

Review of *Monte Cristo*, for Art Papers by Olivian Cha

It is rumored that the old Cinema Land theatre in Chinatown screened pornography before it eventually shuttered. I imagine viewings were fragile experiences, a careful balance of public and private pleasure derived from the fear and excitement of what one might see, combined with the moment of potentially being seen. Human Resources, an artist run project space in Los Angeles now occupies the Cinema Land building and it is in this movie theater-cum-gallery that Math Bass and Leidy Churchman present "*Monte Cristo*," an exhibition of painting, sculpture and video curated by Chiara Govindo. While Bass and Churchman do not explicitly reference the theater's screening history, the show carefully utilizes the space's eccentric architecture and moves the viewer through works that play with varying degrees of visibility and obscurity.

Proposing *Monte Cristo*—"an island, a sandwich, a novel"—as a metaphorical framework for the exhibition, the main floor of the two-story building has been transformed into what feels more like a stage or set than a gallery. By strategically placing makeshift walls, rust-colored terracotta pots, wood slats and painted canvas in various arrangements, the artists create a fluid "scene" that stimulates both ludic curiosity and motion.

Low-hanging tracks of warm spotlights replace the gallery's fluorescent lighting, casting the works and viewer in a dramatic mix of shadow and light. While each element contributes to an overall formal coherence, the most compelling pieces are inexplicably amorphous forms made of painted canvas. These objects convey an ambivalent hollowness. Their shapes determined by armatures we never see and so can only imagine, giving the impression of a chair after one has casually thrown a coat over it. They call to mind a certain "soft" quality, one art historian Max Kozloff identified in the sculpture of Claes Oldenburg. For Kozloff soft sculpture demonstrated "a kind of surrender to the natural condition which pulls bodies down." In this sense Bass' works are both "soft" and erect; exhibiting various levels of verticality and fullness; propped up like tents but still drooping, swollen but still embodying a palpable pliancy. If their anthropomorphic shapes suggest a fleshy mass inside them, their surfaces also function more like *skin* than canvas. One rather deflated piece depicts the tail and face of a mouse while another the spotted marks of what we can only assume is animal in inspiration. Skin is that visceral and elastic surface which manifests interiority and exteriority simultaneously and it is this phenomenological expression that persists throughout the show. Canvas is made into animal hides, stretchers, a flag or drapery; these various materializations, alongside white walls and empty pots, seem to partition, conceal, recede, reveal and even slump in quiet repose. In turn, the viewer is compelled to move: to crouch, tiptoe, peer behind, above and around these forms, in the process her role becomes inescapably performative.

Churchman's paintings, the only expressly representational works, also offer a kinetic proposition by way of form and subject. Hanging on the walls in a disperse fashion they maintain a loose equivalence with Bass' floor works, sharing the same palette

but also creating an associative and metaphorical register for an otherwise abstract group of sculptures. These works depict movement in obvious ways—in a mobile of yellow circles, a speeding ambulance or a man in a gondola—but function more as generic, pictorial stand-ins rather than serious painterly investigations. Because of their relatively small size, they appear to withdraw in the massive gallery; their visual legibility almost compromised so that the viewer is ultimately forced to *move closer*.

Elsewhere, a sizeable speaker in an inconspicuous stairwell emits the sound of ocean waves and classical piano compositions into the main gallery space. We later discover this is the soundtrack for Churchman's video, which screens alongside Bass' in an upstairs gallery. Both videos, while relevant, feel slightly gratuitous in an already full exhibition.

If one's movement through the exhibition resembles that of the children's game "hide-and-seek", the show offers one final vantage point from the second floor gallery where the original projection cutouts still puncture the lofted walls. What once provided the path of light from projector to screen now gives the viewer an elevated perspective of the topography below. From this height, the first floor installation is compressed into something closer to a picture or a map, miniaturizing and flattening a scene that was life-size and immersive just moments before. It is in this static moment that the viewer no longer struggles to see; the whole scene is enclosed before her while she watches at a pleasantly furtive distance.