

Lands' End

by Jody Graf

BODEGA | JANUARY 11 – FEBRUARY 15, 2015

Lands' End, a six-person group exhibition at Bodega, borrows its title from that impressively average American clothing company of the same name. A brief historical oddity: the company's name is itself a misspelled reference to the western-most point in England, Land's End. With a shift of one apostrophe — an almost unmentionably minor mistake—we move from the precipice of the wild to a land of “no iron” slacks. This slippage between symbolic extremes pervades the exhibition, organized by artist Dena Yago, in which a “frontier” imaginary, largely an allusion to the American west (the press release features an image of a rusting wagon wheel), is casually compounded with narratives of an intimate, and often urban, domesticity.

Take, for example, the conflicting references that greet the viewer upon entry: a rusting metal bowl holding a single rattlesnake tail by Yago rests alongside three photographs by Patrick Armstrong that coldly depict building number signs of the type you might find outside a corporate park. The signs Armstrong captures in fact designate the East River Cooperative, a building complex originally built as affordable housing and located on the edge of Manhattan, not far from the gallery. Two lush photographs by Josephine Pryde layer images of cacti with MRI scans of human fetuses, illustrating a literal meeting of symbolic opposites without fully dissolving either—the womb and the cactus being, respectively, paradigmatic tropes of domesticity and exotic terrain. In the context of this exhibition, each piece reminds us how one kind of frontier might find itself gradually shifted to the geographic, or metaphorical, center.

In other works, materials ripe with symbolic charge are reconstituted into more ambiguous compositions that, while complicating, extend the initial duality between familiar and foreign. In Zoe Latta's “Suckle Diversion” (2014), a horsetail spills from an awkwardly poignant felt cone carrying a range of bodily connotations. A wall-mounted sculpture by Mia Goyette abstracts the conventional windowbox into a simple metal support for a thin slab of resin. Suspended within the resin, leftovers of the day-to-day—cigarette butts, dead leaves, discarded necklaces, and, surprisingly, a cast finger—are transformed into a condensed, pleasingly gritty landscape.

Perhaps the most unexpected inclusion are two inkjet prints by Alisa Baremboym (both 2009), which, painted over in acrylic, depict scarecrow-like figures against bucolic landscapes. Any sentimental attachment to the rural they might conjure is quickly undercut by the banal clothing draping their forms and multiple plastic shopping bags they each carry. Quite different from the work Baremboym currently exhibits, these works offer an interesting look back at her earlier efforts.

Suspended above the floorbound works, three interconnected sculptures by Yago hang from the ceiling to form an extended metal chain from which dangle an assortment of objects ranging from antique glass bottles and rusting tools of indiscernible utility to a miniature red bean bun made of foam. In literally stringing together *kawaii* ornaments (Japanese tokens of “cuteness”) with souvenirs of the “rustic,” Yago materializes such invitingly clichéd dichotomies as the “tame” vs. the “rugged.” These juxtapositions double as points of critical entry into the force of the aesthetic to render the foreign familiar, effectively condensing the show's larger thematic. Put slightly differently, they suggest the possibility of the frontier finding itself transformed into a new pastoral.

The pastoral reemerges as an explicit reference in the opening paragraphs of a short text accompanying the exhibition. Yago writes of a contemporary pastoral that, having entered the urban imagination in the form of a fetish for the rustic (she cites recent trends in restaurant décor), marks the very *lack* of a viable frontier. The frontier, then, must establish itself where it can—doubling back in the form of the pastoral, which is to say, the aesthetic, into already charted territory. The effort to re-inscribe difference within the known not only offers an interesting perspective on the operation of kitsch, but also returns us squarely to the heart of the domestic.

The domestic comprises the text's remaining themes, with short segments authored in the first-person by Armstrong, Goyette, and Latta, as well as Yago. Each offers short musings on the apartments they have shared together in a variety of cosmopolitan centers, such as Berlin and Los Angeles. The tone—nostalgic, verging on the cathartic—tethers the show's often-abstract thematic content to a nexus of highly personal relationships and experiences. This particular brand of sincerity mirrors that of the exhibition as a whole, in which critique is catalyzed not through distance, but via a careful injection of subjective experience performed without recourse to any definite authenticity. In a moment that is supposedly post-ironic but clearly isn't, the topography of this elusive tone stands as one of the exhibition's distinguishing, and most refreshing features.