

ARTWEEK

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MUNGO THOMSON AT HAMMER PROJECTS

by Jeri Khadivi

Taken as a whole, Mungo Thomson's oeuvre has the deceptive simplicity and humor of a Zen koan. His conversational works filter popular imagery, folkloric tradition and conceptual art practice through an emphatically Californian insouciance. Works like *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* (2002), a mash-up of Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner cartoons presented at the High Desert Test Site in Joshua Tree and *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest* (2005-06)--the title says it all--combine landscape with an incredibly goofy (and at times downright corny) pop sensibility.

Some of Thomson's early work evokes the wickedly funny Italian conceptualist, Maurizio Cattelan. *Tapestry* (2004), a woven Ecuadorian wool rug, is emblazoned with political slogans that are both insightful ("Why are peace activists so violent?") and cracked ("Kerry is Bin Laden's/Bush is Mine"). *Between Projects* (2001), a sculptural installation consisting of a dozen handmade pencils embedded in the ceiling of the exhibition space, is hilarious because of the absence it evokes: a bored office worker casually winging pencils at the ceiling like darts. But Thomson isn't all fun and games. He presented the deathly still *Wins Chimes*, six sets of charred garden variety wind chimes, in *Red Wind*, a group exhibition about the enigmatic and quasi-mystical Santa Ana winds at Blum & Poe (summer 2008). The work's pared down simplicity and latent possibility encapsulated the dread and precariousness of the mythic winds better than any other work in the exhibition.

Thomson's recent exhibition at UCLA's Hammer Museum included a variant of the artist's ongoing *Negative Space* project, presented in the museum lobby and organized by Hammer curator (and long-time Cattelan collaborator) Ali Subotnik. Keeping with his history of experimenting with ambient sounds and sparse gallery installation, Thomson downloaded photos of the M74 and NGC 3370 galaxies taken by the Hubble Space Telescope and inverted them in Photoshop to create a photographic mural. The swirling, bubbling depiction of space debris elicits the tensions between positive and negative, fullness and void, verisimilitude and fancy. He leaves room for humor with the ambient loops that accompany the mural (these are made by altering the frequency of whale calls so the sounds like birds and vice versa). Thomson says that the project "came out of reflecting on the color of nothing; in outer space the void is black, and in the art context the void--the empty gallery--is always white."

Art that interrogates its gallery context is as old as Marcel Duchamp's *1,200 Bags of Coal* (1938), if not older, and Thomson does nothing new by calling our attention to this. He succeeds, however, because *Negative Space* thrives in liminal, almost forgotten areas: hallways, staircases, and overhangs--making transitional spaces the locus of infinite possibility.

Hammer Projects: Mungo Thomson closes December 4 at the Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire blvd., Los Angeles.