

Jack Goldstein

ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART,
LOS ANGELES
Thomas Lawson

WHEN IT WAS FIRST ANNOUNCED that curator Philipp Kaiser would be mounting an assessment of Jack Goldstein's career at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, there was an instant buzz about it. Goldstein has always been a charged presence, and the show was seen as complementing the upcoming celebration of LA art under the banner of "Pacific Standard Time," rounding out the story of the growing interdependence of New York and LA as incubators of significant new art in the 1970s and '80s. A small scandal erupted when LA MOCA's management canceled the exhibition in response to the fiscal meltdown there, and when the Orange County Museum of Art decided to stage it, interest surged. I was a little apprehensive of all the fanfare, so on the opening night of "Jack Goldstein X 10,000," I was relieved to hear a local curator say to me, "It's a tight show." And so it was: a modest and carefully choreographed disquisition on the idea of authorial disappearance—the ultimate expression of keeping everyone at arm's length, by means of an extreme focus on the process of imagemaking. This first comprehensive US survey provided a chance to measure the work Goldstein made in the '70s, mostly in LA, against the '80s paintings, made in New York. (The exhibition's last room showed a few pieces made after Goldstein's move back to LA, where he lived reclusively for a decade before taking his own life in 2003.)

Goldstein was one of a disparate group of young artists who began arriving in New York in the mid-'70s, thinking about ways to move past the various brands of Conceptualism practiced by their teachers. In place of instructions and admonitions, these artists wanted to reconsider the image, especially its reproduction and re-presentation through various media. Within the span of some ten years, they had repositioned photography in the hierarchies of art, and reinvigorated painting. Goldstein was a central figure in this realignment. His work had an astringent directness and reductive clarity that made it something of a yardstick. He had a familiarity with both film production and film theory, and nurtured his authority as a teaching assistant to John Baldessari at CalArts by developing a persona, "Jack": a mysterious, withdrawn figure in skinny leather jacket, aviator glasses, and shag haircut; a paranoid circa 1969, part Keith Richards, part Peter Fonda. Goldstein's work was timely, even as Jack hovered out of time. I wrote about Goldstein several times during those years, and never found it easy; the work was compelling but elusive. The logic that drove its form was impeccable, but the content remained mostly blank. In one piece, in *REALLIFE Magazine* in 1980, I talked at length about the Jack in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* before getting to the Oz-like artist who directed others to make what he wanted to see.

Following Goldstein, the key terms I zeroed in on back then were *distance* and *control*, and these remain the defining adjectives used in describing his oeuvre. Seeing this show some thirty years after first encountering the work, I would now add *brevity* as a qualifying third term. Time-based art in the '70s tended to privilege endurance, the element of time made so palpable as to be almost unbearable. Goldstein's early films are a few minutes long, and record actions infused with anxiety: A man—the artist himself—runs from a spotlight, topples a stack of dishes, pulls a nail out of a board with his teeth. The turning point is perhaps the roaring of the MGM lion in *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, 1975, Goldstein's first work to directly appropriate an image. In his later films, the sense of unease is leached out in favor of an abstract visuality that burns into the memory in as little as twenty seconds, a kind of sugar rush in the optic nerves that vacates meaning. There is a strange, hallucinatory beauty in the colored



From left: View of "Jack Goldstein X 10,000," 2012. From left: *Untitled*, 1989; *Untitled*, 1988; and *Underwater Sea Fantasy*, 1983/2003. Photo: Chris Bliss. Jack Goldstein, *A Ballet Shoe*, 1975, 16 mm, color, silent, 19 seconds. Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72"



light glinting on steel in *The Knife*, 1975; in the animated bird flitting around the edge of a dinner plate in *Bone China*, 1976; in the glittering diver in *The Jump*, 1978, in which the figure dissolves in a hypnotic shower of sparkly effects. In such works, even the hint of narrative is removed. Image is everything.

The next step in this logic of reduction called for a stilled image, ramped up in scale. It is seldom noticed that the earliest of Goldstein's paintings almost appear hand-made, although he outsourced their production in order to remove such traces of process. Their airbrushed surfaces are enlivened by the raised textures left by masking tape and layers of drips and spatters, which compound the flat-footedness of the imagery of World War II fighter planes and anti-aircraft fire: a nostalgia repackaged, weirdly in sync with the Reagan oratory of the time. Goldstein soon hired more adept technicians, found less weighted images and, by 1983, in a series of paintings of cosmological phenomena, had created an evanescent but

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hauntingly empty expression of an image/idea uncontaminated by the messy contradictions of the artist's hand. These paintings look spectacular, but feel cold, and by the later '80s the willed absence of emotional resonance leaves the paintings dangerously decorative, close to kitsch.

Something had happened. In search of a cure, Goldstein went into exile, but both he and his persona were hollowed out, and he was left with no way to deal with the despair. In the end, arranging sentences he culled by reading philosophy texts backward (for *Selected Writings*, 1993–2000), Jack became more and more like the blocked writer in Kubrick's film, lost in a snowbound maze. A career that had once been a beacon of clarity ended lost in obscurity. □

"Jack Goldstein X 10,000" travels to the Jewish Museum in New York, May 10–Sept. 29, 2013.

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