

Art and California's ribbons of road

Published November 13, 2013

By Tyler Green

This is Vija Celmins' *Freeway* (1966), a small painting that I thought about a lot last week as I prepared to talk with Celmins on the current Modern Art Notes Podcast. It's unlike anything else Celmins was painting at the time, such as the Morandi-esque still-lives of studio objects and works in graphite and oil of photographs that relate to World War II or the Cold War. But in many ways *Freeway* pointed toward the work that Celmins was to make over the next couple decades, including star fields, seascapes and spider webs: *Freeway* toys with the idea of the picture plane by presenting something simultaneously pushed up against it and receding from it.

But *Freeway* started me thinking of something else, too: It's a prime example of a California-based artist making work that engages the state's famous highway system. For reasons that are probably obvious, California-based artists have had the same relationship with their state's dominant infrastructure that New York artists once had with their city's most famous landmarks, its skyscrapers. That relationship probably goes beyond the experience of the highways, but back into art history, to pictures of the first roads in the West by artists such as Carleton Watkins and various lesser lights.

As you scroll through the next 25 artworks, think about the freeways — but think also about how the artists whose work is featured below have used California's infrastructure to make points related to their own interests.



William Garnett, Perspective, Lakewood Park, August 9, 1950.



William Garnett, Grid and Sprawl, 1952.

Edward Steichen may have pioneered aerial photography during World War I, but Garnett was probably the first artist to adapt it to his own uses at home. Even though Garnett's pictures of the man-altered landscape are a key precursor of one of the post-war era's most important art movements, New Topographics photography, Garnett is little-considered by American art museums. (Exception: The J. Paul Getty Museum.)

On one hand, Garnett's photographs of Lakewood, Calif., many of which suggest the impact of highway infrastructure on the development, seem quite early: The Interstate Highway System wasn't authorized by the federal government until 1956. But as you might expect, California was a national leader in developing access-limited byways, building major roads as early as 1926. So by the time Garnett began taking pictures of Lakewood, he'd have had some time to think about how California's reliance upon massive ribbons of concrete and asphalt would impact the land and the people who lived on it. (Lakewood is not one of the parts of California where you live in the landscape; Lakewooders instead live on it.)

Similarly, a few years later, Berkeley-based Richard Diebenkorn painted a freeway cutting through open fields. Consider the Diebenkorn and the Garnetts reminders that California built highways not to respond to where people were going on their own, but to encourage sprawling development.



Richard Diebenkorn, Freeway and Acqueduct, 1957. Collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The standard art historical line is that the generation of artists that came along in the late 1960s and the early 1970s focused less on California's freeway system than on the sprawl and quickie-development it enabled. Artists such as Joe Deal, Lewis Baltz, Hank Wessel, Bill Owens and Robert Bechtle made pictures not so much of the infrastructure itself, but of the buildings and lifestyles it encouraged.

There's some truth in that read, but it is not a complete truth. For example, the pioneering generation of California-based conceptualists made rich use of freeways.



Bonnie Sherk, Portable Park I, 1970.



Bonnie Sherk, Portable Park II, 1970.

Bonnie Sherk's *Portable Parks*, commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Art's Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (a museum and group now known as SFMOMA and SECA), pointed out ways in which cities effectively lost the space that either they or the state and federal governments had given over to massive freeways and cheekily proposed utopian alternatives. (Sherk's use of palm trees is historical and thus sneaky-clever: San Francisco was the first California city to plant them.)

A couple years later, San Francisco-based conceptualist (and relational aesthetics pioneer) Tom Marioni curated an exhibition at the Newport Harbor Art Museum called "The San Francisco Performance." Marioni's piece for the show was titled "The Trip," (1972) and consisted of a marijuana-fueled road-trip from San Francisco to Orange County, complete with video and photographic-documentation. Marioni's piece highlighted the way in which freeways could enable consciousness-expanding, not just because there was nothing to do on open, boring Interstate 5 but smoke pot, but because "The Trip" destinations included artificial tourist sites such as Fresno's Forestiere Underground Gardens, an odd mash-up of Mediterranean-style catacombs and gardens. At a time when all those freeways were inspiring second-rate developers to plaster the state with knock-offs of Mediterranean homes, Marioni's "The Trip" highlighted the surreality of life in the Golden State.



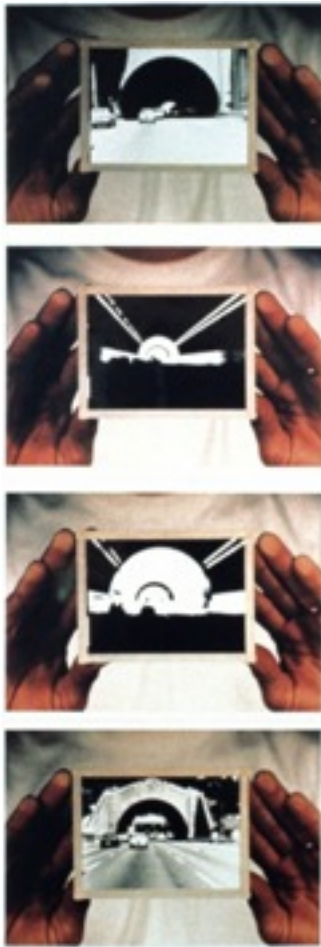
Documentation of *Untitled (The Trip)* as part of the exhibition *The San Francisco Performance*, organized by Tom Marioni, 1972, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California. Photos: Larry Fox. Collection of the Berkeley Art Museum.

Bas Jan Ader also used a California freeway as part of a documented journey. For *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)* (1973), Ader walked across the city, including, it appears, along Interstate 10. (To the best of my knowledge, Ader's route has never been conclusively identified.) The complete work, which exists in both a 14-picture and an 18-picture version, is marvelously funny in the same sly way that so much early California conceptualism was: Who walks across LA?! Doing so is also a little bit dangerous, charmingly and perhaps ironically naive, and a little bit revelatory about the scale of the place. Given Ader's interest in all of those things, no wonder the freeways interested him.



The year after Ader wandered the desert-turned-to-asphalt, Los Angeles-based conceptualist Gary Beydler made a series of films about filmmaking. One of them was titled *Pasadena Freeway Stills* (1974). Like several of the other pieces mentioned here, it's included in "State of Mind," the Constance Lewallen and Karen Moss-curated survey of early conceptual art that debuted at the Orange County Museum of Art and that is now at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago. Here's how Lewallen described *Pasadena Freeway Stills* in the "State of Mind" catalogue:

[For Pasadena Freeway Stills, Beydler] filmed as he rode through four tunnels on the oldest freeway in the state. He then made 1,400 paper prints from the 16 mm film stock negative frames. Next, he explained, "I mounted a piece of glass in my garage, with a square of tape marked out on it. I sat down behind the glass with a white t-shirt on and started shooting the stills. My wife Sarah shot the first part, and as the shots got shorter and shorter, I shot myself using a bulb hooked up to the camera that I operated with my foot." About the work, film historian Mark Toscano says, "Possibly the most lucid, vivid, and awesome demonstration of the building up of still images to create moving ones, Pasadena Freeway Stills simply, gracefully and powerfully shows us the process by which we are fooled by the movies."



Gary Beydler, Pasadena Freeway Stills, 1974.

More recent conceptualists have mined the freeways too. Take Ruben Ochoa, whose Freeway Extraction or Freeway Wall Extraction pieces, created with the help of the California Department of Transportation, point to the ways in which the seemingly ubiquitous freeway walls that line California's urban and suburban interstates break up neighborhoods, especially in low-income and immigrant neighborhoods. (In a series of related drawings, Ochoa proposed the intrusion of new walls in Los Angeles-area neighborhoods.)



Ruben Ochoa, *Freeway Wall Extraction*, 2006-07.



Ruben Ochoa, *What if walls created spaces?*, 2006.

Artists have also found beauty in California's ribbons of highway. As this is pretty hard to do from concrete-level — and as much time as I've spent sitting still on the 405, the I 10 or I-80,

Source: <http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2013/11/art-and-californias-ribbons-of-road/>

I've had time to look for it — photographers in particular have taken to the air to make the roads look good.



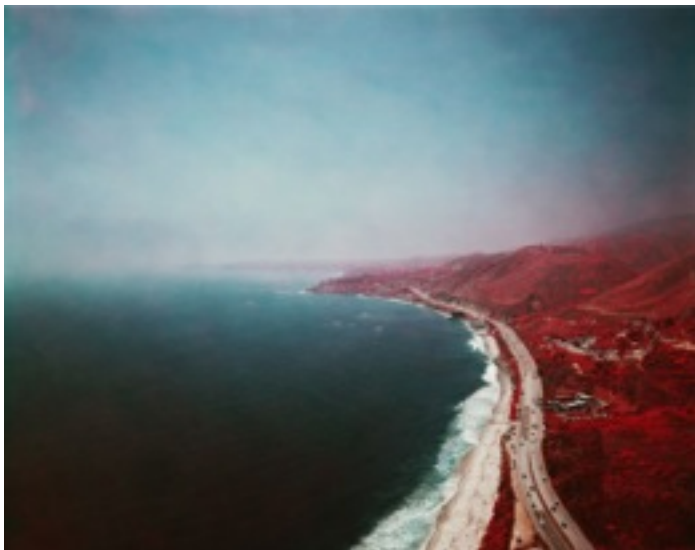
Ansel Adams, Freeway Interchange, 1967.



David Maisel, Oblivion 2n, 2009.



Michael Light, *L.A. River Looking Northwest, I-5 and Los Feliz at Left*, 2004.



Florian Maier Aichen, *Untitled*, 2005.

I love how each of these four artists took to the sky and how they ended up with intensely different results. The Adams is pretty. Maisel slams the city up against the picture plane. The Light asks if Los Angeles has built an artificial resource that replaced a natural one. The Aichen notes that Southern California is defined not just by the ocean, the beach and its coastal hills and mountains, but by its freeways too.

Pictures of California's freeways, be they photographs or paintings, tend to make plain their monumentality. Nowhere do Los Angeles' elevated skyways look more permanent, more historically significant than they do in tiny platinum prints Catherine Opie made in 1994. Just 2 1/4 inches by 6 3/4 inches, Opie's "Freeway" series treats L.A. freeway interchanges the way early British photographers treated Egypt's pyramids.



Catherine Opie, Untitled #1 from the "Freeway" series, 1994.



Catherine Opie, Untitled #4 from the "Freeway" series, 1994.

I think I've gotten a little photo-heavy here. By no means are photographers the only artists who have been fascinated by California's freeways. Take Wayne Thiebaud, who used San Francisco's elevated skyways as inspiration for a fantastical painting or Mark Bradford who seems to see networks in what seem to be aerial cityscapes. Robert Olsen may have been inspired by Opie's pictures. And Dmitri Kozyrev, like Chris Burden, has been interested in speed.

(You know who seems to have never painted a California freeway? Ed Ruscha. Surprising, right? Similarly: Robert Irwin discusses car culture at length in Lawrence Weschler's classic "Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees," but freeways themselves don't seem to be in his work.)



Wayne Thiebaud, Urban Freeways, 1979.



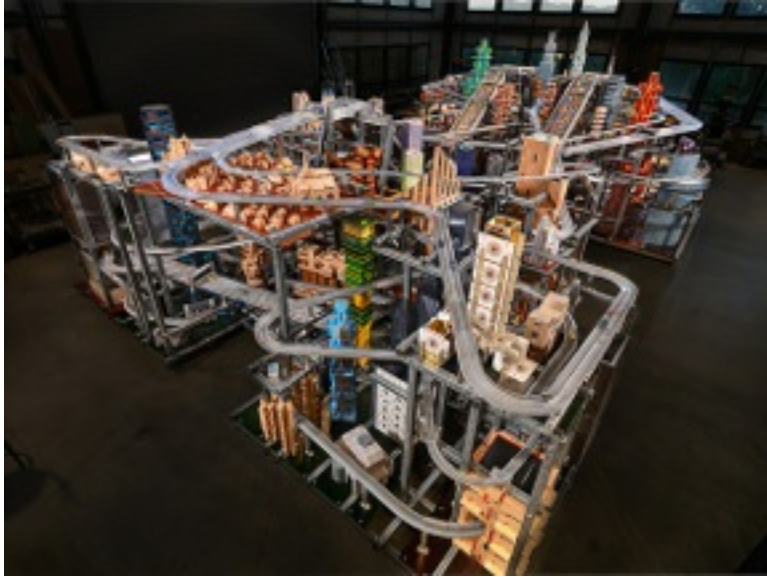
Robert Olsen, no title, 2013.



Dmitri Kozyrev, Untitled from the “Black Square” series, n.d.



Mark Bradford, Bread and Circuses, 2007. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Chris Burden, *Metropolis II*, 2011.

Until now, I'd only been looking at how California artists looked at their own freeways, but there are a few artworks I find myself returning to again and again. There's Thomas Struth's view from California state Highway 140, the road that takes visitors into Yosemite National Park. A big part of Struth's project is to examine the way we look and how we see, and nowhere in Struth's oeuvre is that foundational principle clearer than it is here. The road from which Struth takes his picture of people looking at El Capitan is more or less the same road that's taken visitors into Yosemite since the mid-19th-century. Struth's picture is an updating of Carleton Watkins' important and famous 1861 photo from nearly — exactly? — the same place.



Thomas Struth, *El Capitan*, 1999.



Carleton Watkins, El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, 1861. Collection of the Library of Congress, Washington. Also collection of the Harvard University Herbaria, J. Paul Getty Museum, UCLA Research Library, Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, Yosemite Museum, Denver Art Museum, California Historical Society, National Archives, New York Public Library, Royal British Columbia Museum, Ransom Center at the University of Texas, State Library of Victoria, Crocker Art Museum, Clark Art Institute, Boston Public Library, American Geophysical Society, and the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

I'm sure there are artworks about which I'm forgetting, but I can't think of a lot of Californians directly addressing how California's freeways have impacted its environment, especially its air quality. Smog isn't as big a story now as it was 20 years ago — the state of California passed aggressive new laws that have had an enormous impact — but there aren't that many artworks directly linking air quality to highways. Here are two, one from a New Yorker, another from perhaps America's most passionate lover of the West.



Bruce Davidson, 405/10 Underpass from the series “The Nature of Los Angeles,” 2009. Collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Robert Adams, Interstate 10, West Edge of Redlands, California, 1988. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

I'm sure I'm forgetting plenty of great examples, so please offer your own faves in the comments or via Twitter, at [@TylerGreenDC](https://twitter.com/TylerGreenDC).