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Roy Dowell

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OUTSIDE IN: ROY DOWELL, JEFFREY VALLANCE

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Roy Dowell, Untitled (#974), 2009

Roy Dowell's timing is seriously out of wack. For more than three decades, as the art world has careened from poststudio praxis to neo-expressionist painting and back again, L.A.-based painter/collagist Dowell has been steadfastly mining a creative vein whose most conspicuous antecedents are the abstract-formalist vocabularies of early Modernism. A midcareer survey at Margo Leavin Gallery in 2006 demonstrated how much internal evolution had occurred within those parameters, absorbing and translating stylistic elements as universal as fragmented billboard advertising and as personal as the (reciprocal) influence of his longtime partner Lari Pittman. Chair of Otis' graduate school for the past 20 years, Dowell is about as far inside the L.A. art world as you can get, and I have heard his elegant collages dismissed as "too safe" — the privileged, solipsistic exploration of an anachronistic aesthetic bubble, irrelevant no matter how gorgeous they might be.

Irrelevant to what? I wonder. Last I checked, the idea that art history was actually heading somewhere had been out of fashion since the mid-1970s. And ever since, art history has been, essentially, a quirky subset of the fashion industry. I've recently begun to think that all art is both spiritual and political — regardless of the artist's intentions. In part, this is the result of every artwork's schizophrenic duality — the spirituality deriving from the inescapable subjectivity of creative practice; the political from its manifestation in consensus reality.

Dowell's work is political precisely in its adamant disavowal of fashionable talking points, and refreshing in its refusal of the plausible deniability of irony. The measure of an artist's subjective accomplishment is tricky but can often be surmised from the complexity and power of their chosen language — and their fluency with it. Dowell's latest body of work — 28 identically sized collages that incorporate a substantial amount of original painted material — display a virtuosic command of the language of modernist design, filtered through a curious handmade homeliness and verging-on-outsider graphic quality.