

Art and Cake, July 4, 2018

This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich and Many Other Artists  
at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA)  
Organized by Meg Cranston and John Baldessari

June 3 – September 2, 2018

By Jody Zellen



It is an open secret that many artists hire out, working with fabricators in the production of their artwork. These artists, artisans and fabricators are often silent and uncredited partners in the creation of the work. Los Angeles based artists Meg Cranston and John Baldessari have organized an exhibition to celebrate Norm Laich, who has been instrumental in the creation and production of numerous artists' pieces. Included among the artists Laich has assisted are Barbara Kruger, Gary Simmons, Mike Kelley, Kay Rosen and Stephen Prina as well as Cranston and Baldessari themselves.

In the early 1990s, Laich was one of the only fabricators that produced vinyl lettering used by galleries and museums as wall text. In addition to vinyl letters and cut-outs, Laich also hand-painted numerous signs. His steady hand and easy to get along with personality made him the go-to-guy for most of the hand lettered work created in Los Angeles. While he was a welcomed collaborator and instrumental in the creation of many text-based artworks, he was a mostly silent partner.

This evocative exhibition raises questions about authorship and responsibility, as often the artist would supply a sketch or a directive and then let Laich make decisions as to how to best create the art. In an informative documentary by Pauline Stella Sanchez about Laich, artist Gary Simmons speaks to Laich's genius in scaling and offering expertise for his large-scale wall painting currently on view in the lobby of the California African American Museum.

On view at the The Institute of Contemporary Art are documents, sketches and recreations, as well as new works painted by Laich for this occasion. Kay Rosen's *Various Strata*, 1996/1998-99 (recreated 2018) is a large-scale wall painting of three words in white letters — HIM, HYMM, HMMM — on a blue rectangle. Occupying a large freestanding wall that divides the gallery is Stephen Prina's deep green work, *Monochrome Painting*, 1998-99 (recreated 2018). Here Laich has painted the title of the work in all caps on a green wall. On the floor is

conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner's text *AS LONG AS IT LASTS*, 2018. Weiner has been working with Laich for many years and trusts Laich's interpretation and presentation of his language based pieces.

Also included in the exhibition is John Baldessari's *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation*, 1966-68. In this work, a sign painter (sometimes Laich) adds text citing each place and date the work is shown. The original canvas now includes four additional panels: each entry is both a unique addition, yet also similar to those before it.

After viewing the exhibition and watching the video, it is impossible not to admire Laich's dedication to his craft, his relationship with a wide range of artists and his willingness to exist below the radar. Each work on view is the result of a negotiation and trust — as it is Laich who is responsible for the “painting” of the image. Cranston and Baldessari as curators/organizers have included both small canvases and large-scale wall paintings as well as a multi-room installation by the late Mike Kelley for which Laich supplied the hand-painted imagery. Works by eighteen artists are included. One might ask, where is Norm Laich in all of this? The answer, a painting entitled *Never Die*, 2015 is an example of Laich's personal work which is right at home in the context of these other text-based pieces.

While it is commendable to celebrate a contribution such as Laich's, the exhibition seems somewhat thin and unfulfilling. It is Stella Sanchez's film that elucidates Laich's role as a *brush for hire* and the complex relationship he has with both the artists and the art world at large. However, the works on view feel like a small sampling of a much larger oeuvre.

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