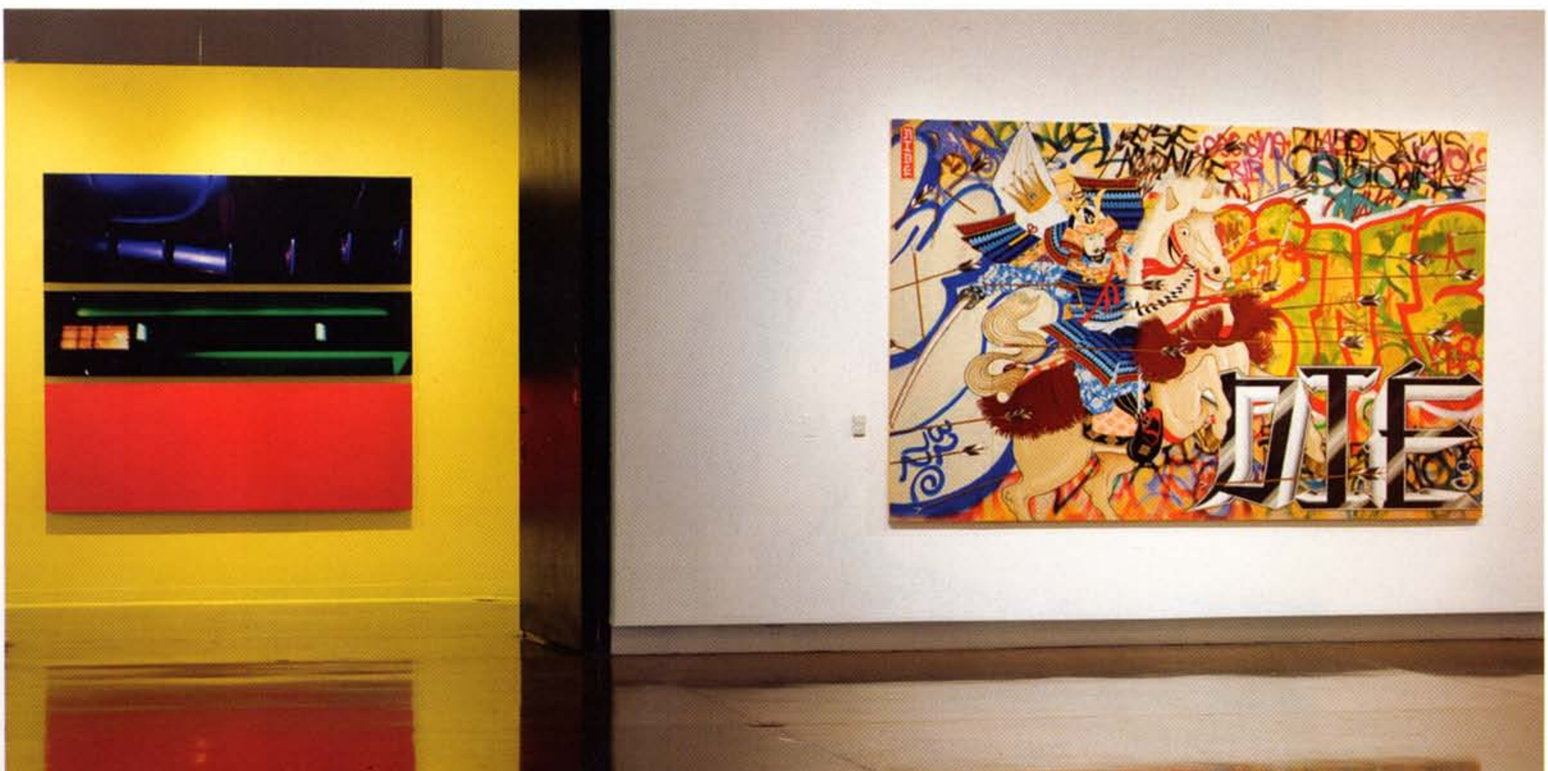
Tim Bavington: Step (In) Out, *2007, synthetic polymer on canvas, 8 by 24 feet. All photos this article courtesy Las Vegas Museum of Art.*



View of Shawn Hummel's iateyouwithmyford *(left), 2007, C-print and automotive paint on aluminum, and Gajin Fujita's* Ride or Die *(right), 2005, gold leaf, spray paint and mixed mediums on wood panel.*

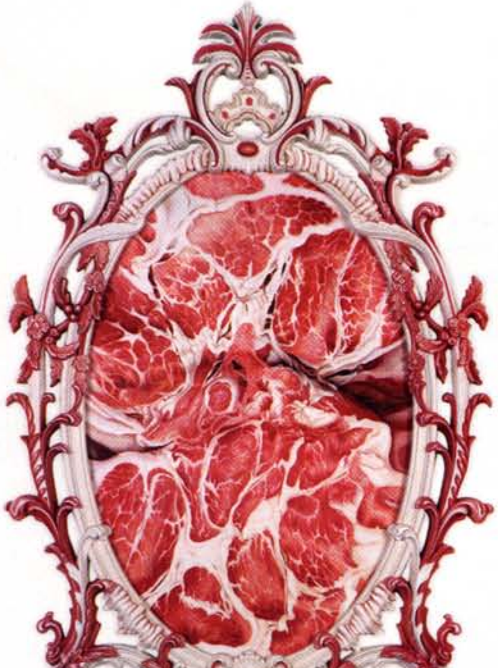
Sin City Slickers

Critic and curator Dave Hickey, long a luminary of the Las Vegas—and international—art scene, selected work by 26 former students for an exhibition at the city's only museum for contemporary art.

BY KIRSTEN SWENSON

Las Vegas is many things, but a city known for its patronage of the arts it is not. Even art world insiders are surprised to learn that there is an ambitious venue for contemporary art here—no, it's not the Guggenheim branch at the Venetian hotel and casino, but the Las Vegas Art Museum. I count myself among the surprised. When I relocated from New York in the fall of 2007 to teach in the art department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I had little sense of what a "Vegas art scene" might hold. True, LVAM is outside city limits, about eight miles from the Strip in the upper-income suburb of Summerlin, where it shares a building with the community library. But its presence—and recently announced plans for a 97,000-square-foot facility just off the Strip—attest to a serious commitment to contemporary art in Las Vegas.

This fall, LVAM hosted the exhibition "Las Vegas Diaspora: The Emergence of Contemporary Art from the Neon Homeland," featuring locally nurtured talent curated by a hometown critic. The critic is Dave Hickey, who taught criticism and theory in the art department at UNLV from 1990 until 2001 and is known for his contentious writings on art and common culture. To view recent work by 26 of Hickey's former students is to recognize how the atmosphere of Las Vegas has stimulated the production of contemporary art that, like the city itself, occupies a unique visual territory.



Victoria Reynolds: **Down the Primrose Path***, 2004, oil on panel, 44 by 20 inches.*

That territory is marked by lots of painting in bright acrylics and acid-toned polymers, an often hard-edged abstraction that resuscitates the precision and (ironic?) vapidity associated with Neo-Geo in the '80s. Other telling materials include polystyrene, anodized aluminum, automobile paint, Plexiglas and acrylic applied with airbrush. Like the city itself, the look is high on artifice, low on nuance. Also like Vegas, much of the work is infused with a sense of the risky or risqué that can, ultimately, seem closer to Disney than to danger.

The strengths of individual artists could, at first, get lost in the wealth of hard edges and bright colors. Gajin Fujita is among the many artists in the show who have established notable early careers—in 2006 he had exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, and was included in the 2001 SITE Santa Fe biennial, organized by Hickey—and in two works here sustained the irresistible mode he has employed since his student years in the late '90s. Fujita fuses imperial Japanese imagery—phoenixes, geishas, warriors and the like—with East L.A. street tags, using both gilt and spray paint. It's like finding an Edo-period painting on a barrio wall. In a painting that uses gold leaf in the imperial style, a Japanese warrior on horseback is embedded in a thicket of graffiti that includes the titular phrase "Ride or Die." The fusion is not a new idea. Japanese youth culture has long been fascinated with hip-hop and gangsta rap. But Fujita pushes it to the extreme, and his large-scale panels—the larger of the two here is more than 10 feet wide—are about as attention-grabbing as painting gets.

Sush Machida also uses traditional Eastern imagery, in his case to suggest the visual culture of a global economy in paintings that extend the "superflat" mode associated with Takashi Murakami. Drawing on Japanese folklore and, it seems, the cult of European luxury goods among wealthy Japanese, Machida's imagery involves uneasy pairings such as the peasant tale of Taketori Okina juxtaposed with bottles of Chanel No. 5 (*Taketori Okina Tiger*, 2007). His acrylic paintings framed in clear Plexiglas, sleek and expensive-looking, also suggest the visual clash of transplanted communities everywhere, with knock-off luxury goods and artifacts of cultural heritage side by side. But unlike Murakami (who has designed his own line of Louis Vuitton handbags), Machida strikes a critical note in his deployment of luxury brands that might extend to a critique of art as the ultimate commodity.

Sush Machida: **Taketori Okina Tiger** *(left) and* **To the Capital of the Moon** *(right), both 2007, acrylic on panel, each 96 by 23 inches.*

Historical appropriation found broad expression in the show and represented its major strength. In addition to the work of Fujita and Machida, several other examples were thoughtful, critical and funny all at once. James Gobel's 16-foot-wide triptych *Ridicule Is Nothing to be Scared Of* (2005) refers to both Adam Ant (the refrain of his 1981 hit "Prince Charming" is "Ridicule is nothing to be scared of/ Don't you ever . . . / Stop being dandy/ showing me you're handsome") and William Hogarth's comedies of manners. As is typical of Gobel's work, the piece allegorizes contemporary gay culture, "bears" (beefy, hairy gay men) in particular. Dandies in baroque finery cavort and strut like peacocks, overindulged and overfed. Remarkably,

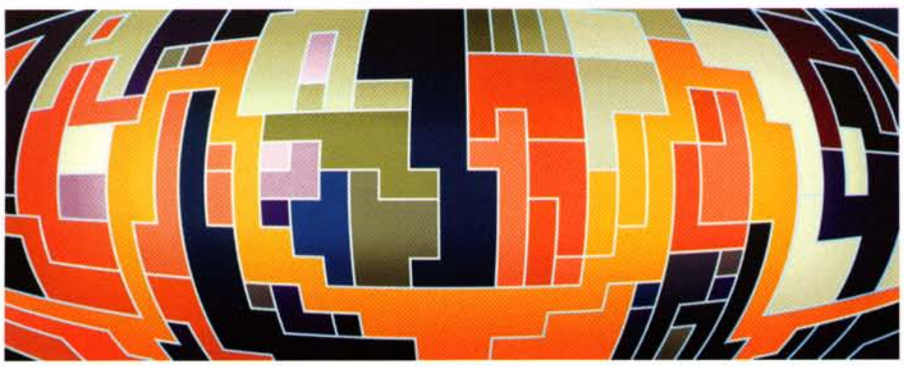
The prevalence of bright palettes and mechanistic approaches to painting, informed by the signage and riotous excess of Vegas, suggested a contemporary revival of the Pop sensibility.

James Gobel: **Ridicule Is Nothing to be Scared Of,** *2005, felt, yarn and acrylic on canvas, triptych, 7½ by 16 feet overall.*

Gobel creates this elaborate fantasy tableau, set against a mountain landscape, in a patchwork of felt and yarn, underscoring the soft, effeminate mood.

Intricate Victorian frames encircle studies of meat and offal in Victoria Reynolds's oil paintings. Luscious or sickening, depending on whom you ask, *Down the Primrose Path* (2004) is a closely observed study of slabs of well-marbled beef. Its creamy and sanguine hues are extended through the vegetal tendrils of the frame. Reynolds's contemporary *memento mori* registers our cultural squeamishness about the fleshly nature of the animals we consume, striking a balance between grotesquerie, beauty and comedy. It's hard not to stare.

Jason Tomme's approach to historical appropriation is more restrained. His "Crack" paintings in brownish-yellow hues of crackled oil paint seem to isolate the atmospheric space of a Rembrandt painting—one with several centuries of grime coating the surface. These are abstractions, ostensibly, but the Dutch master's moody chiaroscuro is unmistakable.



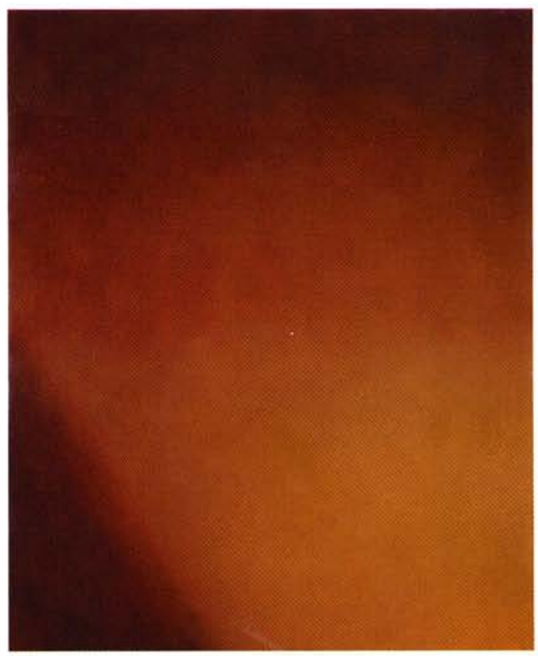
Thomas Burke: **Like a Heat Wave,** *2005, acrylic on aluminum, 4 by 10 feet.*

Tomme's paintings stood apart from the glossy "finish fetish" surfaces that were legion in the show. The unrelenting emphasis on surface pushed by many artists—Jack Hallberg, Thomas Burke and Shawn Hummel were a few—suggested a kind of analogue to the superficiality and slick illusionism of Vegas itself. But for anyone who has lived here, that illusionism is complicated. The unreality visitors seek—the sublime spectacles of the casinos, the abstract relationship to money that gambling entails, the 24/7, 365-days-a-year party—has a high price in the realities that play out in the shadow of the neon: homelessness, the nation's highest suicide rate, drug and alcohol abuse, and gambling addiction. Hickey's characterization of Las Vegas in the catalogue describes an unforgiving place: "Losers leave right away and victims get no sympathy. Everyone knows that the house has the edge and that luck is real." The show doesn't address this fact of life, at least not directly. Still, it seems implicit in the hard-edged, anti-emotional quality of much of the work and the collective fascination with surface.

Burke's vertiginous Op art paintings on aluminum exemplify the pure formalism and virtuosity that characterize much of the show's work. The undulating ribbons of what appear to be random, computer-generated color sequences have the look of being both arbitrary and tightly controlled. Hummel also exploits aluminum as a painting surface; even the texture of canvas can add unwanted depth and a sense of materiality to a painting, and aluminum allows a sleek polish and reflectivity. Hummel applies automobile paint and C-prints to aluminum for *iateyouwithmyford* (2007), a three-paneled abstraction that evokes auto body components and passing lights.

In a city that distills American fantasies and desires, car culture and rock 'n' roll are big themes. The latter is represented by Tim Bavington, whose compressed, vertical-stripe compositions in blinding acid-colored polymer are organized through a system that assigns colors and tones to musical notes. Bavington, who was among the more established artists in the show, got pride of place in the installation, his expansive painting *Step (In) Out* (2007) set against a projecting wall painted lime green to heighten the painting's optical overload.

The relentlessly bright palettes, the prevailing mechanistic approach to painting and the commodity esthetic that inflected much of the work, informed by the signage and riotous excess of Vegas, suggested a contemporary revival of the



Jason Tomme: **Crack Painting,** *2007, oil on linen, 63 by 53 inches.*

Pop sensibility. It all brought to mind Emile de Antonio's alleged remarks upon seeing Andy Warhol's black and white sign paintings: "It's naked, it's brutal—it's who we are." Hickey knows his Warhol (in his catalogue essay he tells us he was a model at the Factory), and he also knows that when art responds to the vernacular visual culture it can change the way we look at the world.

Hickey's relationship to the exhibition, as curator/critic/collector/teacher, is complicated. His involvement is deeply personal on many levels: for one, he is married to LVAM director Libby Lumpkin, who also taught artists in the exhibition. For another, Hickey collects the work of artists in the show—the catalogue essay relates an anecdote of a studio visit in which "I opted for buying the painting for five hundred dollars" rather than engage in the usual critique.

But more to the point, "Diaspora" carries Hickey's mark, his esthetic, and is framed by his ideological stance toward "art and democracy." Democracy, a word he is extremely fond of, in his usage signals anti-elitism and also a kind of extreme individualism and meritocracy. The Vegas art scene is, he says, self-selecting: "Tree huggers, religious nuts, and communitarian do-gooders are quickly eliminated, as are social climbers, since there are scant social ladders to climb," Hickey warns in the catalogue. "The town does not attract the insecure or the needy," he continues, "and if it does, their needs are rarely met nor their insecurities assuaged." It's hard to imagine that most artists in the show are comfortable with such hyperbole, which, despite Hickey's disdain for moralizing, can itself come to seem doctrinaire.

But thanks in no small part to Hickey, Las Vegas does have a serious contemporary art scene, and he's right that the city's "absence of limitations," its "dynamic mercantile culture that loved the new, embraced change, and took risks"—and still does—make it a fascinating venue for contemporary art.

In September, the LVAM held the "Las Vegas Diaspora Gala" at the Four Seasons Hotel, where it launched an ambitious capital campaign for its new venue. I attended the event and met a New York collector of James Gobel's work who, a few martinis in, guffawed, "The Las Vegas *Art Museum?* You have got to be kidding!" A city that doesn't encourage an outlook any more long-term than the next roll of the dice may seem an unlikely place for a significant and sustainable museum. (The Guggenheim's Rem Koolhaas-designed gallery at the Venetian, a partnership with the Hermitage generally devoted to historical modernism, is now its only exhibition space in Las Vegas. The museum's second, larger space at the Venetian, designed by Koolhaas and Frank Gehry and intended for more adventurous programs, closed in 2003, just 15 months after it opened. The Bellagio operates a "Gallery of Fine Art" originally intended to showcase the collection of Steve Wynn, who no longer has a financial interest in the hotel/casino; it now operates as a for-profit venue for borrowed exhibitions such as a recent show of Picasso ceramics.)

Hickey knows his Warhol (in his catalogue essay he recalls his days at the Factory), and he also knows that when art responds to the vernacular visual culture it can change the way we look at the world.

But there's no place like Vegas to foster reinvention and a break with tradition, and as much as New York or Los Angeles, Las Vegas is a crossroads. The contemporary art that happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas, as "Diaspora" proves. □

"Las Vegas Diaspora: The Emergence of Contemporary Art from the Neon Homeland" was on view at the Las Vegas Art Museum [Sept. 30-Dec. 30, 2007]. It was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by exhibition curator Dave Hickey.

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