

## ***Post-American L.A.***

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In Fareed Zakaria's 2008 book *The Post-American World*, which was published prior to the major global economic crisis, the author argues that the end of U.S. economic and cultural hegemony is upon us, as the growth of countries such as China, Brazil, India and Russia will lead to a balancing out of power across the globe.<sup>1</sup> While these nations, along with the United States, face an unstable financial climate and the repercussions of this economic downturn, change is at hand. In the recovery period still yet to come, nations will seek cooperative strategies for recuperation while simultaneously staking out their own territory as dominant world powers. In the struggle for influence, the U.S. will likely no longer find itself at the helm as director of the rest of the world, but will have to learn how to exist as a team player, equal to or trailing other nations instead of dominating them.

In preparation for this major global shift, it is critical that the plans for the community we wish to see in ten years time are considered today. While in the midst of shifting distributions of power on the international stage, we ought to examine what impact such changes will have on our city, neighborhoods, schools, and social services in the coming years. By 2019, the population of Los Angeles is projected to increase by several million inhabitants (projections vary, yet they are mostly slated to be immigrants from Latin America and Asia). As it stands today, the demographics of the city already reflect transitioning populations, such as soldiers returning home from war, increasing homeless and prison populations, and new hordes of unemployed and uninsured Angelinos. How will we find our footing in a new global society without fully examining our preparedness on the local level?

The exhibition *Post-American L.A.* features artists that question the scope, sphere and impact of American predominance, from the international stage to municipal politics. As the power of influence exercised by the United States has come into question, it is critical to underscore this changing course of history with realistic reflection. Drawing from a variety of strategies, such as installations rooted in community outreach, research-based practices, video work, conceptual interrogations and photography, the artists in *Post-American L.A.* are invited to consider distinct observations, proposals and strategies for our civic and national roles.

### **A Bird's Eye View of the Powers That Be:**

In the work *A WORLD MAP: in Which We See...* (2004), Ashley Hunt presents a very telling flow chart that illustrates how super-structures of globalization filter down to the current conditions of individuals across the world. This conceptual

mapping project delineates a direct cause and effect relationship between the mechanisms of profit-seeking corporate bodies against individuals and the labor forces they represent. In this installation, the artist sets a geographic course situating migration patterns and the criminalization/marginalization of the poor against international policies, laws and institutions.

Adrian Paci's video works are rooted in collective and personal experiences surrounding mass expatriation. Paci, along with an untold number of fellow Albanians, reflect a wave of emigration to Italy and elsewhere since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. This particular history becomes a metaphor for shifting populations on a global level in the video *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea*<sup>ii</sup> (2008), where a multi-ethnic group waits in limbo on an airport tarmac. Whether through voluntary or involuntary migration, the circumstances presented in a changing understanding of citizenship are complex. While the viewer is confronted with what appears to be transient laborers, there is an unspoken narrative that is told by their faces. Insecurities – both personal and political – are amplified by a sense of loss for those left behind. Uprooted from home, their personal displacement is underscored by the potential decline of their own traditional cultural practices in the face of globalization.

Global urban development is rapid and expansive. The notion of a city has given way to the idea of a megalopolis as populations swell in metropolitan areas around the world. In the video *Ink City* (2005), Chen Shaoxiong takes the viewer through a day in the life of what a modern, global mega-city looks and feels like. With a nod to traditional animation, the piece is a moving assemblage of classically inspired Chinese ink wash drawings showing an urban melee of activity where industry and humanity are densely packed. Through a compilation of quick snapshot-like studies, the artist captures the shifting cityscape of Guangzhou, China, as its adaptive inhabitants navigate it. *Ink City* alludes to the near future or present conditions of cities across the globe. (Southern California is currently home to 24 million people, putting the region in the same rank as the greater metro areas of Mexico City and São Paulo, whose population estimations range between 22 million to 30 million inhabitants each<sup>iii</sup>).

### **The changing face of L.A.:**

Vincent Johnson's photographic montages utilize found images to create a collective portrait of iconic events from American history. In retrospect, it is now possible to see how profoundly the subjects Johnson addresses - issues such as the Cold War, the Arms Race, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights Movement - were to stimulating cultural shifts. Yet on a regional level, for example, Johnson also traces the influence of these occurrences on L.A.'s layered development, linking the city's vernacular architecture to the region's military history. For this exhibition, Johnson assembles images from L.A.'s Korean-American and Mexican-American communities, seeking parallels between these groups' home

countries and their Southern Californian neighborhoods. The artist postulates that over the course of the next decade, the cultural manifestations of these populations will become ever-increasingly part of the landscape of the city - from technology to entertainment to food.<sup>iv</sup>

Artist Carolina Caycedo uses a broad variety of media, ranging from public intervention, performance, installation, video and sculpture to weave a set of experiences together that question the concepts of nationalism and citizenship. As part of a larger body of work of mixed flags and banners, *Mexicamericana* (2007) reflects the interconnected nature of Los Angeles' two most predominant bodies politic by creating a hybrid Mexican and American flag. This image exemplifies the two countries' dependence on one another by utilizing the most identifiable icon meant to represent nationalism and ethnic pride – the flag. While the miscegenetic history of Mexico and the United States is the foundation for California and the Southwest, the acceptance of an integrated cultural amalgam is far from being widely accepted today. Caycedo's simple proposal addresses the slippery notion of territory, pointing out that geographic borders lie somewhere between the real and the imaginary.

#### **A call to action:**

Further contemplating an understanding of collective identity, Glen Ligon's silk-screened mural *Hands* (1996) calls the viewer's attention to group consciousness. This image was taken during the Million Man March in Washington D.C. on October 16, 1995 when, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, African-American men were called upon to rededicate themselves to the American family. While the scene portrays a mass of hands in allegiance to these ideals, Ligon also considers those who were left out of this event – specifically women and gay men – by titling this series *Day of Absence*.<sup>v</sup> While the image is inspirational, the artist sends the message that the event still needed to connect to the entirety of individuals that constitute the masses.

Vincent Ramos's project addresses the role that youth may play in answering questions about the future, by posing a scenario of looking to the past at a group of students from Venice High School in Venice, California. Working directly with the graduating art class from Ramos's own alma mater, the artist presented students with the works of science fiction author and Venice resident, Ray Bradbury. Bradbury's tales of the future speculated on our present. While these imagined, dystopian scenarios may or may not have come to pass, Ramos hones in on the difficulties that we face in imagining the world that lies ahead of us, while undertaking a meaningful measure of mentorship.

Advancing an agenda of direct community dialog, Sandra de la Loza, representing the collective *The Pocho Research Society*, will work as an artist-in-

resident during the course of the exhibition to develop a series of events entitled *The Revolution Will...* These encounters and discussions include individuals from diverse sectors interfacing and discussing topics such as environmentalism, labor and alternative economies, and the future of cultural production. Resulting materials including sound recordings, video footage, photographs, collectively created drawings and maps will be incorporated into an ongoing multi-media installation, in which the artist acts as a performative archivist.

Tying these ideas back to the conundrum of the artist, Hugo Hopping speculates on the concepts and issues that could exist as the source materials for artistic discussion in the near future. In his conceptual, sculptural installation, *New Directions for Future Pilgrims (2009)*, Hopping asks, “What will be the result of cultural discourse today?”, “What topics will be at the forefront of critical dialog in ten year’s time?” and “What will take the place of gender studies, multiculturalism, post-Modernism, post-Colonialism, post-Black and post-Latino politics a decade from now?”

Will we be post-American in 2019?

## **Conclusion:**

Given the current downturn in the economy and its attributed causes and consequences, it is apparent that the U.S. is in the midst of major historical change. The end of the United States’ “era of excess”<sup>vi</sup> may be likened to the abatement of the dominance of any such global hegemon throughout history, when the decline of a super-power is followed by the rise of other nation-states that fill the void left by the declining nation. Perhaps a key concept to remember during these defining shifts is that the sustainability of nationalism is dependent on true adaptability and realistic planning. As the world rebalances its centers of power, recoups its financial markets, and realigns its global partnerships, the changing composition of Los Angeles and its citizens are a representative cross-section of the assets that should be responsibly embraced in this transition.

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<sup>i</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, NY: 2008, pp. 1-5.

<sup>ii</sup> *Centro di permanenza temporanea* refers to an Italian immigration structure known as “Center for Temporary Stay” or “Center for Identification and Deportation” established to accommodate aliens subject to deportation, according to Wikipedia.

<sup>iii</sup> Population figures come from various internet sources and from regional reports from Mexico City and São Paulo,

<sup>iv</sup> Email exchange with the artist, March 9, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> Meyer, Richard. *Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language*.

<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Ligon/LigonEssay.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Roach, Stephen S. *After the Era of Excess*. What Matters by McKinsiney & Company. February 26, 2009.

[http://whatmatters.mckinsiedigital.com/credit\\_crisis/after-the-era-of-excess](http://whatmatters.mckinsiedigital.com/credit_crisis/after-the-era-of-excess)