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Paradise Lost: Paul Davies's Fictive California

The painter's depiction of breezy palm trees and picturesque mountain ranges contain eccentric, discordant details.



Louis Bury June 8, 2019



Paul Davies, "Everything Loose Will Land," (2019), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches (all images courtesy of Olsen Gruin)

In *The Roaring Daze* at Olsen Gruin, the expanses of tropical color in Paul Davies's fictive landscape paintings emanate summery ease. Swaths of canary yellow sky and splotches of pastel pink, tinged with notes of peach and honey, and reflective aquamarine swimming pools, combine to form bright, inviting gestalts. The imagery — composites of the artist's Australian heritage and adopted Los Angeles environs, layered upon the canvases using hand-cut screens based on

photographs — are similarly pleasing: breezy palm trees, stylish Frank Lloyd Wright architecture, picturesque mountain ranges, and alluring backyard swimming pools.

Yet these paradisiacal scenes contain eccentric, discordant details. Their constituent photographic forms betray the wobbles of Davies’s hand, as well as the irregularities of the acrylic paints. Their tropical colors are punctuated by large, intricate patches of shadowy foliage, as in “East West Coast 1” (2019). The colors themselves are not true to life, nor are the paintings’ composite scenes. The scenes repeat across canvases but also subtly vary, inviting the viewer into a spot-the-difference comparison game. This dynamic is especially apparent in the show-stopping triptych “Three Stories” (2019). Swimming pools in the foreground of all three paintings reflect their background architecture and environments, but in distorted, inaccurate ways.



Paul Davies, “East West Coast 2” (2019), acrylic on canvas, 69 3/4 x 58 inches

The paintings’ jangly details and conceptual tensions — between utopia and dystopia, nature and culture, photography and painting, reality and fantasy — suffuse them with ambiguity, a sense that something’s not quite right in paradise. The word “daze” in the exhibition’s title, suggestive of both aesthetic dazzle and cultural stupefaction, conveys this feeling of subdued trouble, as do the landscapes’ peeping Tom vantages, which situate the viewer as an outsider surveilling the scene: houses are tucked away in brambly darkness; human silhouettes are glimpsed through backyard windows.

Though neither the artworks nor the press release reference California's recent wildfires, the paintings' unnatural pastel backgrounds associatively call this context to mind. It's as if the sky were permanently — alarmingly — ablaze with a fantastic sunset glow. A series of streaky, semi-abstract photograms, each depicting a detail from the paintings' landscapes as though it were melting or combusting, reinforces the association. At once pleasing to observe and disconcerting to contemplate, Davies's idylls burn with a relaxed complacency of which we're meant to be suspicious.

Paul Davies: The Roaring Daze continues at Olsen Gruin until June 16, 2019
