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The Landscapes of Adam Harrison

Damon
Willick

Adam Harrison, *Place*
Long Beach Museum of Art
September 19, 2019–January 12, 2020

This city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember...

–Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

A sense of place is this city's most elusive quality.

–D. J. Waldie, *Where We Are: Notes from Los Angeles*

As Marco Polo states in Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* (1972), places are infinitely subjective and invariably personal. Polo's dialogue with Kublai Khan in the novel revolves around the merchant's description of the Mongol ruler's vast colonial empire, told in such poetic bursts that details of each locale mix together into a broader meditation on space, place, and home. In a moment of candor, the Venetian explorer admits, "every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."¹ Might all expressions of place be more about the homes we hold close in our memories, our lives, and our identities? Furthermore, what does this mean for "elusive" places like Los Angeles, and how might this be envisioned, in our current corporate global world? The answers to these questions are as infinite as the places that inspire them, and Adam Harrison's exhibition *Place* at the Long Beach Museum of Art offers five Los Angeles landscapes that invite deeper meditation on some, at least, provisional answers. As D. J. Waldie asserts, a sense of place is hard to come by in Los Angeles, a city whose modern history is one of restless expansion, turnover and development for over a century now. Harrison's paintings offer welcome opportunities for extended contemplation of our place, our time, and ourselves.

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, New York, and London: Harvest Harcourt, 1972), 86.

Place is Harrison's first solo museum exhibition, and the Long Beach Museum of Art aptly chose five representative works that focus on overlooked and quickly disappearing sites of middle- and working-class Los Angeles County. These canvases invite time-intensive consideration on painting's potential role in envisioning and taking stock of our current times. Located in the museum's rear-facing Ocean Gallery, the selection of works are either acrylic or oil on canvas and range from medium to large scale. Harrison's locales appear as if they are already of the past, varying in subject from broad panoramic views of industrial sites and nondescript West Los Angeles apartment complexes to a foregrounded elm tree centered in a verdant, suburban backyard. These are the in-between spaces of our everyday lives, intimately felt, though most often unremembered, and Harrison's site-specific, patient method seems the most appropriate medium for these lived-in sites. Harrison works on each canvas over the course of about a year, painting plein air, looking and looking again at his subjects over time and light, weather and folks. There is no shorthand of sketch or photograph. He is on the street for close to the entirety of the process, and his daily routines of priming and securing the canvas, mixing paints, measuring objects, and distances between them allow him to experience the day-to-day rhythms and intricacies of the place. As such, time is a central theme of Harrison's work and its exhibition: the time the artist put into the works, the time taken viewing the details of the canvases, and, maybe most importantly, the capturing in time of cityscapes yet superseded by today's rapid redevelopment.²

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains that as our cities change, so do the people who call them home: "As

the city is no longer quite the same city, so I—with the blurring of an important period of my past—am no longer quite the same person."³ Yet, as Rebecca Solnit highlights, although one accommodates changes within the landscape, our memories of it haunt us and remain indelibly part of our identities. Writing of her beloved hometown of San Francisco, Solnit dolefully accepts the realities of the passage of time: "I also live among ghosts. For better or worse, the familiar vanishes, so that the longer you live here, the more you live with a map that no longer matches the actual terrain."⁴ To paint Los Angeles, a city with its own unique set of circumstances quite separate from Solnit's San Francisco, is to confront full-force the inevitabilities of a changing terrain on the front lines.

Few cities refuse stagnancy like Los Angeles, and, as D. J. Waldie writes, "remembering is an act of courage in Los Angeles, even if we don't fully understand the stories we have to tell. Remembering is sabotage against the regime of speed."⁵ Waldie's writing, it should be noted, subtly counters the common view of Los Angeles's suburbs as devoid of value or unworthy of extended consideration. A lifelong resident of Lakewood, a community just southeast of the Long Beach Museum of Art, Waldie's writing is useful in considering Harrison's work, as both look to the everyday ordinariness of the city in order to deepen perspectives of broader Los Angeles and megacities like it. Central is

2. California Governor Gavin Newsom has pledged to have 3.5 million new housing units built in the state by 2025, 900,000 of which are projected to be in Los Angeles. See Gavin Newsom, "The California Dream Starts at Home," *Medium.com*, October 20, 2017, <https://medium.com/@GavinNewsom/the-california-dream-starts-at-home-9dbb38c51cae>.

3. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Place, Art, and Self* (Sante Fe, New Mexico and Chicago, Illinois: Center for American Places with Columbia College Press, 2004), 14.

4. Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2010), 6.

5. D. J. Waldie, *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2004), 17.



Adam Harrison painting on location, Los Angeles, c. 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Following spread: Adam Harrison, *Arizona*, n.d. Oil on three panels, 31 1/2 × 45 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and George Billis Gallery.

the idea that expressions of place have the ability to illuminate our relationship with a site's past, present, and future, and, when successful, speak beyond ourselves, creating common histories and culture hitherto unacknowledged or understood.

Harrison balances fidelity to the seen with the feeling of seeing. Eschewing the assistance of photography and other imaging tools, his process is interactive, integrative, and transitory; as he explains, "I get to witness a city like no one quite can... working with one vantage point, I remain stationary while the sun runs its circuit 1.5 to 2 times around me and the city. The 'individual parts' can be seen relatively quickly but the 'multi-layered-sets' of lights and atmospheres have to be accumulated over long periods of time. And it's this record of time that I leave for others."⁶ Those "others" are the paintings' viewers, and Harrison's landscapes are loose enough to allow for a multiplicity of receptions. Realistic depictions of buildings and the environment

play with areas of abstraction that invite contemplative viewing, extending beyond the artist's undeniably skilled handling of paint and composition.

In *Arizona* (n.d.), Harrison captures a modest two-story apartment building from an angled perspective that accentuates the abstract qualities of the canvas yet preserves the familiarity of the pictured structure common to West Los Angeles neighborhoods. Our attention jumps between the centered blue building, the deep perspective down the walkway to the left, and the foregrounded green foliage that projects toward us on the right. Harrison's process remains marked on the canvas with brushstrokes and measurement lines visible throughout the composition, serving as indexical marks that point to the painting process.

Counter to the Los Angeles clichés of palm trees, glamour, and excess, Harrison seeks out ordinary, everyday sites that seem to be rapidly disappearing from the city. The paintings capture spaces that are holding on as Los Angeles redevelops

6. Adam Harrison in "Art & Life with Adam Harrison," *Voyagela.com*, September 17, 2018, <http://voyagela.com/interview/art-life-adam-harrison/>.





Above and title page: Adam Harrison, *Santa Monica (06/14-08/15)*, 2015. Oil on Panel, 50 × 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and George Billis Gallery.

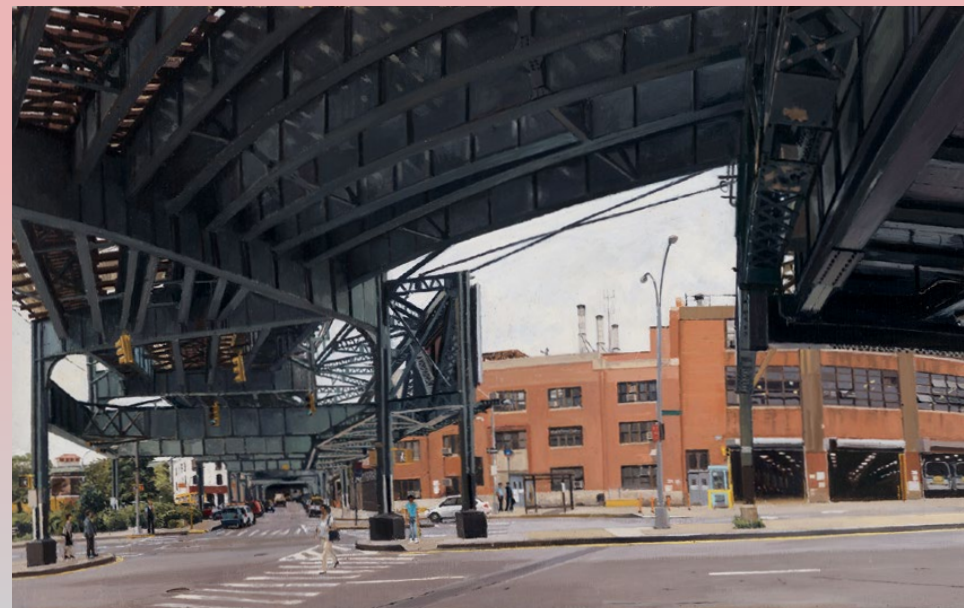
under the pressures of a declining industrial economy, the rising tech and media sectors, and the building initiatives of state and local governments. Like Charles Baudelaire's ragpicker salvaging the everyday debris from the upheaval of Haussmann's modern Paris, Harrison can similarly be seen as capturing soon to be forgotten views of a Los Angeles in flux. The ragpicker, as Baudelaire described, preserves what will soon be lost: "Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice."⁷ The ragpicker, like the painter, has the time to consider the changing

environment around him; he encounters the modern world at his own pace unconcerned with factory schedules or market fluctuations. He exists on his own time, an outsider that Baudelaire and others, such as Walter Benjamin, elevated as both of and against modernity's disruptive forces.⁸ Harrison's cityscapes, like those of other current Los Angeles landscape artists Marc Trujillo and Karla Klarin, often capture places that will soon be lost to redevelopment or repurposing.

The painting *Santa Monica (06/14-08/15)* (2015) depicts the rear units and parking spaces of a rundown, four-story, 1960s-era apartment building. The large building pictured most likely replaced early-century single story bungalows,

7. Charles Baudelaire, "Du Vin et du haschisch," quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 349.

8. See Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York and London: Verso Books, 1997).



Rackstraw Downes, *A Stop on the J Line (Alabama Avenue)*, 2007. Oil on Canvas, 11 × 18 7/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery

Following spread: Adam Harrison, *Long Beach, Near Campus*, n.d. Oil on canvas mounted to panel, 36 × 52 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and George Billis Gallery.

and inevitably will be redeveloped itself into the even larger-scaled housing complexes now spreading throughout the area. Harrison doesn't sentimentalize the building, but instead, chooses an unremarkable view of an apartment building we would soon forget if not for his extraordinary focus and painting. The work is the result of time spent in place, navigating the challenges of painting on the street and trying to see and feel the neighborhood over an extended period. As a result, Harrison's paintings feel

lived in and patient, quite separate from the better-known drive-by Los Angeles landscapes of Ed Ruscha or the panoramic flyovers of Peter Alexander, both of whom offer cinematically inspired examinations of the city that feel lived through.⁹ Even Harrison's industrial landscapes like *Long Beach, Near Campus* (n.d.) present patient images that are soon to be lost. *Long Beach, Near Campus* offers a view over a chain-link fence of the AES Alamosa gas-fired power plant, a facility undergoing renovation into a clean energy site.¹⁰ The plant's smokestacks recall Robert Smithson's fascination with modern technology as "ruins in reverse."¹¹ Standing as monuments of American industrialism, such modern sites now languish in what Smithson framed as entropic demise, yet, as in the case of AES Alamosa, might soon be recycled

9. More so than Alexander, Ruscha encourages a detailed examination and reexamination of everyday Los Angeles, especially in the way he rephotographs the same streets, indicating an involvement with history and change that compares to Harrison's painting.

10. See Harry Saltzgaver, "New Long Beach AES Power Plant On Track To Be Complete This Year," *The Grunion*, February 21, 2019, http://gazettes.com/news/new-long-beach-aes-power-plant-on-track-to-be/article_74b95024-3470-11e9-9eeb-338d691f870c.html.

11. Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 72.



into an updated and more efficient version of its original construction.

In essence, Harrison is a contemporary regionalist, critically focusing on the local in order to counter the homogenizing effects of globalization and market forces. British critic Lawrence Alloway argued that American regionalism of the 1930s and 1940s was more critically engaged than its detractors would allow. Rejecting their characterization of regionalism as isolationist and reactionary, Alloway instead saw works by John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood as containing “a double time-perspective of some complexity,” one that could simply seem narrowly focused on a particular locale but that upon rethinking offered broader statements on how place is felt and experienced globally.¹² Alloway believed the local was always a complex combination of the particularities of place in relation to broader global forces. Harrison’s practice also harkens back to French realist and impressionist painters who similarly reckoned with the tensions between the local and global forces. As Linda Nochlin explained, nineteenth-century painters were largely motivated to capture their unique urban and rural landscapes in reaction to the upheavals caused by modernity’s “radical alteration of the sense of time.”¹³ These artists utilized the everyday, the low, and the commonplace of their worlds to slow down the rapidity of their changing society.¹⁴

Whereas artists of past centuries confronted disorienting modern technologies like photography and modern transportation, Harrison’s practice can be contextualized in relation to our century’s fracturing of experience by digital and online media. If, as Robert Storr explained of the paintings of Rackstraw Downes, “cameras don’t record facts; they register but also filter, isolate, recast, and

sometimes distort impressions of facts,” how might we expand this to consider our own time’s avalanche of digital imagery uploaded and consumed?¹⁵ Today’s here and now is always somewhere else suspended in cyberspace, but Harrison, like the New York-based Downes, challenges current distortions of time and place with slow-time, site-specific painting. These are not static images created or received passively, but instead, are opportunities for reflection not only on our rapidly changing spaces, but also on the avalanche of imagery we encounter digitally every day. The comparison to Downes is constructive in thinking about Harrison’s landscapes as Harrison is also interested in what Storr calls the “unflavored aspects of our reality.”¹⁶ Harrison, like Downes, slows down his painting process by spending long periods of time on site, and both subsequently ask that we do likewise when looking at their work. Crucially, the work integrates the dynamics of memory, identity, and place, giving us a unified sense of self so lacking in current times. Amidst the dislocation of technology like Google maps, Instagram, Waze, VR, and the like, Harrison proposes a slower, more embodied and located point of view.

The best paintings of place are, as such, three-dimensional images that extend beyond their two-dimensional surfaces (optically and emotionally). They invite us to see and reflect upon what we have always seen, but as yet not contemplated. Harrison’s five paintings at the Long Beach Museum of Art tell the story of his time in these places,

but also our very own at the moment. One can’t help but look out to the Long Beach harbor framed by the gallery’s rear window. There we encounter the cranes, oil derricks, and piers of the twentieth-century industries that fueled Long Beach’s, and Los Angeles’s, rise. In 1967, Robert Smithson wrote of the industrial decay of Passaic, New Jersey: “I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past.”¹⁷ How might Harrison’s paintings and the views they offer complicate our understanding of place as they and we transform under the weight of the twenty-first century? When we think we’ve found ourselves in place, especially in cities like Long Beach and Los Angeles, they change, redevelop, expand, erase. Harrison’s work is on and of this precipice, this moment.

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12. Lawrence Alloway, “The Recovery of Regionalism: John Steuart Curry,” *Art in America* 64, no. 4 (July–August 1976): 71.

13. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 23.

14. Nochlin, *Realism*, 34.

15. Robert Storr, “As Far as the Eye Can See,” in *Rackstraw Downes*, eds. Sanford Schwarz, Robert Storr, and Rackstraw Downes (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 73.

16. Storr, “As Far as the Eye Can See,” 62.

17. Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” 72.