

LARRY JOHNSON

PATRICK PAINTER, SANTA MONICA
JANUARY 29 - FEBRUARY 26, 2000

Among the stories that circulated about my thesis advisor, there was the one about his pilgrimage—as an American-Jewish comp-lit doctoral candidate studying with Paul de Man in the 1960s—to Heidegger's home. When he knock-knocked, who answered? Madame Heidegger. As he stammered out his mission in worse-than-ever German, she looked at him, took a deep breath, and, speaking with a deliberation reserved at the time for communicating with foreign workers, explained: "*Mein Mann denken*" ("My man [or husband] thinking").

One way to begin translating the white-on-white title work of Larry Johnson's new-millennial show, "The Thinking Man's Judy Garland & Other Works" (all 1999-2000), would be to place outside the genitive belonging to the working order of thought the Judy who at the same time is commemorated by the funereal "garland" that follows: the Judy or *Juden* garland. In this opening work, which, site-specifically, must be seen first, like or as the title for the show in the next room, the sentence appears, at once erased or whited out, on one

side of an otherwise wide-open, white space. The photographs in the main gallery are, in a sense, held together by the opening piece and strung across the empty white space that is so hard to contain, like a garland of vanitas and memento-mori offerings. The colors setting off the works in the round have the quality of hallucinations or afterimages of former color, now rebounding with an enigmatic force from the absolute or clinical whiteness we still see before our eyes. If Judy Garland serves as emotive mascot for a kind of acting-out style of affection deficit, then its etiolated-tomb-inscription version underscores a difference mourning can make.

The garland is comprised of souvenirs of the artist's past year: in *Untitled (The Two Economies)*, two terminations in Johnson's 1999 calendar are re-marked, dated, and signed. In *Untitled (John Sex)* and *Untitled (Leo Ford)*, the past extends into the posthumous present: autographs the artist obtained one night from the art star and the porn star, both now dead, light up as signs above buildings

with L.A.-recognition value. In another piece, an outmoded factory can't escape from L.A. Instead, it is refunctionalized as the "unfinished" make-believe center for the production of "Fome-Cor," the medium of art instruction that many young artists now use as their main medium, thereby bearing (or burying) testimony, however unwittingly, to the transferential or commemorative legacy of their artist-instructors.

Untitled (Land Without Bread), the other altarpiece of the garland show, sets off with two double takes an endlessly skewed self-reflexivity of or in memory. Two cover memories from the Buñuel documentary/propaganda film cited in the title—a bee-harassed donkey and the goat that's over the hill—come down to us as family photographs (as witnessed by the clumsy smudging of the double images' periphery by fingers on the lens). But what passed before the lens are mass mediations of nature/culture, at once recognizable (Disneyesque) but not identifiable (as Disney). This déjà-vu combo, both familiar and untitled, signals, says Freud, representation and repression of mother. This split reception could be spun and strung along endlessly, à la Adorno's 1966 memo to Heidegger *re* thinking being: "Transmission is transmitted by what it transmits."

LAURENCE A. RICKELS

LARRY JOHNSON, *Untitled (Land Without Bread)* (detail), 1999-2000, C-print, 42 x 42 in. Courtesy Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica.

