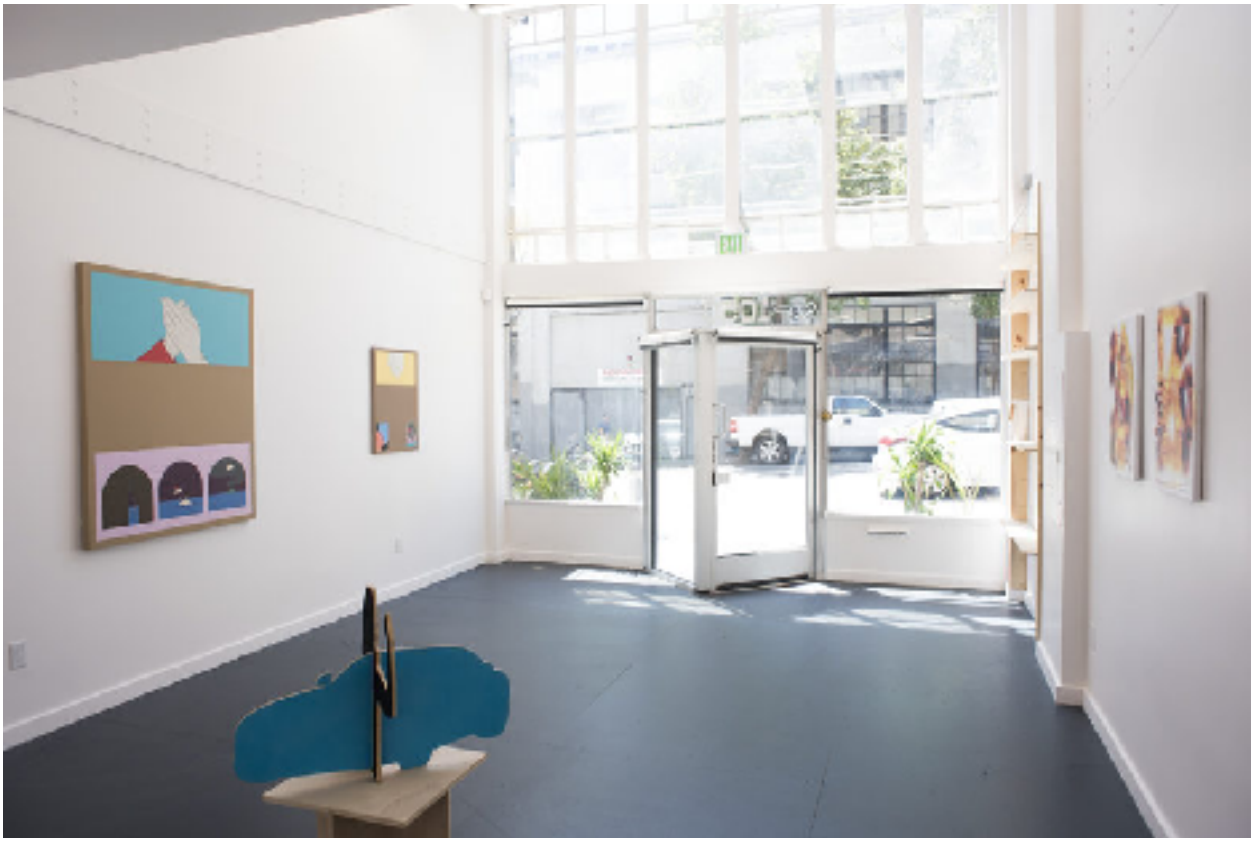
ARTSLANT



"ARTIST MIGRATIONS FROM SF TO LA ARE SHAPING WEST COAST AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY"
BY LEORA LUTZ
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On this particular Saturday in May, it's unusually quiet in the Tenderloin as I walk from BART up Larkin Street. The San Francisco neighborhood is known for its seedy characteristics, its history of vice, homelessness, happy ending massage parlors, strip clubs, dive bars, single occupancy hotels, and social service centers. Today it feels like a level of caring has taken place, with some new businesses now occupying previously vacant storefronts—the rawness is still there, it just doesn't feel as bedraggled and dangerous. Maybe it's the heat—a blazing 65 degrees that feels like 80 by our SF standards.

I left LA in 2011 to escape the heat.

I am on my way to see the exhibition EXPAT at R/SF projects. The show interested me because I am myself a Los Angeles transplant, and the show features artists who all moved to LA from SF. In fact, two of the artists, Greg Ito and Matt Lipps, lived in LA, moved to SF, and then returned south in the last couple of years. For EXPAT, R/SF wanted to bring the artists back to San Francisco to

establish a cross-pollinated identity for the two cities, and to create a stronger contemporary art presence encompassing the entire West Coast.



EXPAT, installation view at R/SF projects, 2017. Courtesy of the gallery

Artist and R/SF project co-founder Anička Vrána-Godwin briefly moved to Los Angeles to take advantage of the city's opportunities, but returned recently after becoming homesick for the project space she had co-founded. "I missed the energy here," she said, and the atmosphere of the Tenderloin. There really isn't anything like the Tenderloin in LA.

San Francisco, in comparison to LA, is a very small town, which suits those who welcome a slower pace, the compact "big city feel," historical architecture, and cooler weather—not to mention its reputation as a safe-haven for innovators, intellectuals, the LGBTQ+ community, and anarchists alike. But there's an elephant in the room: the rise in population over the last five years, driven by masses of tech companies, their workers (or those hoping to be), and those taking advantage of this new population in need of culture and living spaces. The resulting real estate greed of almost criminal proportions has out-priced many low-income people, working class families, and artists from their shops, studios, and homes.



Peter Wu, Helene XII, 2017, Archival pigment transfer on perforated projection screen, 25 × 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist

For many artists in EXPAT, the move to Los Angeles was a practical one: it's cheaper to live there, there is more available studio space, and there are more galleries, artists, and opportunities. For others, it's the city's energy. Peter Wu shared a story via email:

> After graduating from SFAI, me and two classmates (Aaron Garber-Maikovska and Jason Hwang) moved out to LA. We were some of the first which turned into a mass exodus to this city. We realized that the rent was too high in SF but we

also wanted to be near our art school heroes like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Jim Shaw.

Upon moving here to LA, I started working at Patrick Painter Inc. This was a crazy moment for me. I had so many romantic ideas of the art world which were quickly crushed by being exposed to its inner workings (good and bad). I chose to work there as this is where our heroes were showing. Later on I was fortunate to have the opportunity to show with the gallery—a momentary dream come true.

Los Angeles has an energy to it where you feel like you have to get things done. Maybe it was just me, but in SF I felt content with just getting by. Maybe we were afraid of the saturation of artists in New York but there is a slow burning fire here. Not aggressive but, at the [same] time, the potential to become a real threat. We like that space, it's just our pace.



Matt Lipps, Untitled (Curtain), 2010, C-print, ed. *5/5*, 44 × 33 inches. © Matt Lipps. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery

Many of the artists in EXPAT were able to find work spaces up to five times the size for the same price they were paying in SF. They found more freedom to explore scale and materials, to make messes and to step back from the work and see it clearly, without the walls "caving in." In addition, some artists described the psychological relief of not having to worry about the cost of living, which allowed for more mental creative space.

"There is a slow burning fire here...We like that space, it's just our pace."

Furthermore, some described how the sheer volume of galleries expands opportunities for building relationships and becoming part of an ambitious and globally recognized contemporary art circuit. EXPAT artist Jake Ziemann participated in a group show at LA-based Shulamit Nazarian in 2016. In an email he described the decision to move south after that show: "[It] felt like the logical next step in my career to extend my community, expand my practice, and to be in more immediate contact geographically with an art scene that both felt foreign to me and in which I had already begun to participate."

Photo-based artist Matt Lipps moved from LA to the Bay Area a few years ago to take a full-time academic appointment. Lipps exhibits his work regularly at Jessica Silverman Gallery in SF and at Marc Selwyn in LA. He recently moved back to LA; he realized that his 17 years' worth of relationships with colleagues and peers there was "home." He described via email how, upon returning, he was able to find a space "I can grow into," rather than a space to merely "fit" into. Thematically his work changed, too.

"Not only did I have space and time to slow down and breathe, but I think that feeling is reflected in the work."

"The first show I completed back in LA, Looking Through Pictures, was much more contemplative—not only did I have space and time to slow down and breathe, but I think that feeling is reflected in the work as well." The piece he showed in EXPAT, Untitled (Curtain), is from 2010, and was created while he was still in SF. It's part of a series titled Horizon/s, after the 1950s magazine of the same title. The series, as had a majority of his work since 2004, used cut-out and propped up "paper dolls" arranged in theatrical dioramas. The new work is more self-reflexive, using the negative space that remained from previous cut-out works such as Untitled (Curtain).

A week after visiting R/SF projects, I took a trip to LA. While there, I stopped by HILDE, whose Director Hilde Helphenstein recently relocated from SF to open her gallery on Washington Blvd., a quick jaunt east of the gallery cluster in Culver City. On view through July 17 is HYDROGENESIS, an exhibition by artist duo Ohlsson/Dit-Cilinn, who were my classmates at California College of the Arts. While at their show, I happened upon Jake Ziemann and Julie Henson, who were both included in EXPAT, and who now share a huge studio in Boyle Heights. I dropped by the space to talk about their work and relocation.



Jake Ziemann, standing here until you make me move, 2016, Spray paint, acrylic, and gouache on ceramic, wood, cardboard, plaster, and graphite powder, 28 × 8 × 7 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian

"My move to Los Angeles has made me realize how connected my personal state is to my work."

When I showed up, Ziemann was working outside in a roomy tool shop with saws and worktables. Since moving into his new studio, he has been making work that hangs in mobile-like configurations from the ceiling, emphasizing notions of precariousness and instability. "I believe my move to Los Angeles from San Francisco has made me realize how connected my personal state is to my work," he said. Elaborately knotted ropes bind small ceramic clumps to long wooden

poles; they entwine a ceramic arch-shape. The knots restrict and support the pieces in these suspended states. One particularly alluring piece consists of an old painting sewn into tube shapes, filled with concrete, then tightly bound and left to dry. The ropes were later removed, leaving behind the remnants of the squeezing process frozen in time.
The studio's huge main room provides a perfect spot for photographing work, staging studio visits, or hosting gatherings. Henson had just deinstalled her solo exhibition at Anat Ebgi, and the work was set up in the main room. Of the artists in EXPAT, Henson's work is the most overtly socio-political. She juxtaposes silhouettes of women athletes with images of women from fashion magazines. Using mirror, acrylic, and plywood, her materials reiterate "the cold language of advertising," she said.



Julie Henson, The Triumphant Return, 2016, Inkjet print and flocking on plywood, 34 × 22.5 × 37.5 inches

"I don't feel 'comfortable' here," Henson says. Meaning, she doesn't feel that sense of comfort, or perhaps boredom and stagnation, that one feels when they are settled in a spot.

"I don't feel 'comfortable' here."

Here she is always working on her art. Since moving to LA, her work became more sculptural. Still using images from magazines "and turning them back into solids," she is now taking things a step further. The bodies are now three-dimensional, slotted like segmented building toys, and then repositioned as teetering and awkward giant amulets, jewels, or trophies. They seem to signify the way that female bodies are glorified and commodified in the media, yet oftentimes seen only as parts.

Henson is married to Seth Curcio, who was using an unoccupied space at their studio as an office. He is the previous co-founder and publisher of Daily Serving, and is now the Senior Director of Shulamit Nazarian Gallery where he has just curated his first show, Broken Language, which includes Josh Faught, an SF textile artist, and Greg Ito, whose work is also in EXPAT. Since moving to LA, Ito has been working on several bodies of new paintings using multiple narrative vignettes on single canvases. These are based on the story of his grandparents who were interned together in a camp during WWII, where they managed to find love despite the harrowing times. In the paintings, two hands posing in a variety of gestures are featured adjacent to imagery common in children's fantasy stories. The narratives reiterate uncertain outcomes in the face of danger or the midst of deceit. Lone boats float on a calm sea with smoke in the distance; a lick of flames curls out of a second story bedroom window.



Greg Ito, Soothsayer, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 31.5 × 23.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Throughout the work in EXPAT there seems to be a subtle darkness looming, despite the hopeful promise of Los Angeles, whether Ito's bittersweet love stories, Ziemann's sculptural existentialism, or Hansen highlighting the enduring social exploitation of female bodies. In contrast, Petra Cortright mines digital data in her practice, and her video work in EXPAT includes herself as subject. Her post-digital-selfie cinematic pieces seem very LA. Bailey Hikawa's Refrigerator Feelings is another exception. She painted her first stand-alone painting after moving to LA, replete with washy soft colors and abstract shapes playfully floating on an almost nude canvas.

Perhaps EXPAT's darkness is a case of "no matter where you go, there you are." In some ways the question "Does location matter?" seems simply answered by the fact that every artist bio or press release states the city where an artist works and lives; people may even confer "zip code cred" to a given location. But is it to be expected that an artist would make a sudden and radical shift, drastically changing their work after moving to a new location? If the goal—as seems to be the case with EXPAT—is to create or identify a West Coast artistic relationship between LA and SF, one that acknowledges the ever shifting back and forth of ideas and bodies, what will the new place-identifying moniker be? "LA/SF"? Is it even important? With EXPAT, the subjects and conceptual concerns ultimately remain true to the artists' ongoing practices, no matter where they lay down roots.

I drive back to SF through the heartland on the 5. It's 95 degrees, and the air conditioner (that I don't need in the Bay Area) is not working. I finally arrive home in Oakland, to the cool ocean breeze, and a bright pink sunset. It is after all, still California.

EXPAT ran May 14—June 4 at R/SF projects, San Francisco.

Broken Language continues through July 1 at Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

—Leora Lutz