



California Dreamin'

Liz Craft

Chris Finley

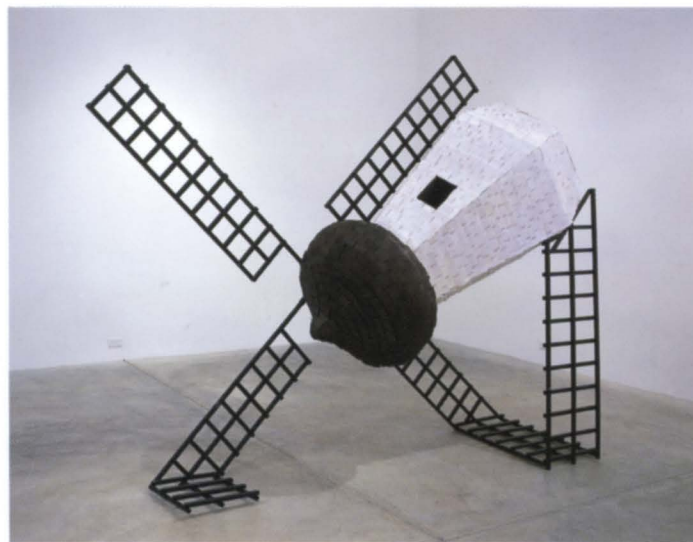
Pentti Monkkonen

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



Liz Craft, *Untitled*, 1998, mixed media, 11' x 5' x 5'
collection Michael and Susan Hort, New York



Liz Craft, *Round Off*, 2000, wood, steel, paint, 96" x 86" x 33", collection
Kenneth L. Freed, Boston, courtesy Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles

Serious Fun

For many years now, artists from L.A. have bemoaned the regional tag that always seems to turn up in reviews, exhibition announcements and press releases whenever they show outside the city. "New York artists are never referred to as 'New York artists,' or put in New York-themed group shows anymore" they cry, worried that specific civic associations portend eternal banishment to the realm of the provincial. Yet curators, critics and dealers seem to get a lot of mileage out of the appellation "Los Angeles Artist," and for as many times as this qualifier has been bandied about, there has yet to materialize a serious artworld backlash against the now-ubiquitous West Coast School. New York galleries are consistently filled with Angelenos, European kunsthalls spill over with graduates from schools like CalArts, Art Center and UCLA, and any self-respecting international gallerist has at least one L.A. artist in his or her stable.

Several factors are responsible for this demographic. One, a tremendous amount of very good art has been coming out of the region for the past 15 years (if you are talking about those just coming into international prominence), and secondly, there has been critical and commercial support of it. Another more suggestive reason, which is only now coming into focus, is that in the face of globalization and its concomitant homogenization, authentic, regional idiosyncrasies have become hot properties. And rather than limiting the art that has been made in L.A., an identification of the dominant tendencies that have shaped its history only make it seem more genuine and therefore attractive. As I see it, one of the defining characteristics of L.A. art is its insistent playfulness and reliance on humor to jump-start aesthetic discourse. The twin pillars of Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari are the obvious progenitors of this lineage, carried on in different guise by the likes of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, and passed directly on to artists such as those included in this exhibition and their broad circle of peers. Fun for fun's sake is never the end goal for any of the better art coming out of the region, but for many, whimsy does serve as a powerful hook to bring viewers into a challenging relationship with the work.

One would be hard pressed, for instance, to suppress a smile upon encountering the work of Pentti Monkkonen, but to stop there would be to miss some fascinating forays into physics, optics and biology to name only a few of the fields his work traverses. For the past few years, Monkkonen has been making motorized sculptures that would be the envy of any adolescent boy. A cartoonish egg-shaped go-cart replete with mock-corporate sponsors, matching graphics and coordinated racing outfit was followed in 1999 by two outrageous two-wheelers hatched from the same fertile garage, the *Duck Bike* and *Swancycle*. Each accommodates fully functioning motorcycle parts within a disarming, aviary body sculpted from fiberglass. As imagery, both the duck and the swan undermine any aspirations their riders might have for Brando-esque cool, turning prospective wild ones into fey clowns. After a period of time, however, the wacky disruption of expectations created by the odd marriage of fowl and fairings becomes more acceptable to the eye, even vaguely familiar. Monkkonen's unlikely vehicles, in fact, share much with their more conventional brethren. The compact,

streamlined body of his duck is directly analogous in form to the aerodynamic teardrop of motorcycle gas tanks, and the languid curves of the swan turn out to be not too far removed from the flow of chromed exhaust pipes or extended motocross fenders. Perhaps we can all just get along.

The artist's recent *See Saw* (1999) is even more beguiling. Ostensibly a goofy exercise in nostalgia for the simpler days spent on the playground, *See Saw* preys on our hard-wired recognition of and longing for good clean fun. As effective as it is in bringing back the good old days, however, it equally wreaks havoc with notions of time and perception. It is easy to recognize the diagrammatic representation of the two extremes of movement on a fulcrum — the girl goes up while the boy goes down and vice-versa — but the way this static object flip-flops in one's mind, collapsing time so that two separate states are visible at once, is a stunning little trick. The title too becomes extremely evocative, suggesting that split second between active and archived vision and finally giving meaning to a name that had always been taken for granted.

Simultaneity seems to be a crucial component of the sculptural objects of Liz Craft as well, the lucky viewer put in a position of trying to find narrative closure in works that are constantly beginning and ending at the same time. In *Living Edge* (1997-98), for example (not included in this exhibition), a continuously evolving swirl of suburban imagery catches observers in an associative whirlwind that whisks the imagination from the banal to the ominous in a dizzying flash, never resting at either point on the spectrum. The same is true for *Untitled* (1998), a tower of maddening scale that implausibly straddles the living room and the municipal zoo. As one's eye tracks across its varied surface, certain details help fix spots on a referential compass — a pointy leg of a coffee table perhaps, a puddle of spilt milk — but the positioning is only momentary as an adjoining passage — a rock outcropping? an undersized monkey? — confounds all previously determined bearings and one is left to start again.

Round Off (2000) is equally frustrating. A replica of a Dutch windmill, not too dissimilar in size to one that might serve as an obstacle at a miniature golf course, has been flipped up off its foundation and come to rest with its base in the air. To make a more stable footing with the ground, two of the windmill's latticework blades have been bent 90 degrees at their ends, yet instability still reigns. One's eye wants to see the structure continue its revolution or play back the action that brought on the current misfortune. Instead, the seemingly spindly blades have been irreversibly modified to accommodate the current topsy-turvyness, gravity be damned.

Appearances are easy targets for Chris Finley too, and he has mastered the art of mutable sculptural presentation. Although no longer residing in Los Angeles (he now lives in Northern California), the artist was schooled in L.A. and sowed the seeds of his ongoing, interconnected project while working here. Like Craft



Chris Finley, *Here Boy (warp zone, teleport pod)*, 1999, mailboxes, plastic rain gutters, tennis balls, forks, hummingtape surveillance tapes, sliced best sellers, alligator calamari, whittled pencils, baseball covers, 32 cans of Pedigree dog food, poetry, dog leash, collar, i.d. tag, dimensions variable collection Dr. Richard Feldman, Los Angeles



Chris Finley, *Drool House Zoom Stretch Flip*, 1999, sign enamel on canvas over wood, 72" x 72", courtesy Jack Tilton Gallery, New York



Pentti Monkkonen, *See Saw*, 1999, fiberglass, wood, paint, 84" x 18" x 136"
collection Erik and Heide Murkoff, Montecito, Calif.
courtesy Acme, Los Angeles

and Monkkonen, Finley's work on first inspection has the look of a humorous but hardly weighty exercise in formal tomfoolery. Mixing and matching store-bought domestic products from Rubbermaid bins to "car-caddies," placemats and flower pots, Finley constructs tidy bundles of gear that perfectly interface with one another, even across product lines. From his earliest exercises in this medium, these components were used as containers for further collations of material inside, the whole becoming visible only upon physically opening up layer after layer. A computer metaphor, whereby files are clicked open to reveal further files within, which in turn contain still more information, guided the artist's thinking, and bodies of work evolved like new software updates. The hierarchical structure of computer games eventually became an organizing principle for Finley, with each successive exhibition representing a "Level" in a meta-narrative. Sculpture referenced and led to other sculpture or morphed into two-dimensional paintings that subsequently cannibalized themselves to create compressed hybrids with shared genetic codes but wildly different resolutions.

The work in this exhibition reflects a certain stage in Finley's spooling storybook, beginning with *Here Boy! (warp zone, teleport pod)* (1999). An innocuous-looking assemblage of white plastic objects sits in tasteful minimalist composure until one starts to download its hidden internal contents. Tennis balls pierced with forks, "alligator calamari," obsessively altered paperback novels, whittled pencils, and other evidence of quasi-violent steam-letting hint at an undercurrent of unrest, as does the suspiciously unfastened dog collar tethered to the construction and the attempt at canine control alluded to in the work's title. Once let loose into the machinery of the narrative, the implied dog gums up the system with its effusive salivation, evident in the painting *Drool House Zoom Stretch Flip* (1999), where a fragmented reflection of a dog's face is seen on the left-hand side and characters from earlier, more straightforward paintings are visibly corrupted. Further disintegration occurs in *Scream House Scramble* (1999), where recognizable elements are fewer still and a seemingly viral state of abstraction has taken over. In this series of works, the familiar domestic drama of an unruly dog is transformed by Finley into a meditation on technology, order and chaos, setting up his audience for an unknown future as they navigate their way to the next level.

— Each of these three artists reaches back to the more innocent time of childhood and adolescence, when play was an integral, if unrecognizable, mode of development and acculturation, to find models of perceptual and even moral learning. The lighthearted veneer of their works effectively disarms viewers, making them more receptive to the respective message without lessening its import. Such serious fun is a hallmark of a great deal of the art that has come from Southern California over the past 40 years and more than lives up to its increasingly desirable label: "Made in L.A."



Pentti Monkkonen, *Duck Bike*, 1999, fiberglass, motorized minibike, urethane paint, 33.5" x 47" x 21.5"
collection Brondesbury Holdings, Ltd. Tortola, B.V.I.

Cover: Pentti Monkkonen, *Swancycle*, 1999, fiberglass, metal, 48" x 36" x 48"
collection Dean Valentine and Amy Adelman, Los Angeles

— Michael Darling
independent writer and curator, Los Angeles