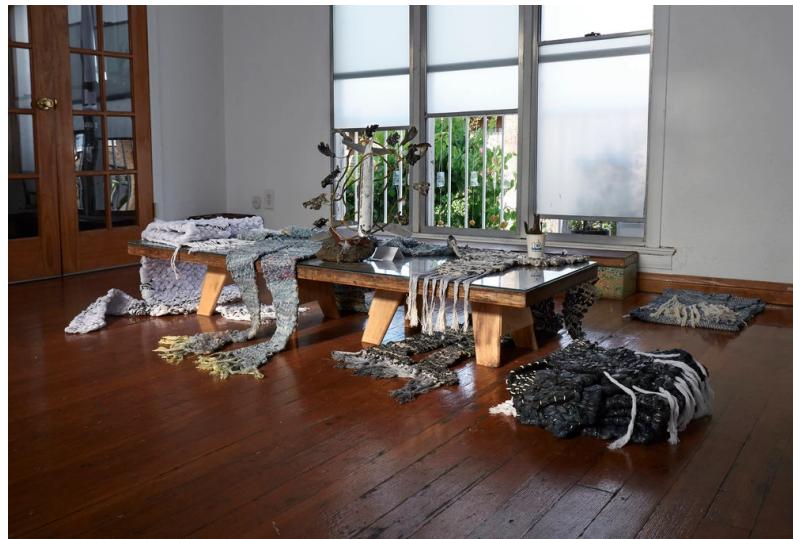
A screening at Vernon Gardens, summer 2020. COURTESY VERNON GARDENS

It's hard to overstate the social benefit of artist-run endeavors in LA. The melding of art and life extends to the conflation of work and fun, colleagues and friends, bosses and rivals. Perhaps the most successful experiment in inebriation-as-praxis was the original Night Gallery, circa 2012, a black-box space in a Lincoln Heights strip mall—a far cry from its present market-driven incarnation in a former warehouse in Boyle Heights. Openings were ragers, of course, but the real draw was on weekdays, when proprietors and aspiring artists Davida Nemerov and Mieke Merple held court in a back room. "In the evening, there is feeling," went the tagline—

guests were encouraged to get sloppy on their drug of choice, and sometimes even with each other. But it's more than the parties that brings the LA art world together: there's a shared belief in the visionary value of altered states and marginal spaces, art included. Much is made of LA being a city of artists, and it still holds true, even if light and studio space aren't as affordable as they were a decade ago. But when artists put down their brushes and head into the champagne night, it's a faux pas to discuss "my work."

Nothing wrong with giving your friends a chance, of course. The list of named private spaces, from living rooms and kitchens to backyards and studios, is long. Suffice it to mention The Vanity, a closet project space maintained in artist Asha Schechter's apartment from 2011 to 2013, and then in a high-ceilinged commercial space at 356 Mission Rd. until 2016. Its name pointed to one of the less altruistic reasons someone might invite artsy strangers into their home, or why artists might want to show there. Whatever form these innovative spaces take, they always seem to mix professionalism and self-promotion. At the latter extreme, there are spaces that not only draw on the potluck model of curating—hanging works by upwards of thirty artists in rooms the size of a storage unit, with Tecate and grillables abounding—but blur the lines between galleries and open studios. The Pit operates, as did the now defunct BBQLA, in the same building as the curators' studios, the doors of which were often conspicuously ajar.

A corollary of its legendary car culture is that Los Angeles is a lonely city, where it's easy enough to be submerged in the rush-hour throng. For some, the community and conversation that alternative spaces engender is enough. But the pull of fame might have something to do with why these venues are usually short-lived: part of the point is to climb, somehow, becoming the one in a thousand plucked by the gallery establishment for wider recognition and bigger sales—and the more memorably odd your curatorial gambit the better. "From the Desk of Lucy Bull," a series of (mostly group) shows on a low table in Bull's living room, has helped raise her profile as a painter. Her shows often feature upwards of two dozen people. Bull's most recent exhibition, organized with artist Nikita McCauley in Malibu, consisted of roughly thirty hermit crabs, their shells decorated by artists and released into tide pools at dusk. This is the paradox of alternative LA: as artists make space for themselves in quirky digs—ranging from cars to vacant restaurants to, in one case, a gallerist's ear that hosted a white cube filled with pin-sized paintings—they walk the line between seemingly rejecting the establishment by inventing ways to thrive outside of it, and yet also wanting their share of mainstream recognition and resources. Each space finds its balance between professionalism and freedom—and there is plenty of freedom. And so, as millions of vehicles ply the freeways, one wonders, as one does in LA, who it's all for—in other words, is it for me?



Nina Wiesnagrotzki and Maximilian Schmoetzer's exhibition "Rebellion," 2019, on Lucy Bull's table. COURTESY FROM THE DESK OF LUCY BULL

