

Kevin Cooley

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Man Meets Nature Once More

by Alicia Eler

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Kevin Cooley and Philip Andrew Lewis, "We Can Break Through" (2013) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — Kevin Cooley and Philip Andrew Lewis's exhibition *Unexplored Territory* at Kopeikin Gallery made me wish the artists had taken a hint from Joseph Kosuth and the spirit of 1960s Conceptual art rather than just creating photographs and videos of the age-old man vs. nature battle. This territory has already been explored, and though that doesn't mean there's no room to retrace and ponder the paths paved by Ansel Adams's breathtaking photography or Jeff Koons's curious use of consumer objects, Cooley and Lewis's show is more like a ubiquitous Los Angeles palm tree sunset. It's

hard to go more than a block in this city at dusk without spotting a picturesque palm-tree-and-sky photo opp, but it's never revelatory. That same blandness is embodied in *Unexplored Territory*, in which the artists circle around timeless themes such as man's relationship to natural processes and manmade consumer objects, but do little to break new ground.



Kevin Cooley, "Smoke Bollide" (2013)

In the video "We Can Break Through" (2013), viewers experience a battle between two household fans that share a power strip. They fly at each other like a bull and matador until they collapse, one remaining plugged in, the other departing from the strip. The collision of consumer items calls to mind a sporting event's win/lose battle. But if the title includes "we," where is the viewer in all this? Who is breaking through, and why? It doesn't matter, really, because the fans will eventually just break down, and the fourth wall is never broken; instead, the viewer watches a match between two equally built teams. We know that one will lose and one will win, yet no one breaks through.

In the front and back rooms, the artists present photography and video about the natural elements. These works make more sense, perhaps because they're not trying to be anything more than what they show. "Smoke Bollide" (2013) is a collection of three works on paper whose marks have been made from the residue of smoke. In the same room, "Controlled Burn #1," "Controlled Burn #3," and "Controlled Burn #7" (all 2013) show

variations on billowing clouds of smoke — two with reddish-orange fire and gray clouds against a black background, one with black smoke against a white background. This capturing of the elements reminds us that we don't have control over nature, but we can make culture out of it — or, at least, something awe-inducing and ubiquitous, just like those palm tree sunsets.



Kevin Cooley, "Controlled Burn #1," "Controlled Burn #3," and "Controlled Burn #7" (all 2013)

Kevin Cooley and Phillip Andrew Lewis: *Unexplored Territory* continues at Kopeikin Gallery (2766 S La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles) through February 22.