

Art and Cake, July 7, 2017

Glen Rubsamen
The Disguise Was Almost Perfect
Christopher Grimes Gallery
June 24 - September 1, 2017

By Jody Zellen



What constitutes iconic Los Angeles imagery: ocean sunsets, palm trees, the Hollywood sign? In many ways it is easy to imagine the black silhouette of a palm tree against a sky colored gradient, and think, classic Los Angeles. Yet, it is anything but easy to construct such an image as a painting that reaches beyond a cliché, transporting audiences to a new realm of appreciation and understanding of Los Angeles' unique cityscape. In his exhibition, *The Disguise Was Almost Perfect*, Los Angeles / Dusseldorf based artist, Glen Rubsamen achieves a sophisticated confluence of the natural and the man made as representations of the complex relationship between technology, nature and culture in Los Angeles.

Many of the places depicted in Rubsamen's paintings are recognizable. He chooses these locations through an idiosyncratic (technology driven) method of plotting a route via Google maps and Street View. The image in Street View serves as a point of departure as Rubsamen consults his computer for visual landmarks before visiting and photographing a site. Often he photographs the location from the same vantage point as the Google image. While many of Rubsamen's paintings juxtapose skies filled with billboards and towering silhouetted palm trees, some include distinctive imagery like Randy's Donuts in Inglewood, the roller coaster at Magic Mountain and the Mark di Suvero sculpture on Venice Beach. In *Randy's Blue* (2017) the towering donut rises from the bottom of the canvas silhouetted against an expansive horizon painted in hues that shift from blues to greens alluding to the sky at sunset. The edge of the oval shaped donut glows orange and pink as if reflecting the setting sun. The painting celebrates the

incongruity of the large circular form in relation to the thinner verticals—trees, electric poles, street lamps— that balance out the composition.

Rubsamen is interested in the relationship between shapes. Integral to his practice is composing high contrast black and white or colored photographs where he documents the proliferation of billboards that dot the L.A. landscape advertising this and that, in addition to what juts into the sky in opposition to the horizontal plain. His paintings, abstracted from the photographs (where the relationships between shapes have been carefully framed in the view finder), depict these collapsed spaces. From a distance, the paintings appear flat but upon close examination, Rubsamen's careful layering becomes apparent. For example, in *El Camino Real* (2017), a silhouetted palm tree is centered in the composition. Textured brushstrokes and colorful underpainting radiates from below the black shape. In the right foreground sits a tall historical marker in the form of a shepherd's crook supporting a mission bell. In the lower left corner is what seems to be a road sign and a street lamp. These elements are depicted in receding perspective creating a diagonal line across the painting. The background is a subtle gradient that shifts from green to orange along the opposite diagonal. Only the light and the bell are rendered with some detail—having opaque green and orange outlines that cause them to pop from the background as if awash in self-illumination.

In his works, Rubsamen explores the intersection of the natural and the modern, fabricated world. He delights in juxtaposing the graphic qualities of these elements. In the painting, *The Disguise Was Almost Perfect* (2017) Mark Di Suvero's angular Venice Beach sculpture is contrasted with a fluttering array of palms. A similar tension arises in *Magic Mountain* (2017) as the arcs and support towers of the roller coaster are seen in relation to the organic shapes of blowing palm fronds. These silhouetted structures are set against a gradient of hot pinks and oranges, suggesting a fiery sky. What becomes clear upon close examination and puzzling out the relationships, is that there is a pattern and methodology to Rubsamen's abstracting. The natural is flattened: skies are reduced to color gradients while trees become textured silhouettes. It is only the man-made —billboards, public art, radar installations and amusement park rides— that are rendered with detail and dimensionality. Because his focus is up toward the sky or across a distant horizon, what exists close by and at street level is cropped. Rubsamen has stripped away everything extraneous— including human beings. Although devoid of people, Rubsamen's paintings are not apocalyptic and about ruins, rather they celebrate the formal relationships and abstract qualities implicit in Southern California's urban and natural landscape.

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