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Art review: Zaki at Steve Turner Contemporary

December 10, 2009 | 4:20 pm

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Zaki, a photographer of the built environment, has chosen nearly 80 small (mostly postcard-size) photographs from an unnamed collection. The images, many of them anonymous, all of them black and white, are organized into categories according to their subject: banks, piers, train depots, hotels and inns, structures damaged by natural disasters, and so on.

The pictures are at once humble little objects and precious artifacts. They detail the texture of both moment and place. A photograph from the 1920s of the U.S. Customs house on the border at Tijuana illustrates with striking clarity how much difference a century makes. The tiny wooden structure, with a single chair on its porch, sits beside an otherwise unguarded, unceremonious dirt road linking one nation to the other.

This collection celebrates the vernacular, the idiosyncrasies of signage and architecture that are central to the New Topographics photographs of the 1970s now hanging across the street at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Both the LACMA pictures and these expose the built environment as a manifestation of societal dreams and blunt realities, as a reflection of the aesthetic bounty or poverty (depending on your interpretation) of a particular time and place.

The kind of photographs on view at Steve Turner served as a foundation for those at LACMA, but mostly after they had already been filtered through the sensibility of Walker Evans, whose work was profoundly influenced by the plain-spoken art of picture postcards, which he collected by the thousands. (The private collection this show is drawn from is accessible in its entirety online in the gallery.) A statement from Zaki outlining his interest in this type of photography and its possible influence on his own work would have connected the dots into the present and more thoughtfully contributed to the dialogue the pictures invite about where art and artifact converge.

— Leah Ollman

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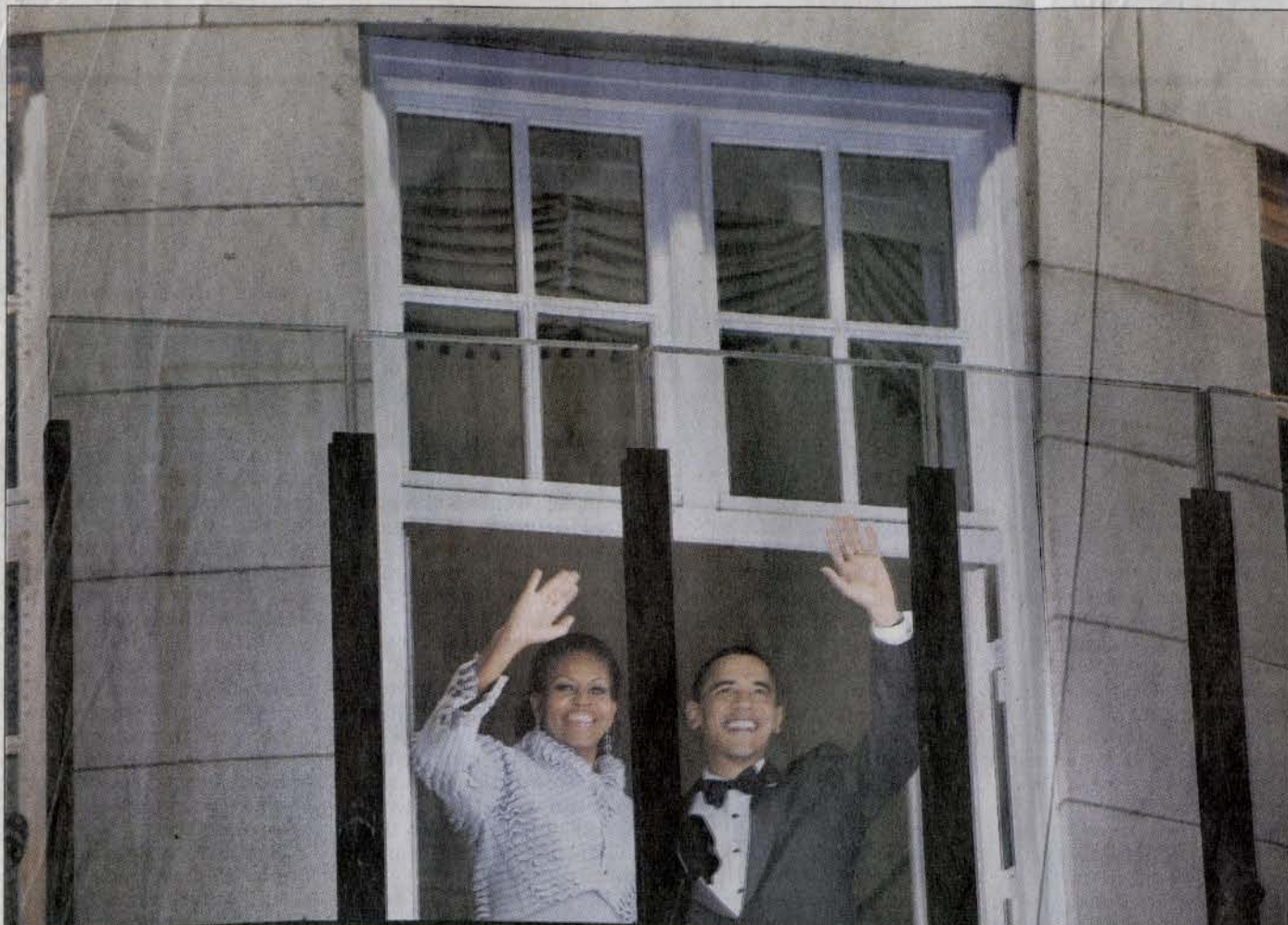
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HONORED: President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama wave from their Oslo hotel balcony to the thousands of people below celebrating his Nobel Peace Prize, which he had formally accepted earlier in the day.

JEWEL SAMAD AFP/Getty Images

Some wars keep peace, Obama says

He confronts head-on the seeming paradox of his Nobel prize, telling his audience 'evil does exist' and must be met.

CHRISTI PARSONS
REPORTING FROM OSLO

President Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on Thursday as the leader of a country fighting two conflicts, using a ceremony honoring the pursuit of peace to lay out a moral justification for war.

A week after ordering 30,000 more American troops into Afghanistan, Obama told a committee that chose him to join the company of such icons of nonviolence as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. that evil must sometimes be met with force.

"Instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace," he said.

"So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths — that war is sometimes necessary, and war is at some level an expression of human feelings," he said in his acceptance speech before about 1,000 people in an Oslo City Hall auditorium with huge murals adorning soaring marble walls.

Since his earliest days on the stump, Obama has relied on rhetoric that holds up lofty ideals but at the same time acknowledges politically pragmatic goals. In reaching out to the Muslim world, for instance, he has promoted human rights and justice but also focused tightly on common national interests.

Thursday's speech was a clear acknowledgment that although Obama favors negotiations and international cooperation, he is also a staunchly traditional American leader intent on guarding U.S. interests and prerogatives.

"I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people," Obama said. "For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world."

Obama is the fourth U.S. president to receive the prestigious award, but the first to do so while waging a war.

His speech Thursday won praise from many U.S. conservatives, especially for recognizing the existence of "evil" and acknowledging the futility of negotiating with groups such as Al Qaeda.

"He clearly understood that he had been given the prize [See Nobel, Page A41]

Priest in eye of Anglican storm

DUKE HELFAND

In the space of a week, Mary

Goldman scraps cash bonuses for top execs

The Wall Street firm instead will give them stock. Critics call the move window dressing.

WALTER HAMILTON

tradition and pay no year-end cash bonuses to 30 top executives.

Instead, the firm will give those employees bonuses made up entirely of Goldman Sachs stock and will bar them from selling the shares for five years. The company also said it would give shareholders a for-

at their disposal have been widely blamed for contributing to the mortgage meltdown and the global financial crisis.

But Goldman stopped short of the most dramatic step that critics have called for — actually reducing compensation — leaving outsiders to ask whether the latest move was

A reality check

ART



Photographs by SUSAN ANDERSON Kopeikin Gallery

TANNED TODDLER: Susan Anderson photographed Savanha, then 2, in Nashville in 2008. Anderson's "High Glitz" exhibition continues at Kopeikin through Dec. 24.

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Garish glamour girl images

LEAH OLLMAN

Forget slasher flicks and gore fests. The scariest images in Hollywood right now are photographs of pint-size beauty contestants hanging at the Kopeikin Gallery.

Susan Anderson's pictures are straight shots, mostly head-and-shoulders portraits of little girls in their competitive finery. The special effects have all been put to work earlier, in readying the kids for their moment before the judges — and the camera. Artifice runs so high it verges on the grotesque. "Little Miss Sunshine"



PAGEANT CONTESTANTS: Photographer Susan Anderson says she invites the children to pose themselves. Allison, left, then 10, was photographed in Nashville in 2008. Beauty, then 5, is pictured in Las Vegas in 2006.

has been bested by Little Miss Spray Tan.

Consider 5-year-old Danica, lips painted glossy pink and blue eyes rimmed by the long, dark tendrils of fake eyelashes. Or the disturbingly sultry Mary Ashton, 9, her lime green bikini top stretched tight across her tiny flat chest.

Anderson, a commercial photographer specializing in portraiture and fashion, traveled to beauty pageant sites around the country for the last three years, shooting the girls in portable studios, against pastel backgrounds glimmering with paparazzi-flash bursts of light. Her clean, slick style suits the subjects; nothing distracts from the human spectacle.

Though Anderson invites the subjects to pose themselves and says she intervenes only minimally, that doesn't mean the girls look natural or relaxed. Competition has expunged the natural from their vocabulary of behavior and appearance. Image is all, and whatever it takes to achieve the "High Glitz" look these competitions favor is fair game: false fingernails, brilliant white veneers on the teeth, makeup to turn an already smooth cheek into a surface of flawless — and frightening — uniformity.

Stylists sculpt the girls' hair into ornately piled, curled, extended, amended and stiffened extravaganzas. Costumes tend toward candy colors and pinks, liberally augmented by sequins, rhinestones, ruffles, pearls, feathers and lace.

There is a strange retro glamour to the look achieved by the kids and their handlers — part country music star, part vixen housewife. Commercial-

ized and sexualized all out of proportion to their age (contestants range from around 2 to 10), these children haven't just lost their innocence, they've had it packaged and sold.

Anderson seems motivated more by fascination than repulsion, and her photographs manage to illustrate a sociological phenomenon without either celebrating or condemning it. It's possible, I suppose, to be charmed by the world of "High Glitz," with its towering tiaras and unbuxom beauties. But for me, the horror quotient ran high, and I was grateful for the antidote offered (whether intentionally or simply ironically) by the gallery's smaller, second show of photographs of the Japanese bath by Márk Edward Harris.

In the rich charcoal tones of these pigment prints on washi paper, natural beauty prevails. After the excesses of the pageantry scene, Harris' pictures are a cleansing soak in the quiet, contemplative and pure.

Kopeikin Gallery, 8810 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (310) 385-5894, through Dec. 24. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.kopeikingallery.com.

What emerges from the 'Mud'

"Mud," Nataša Prosenč's short video at Ruth Bachofner, has the absorbing character of a parable, an origin story. It traces an individual's transformation but also reads as a metaphor for the passage from naïveté to adulthood. [See Galleries, Page D15]

AMERICA'S #1 MOVIE

"IT'S A WINNER." — LOS ANGELES TIMES

"THE MVP OF THE HOLIDAY SEASON!"

— Megan Basham, **WORLD MAGAZINE**

"BEST PERFORMANCE OF SANDRA BULLOCK'S CAREER."

— Pete Hammond, **BOXOFFICE MAGAZINE**

"THE BLIND SIDE' KNOWS ITS FOOTBALL, BUT IT'S EVEN SMARTER ABOUT THE PRICELESS THING KNOWN AS A FAMILY."

— Richard Roeper, **CHICAGO SUN-TIMES**

"IF YOU GO TO MOVIES TO BE INSPIRED AND FEEL WONDERFUL, 'THE BLIND SIDE' WILL MAKE YOU VERY HAPPY."

— Gene Shalit, **TODAY**



[Galleries, from Page D14]
ture to culture.

The 10-minute piece begins with a tight shot of bubbling, gurgling, viscous gray mud. Within the heaving pool, shapes appear that resemble curves and mounds of the body, and soon a hand is visible. A female figure emerges from the primordial ooze, to the heaving sounds of first breath. Coated entirely in mud, she walks onto shore and across a stretch of desert.

Later, she is lying next to a small body of water. At first, the figure remains one with the earth (and reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's performative work unifying with the elements), but then she begins to scrape the mud off her skin. Under a plume of water, she washes free of the clay of her birth and walks on. In the final scene, the woman faces us for the first time, and is clothed, having transitioned from emblem to individual, raw to refined.

At one point in the video, the woman takes mud from her body and the ground and shapes it in her hands, forming rough spheres. It's a passing moment, but powerful in its equation of the substances of earth, life and art, its portrait of the human as instinctual creator.

Prosenc, born in Slovenia and a resident of L.A. for the last dozen years, has engaged the themes of passage and transformation in earlier video installations, and they remain richly poetic springboards for her work. Though this is a small show, comprising just the video and a group of stills mounted on aluminum, it resonates poignantly.

Ruth Bachofner Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 829-3300, through Jan. 2. Closed on Sundays and Mondays. www.ruthbachofnergallery.com.

A regression for Marcia Roberts

Paintings by Marcia Roberts have long been seductive perceptual snares — stealthy, subtle things, fields of shifting atmosphere and luminosity. For at least a decade, her work has claimed a strong affinity with the Light and Space phenomenology of Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Larry Bell. That

connection still holds in a new series of paintings at Rosamund Felsen, but as aspiration more than achievement. The work is not Roberts' nuanced best.

In each of the canvases, which range from a modest 15-by-20 inches to a more commanding 5-by-7 feet, she stages a play of planes. The ground of each work is a single color — forest green, concrete gray, umber, red violet — lighter in the center and darkening toward the edges. Within this indeterminate space float additional painted planes (as few as three, as many as six), rendered to appear perpendicular to the picture plane, like slim, tilted panels. These are of a hue that sometimes neighbors the background color but just as often contrasts with it, cool tones often offsetting warm.

Some of the paintings also feature faint rays emanating from the center like cartoon lines of force, but these shorthand indicators of dynamism don't help the paintings come to life. The series feels stiff and heavy-handed, repetitive rather than expansive. Painted by hand as well as airbrushed, the surfaces too often have a grainy, manufactured feel. Their illusionism is convincing but inconsequential. The L.A.-based Roberts disappoints with this new work, which is uncharacteristically illustrational instead of ephemeral, all mechanics and no mystery.

Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 828-8488, through Dec. 30. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.rosamundfelsen.com.

A constructive look into the past

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Ruth Bachofner Gallery

'MUD': Nataša Prosenc's 10-minute video work shows a female figure emerging from a pool of mud and walking into the world, then scraping and washing the mud from her skin.

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Steve Turner Contemporary, 6026 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 931-3721, through Dec. 19. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.steveturnercontemporary.com.

"THE MOST ROMANTIC MOVIE OF THE YEAR!"

— Shawn Edwards, FOX-TV

