

# Letter to the Editor

Hello Carla,

Writing to say that I appreciated Travis Diehl's thoughtful review *MEATPHYSICS/ Metaphysical L.A.* in Issue 1, about *The Making of Personal Theory* exhibition at the Armory Center for the Arts. I also found Sara Kathryn Arledge's paintings to be a revelation and I valued Mr. Diehl's drawing of the connection between mysticism, the body, and visionary art. Although not an unprecedented observation, it's one worth repeating.

I especially appreciated, though, Mr. Diehl's aside addressing the fashion-ability ("now or always") of interest in "belief," particularly here in Los Angeles. As this conversation appears to be moving into vogue again, let's talk about belief and its apparent partner, metaphysics. When he says, "it's important to distinguish between the reality of the effects of belief in metaphysics and the reality of metaphysics," I think he is starting to be loose with the word "metaphysics," veering into the vagueness he later decries. It reads like he's conflating metaphysics with "supernatural" and, at other points, "credulity." Clearly, though, with a little reflection and some investigation (sorry friends, reading the Wikipedia entry alone is not enough!), metaphysics can also be understood as a field of investigation both vast and abstruse; a lifetime (lifetimes?) of study in itself. It's misguided to start by assuming that every system of metaphysics is built on an irreconcilable difference between "matter and spirit," the body and the spiritual, natural and supernatural. Even contemporary, theoretical physics has largely done away with the fundamental difference between "material" matter and "immaterial" energy.

Maybe this state of affairs is not so surprising; Can you name a Los Angeles-based, academic art program (studio, curation, criticism, or otherwise) that includes *any* study of metaphysics in its curriculum? Its history, permutations, and connections to contemporary thought? Its relevance to art both modern and contemporary? This situation seems odd as it's clear that generations of artists up to today have found rich possibilities in these subjects and questions. The very condition that Mr. Diehl critiques—"Californian metaphysical art" as something "free-floating or magical" and not grounded, solid, or human—I think grows out of the lack of a significant investigation into and dialogue around metaphysics in contemporary art. So scorned, neglected, and starved is it that only the most meager of dialogues is possible before being rolled back under an obsession with irony and self-serving distancing. Why would any of us "fess up to without qualifications" in the face of what is seemingly a mode of cultural and institutional bias, perhaps even bordering on intolerance? It's obvious to many that the relationship between art and metaphysics goes deeper than polarized opinions and bitter debates about religion and "belief." There is no modernism without the new age and, thus, no contemporary. Any building on or breaking from the past necessarily requires an engagement with the very concerns contained in that past.

To most of us now, sincere consideration of metaphysics in any form conjures fantasies of the supernatural, shadowy evils, cults, brainwashing, and loss of personal identity. Yet, the historic and on-going relationship between art and metaphysics is inescapable. Do we really believe that we have forever abandoned this conversation to our materialist metaphysics of the image and word? That what is probably the oldest and surely the most enduring discourse in human culture is unable to speak significantly to the circumstances and conditions of our era? There must be other answers and other narratives to discover. If not, we surely have all the knowledge and tools to create these now.

Michael Carter