

The hour has come. This is our generation's rendezvous with destiny: it is our generation's duty to restore to our children that land of opportunity—that Golden State—that our parents gave to us.

Senator Tom McClintock,  
former Republican Candidate for Governor of California

# In Search of the Golden California

Four video artists investigate California's conflicted relationship with surveillance

| BY JENNIE KLEIN

Throughout the California recall election in October of 2003, State Senator Tom McClintock campaigned on the platform of restoring California to its glory days as the Golden State of our forefathers. His television and radio commercials invoked a pastoral California, one with which McClintock was closely identified; a land in which he, like his parents, had grown up. Geography in this case formed identity—alluded to but not stated was that the Republican frontrunner, Arnold Schwarzenegger, had not grown up in California. While McClintock's evocation of land, identity and blood did not get him elected, the idea of a uniquely Californian identity tied to ancestry, geography and economic entitlement remains significant. Progress, in this scenario, travels backward to a mythical land of plenty, a California gold rush for the twenty-first century.

This nostalgic evocation of the geography of (southern) California, a vision of houses with yards, endless sunny days, miles of clean beaches and, of course, (financial) opportunity, is Disney Land and Hollywood in one, a cultivated, enclosed garden of plenty. Hillary Mushkin examines the California landscape as pastoral garden in her slyly ironic two-channel video installation *Pastoral* (2002), which parodies California's omnipresent suburban development by hinting at this development's artificiality. Beneath the viewer's feet, a "landscape" of golf courses, swimming pools and beaches unfolds that mixes architectural models with live action video and seems filmed from the viewpoint of God—or at least of someone in a helicopter or airplane. The tiny people, some moving, some clearly plastic models, make one feel like Gulliver in Lilliput. Meanwhile, strange objects float overhead,

stones emerge from the golf course and laurel victory wreaths pass by, while below mysteriously large shadows suggest that the seagulls here are three times the size of the people over whom they fly.

With its vertiginous viewpoint on "reality," albeit a cultivated and controlled "reality," *Pastoral* renders the landscape of southern California uncanny and disturbing—hyperreal, with no freeways or congestion. In a piece made in 2000, *This Land Is*, Mushkin satirized the longing for unmediated nature by juxtaposing Woody Guthrie's folk tribute with hand-held footage of a sunset filmed while riding a bicycle. Like *Pastoral*, *This Land Is* deconstructs the lyrics to Guthrie's song—whose land is this really? Who owns it? And how does Nature (with a capital N) figure into this notion of land? Implicit in Mushkin's *Pastoral* footage of pools, golf courses and beaches is the idea that this is the stomping ground of the economically privileged—an Aztlan for the predominantly Anglo Californians whose ancestry goes back little more than one generation. At the time that she was making *Pastoral*, Mushkin was reading Ann Bermingham's *Landscape and Ideology*, one of the earliest texts to argue for the ideological and class underpinnings of the rustic English landscape garden and its relationship to English landscape painting.<sup>1</sup> Mushkin's *Pastoral* California garden reflects the economic conditions of the early twenty-first century in California where resorts are more valuable and profitable than farmland. Those who can afford the resorts, rather than those who grow the produce, have the most power in this new, post-Industrial economy.

The single-channel version of *Pastoral* includes footage of a Phoenix neighborhood taken from a low-flying airplane. Post-



Opposite: Installation view of Hillary Mushkin's two-channel video *Pastoral*, 2002 (courtesy the artist); above: Kacyla Brooke, *The Boy Mechanic*, 2000 (courtesy the artist).

September 11, this imagery immediately suggests a police surveillance video made from a helicopter. And this suggestion explains *Pastoral's* creepiness: the video underscores the ubiquity of technological surveillance, from helicopters to seemingly innocuous store cameras, in the urban/suburban sprawl of Los Angeles. As with *Pastoral*, this surveillance is relatively unobtrusive. Most people remain unaware (deliberately or not) that Big Camera is watching, until something disrupts the fiction of autonomy.

Winfried Pauleit has such disruptions in mind when she argues that artists can compete directly with surveillance by using video to "produce 'evidence' of a different sort."<sup>22</sup> Motivated by this idea and by the Surveillance Camera players' designation of September 7, 2001 as "Anti-Surveillance Day," S. E. Barnet and Kahty Chernboweth took up their cameras to look at surveillance Los Angeles style. Dressed in Tweety Bird costumes, Chenoweth and Barnet positioned themselves in front of surveillance cameras in various stores and banks. While they danced, waved and held up crudely made signs with phrases such as "Look at Me" and "Big Sister Is Watching," an unseen accomplice videotaped the Tweetyts as they appeared in the monitor's screen. In one particularly amusing segment, the two Tweetyts videotape each

other while running to stay in the view of a camera scanning a parking lot. What is most interesting about the 2001 video *Tweetyts* made from this ongoing performance (newer footage has not yet been edited) is that most people, far from shunning the surveillance of both the Tweetyts and the stores in which they were filming, welcomed and even participated in it. People in southern California, accustomed to having movies and television shows filmed on their streets, were undisturbed by the Tweetyts with their video cameras. They sent children over to shake a Tweety wing, held up signs, and cheerfully interrogated the helpful Tweetyts. Surveillance in southern California has a different flavor than it does in other parts of the United States. In a land of famous people and famous wannabes, any attention is better than none.

Thanks to television's ubiquity, we now associate certain visual codes with surveillance: grainy footage, the long shot perspective, the prominent date and time in the lower left corner of the image. *Tweetyts* proposes a different type of surveillance, which perhaps reflects California's more laid back approach. Another uncharacteristically personal form of surveillance appears in Barnet's *Shooting Alley* (2003). Shot at a local beach, *Shooting Alley* catches three bathing suit clad,



S.E. Barnet, *Shooting Alley*, 2003, from the video diptych *Summertime: Two Digital Engagements* (courtesy the artists).

camera-toting women simultaneously shooting something hidden by a boulder. At one point, a young child jumps out from behind the rock. Undeterred, the women continue pointing their video cameras at whatever the child has left behind, the technological gaze becoming an extension of the corporeal gaze of the parent/grandparent. The three women, marked by their clothing, physiques and camera-happy behavior as lower class, wonderful illustrated an engaged, auteur-like surveillance. Unlike the surveillance camera, which blindly records everything in its field of vision, the video cameras held by these lumpen-proletariat women records a specific event/object for the duration of that event only. With the help of their personal video cameras, they become auteurs of the events of their lives, selectively recording whatever seems fitting.

*Shooting Alley* is one half of the video diptych *Summertime: Two Digital Engagements*. The other digital engagement, *Invention*, shows a mother and daughter on a beach creating a tower with stones. The mother and daughter, apparently unaware that they are being taped, hardly typify the young, beautiful surfers who epitomize California. Barnet essentially presents the viewer with an image of voyeurism/surveillance that does not seem like surveillance. Unlike Mushkin, Barnet gets close enough that the viewers almost appear to share the space with the mother and daughter. If the concept of geography is associated, as Irit Rogoff has argued, with "issues of positionality...questions of who has the power and authority to name...[and] who has the power and authority to subsume others into its hegemonic identity," then Barnet's re-insertion of these women into southern California car-

tography perhaps rewrites the geography of the beach's urban/natural space.<sup>3</sup>

Geography is a metaphorical concept closely aligned with the bodies inhabiting it—showing bodies other than those that we expect might re-map that geography. Eve Luckring's short video *Ocean* (2003) focuses on a father holding his small daughter while gently rocking in the waves of the ocean. Wearing a child's inflatable tube around his waist to provide a seat for his tiny child, the father seems aware but unconcerned that he is being taped. In her artist's statement, Luckring states that she is interested in "what Alessandro Baricco calls 'a look that does not take but receives'..." In this meditational piece, made with minimal editing, Luckring re-populates the space of southern California with an image received rather than forcibly taken. If, as Rogoff argues, "the field of vision is sustained through an illusion of transparent space," then one could argue that Luckring is "repopulating space with all the obstacles and all the unknown images which the illusion of transparency evacuated from it."<sup>4</sup> Designed to be projected at slightly more than life-size, *Ocean* transforms the unremarkable into the monumental.

The father and baby daughter caught momentarily in *Ocean* are clearly of Asian descent. While there is no sign of land, the light and the appearance of the ocean (which must be fairly warm for the little girl to remain comfortable) indicate that Luckring shot this piece in southern California. *Ocean* is a small epiphany—a moment when one realizes that the California of Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon has been wonderfully transformed into a land of people of the dias-

pora and their descendents. Southern California has become a place of many languages, ethnicities and cultures. No longer is it possible or desirable to whitewash the indigenous past or ignore the increasingly heterogeneous future. When the little girl in *Ocean* grows up, which California will cause her to wax nostalgic? And what form of the Golden State will resonate in her adult imagination? As of this writing, California is experiencing the worst wildfires in its history, causing the *L.A. Times* to speculate that the author Mike Davis' predictions of an apocalyptic California may be about to come true. On the other hand, the out-of-control development could be scaled back to make the housing tracts of southern California cities a patchwork of smaller, more intimate neighborhoods—as has happened in the Silverlake and Highland Park districts of Los Angeles.

Luckring's video *Chicken*, shown at Mario's Furniture in 2002, focuses on this intimacy by celebrating the many chickens that live in her community. Most southern Californians only have contact with packaged chickens in supermarket cases. Yet, Luckring suggests, chickens surround us—next door, upstairs, down the hall. As with *Ocean*, Luckring blows her chickens up to more than life-size. Shockingly beautiful with their iridescent plumage, they demand attention. Serendipitously, visitors to Mario's Furniture could hear the clucking of chickens kept by the surrounding homeowners. Aztlan is still present—this time in the backyards of the hills of L.A.

Luckring's quiescent subjects, ordinarily outside the field of vision, don't necessarily deliberately avoid scopophilic recognition. In fact, the chickens probably don't care one way or the other. However, despite California's reputation for tolerance, some spaces, places and people still avoid appearing in the visual field for a variety of reasons, one being that these spaces serve a non-normative sexuality. In her video installation *The Boy Mechanic*, an ongoing project begun in 1996, Kaucyla Brooke documents the appearance and disappearance of lesbian bars in San Diego. *The Boy Mechanic* was first shown in San Diego at the Museum of Photographic Arts as part of the exhibition "Re:Public: Listening to San Diego," curated by Richard Bolton. Displayed as a single-channel video, *The Boy Mechanic* follows various dykes through San Diego searching for the former sites of lesbian bars. More often than not, Brooke's guides can't find the erstwhile bars—as one woman put it, "Oh god, you know what, I don't know where it was. [It has been] so built up here...it's gone, not even a trace." In another scene, Brooke follows a different guide into an office space to ask if that building once had been a lesbian bar. This time, Brooke and her guide have found the former site of illicit lesbian pleasure and community. Their success—as well as the happiness of the guide at finding this spot—is tempered by the body language of the (probably heterosexual) male manager who confirms the building's former use. Forced by social convention and Brooke's camera to be polite, he is clearly uncomfortable being so close to two women who have marked themselves as sexual others.

*The Boy Mechanic* of 1996 featured two thriving lesbian bars—The Flame and Six Degrees (formerly Club Bombay). Nevertheless, it was ultimately a narrative of loss and longing, leading Kelly Hankin to suggest that "*The Boy Mechanic* is replete with omens that predict the imminent death of lesbian space...By including only some faces and

not others, the video supports Terry Castle's thesis that lesbians function in Western culture precisely as apparitions by foregrounding the perpetual dematerialization of lesbians and lesbian space."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in response to Hankin's critique, Brooke reconfigured the piece to suggest that lost lesbian space was and is being reclaimed. For the exhibition "Hers: Female As Video Terrain," in Graz, Austria (2000), Brooke transformed *The Boy Mechanic* into a three-channel video installation, complete with bar stool and bar. Prominently displayed was an interview with Diane Germaine, who frequented lesbian bars in the mid-seventies, speaking from her home office about how she and her friends colonized the heterosexual space of coffee shops and restaurants by moving around tables and chairs. The Graz exhibition also featured color postcards of three of the featured bars, transforming these normally overlooked sites into tourist destinations.

Postcards generally commemorate landmarks and shore up faulty public memory. Ultimately, they become part of the historical cartography of a place, archaeological reminders of past geographies. Inspired by how her postcards both memorialized and monumentalized the marginalized lesbian spaces of San Diego, Brooke returned there in 2002 and began photographing all of the bars and former bars, transforming them into austere monuments of classical grandeur. These six large photographs were shown with the video (once again as a single channel) in 2002 at the Stadthaus Ulm in Germany. For her upcoming exhibition at Plattform in Berlin, Brooke plans to expand the three postcards into a limited edition of ten.

The exponentially increasing number of postcards indicates that visible and invisible lesbian spaces riddle San Diego's social geography. Brooke's photographs and postcards of the bars map and re-map this changing landscape, completing the task begun by her dyke guides when they looked for their old hang-outs in 1996. Picture postcards of a San Diego that previously existed only in memory, these images, like the rest of the work discussed here, rewrite the cartography of southern California. This California, charred, be-chickened, and no longer so "golden," is nevertheless infinitely more interesting than the California that McClintock purported to "give back." <sup>6</sup>

Hillary Mushkin is in "Blue Sky: Visionaries, Romantics and Dreamers," a group show at the Pomona College Art Museum January 20—April 4, 2004. S. E. Barnet is participating in the "Moisture" project, which launched its website December 1 at [moisture.greenmuseum.org](http://moisture.greenmuseum.org), and in the group show "H<sub>2</sub>O" at Crossroads High School January 7—29, 2004.

- NOTES 1. Hillary Mushkin, interview with the author. June 13, 2003. 2. Winfried Pauleit, "Video Surveillance and Postmodern Subjects," CTRL[SPACE], Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel, eds. (MIT, 2002): 472. 3. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (Routledge, 2000): 21. 4. Ibid: 34-35. 5. Kelly Hankin, "Wish We Didn't Have to Meet Secretly?": Negotiating Contemporary Space in the Lesbian Bar Documentary," *Camera Obscura* vol. 15 no. 3 (2000): 54.

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