

MYTH BREAKER

Forget about LA's decorator-friendly painters; tune in to the ever-changing world of **Don Suggs**

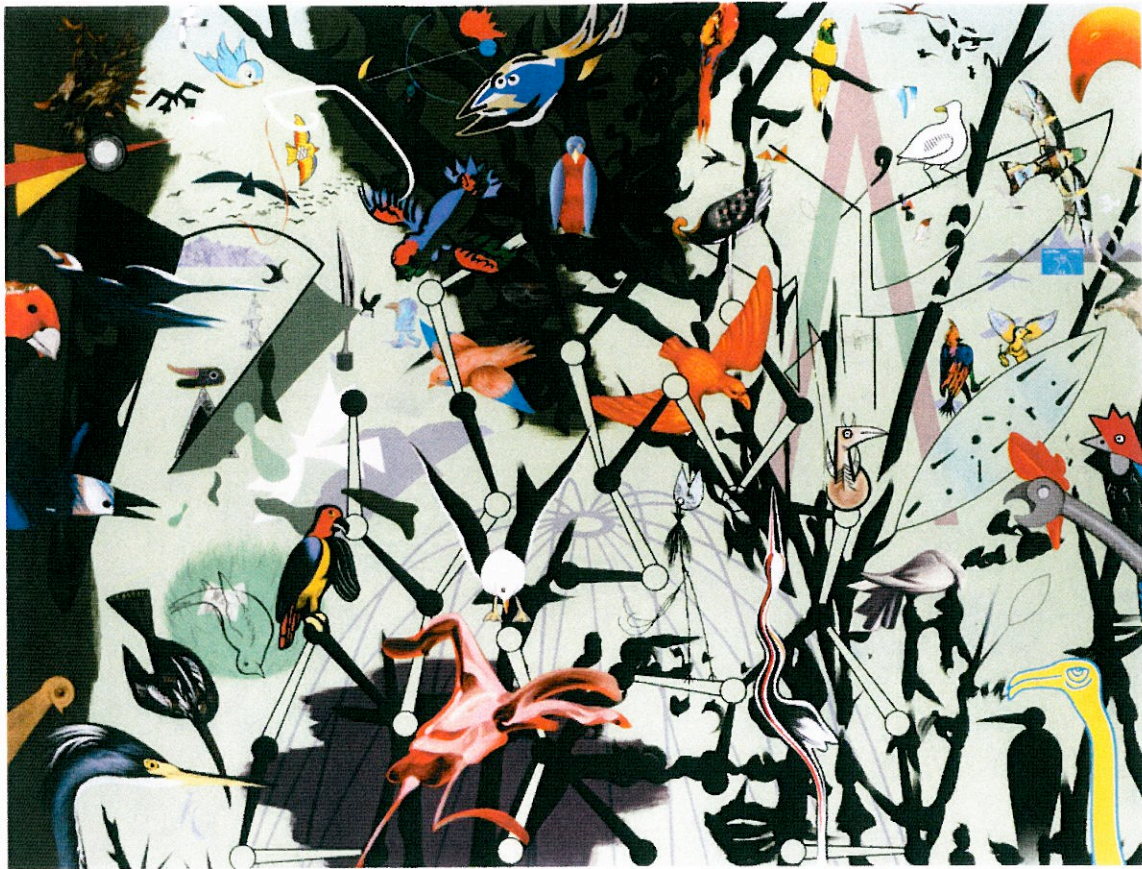
DOUG HARVEY

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT CURRENT PAINTING in Los Angeles, the discussion tends to focus on the *faux naïveté* of Laura Owens or various strains of retro colourfield design strategies. But while these decorator-friendly works have their place, they don't really represent the range or ambition of the scene, depending, as they do, on diminished expectations of painting's relevance to contemporary art practice. Nevertheless, there are a large number of LA-based painters who have never conceded painting's redundancy, but continue to engage the medium as a vital and irreplaceable means of expression, one with an enormous history, and one that is in direct competition with other art practices and the mass culture that flows from and permeates the city.

The reason more people don't know about Don Suggs isn't hard to figure out. Of the seven solo exhibitions he has had at L.A. Louver (the long-running Venice Beach gallery that also represents Hockney and Kitaj), no two would lead you to suspect that



Don Suggs. Courtesy the Artist and L.A. Louver Gallery. Photo: Izabela Jadach



(Above)

Don Suggs, *Progress in Birdland*, 1994–5, acrylic on canvas, 182.88 x 241.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver Gallery

they were the work of the same artist. Beginning with the second ever show at the gallery, Suggs offered a group of textured abstractions composed from the nine geometric structures found in nature. His next exhibition featured hyper-gestural, life-size acrylic figure paintings with subtle, thoughtful diagrammatic overlays that belied the trope of spontaneous emotive expression. These were followed by oil paintings of enlarged, horizonless details from landscape photographs, executed with a deliberately expressive palette-knife application of oils. Next up was *Proprietary Views* – a quintessential series of picture-postcard mountain landscapes partially obliterated by Minimalist rectangular bands of colour, along with several groupings of smaller works that performed the same act of semiotic frustration on black-and-white photorealist portraits. These acquired an additional layer of political comment via the use of national flags as generators for the abstract element. The *Citizen* series used a generic passport-style photograph (incidentally showing a young and beardless Fidel Castro) with pairs or sets of chro-

matically anagrammatic flags – Ireland and the Ivory Coast, for example. Other series obscure images of iconic capitalists and communists (Rockefeller, Stalin), people who had disappeared in a literal or metaphorical sense (Jimmy Hoffa, Cassius Clay), and assassinated moderate politicians (Sadat, Romero, King).

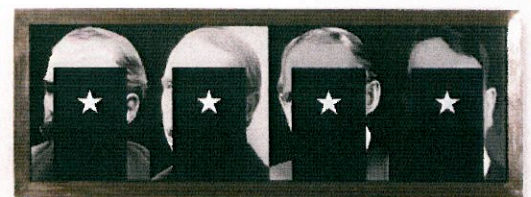
These last bodies of work, along with a concurrent monumental drawing project at the L.A. County Museum, garnered Suggs considerable positive attention, but, in typical fashion, his next exhibition marked the furthest stylistic departure yet – away from paint altogether, and into a series of elaborately encoded photoworks.

Wryly entitled *Old Genres* (as opposed to the National Endowment for the Arts category-turned-academic-catch-all 'New Genres'), the works encompassed landscapes, figures, and still lifes, often compiling dozens of found photographic images into grids of elegant obscurity – fascinating, funny and dazzlingly designed rebuses that thwart any attempt at neat resolution. The *Common* photographic series furthered this growing interest in elaborate systems, but buried it into the structure. These sometimes enormous composite photographs of tourist sites were painstakingly assembled from hundreds of overlapping five-inch-square prints arranged in an intricate 'hexane' pattern reminiscent of Islamic decorative patterns, but invisible from any distance needed to resolve the imagery.

Downplayed too were the careful edits this underlying mosaic allowed – for these seemingly mundane (if strikingly composed and conceptually engaging) documents of humans regarding and/or comprising picturesque vistas are actually condensed from a full day's worth of shots taken from a fixed

(Right)

Don Suggs, *Big Communists/Big Capitalists*, 1988, oil on alkyd on panels (2 part work), 54.72 x 124.46 cm. Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver Gallery



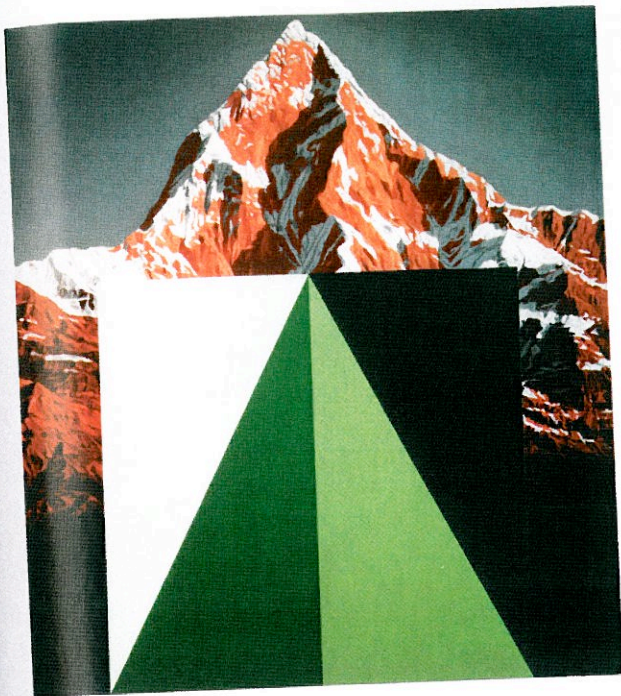


photo-composites have seen a forcible return of this restrained improvisational impulse through a jumble of playful strategies – most notably a process Suggs calls heuristic empiricism (that recalls Max Ernst's stochastic image-generating processes), through which he extracts a complex *pietà* or a floral still life from a dried splash of chromium green acrylic wash, discovering images in the random stains and tracing their outlines, or clarifying structures with brightly coloured shards of geometry. At the same time, Suggs has been exploring a polar approach that expands and intensifies his elaborate rational frameworks – such as populating a canvas with 66 appropriated images of birds from art history, or his elaborate kundalini stacks of circular Pop iconographs, each with a whole cluster of specific references and symbolism carefully worked-out in notebooks and preparatory sketches. These, in turn, are related to another body of work – a series of actual three-dimensional totem poles assembled from all manner of found plastic: toys, kitchenware, seven-inch vinyl, display food, etc.

The space required simply to describe all these varied approaches leaves little room for interpretation. But Suggs work doesn't require rationalisation to communicate – it is deeply formal, and however much you might be tempted to riff on such topics as the destabilisation of the picturesque or the

OF THE SEVEN SOLO EXHIBITIONS HE HAD AT L.A. LOUVER, NO TWO WOULD LEAD YOU TO SUSPECT THAT THEY WERE THE WORK OF THE SAME ARTIST

angle. As we look closer, our normal spatio-temporal framework – along with our ways of understanding and categorising photography's notions of veracity and capacities for narrative – is splintered. Once a fragmentary limb coexisting impossibly in the same space as another queers your ability to absorb the scene at face value, you start to notice that one image contains only men; another, only women. Crowds all seem to be posed so that their gazes are orchestrated into an elaborate network, or made entirely out of identically dressed couples, save for a single overweight man at centre frame, sporting a geometrically abstract tee-shirt and leaning on a cane.

This virtuosic turn – that took place just over seven years ago – comprised Suggs' last major solo exhibition before his recent and surprisingly festive collection of painting and sculpture shown at the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from February to March of this year. The photoworks, as visually masterful as they were, included a necessary element of predetermination that occluded the joyful spontaneous engagement of the senses, at least from the bulk of the in-studio process. The intervening years since the hexane

struggle to reconcile improvisation and composition, the paintings communicate most clearly on a pre-verbal frequency.

They are gorgeous not in spite of their deep irony, but in conjunction with it. This is one of the myths of the last decade of art-



making that Suggs' work explodes – that irony precludes formal beauty and emotional engagement. Indeed, one of the central insights of Suggs' *oeuvre* is that irony is integral in the act of looking at art, in the reading of symbols – that any artwork or commentary on art isn't responsible if it doesn't incorporate irony, and refusal to acknowledge the gap between the symbol and the thing it refers to is to deny experience, and derail the creative impulse into authoritarian entertainment. And LA has quite enough of that particular flavour. ■

A retrospective of **Don Suggs'** work is currently being scheduled for early 2007 at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles.

(Above)

Don Suggs, Red Mountain/Green Mountain, 1985–8, oil on wood, 160.02 x 142.24 cm. Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver Gallery

(Left)

Don Suggs, Floral & Frame, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 218.44 x 134.62 cm. Courtesy the artist and L.A. Louver Gallery