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Art Reviews; Images of the Past and an Uncertain Present, by Susan Kandel (November 21, 1996)

Full text: Tom Wudl's new paintings at L.A. Louver seem to belong both to this decade and the one past. Vast in scale as well as ambition, they go heavy on the art historical allusions, drippy brushwork and gold leaf. Yet it would be unfair to call them bombastic in the manner of vintage Neo-Expressionism. What lingers here, in fact, is a disarming diffidence, as if the artist wasn't quite sure of anything--a contemporary predicament, if not a promising sign.

The centerpiece of the show is a large painting called "The Inevitable," which is itself caught between two idioms. It is a picture of a room strewn with objects (a chair, bottle of wine, violin, discarded clothes), and it is also a geometric composition. The floor is a black-and-white grid, and the walls are abstracted into pastel-hued color fields. Two studies, appended with drawings after Vermeer, reveal that the painting is a sun-drenched variant on the Dutch master's dark-toned interiors; yet it lacks the cloistered intensity of the original.

Still, as with Vermeer, the eye is drawn to details exemplifying Wudl's technical facility: a lacy brassiere with Gustave Moreau-esque tracery; a trompe l'oeil rendering of a book on Ingres; a flock of birds that may or may not refer to Ross Bleckner. However, it is the fine sheets of blue and pink tissue paper, punched with holes and pasted onto the studies, which are the most seductive forms here. Tentative, but knowingly so, they bear the virtue of delicacy and none of the weight of history.

Mall Scenes: David Schafer's new work at Special K Exhibitions takes the "better late than never" approach. Since mass consumerism continues to co-opt the collective consciousness, why shouldn't he go after it? So what if it's been done?

Welcome, then, to the "Mothermall"--his name and his take on what Guy Debord once called "the society of the spectacle." At least Schafer's got theatrical flair: The middle of the gallery is colonized by a massive, whitewashed "Mothermall" model, a

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behemoth of a structure, propped up on a circular array of sawhorses, whose radiating arms suggest infinite reach and total penetration.

The rest of the show elaborates upon this metaphor and includes a Duratran light box, which offers a miniaturized, multicolored, schematized rendition of the "Mothermall"; and a wall studded with idealized "Mothermall" signage, whose texts are taken from, among other sources, TV Guide descriptions of episodes of "Rescue 911," letters published in Hot Rod magazine and random grocery store fliers.

There is something undeniably pungent about juxtaposing phrases like "Tot is unconscious," "Pork neck bones" and "The key is to get a professional look." If it were poetry, it might exemplify the rude language of postindustrial capital. But it is in fact less poetry than reportage, which makes it somehow redundant, like the hoax in this month's Esquire in which journalist Martha Sherrill profiles Allegra Coleman, a starlet who does not exist. The question is: Which starlet does?

Design Issues: It's interesting to watch a billion-dollar structure like the new Getty Center infiltrate the city's other cultural spaces. One can't, for example, look at Beverly Hills' Gagosian Gallery or the Museum of Television and Radio--both designed by Richard Meier--without thinking of them as the prelude to the architect's much-anticipated main event.

On view at West Hollywood's Remba Gallery are drawings and models of the Getty Center, along with several "mixografias" that abstract upon Meier's favored geometric motifs. The very idea of such a show suggests that even before the center opens we should marvel at this century's last and most expensive monument to art, architecture and ego.

In fact, the relationship between art and architecture--equally fascinating and problematic--is a big part of this show. Most viewers, including this one, find it difficult to conceptualize these complexes of cubic masses as spaces to be inhabited. We are thus left to take in the forms on display as modes of artifice.

Some of the maquettes, then, are precious--especially in light of Sam Durant's recent parodies of modernist architectural models. Others are unabashedly turgid, in particular a massive model that sprawls across the wall instead of posing on a table; it is as splashy, geometric and top-heavy as a Frank Stella relief of the 1980s.

As if to show Meier's more human side, the show includes a series of small collages, made from materials culled from years of work and travel: restaurant receipts, train stubs, correspondence with the architectural journals that have made Meier famous

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and so on. In aesthetic terms, these are sophomoric at best. More crucially, they underline the self-indulgence that is so often at the heart of grandiose architectural statements.

Connections: "A Scattering Matrix," a large and cheerfully crowded group show at Richard Heller Gallery, takes its title from physicist Werner Heisenberg's notion of the S. Matrix, which argues against fundamental entities, laws and constants and for a dynamic web of causes and effects.

If this sounds a bit like chaos, it isn't: It's not that things are random, but rather that they are functions of one another to such an extent that verification and speculation are no longer easily distinguishable. Curator Jane Hart uses this premise to do more than simply bring together the so-called "two cultures" of art and science. Rather than trying to codify art or to aestheticize science, she goes after work that subsumes both to wonder.

Highlights include Michael Brewster's sophisticated aural environment, Rachel Berwick's sculptural meditation upon "living fossils," Spencer Fitch's amusing attempt to transmit his brain waves while watching "Hawaii Five-O" and Michael Joaquin Grey and Paulina Wallenberg Olsson's wall piece, which apes the look of 1930s paper dolls to reflect upon that decade's pulp fascination with the superhuman super-brains of the future. There are 21 artists in the show, and Hart is to be commended for including none of the usual suspects.