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Art review: Edgar Arceneaux at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

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Edgar Arceneaux's latest outing at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects (<http://www.vielmetter.com/>) is an ambitious installation that centers around the city of Detroit as a symbol of the ravages of our post-industrial times. Typical of Arceneaux's art, it

feels like a work in progress: open-ended and a bit rough around the edges. While this strategy is occasionally unsatisfying, in this case it feels appropriate, not unlike the city it seeks to address.

Of the show's three rooms, the first is the most powerful: a darkened space lined with metal shelving units that hold damaged and burned cardboard boxes. Partially coated in sugar crystals, the boxes are like waterlogged goods left on the stock room shelf, discharging their surfeit of congealed sweetness. In the center of the room a plastic bucket hangs beneath a glowing paper globe that viewers can grab and release at will. As this pendulum moves, the boxes cast eerie shadows that loom large and then disappear. These phantom silhouettes resemble hazy cityscapes — larger-than-life projections of packaging that once held shiny new consumer products but is now crumbling and empty.



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Although its references to urban decay are oblique, the piece's sentiment is clear. The pendulum suggests cycles of time and how the image or reputation of a place — the outsized shadow it casts — may grow or shrink, but is always ephemeral.

The second room is festooned with raw canvas flags, each depicting a different “god” of Detroit. They evoke heraldic banners but instead of leaders or spiritual figures, each flag represents a civic institution — city government, banks, fire and police, etc. The figures are distinctly un-heroic, composed of what look like broken lumps of clay or bone that float and sometimes coalesce into vaguely humanoid forms (with an odd nod to Hans Bellmer's severed doll parts). The pillars of civilization are now just fossils.

The exhibition's third room contains a pair of beautiful drawings of a burned out Detroit pub where the 1967 riots began. Perched on floating stretches of pavement and interrupted by barren trees, the ruins look literally excised from space and time. A photograph Arceneaux took of the plaza that now inhabits the site reinforces this sensation, but oddly, although they are more specific to Detroit than the other works in the show, the drawings feel stalled in a generalized nostalgia.



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Arceneaux is at his best when dealing with big, elastic ideas, and the title of the show, “The Algorithm Doesn’t Love You,” seems to have little to do with the Motor City. Yet it’s a piece of poetry in its own right: a comment on the reduction of life to some kind of mathematical progression. Google’s proprietary formulas come to mind; they are part of the on-demand economy that has turned cardboard boxes rotting on shelves into an anachronism. Arceneaux’s empties, with their futile crop of sugar crystals, speak both of neglect and exponential growth. In fact, that piece is titled “The Crystal Palace,” which was also the name of the glass pavilion that housed the Great Exhibition of 1851, harbinger of the Industrial Revolution. That’s where it all began. Hopefully the algorithm isn’t the only one that decides where it all will end.

-- Sharon Mizota

Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 6006 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 837-2117, through Dec. 11. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.vielmetter.com (<http://www.vielmetter.com>)

Images: "The Crystal Palace" (top), "The Gods of Detroit (edcaituon)" and "The Gods of Detroit (puilbc siveercs)" (middle) and detail of "Blind Pig #3." Credit: Robert Wedemeyer and Gene Ogami.

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