

Last Round: “At the Brewery Project: The Finale”

Looking forward into the past

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published: January 15, 2009



It's hard to imagine this late in the game, but only a few years ago, it was possible for an enterprising and ambitious member of the art-world cognoscenti to open these storefront showrooms — known as “galleries” — to which middle-to-upper-class consumers would come and acquire decorative artifacts with their “disposable income.” Since those halcyon days, the art market has pretty much retracted into its shell, leaving only a slimy residue to mark its decade of giddy self-congratulations, and a vacuum of both qualitative (ka-ching!) criteria and exhibition opportunities.

But culture abhors a vacuum, and despite the fact that this may well be the end of The Art World as we know it, it behooves us to consider the legacy of an artist-run project space that sprang up the last time the beaux arts economy tanked. The At the Brewery Project (or AtBP) ran more or less continuously from 1997 to 2007 in the titular Lincoln Heights art colony (formerly the Pabst plant), shepherded by artist/organizer John O'Brien. Technically speaking, that specific decade coincided with the recent boom years, but the roots of AtBP lie in several of O'Brien's earlier collaborative exhibition series created in direct response to the bottomed-out art economy of the early '90s.

As much as the art community bemoans these periodic downturns and disparages the “myth” linking creativity and poverty, it's an undeniable fact that when commercial enterprises and bureaucracies drop out of the picture, artists have to become more inventive and improvisational if they want to share their work with the world. L.A.'s underdocumented history of artist-run spaces didn't begin in the '90s, but that period saw an enormous proliferation of such venues, ranging from garages in Echo Park and Pasadena bungalows to commandeered suites of motel rooms and guerrilla shows in abandoned industrial spaces.

AtBP, which mounted more than 50 artist-curated shows in the course of its existence, is in many ways an exemplary model for such grass-roots enterprises, and “At the Brewery Project, 1993-2007: The Finale” — the sprawling, piecemeal self-homage currently occupying most of Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts — wisely forgoes an encyclopedic historical overview (although the accompanying catalog and Web site, www.atthebreweryproject.com, provide considerable chronological detail) in favor of a grand extravaganza in the spirit of the original premise.

Filling the Armory's large main Cardwell Gallery and spilling into the upstairs mezzanine and down an entire wall in the classroom area, “AtBP: The Finale” consists of 10 jumbled-together curatorial selections by former AtBP collaborators, and features mostly new works by artists who participated at some point in the project's history. (I should mention that my own artwork was included in an AtBP show in 1999 — alongside that of my colleague Christopher Miles. I forgot to show up for my gallery-sitting shift and got yelled at.)

The result is essentially a blown-up version of what you might find on any given visit to AtBP — some great work, some not-great work, lots of in-between, but always something unfamiliar and unexpected. Some of the best stuff here comes from artists who have gone on to more illustrious careers. Steve Roden's *the migration pattern of hymns and butterflies* — a large-scale collage/score combining a piano composition by Gurdjieff, with the plan for a Fuller geodesic dome — expands on the most interesting new developments from his most recent show at Susanne Vielmetter. Plastics enthusiast Shirley Tse continues with her recent exploration of representational reference in her gymnastics-punning site-specific *Pommel Horse for a Vault Room*. Lynn Aldrich, Eileen Cowin, Michael McMillen and other familiar names also contribute strong new work.

One artist who has recently gone from strength to strength is Rebecca Ripple, whose rickety, monstrous sculptures are some of the most exciting text-based fabrications around. Her *me please me* shifts the emphasis from the text to the monster, unleashing a herd of Loch Ness Laocoon intestinal tripods across the tiny balcony known as the Art Alliance Gallery, a space she shares with exhibition organizer O'Brien, whose own quirky wall-mounted book/furniture hybrids testify to the unusual curatorial self-inclusion that was one of AtBP's rules of thumb.

Without reading the wall text (and even then it's not that clear), it would be impossible to know that "AtBP: The Finale" actually comprises 10 separate, individually titled curatorial projects. O'Brien's showlet — *outbound.ed* — consists of his and Ripple's balcony, Tse's distant vault-room installation, Roden's entrance-way collage and Daniel Brodo's ceiling-mounted metastasizing geometric sculpture. Nice little show, if you know it's there and can piece it together in your head.

A couple of the thematic shows are given private spaces, and the ones installed along the mezzanine are basically arrayed in single file, but about half the work in the main gallery is mashed together — detrimentally so in the case of Jennifer Faist's *Anti-Godawfulness* manifesto, *Good Clean Fun*, and Karen Koblitz's ceramic survey, *Extended Journey*, which miss out on the conceptual reinforcement of a tightly focused installation.

After O'Brien's own selection, my favorite among the subexhibitions is *Miniatures and Giants*, co-curated by Jamison Carter, Margaret Griffith and Thomas Muller. The work ranges from Carter's soft, organic formalism (a spinning wire-and-paint sculpture and biological illustration-inspired wall hanging identified as a "unique print on Tyvek"), to Kristen Morgin's doppelganger arrays of slightly and extremely decayed magazines and assorted paper ephemera, to Aaron Noble's enormous collaborative wall mural with the Armory's art-class kiddies. Noble's defigurized abstract collages deconstruct classic Jack Kirby comic semantics into a naggingly familiar formal shorthand that refuses to resolve into representational forms. Noble is taking a single page from the oeuvre of late Swedish Pop maestro Öyvind Fahlström and running with it, but he has his own chops, and still has a few miles to go before he hits a wall.

As last hurrahs go, "AtBP: The Finale" succeeds both as a précis of the strategies that carried the L.A. art community through the last drought (and filled the gaps in official curatorial vision when things were flush) and in giving heart to anyone looking forward with trepidation. But the lessons in DIY self-sufficiency only go so far. Bottom line, the success of *At the Brewery Project* depended on the patronage of the Brewery's wealthy owners, Richard Carlson and the late Kathy Reges, whose vision and largesse made the world's largest live/work art colony a reality. With all the recent fuss over MOCA, I can't help but think how much more L.A.'s cultural health would benefit if its well-heeled art lovers funded a half-dozen more such sites instead of pumping massive fiscal transfusions into a hemorrhaging so-last-millennium euro-trash Kunst palace.

Come to think of it, I wouldn't be discussing these issues at all if the Armory wasn't such a model of relatively benign institutional praxis — a modestly scaled cutting-edge community-oriented art space that can juggle the sang-froid of a site-specific installation by French conceptualist Daniel Buren with the compassionate social responsibility of free art classes for homeless children. "AtBP: The Finale" is, ultimately, about the potential paths forward for our city's larger cultural institutions, as it is a primer in home brewing. *At Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena, www.armoryarts.org. Through March 1*