

## Northern California

### Ben Peterson at Ratio 3

**N**ormalcy has become the commute, it is the complaint, it is the abandoned picket line, the vandalized video

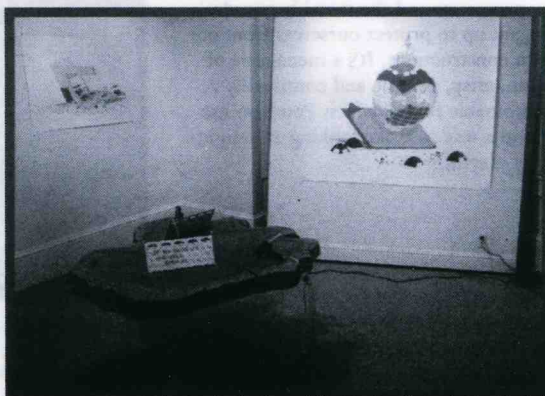
store and the cardboard moving boxes that have been accumulating out on the street corner all week,

sitting there now, wet and limp. This is the rise and fall and rise again of neighborhoods; this is our culture, especially here in California, the home improvement capital of the world. This circuit is narrated with painstaking detail in the meticulous drawings of Ben Peterson. He coyly maneuvers the amalgam of objects that have settled in our neighborhoods, our attics and our consciousness with the constant building, demolition and rebuilding of an anonymous American suburbia replete with strip malls and eco-activists. It is a regular vocabulary of forms: two-by-fours, squares of sod, aluminum barricades, U-shaped bike locks, abandoned red plastic cups, extension cords and pup tents.

References to eco-terrorism and irresponsible land development defend Peterson's work against accusations of conceptually vacant formal finesse. In the gallery, sitting on a table made from the cross-section of an old tree, two little sculptures of garage doors bear witness to the spray-painted cries of environmental radicals, "earth first cars last" and "if you build it we will burn it." On the far wall of the gallery, a drawing of the globe shows a teetering metal frame futilely draped with a swatch of grass and filled with bright blue boxes. In another work, Peterson shows a cluster of potted trees barricading a road, while a nearby podium waits for someone to give an official report of the situation. In yet another, he

depicts a pet store stocked with aquariums and kitty-climbers being pulled to the ground by a rainbow of strings. But we don't have to believe that the point of Peterson's work is to deliver us a sermon about capitalism or activism. He's not telling us that too many people are buying TVs or aquariums, nor is he imploring us to use our purchasing power as a political weapon. Instead, his works present the manufactured landscape that we inhabit and the ongoing guerrilla tactics to save the earth from expanding human development with the same repetitious and bored cheer of the evening news. This work is as much about form and composition as anything else.

Ben Peterson, installation view, *You Build It, We Burn It*, 2006, at Ratio 3, San Francisco.



Look at Peterson's 2006 drawing *T.R.*, a portrait of a home electronics store after it has been attacked and subsequently abandoned. Here we arrive upon the scene. Windows are smashed, merchandise is destroyed, and all that is left is the face of the building—maybe two-feet thick. Fresh sod lies in front of the broken window like a welcome mat, and it's all fenced off with aluminum barricades and caution tape. We can see that people had been congregating outside of

Ben Peterson: *You Build It, We Burn It* closed April 9 at Ratio 3, San Francisco.

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the demolished store because they've left some cups and picket signs behind, but now the scene is deserted. Were they activists? We wonder, what happened? Where did everyone go? And what is written on the other side of those picket signs?

But there aren't any answers to the narratives Peterson presents. There is no depth; he gives us fragmented scenes removed from the real world by an enveloping expanse of clean white paper. Such are our cities: constantly transforming surfaces without history or constancy. We see the crumbling architectural space and the detritus of the deserted cause figured within the picture frame like a massive floating sculpture. Rendered in waiflike lines and flat washes of ink, Peterson's scenes exhibit the familiar visual rhetoric of recent developments and super savings: strings of red-white-and-blue plastic flags, neutral stucco, gray asphalt, orange caution cones and yellow sandwich boards.

Conversing with us like a page from *Where's Waldo?*, Peterson's pictures flow into one another. Each one playfully begs us to tally up the reoccurring tokens: kryptonite U-locks, yellow coolers, plastic cups and slouching backpacks. Even the orange extension cord lying on the floor of the gallery finds itself in several of his drawings. This isn't about the environment; it's about moving your eye around the page and balancing color.

Others have described Peterson's work as "critical" or have asserted that it "scrutinizes" manufactured spaces, or even that his works are about our perception and "the mind's necessity to simplify and catalogue information." But this is to burden Peterson's work with an unnecessary cynicism. His scenes of suburbia—broken, tilting, vandalized and deserted—operate beyond the limits of technical feasibility, but they aren't really about the ramifications of what has happened or who's involved; they are about the vocabulary of images that our culture of development and commercialism provides, from pet supplies and construction materials to the garbage left behind by protesters and the metal barricades we put up to protect ourselves from our own constructions. It's a menagerie of clean, crisp, generic and continually re-combinable forms, which Peterson has found a way to make looking at delightfully playful.

—Lucy Martin