

ART

REVIEW

A deceptive simplicity

Christopher Russell's meticulously designed chairs, photos and books fuel the mind.

DAVID PAGEL

If a power outage has ever left you alone in the dark, with nothing to do but mull over past events and wonder what comes next, you'll feel at home in Christopher Russell's installation in the lobby gallery at the Hammer Museum.

There's not a lot to look at — unless you look closely, move slowly and savor details.

Russell has covered the back wall with floral-patterned wallpaper and hung on it a handsomely framed, life-size photograph of a recently killed buck.

Hunters usually pose with such trophies, but this one hangs alone, as solitary in death as the hunter who must have pulled the trigger and snapped the picture.

There's a sad majesty to the dead deer, which is made all the stranger by the elaborate patterns Russell has scratched into the black-and-white photograph, like some kind of low-tech tattoo or obsessive-compulsive bathroom scrawl.

On the opposite wall, Russell has hung, in a column, five

identical pictures of an empty room. Into the glossy surfaces of two of the prints he has scratched images: a tree, floral wallpaper and a matching rug. Another print has been slashed — carefully, deliberately, consciously — as if it had been tortured by a hate-filled inquisitor coldhearted enough to control his rage.

A milky liquid appears to have been splashed across one of the images, damaging and discoloring it. And Russell has carefully poured sand, mixed with a little glitter, into the space between one of the photographs and the frame's glass. The sand heightens the feeling of desolation the scene engenders, suggesting an hourglass that has broken and spilled its contents, never again to measure time's passage.

A pair of old chairs faces each of the remaining two walls. In front of each chair is a poster-size photograph of variously patterned wallpaper or fabric — some with flowers, one with old-fashioned figures and another with children's book-style dinosaurs. On the seat of each chair rests a small homemade book, not much bigger than a pamphlet and decorated with endpapers that match the prints on the wall.

To sit in a chair is to feel as if you're a school kid who's being punished, sent to the corner to spend some quiet time apart from the group.



BRIAN FORREST

CORNER ARRANGEMENT: The layered and decidedly low-tech installation in the Hammer's lobby gallery demands — and rewards — careful scrutiny by the visitor.

Being in the public space of a museum, especially with other visitors, intensifies the sense of not fitting in, of being vulnerable, out of step, a reject.

The four little books provided by Russell provide great escapes from such feelings of dejection. Each lets you get lost in another world, a place richer and denser and more satisfying and meaningful than the one in which you're sitting.

They are all sketch vignettes that come alive in the mind's eye, their characters and settings as sympathetic and con-

vincing as the real thing. Russell's stories are beautifully written, combining a no-nonsense leanness that strips sentimentality to the bone with a great sensitivity to the deliciousness of details, the ways ordinary things and everyday experiences shimmer with meaning when they make us feel deeply.

Most of the stories deal with adolescents discovering themselves, disentangling their fantasies about how life should be from its blunt, unlovely reality. Sweetness and succor blossom

in the strangest of places.

And life's magic moments pop out of nowhere and then disappear.

The inks with which Russell has printed his stories match the color of the pages. This makes reading difficult, as if dusk has fallen and the world has been swallowed in shadow. It also makes you feel that you're up to something illicit and might be punished or at least embarrassed if discovered.

The stories in Russell's booklets are excerpts from var-

Christopher Russell

Where: UCLA Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., L.A.

When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. Ends April 12.

Price: \$7; free on Thursdays

Contact: (310) 443-7000, hammer.ucla.edu

ious chapters of his novella "Budget Decadence." But the chapter that is easiest to read is not in the four books. It is printed in many colors to form the flowery William Morris pattern on the wall where the picture of the dead deer hangs. To read it, you have to stand so close that you feel as if you're a figure in a painting by Salomon Huerta, your back to the room making you vulnerable.

At a time when so much new technology seems designed to prevent people from having a free moment to use their imaginations, Russell's installation makes a quietly eloquent case for the powerfully humanizing force of the imagination. This modest show is also a terrific teaser for his novella, which you can't help but want to read.

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