

AROUND THE GALLERIES  
Ghosts dwell in 'Trailer'

Leah Ollman. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dec 12, 2003. pg. E.40

Copyright (c) 2003 Los Angeles Times) From the moment the screen door squeaks open at Michael McMillen's new installation at L.A. Louver Gallery, the body is hooked and the mind eagerly follows. McMillen is brilliant at transforming passive viewers into complicit participants. It all starts at that screen door.

Pull it toward you, and that squeak may as well be a trumpet blast, announcing your arrival in a vaguely familiar past.

The gallery walls have been painted the indigo of a night sky. A small, strange painting of buildings deluged by waves hangs in a pool of light on one wall. A traveler's trunk, cast in bronze, sits on the floor nearby. What you see at the far end of the gallery affirms that a threshold has been crossed. You've entered a captivating space that compresses the poetic and the palpable, the metaphoric and the mundane.

Hugging the back corner of the gallery is the "Red Trailer Motel" -- or at least a section of it that convincingly evokes a larger structure. The walls of corrugated metal, much of it rusted, scraped or flaking, make the building look shoddy, perhaps abandoned. Its landscaped by detritus -- old tires and fragments of furniture, tumbleweeds and gas cans -- reinforcing the impression that no one inhabits this structure but ghosts.

Yet the light over the office door still glows, and something is flickering behind one of the motel room doors. A carpet of stones crunches underfoot as you approach the building, the brittle sound countered by occasional wafts of harmonica or piano. McMillen counts on the trusty voyeuristic impulse, luring us to lens-covered eyeholes on the motel's three numbered doors. The views within appear continuous with the scale of the exterior structure, though logic insists that the interiors are miniatures.

They're meticulously crafted, but illusion is less the goal than the delivery system for a provocative emotional encounter. Each of the interiors does appear abandoned, its walls sallow and its broken furniture strewn about. But in each there is also some movement, a presence that hints at McMillen's more subversive, poetic intent.

Looking beyond the disheveled mess of one of the rooms -- loose wires hanging from the ceiling, broken bedsprings on the musty floor -- you can see out the back door, not to a hallway or courtyard but to a few live goldfish twitching back and forth. All sense of scale and continuity is interrupted again in the next room, where empty bottles frame a screen. Its showing a short film called "Motel (Under the World)," a montage of found and new footage with quick cuts of wagging fingers, sinking boats, old signs, old machinery, Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Neuman, and a man with a wooden contraption over his head.

A related installation in the adjacent gallery has mesmerizing qualities of its own, again having to do with creating a sense of atmosphere and place.

In the "Red Trailer Motel," thousands of details integrate seamlessly to achieve a feeling of textural and -- more important -- emotional authenticity. Little narratives unfurl from such minute elements as a scrap of yarn knotted around the screen door handle. A broader cultural history of the West might be spun from the presence of miner's trunks stacked by the office door, a wall sign pointing to a UFO landing site, and myriad other indicators of desperate yearning for salvation or escape.

McMillen, an L.A. native and longtime stalwart of the art scene, extends the tradition of assemblage tableaux exemplified by Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. (Their 1982-83 "Pericord Apts." is a clear precedent.) But the practice of evoking a world in abbreviated form extends beyond Kienholz to Joseph Cornell and, centuries further back, to the making of miniature theaters and cabinets of curiosities. Like its precursors, McMillen's work fuses illusion, experience and memory. Part archive, part fiction, the "Red Trailer Motel" is all magic.

L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Jan. 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.