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Considering Eden

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CONSIDERING EDEN BY DAMON WILLICK

“The only true paradise is always the paradise we have lost.”

—Marcel Proust

The biblical description of Eden locates the garden as the intersection of four rivers: the Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel (Tigris), and Euphrates. These four rivers (two of which are unknown today) are all we have to go on in our search for the actual location of the lost paradise, and there is a long history of explorers, theologians, and historians who have searched for the elusive site of Adam and Eve. During the Middle Ages, the common belief was that Eden had become inaccessible to humans, still real, but just out of reach. Even recently, scientists and cartographers have debated whether the exact location of the biblical garden is within modern Iran or elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region.

The idea of an Eden, however, predates the Old Testament, and paradise myths have their roots in ancient mythology. Common to these stories are the ideals of Man's communion with nature in a bountiful setting of abundant water, sunshine, and happiness. It is no surprise, then, that the topic of Eden would be compelling in the complicated and contentious times we find ourselves in today. Whether approached as a real site or an imaginary ideal, the topic of Eden opens up a wealth of possibilities for artists to follow in their work. Lisa Bloomfield, Jane Brucker, Paul Goldman, Katherine Huffaker Jones, and Bob Jones, all mid-career California artists, approach the ideas of Eden as both corporeal and spiritual, real and imagined.

These artists understand that Eden always implies a mythic utopian paradise as well as its tragic loss; Eden is simultaneously the ideal garden of Adam and Eve as well as the site of their hubristic downfall. Paradise is the sum of our fantasies of heaven on Earth, a location to be rediscovered, and a constant reminder of our past and present mistakes. We search for Eden at the same time we mourn its loss.

Considering Eden in Los Angeles opens other avenues of thought and contemplation. Every hometown has its mythic Eden—a golden era or prime location long lost—but LA is particularly Edenic in its bipolar attractions and repulsions, imagined heydays, and constant reminders that there is always a price to pay for one's paradise. The city lures you in with the ideas of itself (Hollywood, Disneyland, Palm Trees, Beverly Hills, the list can go on and on) while at the same time disgusts with its obverse disasters and scars (fires, mudslides, earthquakes, riots, gang violence, etc). One only has to venture outside the Annenberg Beach House Gallery to experience the city's contradictions directly. Walking along the sandy beach, you may encounter one of the city's thousands of homeless sleeping behind or upon an iconic LA county lifeguard tower immortalized on kitsch television programs like *Baywatch*. If you decide to swim in the

alluring Pacific Ocean at the city's edge, you risk your health as the brownish green waters of Santa Monica are contaminated with urban runoff that flows directly out of the city's flood control channels (our very own four rivers of Eden). Even the Annenberg Beach House itself reminds us of LA's sordid racial politics; the Beach House site was once the Sand and Sea Beach Club, the only beach club to accommodate the religious and ethnic minorities barred for much of the twentieth century from the restrictive establishments that lined the coastline.

As social historian Mike Davis described, Los Angeles is Walden Pond on acid. What may first attract you to the region can also send you away in disbelief, and the artists of *Considering Eden* explore the dichotomies of paradise from a variety of artistic mediums in order to express the unique physical and psychological landscapes of our world. In Lisa Bloomfield's *Like Fire*, for example, we witness the unique atmospherics of Los Angeles's fire fueled skies as seen through the artist's living room curtains, finding beauty caused by the horrors of a distant wildfire. Jane Brucker's display cases of cast metal objects also explore the visceral and spiritual aspects of the human life cycle, reminding us of death's presence in everyday objects. Paula Goldman's *Nature* series demonstrates the aesthetic beauty of decay in her photographs of still lifes that are in various rotting states. Similarly, Katherine Huffaker Jones's oil paintings are based on constructed dioramas and intricate scenes that speak to our futile attempts to understand life's trials and tribulations. And, the collages of Bob Jones recontextualize the familiar sentimental images and texts of greeting cards into uncanny combinations that defy their original messages. Just as Eden conjures up images of paradise and its loss, these artists contemplate the sunshine and noir of our daily lives.

As Marcel Proust explained, paradise has always been lost. *Considering Eden* reminds us of our past, our dreams, and our failures.

DAMON WILLICK is an Associate Professor of Art History at Loyola Marymount University and serves on the editorial board of the contemporary art journal X-TRA. His scholarship focuses on art in Los Angeles.