

BARTLEBY REVIEW

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SURFING THE MARGINS •••• Julian Hou

Lorna Bauer and Jon Knowles

'RENT'

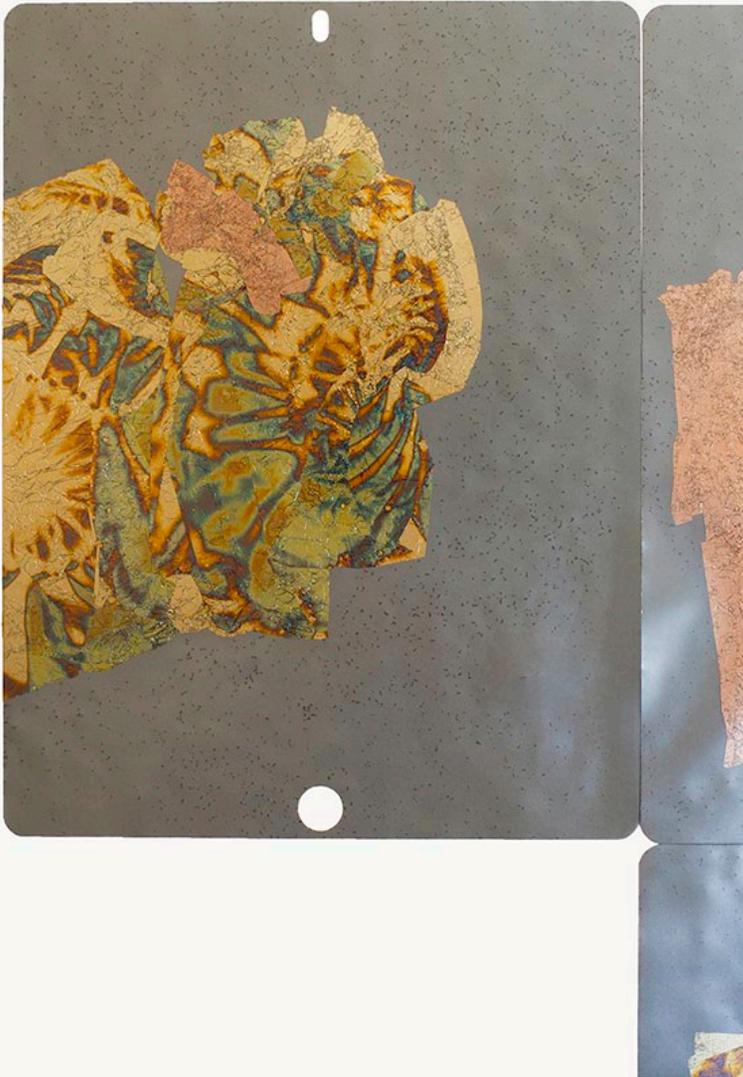
Model Projects

147 Main St.

Through July 7

A friend recently remarked that artists in galleries are similar to *Snakes on a Plane*. Artists must wriggle their way around the institutional politics and obstructions of a vessel which is foreign and ultimately uninhabitable—resulting in artwork that is forced to slither around and beneath. Having witnessed the production process of Lorna Bauer and Jon Knowles for their recent exhibition at Model first hand, much of which occurred in the gallery a week leading up to the opening itself, I realised that project spaces can allow other models of thinking about the artist in relationship to spaces. Bruce Lee talked about the power of formlessness:

Be formless, shapeless, like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow and it can crash. Be water my friend.



While the gallery itself is a project space and ultimately very free from curatorial expectations and institutional funding limitations, Bauer and Knowles nevertheless take on this relationship of artists to spaces as a subject to consider in their exhibition *RENT*. They reflect thoughtfully on context and site as a way of generating textures of meaning that reflect larger concerns about patterns of urban development and its relationship to the conditions of showing and making art. What I read as a metaphor for this approach was their video *HABITAT* (2015), which showed a surfer balancing precariously on a standing wave that had been produced adjacent to large-scale urban construction. To ride momentarily on an incidental wave is the sad illusion of achievement that the artist has come to face in cities that relegate art to balancing on the margins.

The title of the exhibition contains an authoritativeness that belies a more subtle dimension to the works on display, where sourcing materials from local neighborhoods gives the work a textural familiarity. A few thin sticks of bamboo are brushed with copper leaf and mounted to the walls of the gallery, forming a vertical rhythm playing off the architecture of the space. The bamboo, sourced in neighboring Chinatown, nods to the use of copper gilding in decorative applications but also to the heightened value of copper in the Downtown Eastside—a metal that can be stripped from buildings and sold to recycling depots. Inversely, decorating the walls of the Cedar Tavern (the room at the back of the gallery) are actual copper tubes

sleeved in a reprint of a found sunbleached travel poster depicting a giant panda. iPhone protective films and iPad privacy screens are adhered directly to the walls of the gallery, with their inner surfaces gilded in abstract copper patina shapes and arranged compositionally with the electrical outlets and light switches in the room. A tattered threadbare awning, echoing the awning presently installed on the facade of the gallery, is stretched on a painting stretcher and hung over the gallery window, its back to the street and filtering the light that enters into the space.

Site specific works of this kind, showing a commitment to the material sensitivity of sculpture and photography and a relationship to Institutional Critique, have a sporadic history in Vancouver and currently seem somewhat off the radar. We are in a moment when the convergence of voice, collectivity, and persona/performativity seem to be most resonant. However, a slackening from the referential might signify an overestimation of freedom. Which is to say that the expression of freedom is distinct from agency, in that the former risks speaking while having nothing to say, while the latter does not privilege utterance as being the primary mode of delivering meaning. The work in *RENT* exposes the ease and play that a scaffolding of both heavy ideas and light material approaches can afford, which seems to be a continuous propagation of material investigations that are both contingent and engaged.

Julian Hou