

ENTERTAINMENT

Published: July 16, 2010
Updated: July 17, 2010 9:41 a.m.

Art lives in shacks in Laguna Beach

By RICHARD CHANG
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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According to the United Nations, more than one billion people – one-sixth of the world's population – live in shacks.

Shacks have become synonymous with slums, ghettos and the lowest classes. But they serve other purposes – including recreational, utilitarian and artistic.



"Mickey Jakarta," a 2006 oil and acrylic on canvas by Costa Mesa artist Jeff Gillette. The artist juxtaposes cartoony images with makeshift residences of squalor. On view at Laguna Art Museum through Oct. 3.

TEXT BY RICHARD CHANG, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER; IMAGE COURTESY OF LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

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'Art Shack'

- **Where:** Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach
- **When:** Through Oct. 3
- **Hours:** Summer hours (through Sept. 6) are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays-Wednesdays and Fridays, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays; regular hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily
- **How much:** Unlimited summer passes are \$15 adults, \$12 seniors, students and military, free for children under 12
- **Call:** 949-494-8971
- **Online:** lagunaartmuseum.org

Through Oct. 3, the Laguna Art Museum is presenting "Art Shack," an exhibition of 33 artists who combine art, architecture and installation. Most have built shacks out of various materials, including wood, steel, trash and mixed media.

[See photos of artworks from 'Art Shack'](#)

Many of the shacks contain artworks, and all are showcased as works of art themselves.

It's an engaging concept, but not entirely new. Installation art already has a pretty long history, dating back formally to at least the 1970s and probably before then, to Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" of 1917.

Over the years, many artists have housed art in structures of their own making – shacks, if you will. The California Assemblage movement gained prominence in the 1950s and '60s and provided many examples of installations within shack-like constructions.

Even at Laguna Art Museum, several exhibits during the past decade focusing on popular culture – cars, surfing, skateboarding, "lowbrow" art – have featured large, three-dimensional installations by the artists.

The current "Art Shack" show starts with a snowman shack by Marnie Weber, a freeway-inspired shack by James P. Scott and a series of slum shacks by Jeff Gillette.

The Gillette series, "Slum" (2010), stands out as the strongest, with its third-world appearance, videos of Mickey Mouse, Sponge Bob and Beavis and Butthead, and voluminous collection of trash and discarded objects.

Positing tiny real estate signs – Remax, Newport Realty, Century 21 – amid the slums, Gillette conveys a real feel for irony. His work is a commentary on class, inequality, and the detritus culture that we are immersed in.

Travis Somerville has two shacks in this exhibit,

Story Highlights

Review: The Laguna Art Museum is showcasing 'Art Shack' as its newest exhibit, which runs through Oct. 3.

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"Great American Letdown" and "1963" (both 2009). "Letdown," made from wood, metal and painted vintage photographs, tells a mysterious, intriguing tale of ancestry and nearly forgotten faces.

Somerville's other shack, "1963," is a fascinating, almost overwhelming commentary on race and this nation's sordid history, with vintage pictures of black cotton pickers viewable through 3D viewfinders. Meanwhile, a cross burns on a black and white TV – the sounds crackling through an old radio – and a pair of Ku Klux Klan hoods top the white view boxes, amid wallpaper of 1963 newspaper stories. It's a chilling installation, yet searingly effective.

Costa Mesa artist Laurie Hassold has contributed one of her signature skeletal works, "Reading the Bones (Post-Extinction Fossil Grotto)" (2010). It's finely wrought and a bit eerie, but the shack reference doesn't quite come across.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is Mike Shine's "Shine Shack" (2010). It's a large wooden shack, stretching 18 feet wide and 30 feet long, meant to resemble the artist's own shack/studio in Bolinas.

Shine has constructed a fake furnace, bookshelves and decorations that illustrate the artist's own quirky, fun-loving tastes. A couple of

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vintage TV sets broadcast off-the-wall horror-movie scenes, while one modern TV features an interview with the artist by Stacy Peralta.

There's a book that visitors are free to doodle in, and wheels to spin for "Aegir's Surf Report" and other fortune-related outcomes. A visitor could literally spend a couple hours in "Shine Shack" and not get bored.

Nearby is a nifty '50s-style shack by Josh Agle (also known as SHAG), complete with miniature patio furniture, shag carpet and prints of his work. It's a living representation of SHAG's relaxed, loungey aesthetic.

Other strong works in "Art Shack" are Esteban Bojorquez's "Shelter Shock" (2010); Gregg Gibbs' wacky "The R. Biggs Institutional Restoration Foundation" (2010); Don Ed Hardy's "Tat Cat Shack (Tattoo Hut)" (2010), a realistic tattoo parlor with a real, operating tattoo machine; and tiny peephole collaborations by Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet.

Marion Peck and Mark Ryden have constructed the clever, cute and bizarre "Sweet Wishes Theater" (2007). Press a button and one can peep into a miniature theater and see an animated short play on the screen. The mini-film is not recommended for folks who easily get queasy.

An exhibit-specific iPhone application offers artists' bios, video interviews, bonus videos, and information about the museum and the show's sponsors. The app is free if you have an iPhone, or you can rent an iTouch with the app for \$5 at the front desk. It's a dynamic and welcome addition to the exhibit that one can enjoy outside the confines of the museum.

Overall, "Art Shack" is a hit, with occasional patches for quizzical head-scratching. It's an intriguing, interactive concept, one brought to engaging reality by Greg Escalante, guest curator for the exhibit.

And perhaps most importantly, it's a *pièce d'résistance* in the old-fashioned sense, a show that defies art market rules determining what's commercially viable and what "ought" to be made to satisfy the whims of the marketplace.

Contact the writer: 714-796-6026 or rchang@ocregister.com

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Going Into Detail



Bert Green Fine Art Presents Two Solo Shows of Intricate Thoughtfulness

by Julie Riggott

No one can accuse Jeff Gillette or Valerie Jacobs of making rushed, shallow art. The two artists with solo shows at Bert Green Fine Art both have a keen

eye for detail and an even sharper wit.

Gallery owner and curator Bert Green planned the exhibits as two entirely separate shows with “no deliberate connections,” but the artists’ paintings and drawings harmonize in a conversation about aesthetics and society that is difficult to overlook.

The paintings in Gillette’s *Desert Interventions* capture real scenes of natural beauty, but instead of editing out eyesores like an unsightly pile of rusted metal and debris by the roadside, Gillette makes it the focal point - in effect ruining a beautiful landscape like the thoughtless human intruder before him.

Everything from “No Trespassing” signs and cars (evidenced by a dead rabbit on the road) to discarded tires and other detritus encroach on beautiful mountains rising up from vast stretches of shrubs, rocks and sand.

“I either painted stuff as I saw it (dumps and plastic bags in the wind) or I arranged stuff in them (adding plastic in the wind, setting up frames of discarded, dilapidated furniture to see through) or I created composites of two separate scenes,” the Orange County schoolteacher explained in an email.

Gillette paints in the plain air

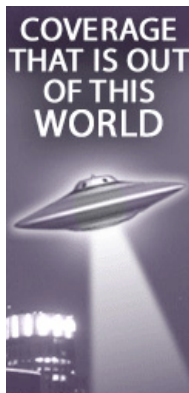


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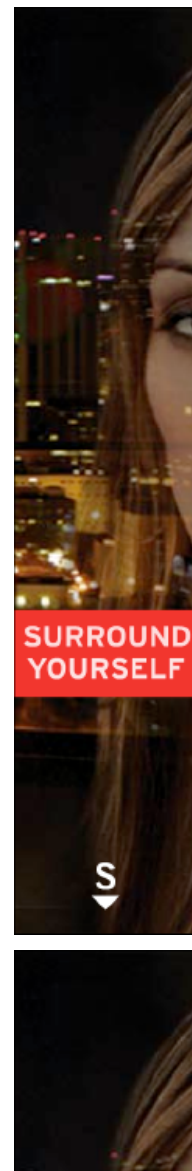
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tradition and works quickly to capture the light and shadows in the desert. His palette is seemingly infinite.

The studio work is much more meticulous. "I spend weeks sometimes, tightening up the desert ground, with the plants, rocks and twigs," he said.

In some of the "interventions," Gillette arranged boulders to look like animals, smashed his iMac computer ("We've all been angry enough at technology to do this for real, haven't we?"), or added his own artwork to the landscape.

"My most ambitious piece was 'Sign Sign' where I painted a 4-by-8-foot piece of plywood and stuck it in an empty billboard frame on the old highway 20 miles south of Vegas. I put it up during the cover of night, wearing all black, and dodged cars going by, jumping behind bushes," he recalled.

In his most incongruous and playful image of man's intrusion on nature, Gillette put a painted canvas of SpongeBob SquarePants at the site of artist Michael Heizer's "land art." "In the case of SpongeBob, I chose him for instant recognition," he said. "Maybe the jarring displacement of an annoying, high-pitched-voiced cartoon character into a terrain that is almost devoid of sound was part of the reason. Maybe knowing this character would either be blasted by beer-swilling gun enthusiasts, blown away by the wind or in the case of 'Sponge/Heizer South,' be buried by tons of rock, is a way of venting my anger."

Mesmerizing Illusions

Jacobs' detailed paintings and drawings have a similarly surreal feel. Her oil and acrylic "Where the Money Is, There Lies the Heart" is layered with symbolism. A multi-armed deity dangles computer mice, as rats drop coins from ruby slippers and beastly human creatures (also featured in two "Hungry Ghosts" drawings) watch the rain of money.

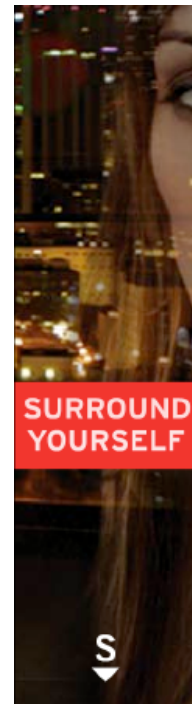
Most of the works on display by the septuagenarian San Francisco artist are graphite drawings, in which she achieves an extraordinary photorealism. The storm-tossed water, boxing gloves and rose-colored glasses in "Untitled Self-Portrait" are mesmerizing illusions, appearing more real than it would seem possible with the medium.

Jacobs said she does research before putting pencil to paper and sometimes makes her own models. That research packs her works with meaning. More accurately, she intends for them to be "visual metaphors": "images that are available to us from history, culture, politics and media."

A mosquito ready to draw blood and magnified many times beyond its true size holds an eerie sense of foreboding, as does a gorgeous painting of a pink rose against a background dripping with dark, almost black paint ("Chicago Peace Rose 1945"). An insect lurks behind a petal.

"The insect is a cockroach, a pest that is from a period between 354 and 295 million years ago," Jacobs explained. "It is very long-lasting, destructive and invasive."

"Chicago Peace Rose 1945" was the first in a series of drawings and paintings exploring insinuations of violence. In her work, the rose appears as a symbol of peace, and the fedora, co-opted by Chicago gangsters like



Al Capone, recurs as a symbol of corruption. Jacobs explained her inspiration: "Peace has been struggling for a long time."

Jeff Gillette: Desert Interventions and Valerie Jacobs: New Paintings, Drawings and Prints continue through June 29. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday noon-6 p.m. Bert Green Fine Art, 102 W. Fifth St., (213) 624-6212 or bgfa.us.

Contact Julie Riggott at julie@downtownnews.com.

Published on: May 16, 2008

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VALERIE JACOBS and JEFF GILLETTE

May 8 - June 30, 2008 at [Bert Green Fine Art](#), Downtown

by Ray Zone

This tandem show at first glance might seem an unlikely pairing. However, these two bodies of work reveal some compelling affinities. Jeff Gillette is a gifted plein air painter who takes the California desert as his subject and context. His paintings have a deceptive realism that mirrors the quiet beauty of the desert. But this figurative celebration of nature is invested with ironic commentary. Using what he calls "interventions," Gillette depicts encroachments both ecological and cultural upon the natural environment.



Jeff Gillette, "Whales," 2007,
acrylic on canvas, 20 x 60".



Jeff Gillette, "Bell Mountain," 2007,
acrylic on canvas, 20 x 60".



Jeff Gillette, "Sponge Heizer South," 2007,
acrylic on canvas, 20 x 36".

In "Bell Mountain," for example, he mountain of the same name is painted with quiet dignity below a serene blue sky in a verdant panorama. It would be an idyllic view except for the fact that in the lower left corner we see a variegated mound of trash with shelving, empty buckets and wood planks scattered amid other human rubble that appears to have been at the location for quite some time. Nature takes no notice of this spoilage, but the viewer of the painting might. The matter of fact presentation by Gillette of the indignity of such debris reinforces the power of a political statement free of hyperbole.

The painting "Whales" also includes human debris in the desert vista. But just behind the scattered trash are piles of rocks that the artist has rendered as whales swimming in the variegated scene. Gillette has also made similar interventions in other locations to create "big foot" cartoon characters out of rocks on site before making the plein air painting. Call this strategy "humor versus despair" if you will, but it's a way to allude to the human encroachment on the natural setting without invoking volatile feelings.

In "Sponge Heizer South" Gillette depicts artist Michael Heizer's large earthwork "Double Negative" (1969) in the Nevada desert gashed out by a bulldozer. In the trench, however, Gillette inserts the "Sponge Bob" cartoon character as if to humorously suggest it is he who has made the trench. As a satirical answer to Heizer's monumental earthwork, Sponge Bob may be seen as a representative in miniature of the delights of popular culture, a co-habitant of the common sphere of even high conceptual art.

The paintings and drawings of Valerie Jacobs are more subtle in their observations and paradoxes. You have to wait for the realizations of their irony to dawn on you. "Chicago Peace Rose 1945" might at first look be a botanical work of simple beauty. But wait, there's an insect on a petal off to the side making its way to the heart of the rose. No human intervention is necessary here for the artist to drive her ironic commentary. Nature itself can be destructive of simple beauty.



Valerie Jacobs, "Chicago Peace Rose 1945," 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30".

In "Concertina" a spiraling web of razor wire is painted white against a pure azure. The wire circles upon itself and, in its musical configuration suggests to this writer the other type of concertina, a hand-held instrument similar to an accordion. Of course, no human hands can touch this material without suffering injury. Pondering the title and looking at the image, one is disturbed by the possibility of this ironic juxtaposition.



Valerie Jacobs, "Concertina," 2008, oil on canvas, 30 x 30".

Jacobs makes delicate graphite drawings that are highly realistic. One, "Untitled (Mosquito)," depicts an extreme close-up of a mosquito feasting with its lance of a proboscis deep in human skin. Quiet intricacy is beautifully rendered here but painful to consider. As with other works of Jacobs' in this show, the delicacy of the style stands in counterpoint to the ultimate effect of the image.



Valerie Jacobs, "Untitled (Mosquito)," 2007, graphite on paper, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2".

Representational art in paintings and drawing for quite some time now has subsumed the lessons of modernism, conceptual art, performance art and post-modernism. Figuration may well subvert itself, question and reinvent itself as it builds new forms of paradox and irony that are quite subtle. Such antinomies are invested in the art of Gillette and Jacobs. Giving voice to sensibilities that are distinctly of the historical moment, representation continues to be renewed.

LA WEEKLY *Art+books*

TWO THREE-FERS

BY PETER FRANK

Wednesday, June 21, 2006



All three painters showing (appropriately) downtown belong to the dystopian wing of the “newbrow” aesthetic, conflating surrealism, classicism, Pop, movie-poster illustration, and a skin-crawly kind of humor into an ecstatic apocalypse. This is least apparent in Scott Siedman’s knowingly overblown renditions of overly attractive people — ancient Romans, apparently — rendered (in eye-wrenching detail) in the act of mutual seduction. But you get the feeling the fiery glow enveloping these bacchantes is more Vesuvian than crepuscular, and that they’re rehearsing the fall of an empire — again. Jeff Gillette imagines what decay already exists on the empire’s periphery, conjuring shantytowns, shack parks and other festering slums teeming with unseen life in the middle of some sort of palmy pondside paradise. It’s more Rio or Manila than L.A., but, in spirit and atmosphere, not much more. Many of Jeff Britton’s furiously painted landscapes are very much L.A. (and the rest might as well be), but an L.A. enmeshed in at best a fever dream of destruction. Freeways collapse in an earthquake inferno, a wild dog snarls in the Hollywood Hills night, tornadoes roar down country lanes — Britton should illustrate Mike Davis’ next book.

Things are rather more sanguine in the Westside precincts, where Stas Orlovski shows painting-size drawings concatenating disparate elements, representational and abstract, into unlikely landscapes, the more compelling for their very incompleteness. For her part, Ilene Sunshine does drawing-size paintings in which colorful, entirely nonobjective elements intertwine with similar playfulness — a low-key antic maintained by her sinewy Tinkertoy wall construction. And maintaining an elegant aloofness, the shimmering unframed paperworks of Marietta Hoferer take classic minimalism to new levels of near-invisible sensuality, their identical horizontal bands defined with pencil and transparent tape.

Scott Siedman, Jeff Gillette and Jeff Britton at Bert Green, 102 W. Fifth St., dwntwn.; Tues.-Sat., noon-6 p.m.; thru June 24. (213) 624-6212. Stas Orlovski, Ilene Sunshine and Marietta Hoferer at Overtones, 11306 Venice Blvd., Mar Vista; Fri.-Sun., noon-6 p.m.; thru June 25. (310) 915-0346

Jeff Gillette

Gillette rivals only the great Llyn Foulkes as L.A.'s most trenchant political artist. His bitterly funny works skewer the shibboleths of religion and commerce that have made the Bush era so heinous and dumb. Casually disregarding any semblance of a careerist path, this Orange County high school teacher and former Peace Corps volunteer is the ruling anarchist of Dirt Gallery, the brainchild of artist Rhonda Saboff.

Gillette's beautifully articulated paintings of Bombay and Calcutta slums deliver a dark satiric bite: Vast landscapes of shanties extending into a distant horizon are interrupted only by single small signposts, a shimmering banner for Kentucky Fried Chicken or a McDonald's arch. Other recent works update traditional Orientalist themes of desert exoticism with accouterments of Imperialist Pop: an Afghan camel rider sets off to deliver a Domino's pizza; a turbaned insurgent sips a Starbucks double latte.

Gillette augments the paintings with off-the-cuff collages stuck in thrift-store frames — simple interventions of Sunday-school illustrations with cut-out cartoon characters. His grinning Mickey cast as Judas, Peter Rabbit denying the dead Christ, and the Grinch leering at a stolen crucifix skewer the myths of both Bible thumpers and the Disney Channel.

Gillette is a sanctimony-seeking missile, and in other collages he hilariously tweaks the sacrosanct values of art history, leveling the playing field. Playboy cartoon nudies pose alongside Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*; Archie and Veronica explore "gender issues" inside an installation by Barbara Kruger. As incisive and tough as Raymond Pettibon's early drawings, Gillette's work takes no prisoners.

Michael Duncan, LA Weekly, Thursday, October 27, 2005