

ARTFORUM

Peter Alexander

FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY

Born in 1939, Peter Alexander came of age in the Los Angeles art world of the 1960s, and is primarily known for his association with the Light and Space movement. Whereas many of his colleagues, including Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Doug Wheeler, dispensed with the art object in order to fashion ethereal, seemingly immaterial environments, Alexander took an opposite tack, condensing atmospheres into hard



Peter Alexander, *Jefferson*, 1992, acrylic on panel, 18 x 20"

chunks of resin and polyester. In works such as *Cloud Box*, 1966, he pictured the natural environment by injecting cumulus puffs into otherwise pristine plastics. Soon after, he did away with iconography to fashion vertical wedges in a variety of chroma—pink, orange, blue—that taper off to a degree such that they seem to dissolve into the room.

Consisting of eleven acrylic-on-panel paintings, each eighteen by twenty inches, Alexander's recent show at Franklin Parrasch, "Los Angeles Riots," was a representation of works that marked a profound shift in the artist's practice when they were first exhibited in 1992. Alexander executed these paintings during the Los Angeles riots, which were sparked by the acquittal of police officers who were on trial for brutally beating Rodney King. Despite being able to see the smoke of the riots from near his studio in Marina del Rey some ten miles away, he based his painting on photographs snapped from his TV. Though he had turned to painting in the mid-1970s, owing to the toxic nature of his first materials, this work offers evidence of a new and deep interest in history, inspired, perhaps, by the very historicity of the medium in which he had come to work. (What would it have looked like, I wondered, if Alexander had tried to capture the smoke of the 1965 Watts riots in one of his little plastic cubes?)

Given their explicit claim on then-current events (which have an eerie timeliness today), the paintings contain few identifying features to tie them directly to their historical moment. There is no signage on the buildings, nor are there people on the street. Rather, the specificity of the scene comes through in more structural, even spectral, ways; one notes the skeletal remains of a storefront with a dark and ghostly automobile out front. In a strange, almost perverse fashion, the paintings evidence a continued interest in light and Space's primary preoccupations— atmosphere and architecture—albeit with a notably different spin. Light here is no longer associated with sun, but with heat and fire. Indeed, the works present civilization in a twilight mood, full of shadows and silhouettes. White flames pour out of blackened apartments; some passages are so bright that one imagines that a tungsten bulb must be hiding behind the picture. (These moments evoke Jack Goldstein's paintings from the early 1980s featuring fireworks and stars.) Other passages are dark and ashy, almost sooty. It's worth noting that Alexander executed these paintings by first laying the panels flat on a table; he lightly touched them with sprayed acrylic, but in some sections the paint has pooled, puddled, and coagulated. If the interest is still in light and space, that space is now full of smoke.

A few paintings in the series called to mind other LA traditions, such as the Pop realism of Ed Ruscha. All the flames reminded me of Ruscha's *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, 1965-68, the great difference being that Alexander deals not with fantasy and imagination but with grim fact. (In this sense, a comparison to J. M. W. Turner's atmospheric renderings of disaster, such as *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, 1834, does not seem like a stretch.) Closer to the moment of Alexander's work are Ruscha's nocturnal maps of Los Angeles, his "City Lights," 1985-2010, and "Metro Plots," 1998-2003, the latter spray-painted so that only long axes of the city's grid and street names—Hollywood, Sunset, Santa Monica—remain. Made just a few years after "City Lights," Alexander's close-ups also give us an aerial view, though they seem rendered from the window of a chopper sent out by the nightly news. Intriguingly, Alexander's paintings are similarly titled after streets—*Hoover*, *Hooper*, *Adams*—thus plunging back into the lived world.

If Light and Space ultimately sought to recalibrate awareness, with these paintings, Alexander put perception under siege. Light and space are never pure or natural, we see; riven with political unrest and state violence, even our most basic elements are subject to history.

— Alex Kitnick