TWO BY TWO
MARY HEILMANN & DAVID REED

Sand in the Suntan Lotion
Essay von David Reed

On a bright sunlit afternoon, as a teenager, I watched a movie on the television in the family room of our house. Perhaps I was sick. I can't imagine why I was indoors on such a beautiful day. It must have been during the winter because strong light came in through the tall south-facing windows. The black-and-white picture on the TV was terrible: grainy and covered in moving "snow", figures were barely visible under the reflected lights on the screen. The movie was "Green Mansions" (1959), starring Anthony Perkins. In one scene his character walks along the edge of a meadow, struggling, but unable to see into the mottled shadows of the trees beyond the light. There were pleasures to discover, as well as dangers, in the forest. Watching this scene, I distinctly remember having the thought that I would always remember what I was seeing and that what was happening would always be part of my life. Being in that room and with that light, I learned how to extend my body through media and architecture. My sister tells me that at night she watched TV in reflections on the windows.

Planning this exhibition, Mary and I have had many discussions about growing up in California, the memories and moods we share: department stores as distributors of avant-garde culture, the new style of casual jeans that my father started selling in his clothing store, his yellow sports car, the seedy beach towns and sandy sidewalks, surfers guarding their territories, and beach bums collecting bottles to return and redeem, the curves of the newly engineered highways and the concrete water works, the snakes in the dusty canyons, that particular orange used in rock posters. I'm amazed by how the design and colors of Mary's interlocking chairs, made for this exhibition, somehow capture all of this. I love it that they are individual chairs but fit together into a kind of bench. I look forward to lying down on them.

In 1994, a few weeks after the Northridge Earthquake, Mary gave a visiting artist's talk at the California Institute of the Arts where I was teaching for the semester. The school, north of Los Angeles, was near the center of the quake and the campus was badly damaged – students could only briefly enter with hard hats to retrieve their belongings. The whole school was relocated for the rest of the semester to a donated site nearby in the hills outside of Valencia, a hidden group of buildings that had been used by the military to design and test the stealth bomber – Lockheed Martin. The buildings were a secret location at the end of a nondescript two-lane road. One could see nothing before reaching the crest of the last barren hill. Then one saw a green valley below and what looked like Star Trek University. In front of the larger buildings, in the middle of a large manicured green lawn, there was a small one-story Modernist pavilion. Mary gave her talk in this space, then dirty and abandoned, with a small screen and folding chairs. The students, Mary has told me, were "dazed and shell-shocked from the quake." That night Mary played an earlier version of the animation "Her Life" in this exhibition. Her painting has gained depth from impurity: landscape references, memories from popular culture, fashion, and craft traditions. Because of the mood that semester, her talk had an especially huge impact on the students, many of whom have become important artists.

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Trying to think of a title for this show, I kept thinking of a song by the rock group “The Runaways”, “California Paradise”: “California – you’re so nice. California your paradise.” But the lyrics don’t convey the ironic, sarcastic tone of their singing. All the optimism that I witnessed growing up, the way avant-garde culture and the middle class could meet, all that has now changed. The transformation of the landscape is not turning out well either.
But I have a memory location that brings back that earlier California. The architect of my parents’ house is my uncle, John August Reed. Built in 1954, the house is no longer a part of the family. Fearing that this might happen, on our visits home my sister, Pamela Reed, and I took photographs over many years. We have used sixty-three of these photographs to make a nine minute video animation set to our father’s favorite music.
Sometimes I think that anything good in my paintings comes from what I have learned from growing up and living in the spaces of that house, real and imagined, and that inescapable, beautiful, but dangerous light.

David Reed
20. Februar 2015