

Sadow Birk

# art and cake

Sadow Birk at Track 16



*Sadow Birk, Installation View of Los Angeles and Her Surroundings, Track 16, Photo Courtesy of the Gallery*

Sadow Birk: *Los Angeles and Her Surroundings*

TRACK 16, LOS ANGELES  
THROUGH MAY 7, 2022

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Sadow Birk, like most of us, has a love/hate relationship with Los Angeles, just as we have with America in general. Put simply, both the country and the city are lands of great beauty and promise full of mostly lovely people, where horrible, hateful, stupid, violent things have happened and continue to happen. This is the paradox of affection and shame at the heart of Birk's bifurcated exhibition, which could equally have been titled "Love/Hate." It pairs a series of dozens of careful, thoughtful, appreciative drawings each depicting a specific, frequently mundane sight or site of daily Angeleno life with a suite of intricate, large-scale paintings chronicling scenes of domestic terror from Parkland to Philadelphia, Charlottesville to Santa Monica.

In the paintings, a careful technique, saturated palette, and Boschian, Brueghel-esque level of detail unfold across vast, hybrid pictorial space and manipulations of scale. They're plausible but slightly illustrative rather than photorealist; they're gorgeous and up close they're horrifying. In the ink on mylar drawings, a sophisticated Grand Tour-style light-hearted energy quickly reveals that even the most picturesque of L.A. scenes has within it a dark shadow, a problematic history, and something to answer for. At the end, there's a reboot of Ruscha's famous *LACMA on Fire* from 1965-68 in which the building that's burning is a rather unflattering rendering of the forthcoming Zumthor remodel. In this gesture Birk reaches back into art history for a wry narrative and iconic stylistic cues, as well as an ongoing concern with LACMA's own perpetration of sketchy cultural stewardship — now both a landmark and a victim of demolition and bizarre ambition.

It will be tempting to deep dive into the paintings, as their chromatic depth and the never-ending assertiveness of impressive detail demand studious attention. It requires time to take it all in, but it's worth it. All titled *The Triumph of...* followed by *Chaos, Fear, Hate, Death, Revenge* and so on, these paintings take on the meticulous and, one would imagine, emotionally

heavy task of recreating, augmenting, conceptualizing, and critiquing headline-making episodes of racist and fascistic large-scale public violence like the riots in Charlottesville, the country music festival shooting in Las Vegas, the attack at the school in Parkland, Florida and that on the synagogue in Mister Rogers' neighborhood of Pittsburgh. These — and the composite universe of years of police murders of unarmed Black people from all across the country, *A Few Bad Apples (Killed by Cops)*, 2019 — are scenes and stories with well-known aftermaths and consequences. Each is filled with compositional tricks of art history, like geometrical groupings of figures, bold sight-lines, deftly surreal contortions of geography and architecture, and a peppering of hidden anomalies like skeletons and tombstones and corporate logos. This is part of what makes them a pleasure to peruse even as they are indelibly commemorating the worst humanity has to offer. The cognitive dissonance is compelling; the injustice of their narratives must not be forgotten.

But do not sleep on the suite of ink drawings, just because they present as dreamy. With the confident classical linework and delicate ink washes of old-timey Grand Tour portfolios marking the great sites of antiquity, reminiscent of the hand-drawn guidebooks of Mexico once intended to introduce the country to tourists and powerful imperialists alike, Birk gives his own city the same treatment. He pays attention to detail, the rhythms of life, the personalities of vernacular architecture and the traces of erased histories. A graffiti-covered skate park, City Hall, Watts Towers, the tamale lady, a cool bodega sign, a guy walking his dog, Christmas lights in a working class neighborhood yard, Chateau Marmont, Union Station, people bathing in the fountain in Grand Park, a homeless encampment in Skid Row, a fireworks stand, a balloon vendor outside Disney Hall, Dodger Stadium as a Covid-testing site, the now-demolished Sixth Street bridge, a Black Lives Matter demonstration, the US-Mexico border crossing, the hoarded loot in our city's museum vaults...

The drawings are charming and witty, a bit romantic even, but they are not idealizations. In their overall selection of subjects and in the dualities often embedded in single images, they shade an easy-going love of the city with the darkness of its flaws. Less intense than the latter-day history paintings, but equally infiltrated with misfortune, they too fall along the Love/Hate continuum that colors everything about what it is like to live in Los Angeles — and America.

*For more information visit: [track16.com](http://track16.com).*

















LOS ANGELES Y SUS ALREDEDORES.



PESCANDO EN EL RÍO SAN GABRIEL.  
FISHING IN THE SAN GABRIEL RIVER.

LOS ANGELES Y SUS ALREDEDORES.



PASEANDO AL PIERRO EN LA MAÑANA DE SÁBADO.  
WALKING THE DOG ON SATURDAY MORNING.

LOS ANGELES Y SUS ALREDEDORES.



LA CIUDAD DESDE DE LAS COLINAS DE HOLLYWOOD.  
DOWNTOWN FROM THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS.

LOS ANGELES Y SUS ALREDEDORES.



PARQUE MACARTHUR A MEDIODÍA.  
NOON IN MACARTHUR PARK - WEST LAKE.



LOS ANGELES Y SUS ALREDEDORES.



ZONA CERO DE POBREZA - BARRIO BAJO.  
SKID ROW - DOWNTOWN.

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