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The Brave Gestures Of Gary Lang

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ERIC MINH SWENSON

Painter [Gary Lang](#) has enjoyed a celebrated career worthy of his keen talent. Free of the burden of conceptual angst that plagues most artists of our era, he penetrates optical space in his large circular paintings that defy the nihilism of both Duchamp's mechanical spinning wheels and Jasper Johns' targets. Far from mechanized, these are exercises in concentration and close inspection sees an ever-present hand in the almost precise brushstrokes.

A separate body of work unlocks the poetry of language within the aesthetics of text. In today's specialized art world this is fodder for two separate artists, but Lang is unabashedly poet and painter.

I have been a fan of his riveting painted surfaces for two decades and was excited to make the hour and ten-minute drive from Los Angeles to Lancaster's Museum of Art and History. That is a quicker drive than downtown to the beach in rush hour, so on the Los Angeles cosmic odometer, MOAH is closer to many parts of Southern California than MOCA.



Gary Lang installing a painting with the help of museum staff at the Museum of Art and History (MOAH), Lancaster, California. Photo: Eric Minh Swenson.

The MOAH space and curation of the show of Lang's new work rewarded the Lang fans in attendance, a nice slice of the LA art world and plenty of locals. Lang creates a space for a universe beyond space to exist, to incite the retina as a pipeline to a deeper place within. The trend in art this month seems to be away from actually looking and especially from making things to be looked at. Philosophically, "to be looked at" is quite far from "to be seen." As the artist explains on camera in the recent Eric Minh Swenson directed video, *Brave Gestures*, "This painting... really removes me from myself and brings me right back."

Some have dismissed his painted discs as a rehash of the target-like circular paintings of Kenneth Noland. Yes, they both paint round circles. That is where any similarity ends. The Noland comparison is the most superficial read as the artists' concerns are almost at a polarity. Noland was painting surface to emphasize the materials and formal nature of painting. Lang is creating ocular space to transform consciousness. The comparison speaks more about a jaded, dismissive art world than it does the subject matter of Noland or Lang.



Lang's poetry speaks of a wounded wanderlust, a lamentation of the ills of the present, no way out and yet the poet unbending in saying what he sees. The artworks he creates of these urgent stanzas achieve what language rarely does — instead of asserting concept, the words are undermined by their very letters, forming rhythms all their own. Without spaces in between the words, Lang illustrates the primacy of the image even in pictures made entirely of literate source material.



At Lang's MOAH exhibition. Photo: Eric Minh Swenson.

The main gallery of the museum is a serene, vast square cube that emphasizes vertical space. Designed by Mark K. Lahmon at PSL Architects, this stark nature of the cube heightens Lang's Circles to obliterate any notion of horizon and to truly function as painted portals to a pictorial beyond. MOAH Chief Curator Andi Campognone pointed out "it's not only the ability of the scale of Gary's pieces to be fully realized in the space but the right angles of our very modern space compliment the nature of his circular shapes." Geography also triumphs, as she underscored, "Of course we're fortunate to have the illumination of the natural desert light in our galleries."

The easy drive to a stunning location housing an underappreciated master painter adds up to an important exhibition of an artist many, myself included, have long championed.

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