

Art in America

PENTTI MONKKONEN

Jenny's

Before there were art schools and galleries in Los Angeles, there were murals. The tradition has a long and distinguished history, dating from the city's eighteenth-century Hispanic founders, and it continues to thrive and evolve. LA-based artist Pentti Monkkonen's exhibition of new works (all 2016) at Jenny's smartly engaged with this history, drawing on retrospective time frames both micro and macro.

Two of the works were quarter-scale renditions (their tops almost touching the gallery ceiling) of advertising billboards attached to cantilevered steel frames. Each of these works bears an advertisement for a recent, highly anticipated product whose newness has already waned: the iPhone 6 and the latest season of HBO's "Game of Thrones." Monkkonen has foregrounded the vanitas quality of his billboard sculptures by ripping away sections of the advertisements to reveal the wood beneath, producing a dilapidated effect.

The exhibition was titled after Agnes Varda's documentary film on murals in Los Angeles, *Mur Murs* (1981), and centered on six scale models of stuccoed walls, all around four feet high

and seven feet wide, topped with terra-cotta roof tiles and punctured by tiny air vents. Each of these walls is adorned with a different paint job; not all are murals exactly, but all represent types of wall painting. On one of them, titled *50 Shades of Mauve*, overlapping rectangles of color emulate the kind of inadvertent patchwork that sometimes accrues when graffiti is repeatedly painted over. *Hair Nails (pink)* is a monochromatic pink, with a window hand-painted to advertise a business.

Monkkonen's walls function both as paintings and as sculptures of painted surfaces. Despite their dinky miniaturization, they assumed a disconcerting realism at Jenny's, a gallery located in a building whose thin stuccoed walls are not much more substantial than the sculptural models. Visitors encountered one of the wall works, *Gentrifiers Rebuked*, hanging in an outside passageway before they even entered the gallery. Its thin washes of turquoise and salmon pink summon the ghosts of California abstractionists such as Sam Francis or Richard Diebenkorn, but also the careless decoration of low-rent properties around the city.

Two works located the exhibition in a broader political and philosophical context. One was *Armchair Socialism*, a wall painted with a trellis and climbing rose pattern appropriated from an 1864 wallpaper design by William Morris. In its fussy decorativeness, the work seemed out of place among the other wall pieces—ironically, given Morris's progressive politics and his sincere desire to see art integrated into daily life. Perhaps Monkkonen intended it as a barbed meta-commentary on the historical function of murals, which have often been painted as political protests or propaganda.

The second more conceptually expansive work was *TREAM*, whose title stands for "time rules everything around me." In front of an ocean sunset, a skeleton dressed in the type of Baja hoodie worn by young stoners holds up an hourglass. The mural is rendered on apricot-colored stucco close in tone to the exposed plywood of the iPhone billboard (which hung beside it), and appears unfinished. Youth, like consumer technology, is shown to be fatally infected with its own demise, already fading while still in the process of becoming.

—Jonathan Griffin

View of Pentti Monkkonen's exhibition "Murs Murs," 2016, showing (from left) *50 Shades of Mauve*, *Billboard (Game of Thrones)*, and *Armchair Socialism*, all 2016, at Jenny's.

