small is beautiful

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Irvine Fine Arts Center
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curated by Constance Mallinson

On the Importance of Being Small

"Today we suffer from an almost universal idolatry of gigantism."

"There is wisdom in smallness."

- E.F. Schumacher

Mid 2020: The Coronavirus Pandemic is yet to be controlled. The global economy is contracting fueling recession fears. A U.S. election with monumental consequences for democracy is months away. Amazon is recording record profits having successfully swallowed retailing whole. Debates and action on race relations are exploding. Siberia, the rainforests, and the western U.S. are on fire while the Arctic is experiencing record heat waves. As it corresponds to some of these events, the art world is undergoing major changes with a plethora of gallery closings and the proliferation of digital exhibitions.

Charting a path forward for the arts in challenging times has always required novel approaches and unorthodox thinking. This exhibition of 16 Los Angeles artists is part of that ongoing effort. Its inspiration and title are based on a prophetic little book ***Small is Beautiful*** by the renowned eco-economist E.F. Schumacher which first came to my attention in 1973, having been loaned to me by an environmental policy wonk in Washington, D.C. As in the 70s when the urgency of environmental politics began to gain traction, the life-altering nature of our present seems to beg revisiting some of Schumacher's most profound premises. I have taken the liberty of applying some of his ideas to an artworld that has expanded beyond this then 24 year old artist's wildest expectations.

Schumacher deftly interwove environmentalism and economics, critically advocating an economics which served the needs of the people rather than obscenely rewarding the few - clearly not its present MO. Technology would be used to combat corporate conglomerates

that are exploitive of nature and people and to create sustainable communities. He questioned the assertion that broad industrialization absorbs all communities into prosperity, observing instead that populations are shifted to larger and larger urban areas that cannot support everyone. Moreover, he believed that a Buddhist-influenced economic model held that "to satisfy human wants from faraway sources rather than nearby signifies failure rather than success." Such gigantic capitalism, he argued, is destroying us and precious waning resources, creating "an orgy of envy" (the very cause of its expansionist success), a "perversion of free being" in its mechanized and dehumanized workforce, and fomenting social tensions. Schumacher reminds us that hypertrophied institutions and organizations tend to fall apart into smaller units. By focusing on small-scale manageable enterprises and local self sufficiency far fewer demands are placed on the environment and vulnerable populations. While never claiming to create mass wealth, he suggests that following this course, embracing a philosophy of "enoughness", and intelligently using human ingenuity and energy would result in a more equitable and dignified system. As we now know, Schumacher's ideas were never adopted.

Those familiar with the contemporary global art market can certainly recognize Schumacher's descriptions of capitalist economies in its practices, especially as it strove to "supersize" just as the rest of the corporate economy. Epicenters of art production such as New York and Los Angeles attract huge numbers of aspiring artists every year despite the inability to support the numbers. For many artists eager for even the possibility of surviving on one's artistic output requires thinking and acting on a global scale. Artworks that attract wealthy collectors eager to fill big walls and expansive corporate boardrooms, a steady supply of easily identifiable or "brandable" product, big studios with assistants in which to produce and exhibit artworks often mimicking exhibitions at the best urban museums and largest commercial galleries, the imprimatur of glossy magazine articles, and a presence at large international art fairs are the entrance fees. Further reinforcing this Darwinian model, art schools and university departments teach to the near myths, padding their departments with renowned artists commanding big perks to keep studios filled with $50,000 / year students.

Within a short time span, in New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin, huge galleries took over entire city blocks and formerly blighted areas to become cultural destinations. Cities encouraged the development, and despite the obvious drawbacks to many in those communities who were eventually displaced, large commercial galleries were promoted as beneficial for everyone.Aligning with the ethics and goals of stock market speculation, most of the rewards have gone to the top-producing artists and dealers, although little transparency or data is available in this unregulated system. Few smaller gallerists, hungry to get in on any art booms, will be suicidal enough to candidly discuss their precarious situations. There have been bubble years as well as droughts, but this basic approach has remained intact despite the disappearance of mainstream galleries, and until very recently were critics willing to attack the industry formula and its attendant mythologies. The size of international art fairs continued to grow, augmenting already bloated artistic reputations and continuously introducing new foreign competitors. Installations have become more spectacular insuring capacity crowds and headline-grabbing press, driving new sales records and valuations for the select artists and their controlling galleries.

What goes up, however, eventually must come down. Not until early 2019 was a major contraction even conceivable. Art magazines had been suffering for some time, but long-standing reputable galleries had begun closing for lack of sales and exorbitantly high rents. Art consultants who had driven sales for many years disappeared perhaps due to changing tax laws on deductibles and the 1% mentality of investing money in only the very top artists, so many artists saw their incomes evaporate along with meager opportunities for exhibition. The further problematizing of the standard art world operating procedures by the pandemic, however, has entailed a reappraisal of how art is exhibited, appreciated and sold. The immediate likelihood of huge global art fairs and their attendant crowds is currently unthinkable. On a local level, openings were possible virus spreaders and exhibitions had to be by appointment only to reduce exposure. Digital exhibitions have flourished to fill the void, but virtual shows have been justifiably criticized for their inability to duplicate the qualities of experiencing artworks in person.

The crisis, while difficult to maneuver and survive in myriad ways, has provided an opportunity to reassess the possibilities for needed change. It is possible that we are living in what one writer called "a plastic hour" - a rare, crucial moment in history when the time is right to act decisively, with purpose and new understanding. Discourse on the unfolding changes is emerging: critic Jerry Saltz wrote at the very beginning of the pandemic, "Art is flexible, adaptive, pervious and hungry for change." (***The Artworld Goes Dark***, Vulture Magazine, Mar. 20, 2020) Subsequently, he wrote crises usually have "shaped, not destroyed [the art] community"...art is much deeper than the business that supports it." We need to "adapt to change as it comes along, not [fall] back on old, outmoded, mean, or inapplicable dogma...maybe all those gigantic artist studios with scores of assistants won't be as much of a thing." (***The Last Days of the Artworld and Perhaps the First Days of a New One. Life After the Coronavirus Will Be Very Different***, Vulture Magazine, April 2, 2020)

As the curation for the ***Small is Beautiful*** exhibition materialized, conversations with the artists revealed the gross inequities of existing art world paradigms. Artists who had received prestigious grants lacked gallery representation or the possibility of museum exhibitions. Artists who had raised families seemed doomed to invisibility. Financial difficulties, declining affordable studio space, isolation resulting from moving to affordable areas outside the city, lack of critical dialogue and attention, and declining exhibition opportunities were prevalent problems. While artists have always struggled, ageing, competition, affordability, systemic racism, and sexism have exacerbated these conditions. It is becoming increasingly clear that the art world/market has served the elite, not its artists.

To effect changes we can consider that according to Schumacher, size matters. He insisted that we must stop basing our economics on gigantism and begin to strive for the manageability of *smallness*. Doing so, of course, would necessitate eschewing the fantasies of mega-careerism in favor of other goals. As Holland Cotter wrote in "The Boom is Over, Long Live the Art" (New York Times, February 12, 2009), "artists can also take over the factory, make the art industry their own. Collectively and individually they can customize the machinery, alter the modes of distribution, adjust the rate of production to allow for organic growth, for

shifts in purpose and direction." Scaling back the size of artworks and exhibitions and the"need" for them or at least finding a balance between big and small is part of that effort. Outsized artworks, of course, have always been a part of how and why we are moved by art: epic portraits, battle scenes, religious pageantry, and landscapes astonished, intimidated, overwhelmed, and excited viewers with their virtuosic visions of power. One can only wonder how the American West would have been settled without the grand paintings of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. Similarly, large scale Modernist masterpieces dwarfed and absorbed viewers in a universal sublime experience intended to transform and transcend quotidian existence. One was *inside* a swirling Pollock cosmos, awestruck and helpless. Scale equaled importance and seriousness. Smaller artworks, however, could not participate in these effects and were easy to dismiss as trifles, or bourgeois baubles. There are gender implications here as well since many women artists without access to large studios were considered less ambitious and significant - derivative versions of male artists.

Largely missing in the comparisons between massive and diminutive scale is how ongoing *intimacy* with an art object yields a much different experience. Small artworks are universally accessible and collectible, generally less expensive and require less space to exhibit. Might then these artworks entertain values contrary to those of power, wealth and prestige? Something akin to a devotional object - not a sublime or unsettling experience but one of inspiration, daily meditation, imagination, sustenance, connectivity. Artworks subject to local output and distribution are also freer to respond to local conditions and less beholden to totalizing aesthetic trends, i.e. the "isms" that tend to dominate production as well as the carbon footprint of transporting art all over the world. Not pandering to an international market allows artists to maintain a certain ethical relationship to art and to explore new inner-directed forms of expression. Defining oneself as an artist requires resisting the accepted cultural norms and capitalistic, market-driven conditioning, as well as a questioning of personal motivations. Artist communities need to support this. Schumacher never discussed art in his writing, but he argued that the human potential for creativity would be immeasurably freed up when not dominated by huge, soulless economies. He most likely would have been in favor of redirecting and reorienting the production of art to these ends

rather than creating global profits.

When Schumacher used the adjective *beautiful* to describe his economic philosophy - having written "Beauty is the splendor of truth"- he was using the word not conventionally but in the sense of *Bella* - beauty raising us to enlightening thoughts, the common good, promoting the ethical and humanistic. Interpreted here, the beautiful is not simply pretty or mindlessly pleasing. Nor is beauty to be found only in its adherence to conceptual formalism, such as the beauty of a perfectly-conceived mathematical equation or perfectly composed and resolved artwork. ***Small is Beautiful*** is predicated on the near ritualistic, careful, sustained examination of and involvement with a concept or object in great detail, allowing for theslow reveal as opposed to the instantaneous spectacular hit. Such reflection can generate new insights, deepening and transforming consciousness.

Although nearly all the artists in the exhibition excel at large scale paintings, sculptures or installations, each has written a paragraph describing how they realize their formal and thematic concerns in a diminutive scale. Their work has been selected for its particular relevance to current issues and concerns. Attention to aesthetics and visual impact as the prime conveyor of content are paramount to these artists. Reflecting Schumacher's insistence on harmony with the natural world., most prevalent are landscape/nature-centered works exploring ecological conditions. **Nancy Evans'** cast resin sculptures of small found objects take on the power of rusted, decaying relics and ruins to suggest a post-apocalyptic or desolate landscape. Exquisite portraits of dead trees from pinpointed California locations by **Greg Rose** recall Romanticism's infatuation with nature, but with an emphasis on ecological impacts on plant communities. The disturbing, darkly surreal, dreamlike landscapes containing expressive human figures of **Siobhan McClure** suggest the fraught psychological states of contemporary life. Similarly, **Hilary Baker** portrays stylized native wildlife most often set within iconic Los Angeles architecture to provoke meditations on their continued coexistence with humans. **Karla Klarin** likewise references aerial views of the infinitely expanding urban landscape in her diagonally-lined geometric abstractions rendered in evocative colors and gestures. Known primarily for her large hybrids of abstraction and

figuration, **Marie Thibeault** compresses a sublime worldview into a window that focuses intently on natural elements as they interact with human constructions and systems. By fashioning sculptural facsimiles of plant forms from actual paint and intertwining them with industrial materials, **Virginia Katz** muses on the relationship of the natural and human made and the landscape painting tradition. **Gegam Kacherian**'s vivid, near-hallucinogenic abstraction/figuration amalgams on mylar oscillate between micro and macrocosms, suspending viewers in a tense dance between differing realties. Sourcing historical photographs of military and industrial scenes, **Lawrence Gipe**'s nostalgically-tinged paintings contrast our highly polarized, insecure era with earlier modernist narratives of empires, progress, and heroism. The end of nature as we have known it and caused it is suggested by **Constance Mallinson**'s painted depictions of natural scenes on found post-consumer objects such asfood packaging. The witty interplay of discarded manufactured objects and natural detritus in **Coleen Sterritt**'s three-dimensional works are formally inventive with profound ecological implications. Known for her large sculptural installations with industrial materials, **Kay Whitney** uses colorful craft store materials in an open book format, obliterating distinctions between high art and homemade crafts and parodying iconic oversized male abstract masterpieces. This impure attitude blurring lowly craft and "serious" art informs **Julia Couzens'** constructions. Fabricated from scraps of found fabric and painted canvas loosely bound and sewn, like Whitney's, they are feminist interrogations of accepted art making practices. Evoking ancient scrolls, **Joan Weinzettle**'s machine-stitched layered grids of magazine texts that crumble and decay under the needle also insinuate the demise of the printed word in the digital age. Abstract painting, most often executed in large formats, is labor intensive and meditative in the small mesmerizing patterned works of **Robert Walker,** bringing to mind Eastern spiritual practices. **Alain Rogier**'s bold muscular abstractions recall the emotive qualities of mid-century expressionism while overtly putting into dynamic tension pressing humanistic dilemmas encountered in a fractious world.

As Schumacher reminded us, small scale operations are less likely to harm the environment than large scale ones and more apt to provide the free space to do the unimagined. The small but very substantive works in this exhibition are symbolic of a reorientation towards sustain-

ability and self-sufficiency in lieu of limitless materialistic expansion under the control of huge financial entities. Their truths are often probing and unsettling but highly consequential in shaping perceptions of our ever smaller planet.

Constance Mallinson

JULIA COUZENS

If it can't be good, make it big.

Tiny dancers skibble out from beneath the floorboards
mixed textiles
23 x 14 inches
2020