

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD: PENTTI MONKKONEN TAKES A SHARP-EYED LOOK AT LOS ANGELES ARCHITECTURE AND GENTRIFICATION AT JENNY'S

BY Catherine G. Wagley
06/30/16



The long walkway that leads up to Jenny's in Silver Lake stretches back from the sidewalk, past a purple-painted insurance shop, and hovers above an overgrown ravine. For his current show, "Mur Murs," Pentti Monkkonen hung a canvas-on-panel painting along that walkway. It's a rough, abstract thing called *Gentrifiers Rebuked*. Like all the paintings in Monkkonen's show, it has a thin line of red adobe roof tiles lining the top of it. It also has three evenly paced vents running across it, so that it looks like the side of one of the adobe houses that are ubiquitous in greater Los Angeles. Made with sand, wood, and acrylic, the painting has literal grit and a ghostly, abstract quality. It's messy and haphazard, like an unkempt, weatherworn slice of urban architecture. At the same time, there appear to be three figures, one beneath each vent, barely legible in the background, haunting a neighborhood that becomes hipper and pricier by the year.

Consisting of six adobe-style paintings and two reconstructed miniature billboards held up by metal poles, Monkkonen's show appeals because of the way it gets at artists' current obsession with gentrification, without obnoxious bluntness or theoretical exegeses. It also gets at the thorny problem of complicity. An artist showing work meant to approximate and preserve an urban street aesthetic in an art space that's young and small but up-and-coming can't help but be somewhat caught up in the swell of gentrifying forces, even if he resists and resents them.

In the L.A. art world, Monkkonen is known for the community experiments he's generated or galvanized in recent years. He and artist Liz Craft, his wife, ran an on-and-off again space called Paradise Garage out

of their Venice home, staging pop-ups and by-appointment shows. They also co-founded Paramount Ranch, an art fair on a Wild West movie set that was considerably more experimental than most (though no fair ever entirely escapes market conservatism). Both of these ventures were intentionally ephemeral. The fair ran its course after three years, petering out just as the L.A. gallery scene became decidedly more international. Monkkonen's newest work stands alone but still feels relevant to these other endeavors, made with an awareness of shifts in local geography and a growing tension between art-world margins and centers.



The title for the show comes from Agnes Varda's 1982 film *Mur Murs*, about murals in L.A. Varda, a French artist, managed to make surfer culture and East L.A. rebels seem exotic and elegant. Many of her subjects, like interventions by the Chicano performance group ASCO, no longer exist. "I don't wish them to disappear," Varda said when her film was rereleased in 2013, "but that's part of the risk."

Monkkonen too explores disappearance—both the possibility and reality of it. One of his paintings, *Honeycomb Light* by Charles Felix, recalls Keith Haring's subway graffiti and pays homage to a longstanding mural in Boyle Heights, a once marginalized neighborhood that's newly home to a gallery scene. *50 Shades of Mauve* consists of patches of peaches, reds, and purples overlapping each other, just as such patches do on the side of tagged buildings that have been repaired by a landlord or contractor who, it seems, just couldn't find the exact right paint color.

The billboard pieces in the show are slightly different, about another kind of fleetingness. Monkkonen photographed worn-out billboards on his iPhone, printed the photos and then pasted tattered versions of them onto plywood. These pseudo billboards reach almost to the ceiling of the small space. One is a *Game of Thrones* ad torn so much at the center that only edges remain visible. It suggests a kind of rapid change in taste and consumer content that coexists with the more gradual drift away from the DIY, mom-and-pop sensibility that Monkkonen's paintings evoke. All together, the billboards and paintings are like a playhouse-sized, aesthetically gratifying version of an urban situation, making a complicated reality seem temporarily, fleetingly manageable.