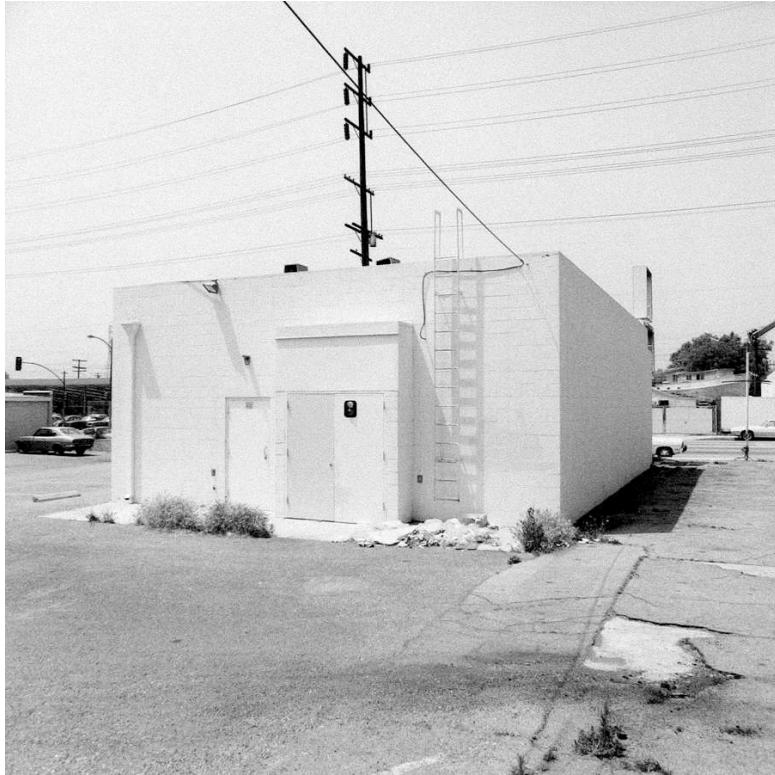


gallery luisotti at Bergamot Station 2525 Michigan Ave. number a2 Santa Monica California 90404

tel. 310 453 0043 fax. 310 264 4888 info@galleryluisotti.com

'The City Proper' at Margo Leavin

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The "New Topographics" exhibition resonated widely when it opened at the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., in 1975, and the show's reprise last year at LACMA is having its own ripple effect. Artist James Welling guest-curated "The City Proper," at Margo Leavin, with the museum exhibition in mind, gathering work by 18 photographers who represent Los Angeles with crisp irony and incisive scrutiny. Never mind that a few of the pictures stretch the show's purview to Oceanside and further south, to the border with Mexico. "The City Proper" doesn't propose an argument about the city as much as it unfurls an engrossing prose poem to urbanity itself and all of its abjectness, deadpan comedy and unexpected pathos.

A smattering of '60s and '70s work by Frank Gohlke, Allen Ruppersberg, Ger van Elk and John Baldessari anchors the show and reinforces the sense that the contemporary work here largely responds to an earlier generation's call. Gohlke's small black and white picture (1974) of the back of a modest commercial building, for instance, is a gem of understatement. It reverses the city's facade fetish and turns inside-out the art world's white cube to state an architectural fact, desacralized, humble, banal. Mark Wyse answers in the amplified, smart-alecky voice of the present in his large color photograph, adjacent, of a pale cinderblock wall pressed up against the picture plane, trimmed by a band of foliage on top, a wedge of brickwork below, and garnished by the schooled, self-conscious humor of its title, "Marks of Indifference #9 (Jeff Wall)."

Visual rhymes like this give the show a bristling vitality, as do themes that meander through and build to critical mass, having to do with the intersection of the built and natural environment (Christina Fernandez, Shannon Ebner, William Leavitt), the taxonomic archive (Amir Zaki, Catherine Opie, Cindy Bernard, Peter Holzhauer), and more. Others in the show include Zoe Crosher, Anthony Hernandez, Brandon Lattu, Lisa Ohlweiler, Arthur Ou, Asha Schechter and Jacob Stewart-Halevy.

-- Leah Ollman