

Art

Michael McMillen

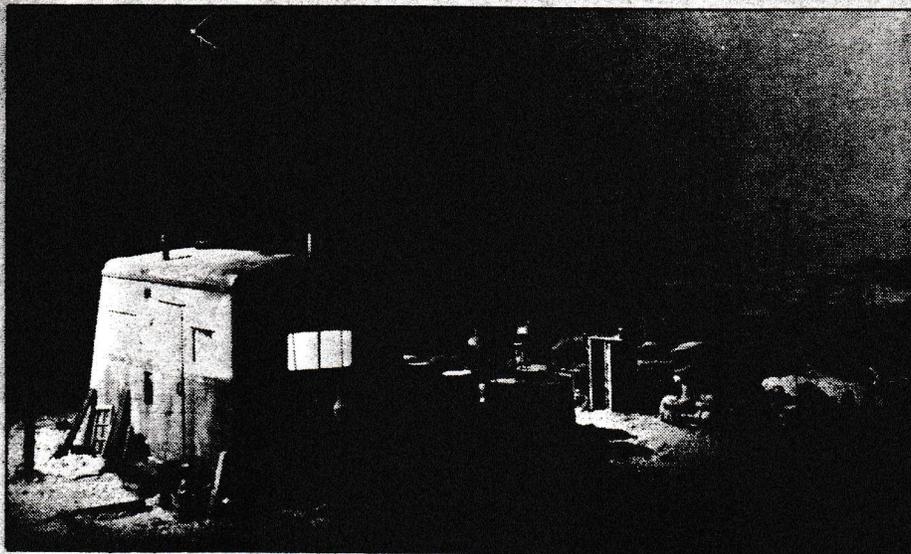
At The Mall

by Hunter
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You're standing on the third level of Santa Monica Place, right across from the entrance to the Broadway and uncertain whether to move on to Kinney's Shoes or walk down to the fast food restaurants and eat "fried cheese on a stick." Then you see a contraption unlike any at the Craft Faire Boutique: a jug of water rigged to an archaic radio transmitter, to a watering can, and to a decrepit cage containing a big bone. This enigmatic junk turns out to be the prologue to "Aristotle's Cage," an installation by Michael McMillen at USC/Atelier, the university's Westside art gallery.

The entrance hallway to the installation is painted black, and in it hangs a portrait from the Renaissance, as though an invitation to rebirth. At the end of this darkened hall one is faced with the sort of construction that has come to be McMillen's trademark. A ramshackle triple-decker cage is lit from within, and the bottom level is equipped with a hamster wheel mounted horizontally, and therefore useless. On the floor rests a dusty red plastic jewel in the shape of a tear. McMillen typically combines elements of dubious import with others in a state of shabby disintegration to create complex conundrums on the nature of value, and on the way man assigns worth to objects. The cages that lead to the installation are obvious references to the title, which seems to question the limitations of purely deductive logic, in which a conclusion follows necessarily from certain stated premises.

The installation is in a darkened room, on a large platform that stands about as high



Aristotle's Cage
(detail)

as a person's chest. McMillen has recreated a desert at sunset. Lilliputian cacti dot the sandy floor, which extends away from the viewer about six feet into the corner so that the scene is only accessible from two sides. On the close angle, McMillen has "parked" a rusty old house trailer about the size of a toy truck.

As with all of McMillen's objects, the trailer is incredibly detailed. A little TV antenna stands erect on the trailer roof, the windows are bright with light, and one can hear the noises of different television shows, as though the bored occupants of the small trailer were changing the channels every few minutes. Scattered about the trailer is the detritus of an industrial age: bombed-out cars, broken TV sets, dead refrigerators, and empty oil barrels. The trailer clearly has been camped here for a long time and apparently there is no car able to haul it away. Caught up in the scene, one can feel completely abandoned in this desert. In the distance, against a horizon glowing crimson with the evening sun, one can see further signs of civilization: a

refinery, judging from the spiked tower, or perhaps an electric power plant twinkling with small lights. In the dark air above this vacant scene, as though they were constellations cavorting across the sky, a skeleton of a dog chases a skeleton of a man, both of them in doll-scale.

There is a cinematic quality about the scene; it's reminiscent of *Road Warrior*. (McMillen has built special effects models for films such as *Blade Runner*.) The exceptional detail built up in the relatively compressed space also recalls trompe-l'oeil painting.

Trompe-l'oeil means "to fool the eye" in French, an expression used to define exceptionally convincing realistic painting. The history of the idea dates from a Roman account of a competition between artists. Zeuxis painted grapes that were so lifelike that birds pecked at them. But the curtain that Parnassios painted over his picture deceived even Zeuxis, who asked to have it lifted.

In American painting of the late 19th

century, there was a movement of *trompe-l'oeil* still-life painting that included technique wizards such as John Frederick Peto and William Michael Harnett. They rendered decorative, commercial and manufactured objects as arranged on shelves, or in shallow space, with such attention to surface illusion that viewers would often relive the ancient story, and reach to lift a curtain, or pick up a book. However, these grave, meticulous indoor still lifes reflected the artists' social concerns. They came to artistic maturity during the 1870s, in a turbulent post-Civil War atmosphere of expanding industrialism and technology, when great wealth was being accumulated and the attention of entrepreneurial America was directed toward property and possessions. The artists depicted still lifes full of acquisitions, whether of financial or personal value. The books, pipes, papers and musical instruments were often weathered, with the patina of passing time.

McMillen's installation uses the device of *trompe-l'oeil*, although it is constructed in three dimensions and is a landscape, not a still life. The effect is to fool the viewer into feeling that he or she is *there*. Society's products are still the subject matter, but they are worthless, used up and without value. It is implied that they came to be without value as the result of blind logic, of endless scientific progression that did not question the direction or the results. McMillen's tableau is thick with private caveats, similar to the *fin de siècle trompe-l'oeil*. He obliquely warns of the folly of man and his vain attachments. (The context of this speculation is obviously ironic, surrounded as the gallery is with the voracious consumerism of the shopping mall.) McMillen's intention is to create a romantic yearning for simpler times, and in theory, the viewer should be induced to feel such emotion by the power of the *trompe-l'oeil* technique. This, however, is problematic.

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Quite often in viewing the technical detail of *trompe-l'oeil*, one's reaction is *not* to forget the illusion but to focus exclusively upon it. It is to ask oneself in amazement — standing before a super-real depiction of a crumpled letter — “How could that be done? It looks as though I could pick it up off the painting?” That is also the problem with much of McMillen's assemblage sculpture, including “Aristotle's Cage.” The sheer fussiness of attention to each adorable shred of evidence can draw one's attention away from the larger issues addressed in the work. There is a tendency to think “how cute,” rather than “how provocative.” To be sure, this installation suffers less from this than some of his smaller individual assemblages shown at Asher/Faure Gallery last year. But the best McMillen I've seen is still the full-scale garage, packed with odds and ends, junk, and an old Dodge, that he created at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for their 1981 exhibition “The Museum As Site.” Thankfully, LACMA bought that tableau and it is to be installed when the Robert O. Anderson Building opens in 1985. There is such a power in the use of life-sized elements that a piece like “Aristotle's Cage” can look like knick-knacks by comparison. Still, it's worth a visit to the mall, and the show continues through November 27. ■