

LA WEEKLY

Natural History: Anthony Lepore and Mark Hagen

By Andrew Berardini

Thursday, Jun 16 2011

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 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 redepiction. 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 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

M+B | 612 N. Almont Drive, L.A. | Through June 30

François Ghebaly Gallery | 2600 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A. | Through July 1

MARK HAGEN: TBA

China Art Objects Galleries | 6086 Comey Ave., L.A. | Through June 25