



Oil, dust devils and Disneyland

During his Santa Monica residency, New Zealand artist Brit Bunkley continues his digital investigation of the tension between nature and culture in the context of 21st-century hopes and fears.

In August this year, I returned to the United States for a two-month residency at the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica, a seaside city within Los Angeles. I lived for many years in New York City before immigrating to New Zealand in 1995, but I wasn't familiar with Los Angeles. So this residency would give me a taste of the Los Angeles art scene, as well as the chance to explore the utopian and dystopian art and architecture of the Southwest.

While there I aimed to make 3D scans, videos and animations of various objects and architecture, then modify the scans and print them on a 3D printer. Some of the subjects I focused on were Disneyland and Arcosanti – a utopian village designed by Italian-American architect Paolo Soleri and built in 1970 by thousands of volunteers in the high Arizona desert. I also photographed and scanned classical sculptures at the two Getty Museums, oil pumpjacks, abandoned towns and gas stations. In another quixotic project, I chased dust devils in the hot desert valleys.

The residency is geared towards independence – there's no specific programme, meals are not provided, and attending the openings and critical seminars is optional. However, we did have a monthly collective pot luck lunch and each one

had a theme. The second was "food that makes a noise" and I brought the beets. The person next to me introduced herself as Suzanne. She was Suzanne Lacy, one of the Los Angeles performance artists who were active in the 1970s and shaped the emergent art of social engagement at the time. Lacy is a renowned artist and author of the seminal book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*.

Since it began in 1992, the residency has hosted more than 400 artists, and the Art Center houses local artists in subsidised studios, a critic's lounge, art galleries and a performance space. It's home to the first year of Otis School of Art and Design's Graduate Public Practice programme, which is chaired by Lacy and taught by several artists, including Andrea Bowers who's well known for her politically charged practice. Interestingly, the 18th Street building was where Judy Chicago made her famous 1970s feminist artwork, *The Dinner Party*, and later Guillermo Gómez-Peña and writer/artist Coco Fusco had their studios there.

While there I met fellow resident J Louise Makary whose residency was funded by the prestigious Pew Trust. She showed us a captivating new film during a forum we shared in the critic's lounge. J (as she is called) incorporates dance



Opposite page and above: Brit Bunkley, *Oil Petals*, 2015, video stills. All artworks in this article are by Brit Bunkley

in her short films, which include stills and experimental processes within an offbeat traditional narrative structure. In *This Is Where the Wool Comes From*, she made a careful analysis of sheep shearing in Wyoming then translated it into choreography for the film. The action took place within a wool shed between the “sheep” (played by J) and a menacing “shearer” as they both lyrically swayed, mimicking the shearing process while alluding to assault on women. The Lynchian tension was riveting.

I really liked my large, live-in loft studio in a former factory and instantly settled in. The weather was perfect – with highs between 23–27° C, gentle sea breezes and blue skies. The beachside communities of Venice and Santa Monica are crowded with surfers, legal “medical marijuana” dispensaries, and new-age spiritual awakening centres. I was invited to a “sound bath”, expecting an electronic music concert only to be instructed in a one-love breathing exercise session taught by a woman with a nasal, valley girl voice. There was late 60s Pink Floyd instrumental-type music and the valley girl periodically sprayed our faces with aromatherapy perfume. Despite several people breathing like heavily panting dogs, it was a pleasant experience.

Los Angeles fed my ongoing interest in dystopias and utopias. The dystopian realities of the Cold War during the 1970s and 80s always intrigued me, and now I’m looking at the spectre of catastrophic climate change. It’s a fear that haunts our collective unconscious, but one that can be tempered with hope exemplified by Stephen Pinker’s book, *Better Angels of Our Nature*, which projects a rosy, less violent future.

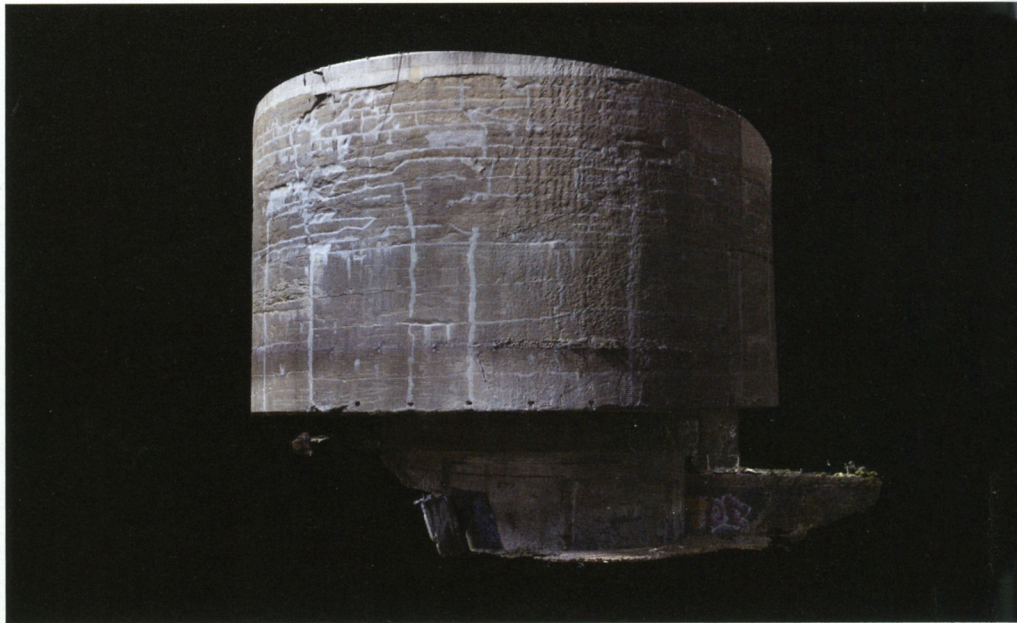
Last year, during a Berlin residency, I scanned WWII and Cold War sites and monuments, including shrapnel pocked



Dark Rose, 2015, PLA plastic, epoxy, artificial flowers, 300 x 200 x 100mm



Brit Bunkley



Test Weight, 2015, C-type print, 600 x 400mm

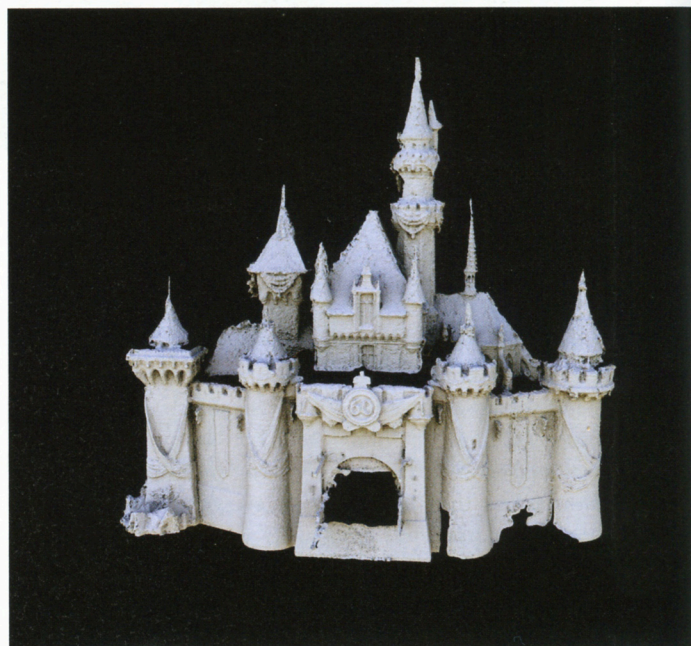
walls, concentration camps, Stalinist monuments, and NSA sites. One of the most strange was the “test weight”, a huge mushroom-like structure built to test the ground for a proposed triumphal arch designed by Hitler’s architect Albert Speer. While I was in Los Angeles, my scanned and 3D rendered image of this structure was included in an exhibition at the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art, curated by Max Presneill, Torrence Art Museum and Nana Bahlmann of LACMA.

At the other end of the spectrum Los Angeles has a veneer of hyperreal optimism – it’s the home of Disneyland, which is branded the “happiest place on Earth”, and Google’s new headquarters in Venice. The endless sunshine and sparkling beaches contribute to this positive outlook, yet the encroaching desert, catastrophic wildfires and dying 3000-year-old sequoia trees on the outskirts of the city signal more gloomy scenarios like climate change. The incessant pumping of oil on vast fields within and outside Los Angeles seemed an apt trope of oil’s stranglehold on the region.

I used photogrammetry to produce as my 3D scanning method to produce 3D virtual meshes of these pumpjacks. Photogrammetry uses multiple photographs and specific software, and the meshes can be used for video animations and “printed” on a 3D printer. When you’re making scans outside in sunny weather the results are often imperfect. Over time I’ve developed a way of using these imperfections to add to the expressive quality of the final 3D printed objects, so they look like they’ve been fossilised or dredged up from the ocean floor.

I also searched for dust devils in the Eastern California desert. These are weak whirlwinds formed by heat updrafts that lift and spin the dust into tornado-like columns that can be hundreds of metres high. Although they look ominous, they’re generally harmless. Indeed Francis Alÿs ran into large dust devils while making his outstanding video *Tornado, Milpa Alta*.

I’ve used flowers in my work for many years, and during one of my trips to the desert I had the crazy idea of spilling flower petals into the path of a dust devil to create a colourful vortex of swirling petals. But dust devils are hard to catch – they’re fast moving, dissipate quickly and are mostly too far away – always just ahead of my car. I was about to give up and was focusing my camera on an abandoned school when a small,



The Happy Place, 2015, C-type print, 600 x 600mm

well-formed dust devil appeared nearby. I turned my camera on a tripod towards it, snatched a bag of flower petals that I’d bought in the Los Angeles’ flower district and ran into the small vortex, dumping the contents. The wind grabbed the petals and spread them over the road. It may not have been the large column of flower petals I’d imagined – that would take a small Hollywood budget to achieve – but with minor alterations, this one was a wrap.

After my 18th Street residency I left for the east coast, where I’ll do the I-Park Residency in East Haddam, Connecticut, before returning home to New Zealand. I look forward to returning to Los Angeles – a complex and invigorating city – and to the Southwest United States in the future.

Brit Bunkley’s exhibition Social Realism is at Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland, from 19 November to 6 December, 2015.