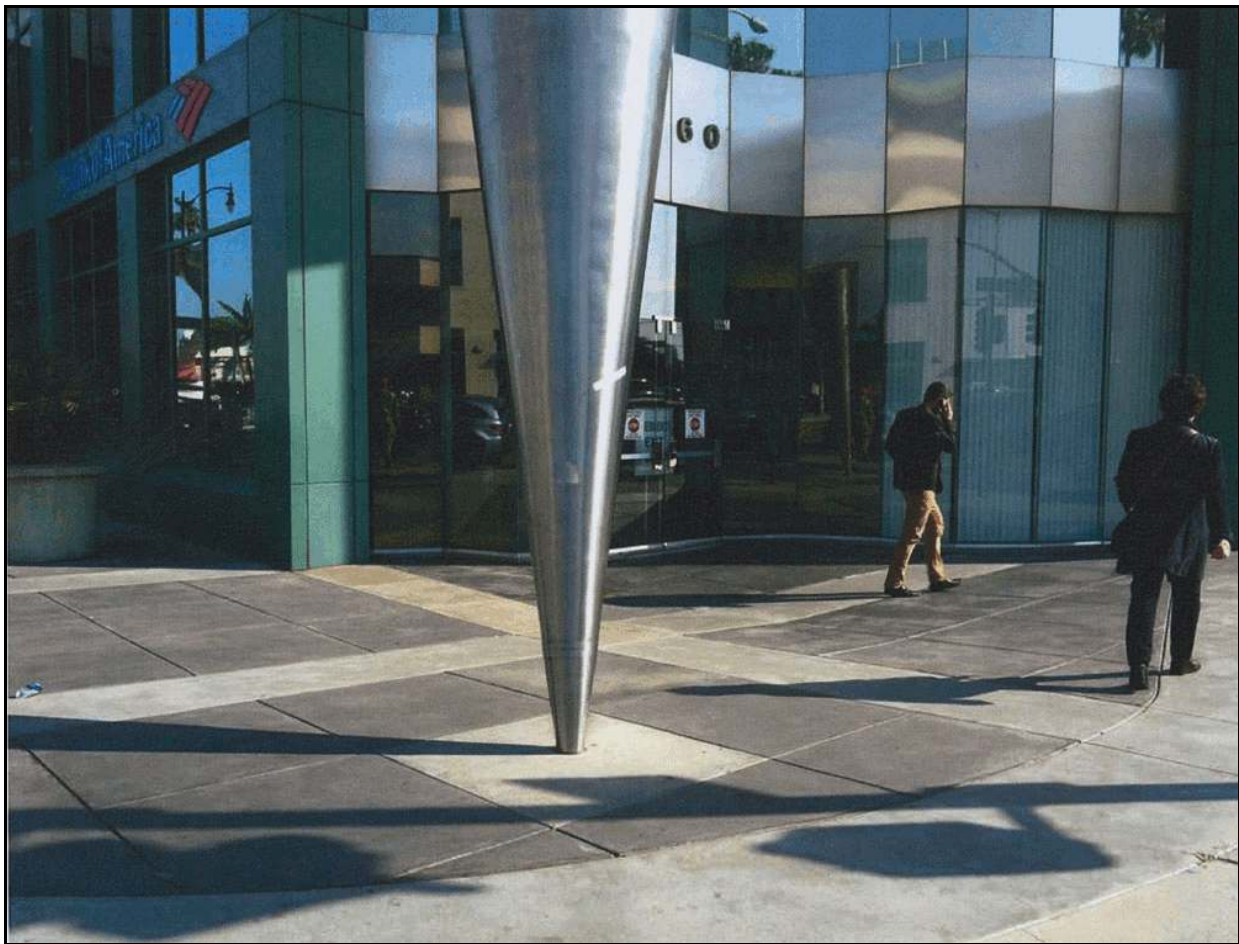


"High End"

Susan Ressler's Photographs from L.A.



Untitled from the series "High End" by Susan Ressler (2011-2012)

by

James R. Hugunin

I

Los Angeles has stood as the paramount example of the postmodern city. Whether examining economic structures, the role of sites of pleasure and consumption in contemporary society, the patterns of growth . . . or the symbolic meaning of gated communities, all roads seem to point to Los Angeles.
— Mark Rice, *Through the Lens of the City: NEA Photography Surveys in the 1970s* (2005)

The globalization of technology
The second industrial divide
The information revolution
The technetronic society
High-technology society
The control revolution
Superindustrialism
The wired society
Postindustrialism
The Third Wave
Post-Fordism

Whatever you call it, our current digital revolution, initiating a political economy of signs, has come to define contemporary anxieties and hopes for the future rooted in two conflicting vectors: 1) the expansion of the world-market via information technology, which is supposed to result in “better capitalism” via the Information Superhighway; and, 2) the countervailing oppositional movement, a politics of transgression and spectacle, initiated by phreaks, hackers, and trolls critical of the swallowing of society by capital (Cf., *The Social Media Reader*, Michael Mandiberg, ed., 2012, 99-119) increasingly linked via Web 2.0 innovations in what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls “the other globalization” (*Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology*, 1999, 13).

The social terrain of this tension is one in which the institutions of civil society are disintegrating and replaced with the construction of an artificial world. Theorist Jean Baudrillard views Los Angeles as the exemplum of such hyperrealization marking this postindustrial, market-driven transformation of humanity:

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

This realm of the simulacral, propelled by media that set the very parameters of perception, is attributed, by Umberto Eco, to our “frantic desire for the Almost Real [that] arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth” (*Travels in Hyperreality*, 1986, 30-31). Everything aspires, like postmodern architecture, to a scenographic flatness.

One of many items “vacuumed” from our memories in our “high-tech/hi-touch” (William Halal) times is Labor’s long climb to parity with Management during the Fordist era (rationalized factory production). In our post-Fordist (digital age) “Crisis State” we suffer such reversals in wage and social benefits, accompanied by widespread union busting, that John McMurtry’s term, “the cancer stage of capitalism” (*Social Justice*, online) becomes an accurate descriptor of what Andrew Ure, a nineteenth-century political economist and contemporary of Charles Babbage, intuited early on: “When capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labor will always be taught docility” (*The Philosophy of Manufacture*, 1835). Now not only work, but increasing areas of life-time — school, domesticity, leisure — are being re-formed into a single constellation integrated into the production / consumption cycle and subordinated to profit; and the gap between low-income and high increases as the middle-class withers on the postindustrial vine.

What are the visual markers of this new, hegemonic neoliberalism? Where might it most clearly be made manifest? In the ghetto, barrio, and on the street with its homeless, as well as in the high-end lifestyles of the players in this new high-stakes game of global capitalism. Susan Ressler, a “meta-tourist” like Walter Benjamin before her, examines the life of the commodity as incarnated in our society’s built environment.

II

As the “ur-phenomena” of modernity, they [the 19th-century Passages/Arcades of Paris] were to provide [Walter Benjamin with] the material necessary for an interpretation of history’s most recent configurations. . . . Benjamin’s goal was to take materialism so seriously that the historical phenomena themselves [these ur-shopping malls] were brought to speech.

— Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1991)

I photograph the small dramas writ large in plain air malls and shopping arcades, emporia of commerce and desire. These sites are cultural markers like those addressed by literary critic Walter Benjamin in his unfinished Passagenwerk or Arcades Project on the shimmering Parisian arcades. . . . My project, “High End,” similarly illuminates what the glitter disguises, de-familiarizing and providing “purchase” in the increasingly slippery realm of the mall, market place that must be continually renegotiated.

— Susan Ressler, unpublished artist statement (2012)

"Implicitly inconclusive, contradictory and humorous in an ominous sort of way, Los Angeles seems poised on the future. Her ironies intimate how much we cannot know," so commented Susan Ressler in the Swiss magazine *Camera* concerning her involvement in the 1970s NEA-funded "Los Angeles Documentary Project" to which she contributed a 15-image portfolio of black-and-white prints, "The Capital Group" (playing off on Marx's *Das Kapital*), some photos of which were featured in that February 1981 issue. Therein, her work focused on symbols of wealth and power: "I photographed corporate enclaves, the CEO offices and boardrooms of the Fortune 500," Ressler explains (figure 1).



Figure 1: A & M Records, Hollywood, CA (1980) from the Los Angeles Documentary Project, Susan Ressler

Her recent re-engagement with a city Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard view as a bellwether of the hyperreal was shot during 2011 and 2012 when wintering over in The City of the Angels. "High End" revisits and reconstitutes her visual probing of late-capitalism in the earlier work, but completes it by refocusing from corporate interiors to exterior, public staging of corporate power and influence.

This revisiting a past project recalls a similar re-viewing of earlier work by social landscape photographer Garry Winogrand written to support his 1963 Guggenheim Grant application:

I look at the pictures I have done up to now, and they make me feel that who we are and how we feel and what is to become of us just doesn't matter. Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty. I read the newspapers, the columnists, some books, I look at some magazine [our press]. They all deal in illusions and fantasies. I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have not loved life. I cannot accept my conclusions, and so I must continue this photographic investigation deeper. This is my project (Winogrand 64 catalogue, Arena Editions, 2003).



Figure 2: St. Francis, Gas Station, and City Hall, Los Angeles, Robert Frank



Figure 3: Houses and Billboards, Atlanta (1936) Walker Evans

Early Winogrand photos, like Robert Frank's before him, probed post-war Fordist America with its roads and cars and trajectory toward a culture of consumption — recall that Kerouac and Frank were *on the road*. They were caught up in an increasingly alienating money economy, a fact that the earlier French edition, *Les Américains*, made explicit with verbal commentary. But each image-maker could still hope for our salvation (a theme in Frank's book, figure 2). But by the seventies, as seen in *Public Relations* (1977), Winogrand is exposing our increasingly media-saturated, news-as-constructed-event culture, something just beginning to be acknowledged in a few of Frank's images. This, on the cusp of a shift to a post-Fordist economy, in which Winogrand records many images of protest. Comparing Winogrand's coverage of a Women's Liberation protest (figure 5) with Ressler's laughing, microphone-toting figure of elegance (figure 6), we see in her image a shift to color, a change in point-of-view from above to straight-on, and an image of our post-feminist era of yuppie dominance, confident in the hegemony of the market, as it reaches throughout the planet.

Ressler's perspective on all this confirms what Winogrand only adumbrated: our postindustrial world is a chimerical social construction deeply imbricated in what media critic Herbert Schiller pegged as an "individualized, electronic global commune." Her images of Los Angeles don't speak so much of America *per se* in the manner of Walker Evans (figure 3), Robert Frank (figure 4), and Winogrand (figure 5) before her, as record signifiers of neoliberal socio-economic trends where the Corporate replaces the State as economic authority, all made possible by electric-speed communication. A global economic village and its "cyberblitz" — of which L.A. is the ur-form, with its glitz and gloom — is the subject of Ressler's still-evolving depictions.

Ressler's project is an insight into, and indirect critique of, this phenomenon. Her precursors could be more confident of a communitarian corrective (compare figures 5 and 6), her stance *vis-à-vis* our social landscape



Figure 4: *Fourth of July, Jay, New York*, Robert Frank



Figure 5: *Women's Liberation Group* (1971) from *Public Relations* (1977) Garry Winogrand



Figure 6: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-12) Susan Ressler

is more akin to Goya's "I saw this!" a standing witness to the horrors of the day. But our contemporary horrors are camouflaged with high-rise office sheen like the Bank of America in figure 7, or walled behind shelves stuffed with desirables like Louis Vuitton items (figure 8 and 18), and everywhere soothed by vapid smiles (figure 5). Concerning the latter, Jean Baudrillard observed: "Smile and others will smile back. Smile to show how transparent, how candid you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile".

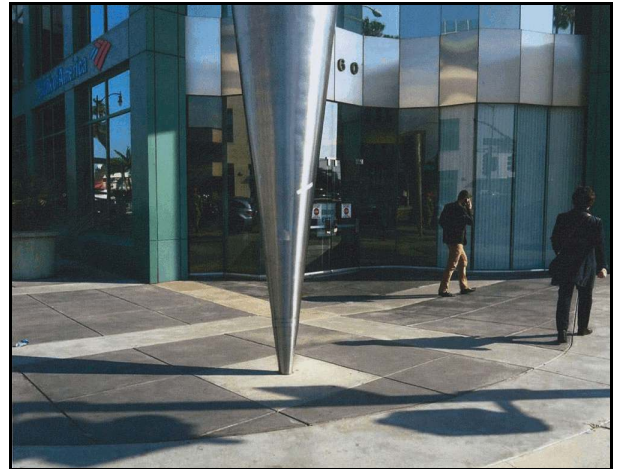


Figure 7: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

We are distracted by electronic billboards and graffiti (figure 9), seduced by slick automobiles as prevalent on TV as on the road, clothed by Joseph Aboud, Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani, Dior, Gucci, Versace, or Louis Vuitton, all existing only as ever-replenished consumerist appeals on smaller and smaller handheld L.E.D. screens. Our subjectivities flatten into Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man," as do the "players" in figure 6 who are more cardboard cut-out than the fully-rendered figures in Wino-grand's image (figure 5). This flattening and "spectering" of people is suggested in figure 8 where a passing, sunglass-clad, pedestrian is "collaged" into Louis Vuitton commodities in a formal optical ploy recalling Lee Friedlander's handling of plate-glass window reflections — and those huge cherries, a nice ironic touch!



Figure 8: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

What opportunities here for long-dead cultural critic Walter Benjamin who, in his study of nineteenth-century Parisian Arcades — direct ancestor to our malls — noted that fashion is "the measure of time" embodying the changed

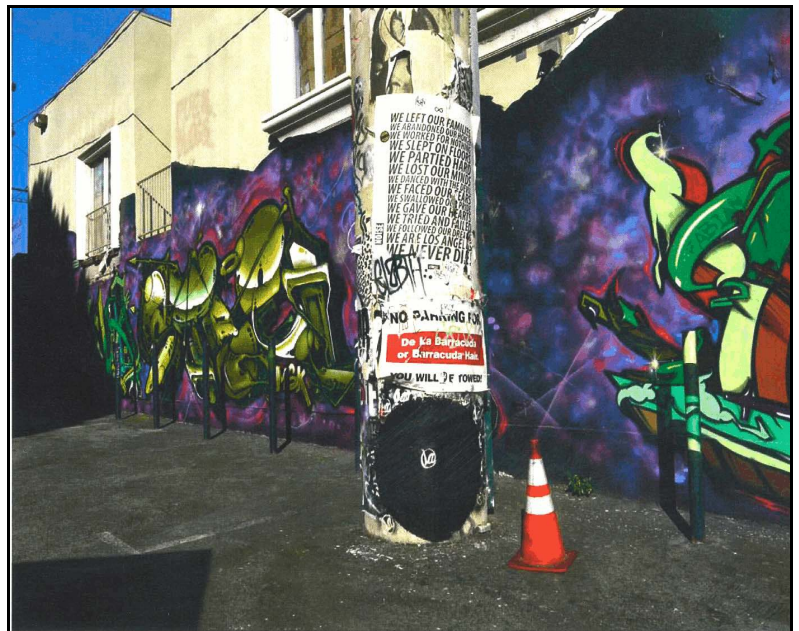


Figure 9: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

relationship in capitalism between subject and object. Today, our desired objects have evolved from a Fordist homogeneous, mass-produced commodity for mass-consumption, to a vertiginous re-structured mode of consumption aimed at subsuming all manner of lifestyles in its orbit, stimulating the needs of a diverse range of consumer desire that spans low- to high-end taste. Wal-Mart for the lower-end, Nordstrom for the upper-crust, but always MORE products, as Umberto Eco wittily puts it: "The announcer doesn't say, for example, 'The program will continue,' but rather that there is 'More to come' (*Travels in Hyperreality*, 1973).

Ressler has focused her camera at that MORE, using Los Angeles as her test case. She seeks to reveal how we incarnate our desires in an economy ruled by production-for-production's-sake and evoked in our structures, objects of desire, and fashions. In so doing, the photographer implies how consumer seduction is now everywhere diffused throughout our life-world and how the "players" in this life-world are so comfortable therein, they stride through "Ressler's L.A." like zombies.

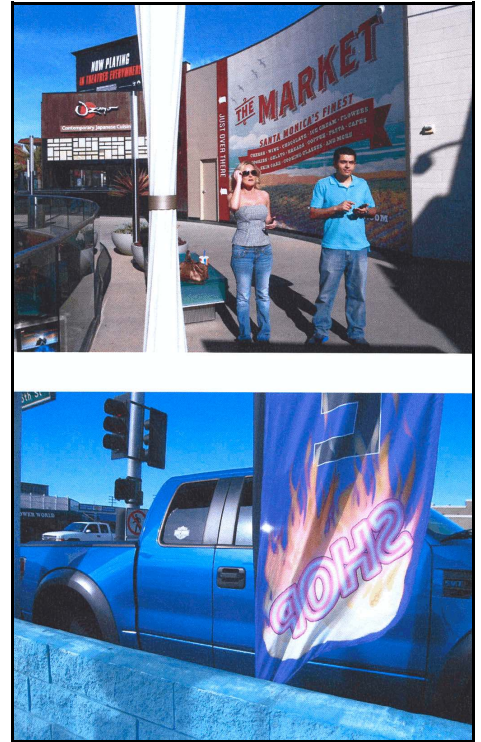


Figure 10 & 11 from "High End (2011 -2012) Susan Ressler

III

To code desire is the business of the socius.

— Deleuze and Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus*

Before the zombie apocalypse, people liked to measure their quality of life by considering whether or not were they happy. Some people were happy.

Most people were varying degrees of unhappy. They bought things they thought might make them happy — expensive handbags, dogs, sexy robots, medications that increased the levels of serotonin in their brains — and sometimes they felt happier, but often they didn't. Some people suggested that this was what happened when everyone thought about themselves all the time.

— Susan McCarty, "Another Zombie Story," *Indiana Review* (Summer 2012)

Corporations have their "hired guns" wearing suits to keep consumers and the government at bay; people in the ghettos and barrios, "gangstas" and "banditos," have guns to suit their fears and wear protests on their tatted flesh. We are a society at conflict. Gleaming ultra-high tech office buildings — such as where Ressler caught a metallic "dust-devil" spinning on concrete in front of a Bank of America (figure 7) — is

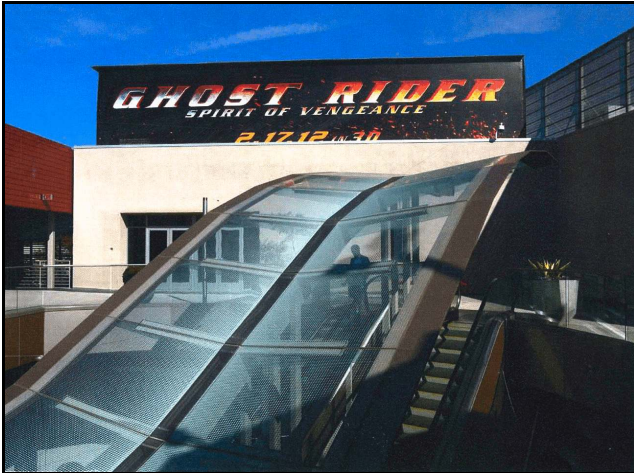


Figure 12: *Untitled from "High End"* (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

contrasted with another centrally-placed form, a pillar in a poor neighborhood (figure 9) pasted with prohibitions like "No Parking," a sign of authority countered by a large activist handbill listing a litany of working-class and undocumented laborer woes that functions in counterpoint to the former image of high-finance: "We left our families," "We abandoned our homes," "We slept of floors," "We lost our minds," "We danced with the devil," "We tried and failed." In the background, a colorful graffiti mural bespeaking neighborhood pride replaces that gleaming steel-and-glass bank building in the former photo (figure 7). The relentless pursuit of novelty is here shown to have brought

forth nothing new in history — the class divide persists, even widens.

Dallas W. Smythe, a Canadian researcher in the political economy of communications, promulgated his concept of "the audience commodity" to focus on how workers' non-work time is sold as a commodity to advertisers, necessitating persistent media saturation stressing consumerism with its immaterial play of signification (figures 12, 15, and 16). Interestingly, the window display Ressler records (figure 15), in content and form echoes a similar 1925 photograph by Parisian Eugène Atget (figure 22) that caught Benjamin's critical eye. At no time are we free of capital's desire to dangle commodities before us on display in shop windows or Windows shopping in cyberspace. We are enmeshed in capitalist production *and* consumption (figures 10 and 11). Los Angeles's key commodity has been Hollywood entertainment, mainly film. So no surprise "LA-LA Land" has taken the look and feel of a movie lot and people imagine themselves stars. No surprise that Ressler's images capture that staginess and glamor which seeps from screen to environment (figure 13) to people's behavior (figure 14).

Like Robert Frank, whose immigrant-eye on America allowed him to see things we natives were too familiar with to notice, Ressler's keen, curious eye for detail, her optical

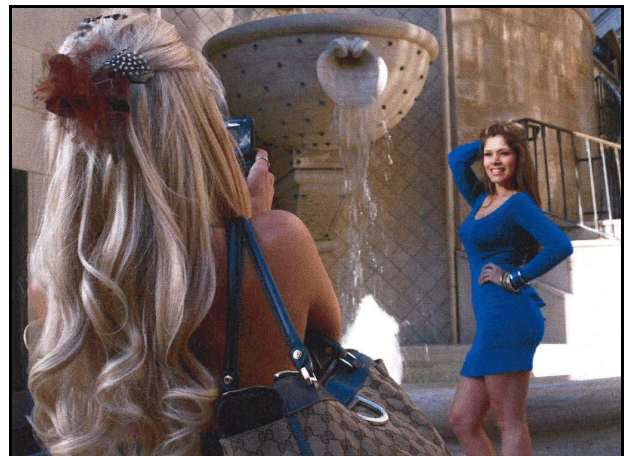


Figure 13 & 14: *Untitled from "High End"* (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

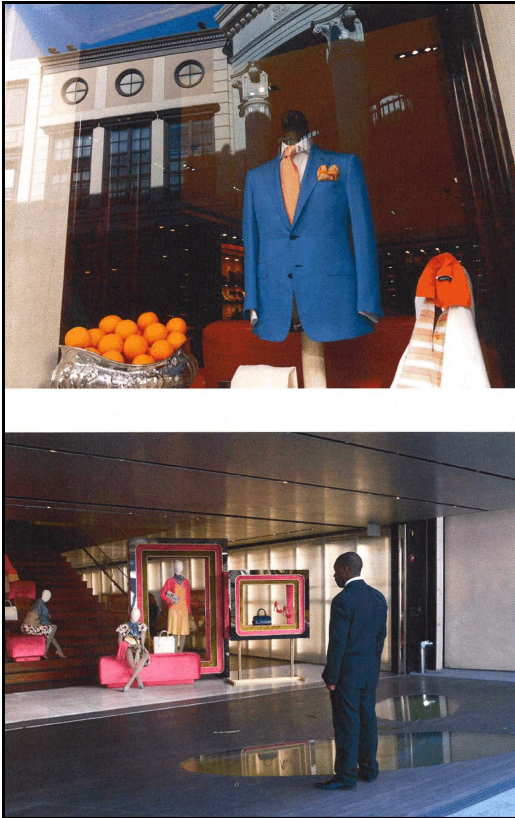


Figure 15 & 16: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

As a city designed around the automobile, Los Angeles offers high-end parking lots (figure 20) for the well-heeled natives (who are usually from elsewhere) to easily access malls, as even provides a mild, beachy surfs-up climate attractive to the on-the-skids transient homeless to park sore feet and weary bones (figure 21), even as it writes them off the economic rolls.

"High End" offers us a tragi-comic visual tour through a cross-section of a quintessential post-industrial urbanscape that is intriguing enough as an allegory of our fractured, code-infested times to resurrect (during the Zombie Apocalypse) a data-hungry Walter Benjamin. Can't you just see him? Muttering in German, staggering, eyes-glazed, notebook and pen in hand, coming your way.

collage flattening of optical space as Friedlander might, incisively probes the elegant strangeness of a city worlds away from her New Mexico haunts. Her mode of approach might be described as "meta-tourism," a reflexive tourism as fascinated with, but more critical of, simulacral L.A. than the families visiting from Des Moines, Iowa, which she's always willing to include, capturing them camera in hand (figures 13 and 19). In her series, Brobdingnagian "sets" (often commodities wrought larger-than-life) recall Claes Oldenburg's Pop Art sculptures and sit begging for a tourist's snap. Yet these marvels of gigantism (our version of those massive classical-world statues in Rome's Capitoline Museum) don't phase strolling local consumers (figure 18) to whom it all seems as natural as the palm trees.

If all that gleaming steel and glass, high-end shopping, and youthful, tanned bodies seem as one vast mirage shimmering in the hot summer sun, well, it just *might be* (figure 17), and a swear I see Paul Strand's famous white picket fence, or that big piano keyboard on the department store floor featured in Tom Hank's charming role as boy toy expert in the Hollywood blockbuster film *Big*.

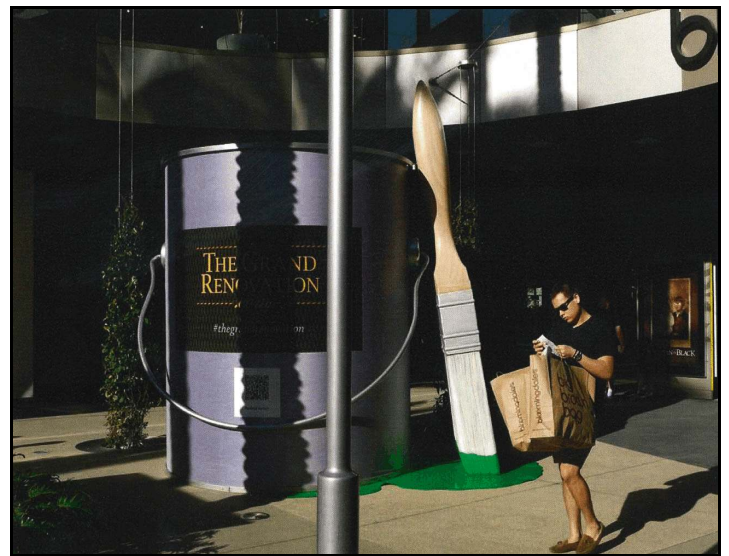


Figure 18: *Untitled* from "High End" (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

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Figure 17: *Untitled* from "High End (2011-2012) Susan Ressler



Figure 20 & 21: *Untitled* from "High End (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

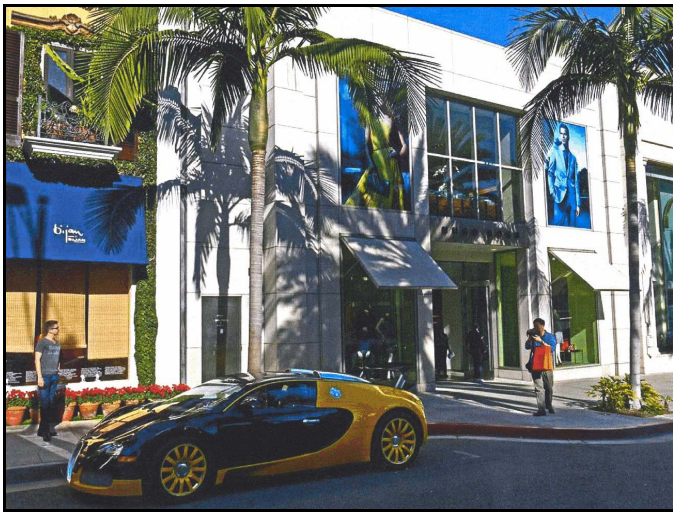


Figure 19: *Untitled* from "High End (2011-2012) Susan Ressler

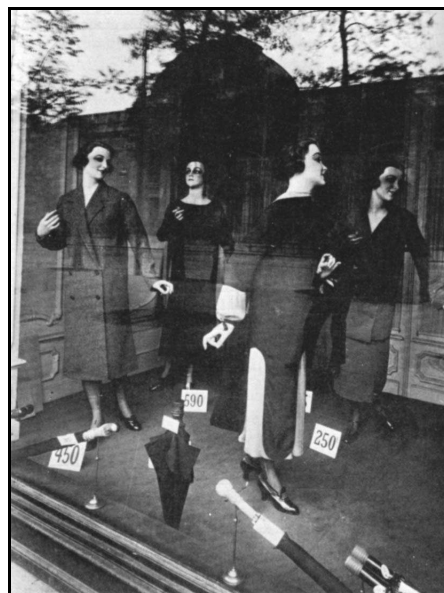


Figure 22: *Store Window, Avenue des Gobelins, Paris (1925) Eugène Atget*

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Susan R. Ressler is a widely exhibited and published artist, author, and educator who has been making photographs since the mid-1960s.

An alum of the University of New Mexico (M.A., 1977) and M.F.A. (1988), she studied with photo-historian Beaumont Newhall, as well as renown artists Van Deren Coke, Betty Hahn, and Thomas F. Barrow (among others).

Ressler's primary teaching position was at Purdue University from 1981 - 2004, where she was full professor in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts. She taught the practice, theory, and history of photography, and innovated the online course "Women Artists of the American West." In addition, Ressler co-authored and edited a 400-page scholarly anthology of same title, published by McFarland in 2003.

Currently, Ressler is Professor Emerita, Purdue University, and an adjunct professor of American and Women Studies at the University of New Mexico. She lives in Taos, New Mexico where she devotes most her energy to her passion: making photographs. Since 2005, she has completed three artist residence in France and spent two winters, during 2011 and 2012, photographing in Los Angeles. Her work can be characterized as social documentary, and her most recent projects entail a trenchant investigation of American values, from Beverly Hills, CA to Taos, NM.

Ressler's photographs are in the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Library Archives of Canada, as well as many university art collections. She has exhibited both nationally and internationally, and was awarded two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships (1979 and 1984). In 2011, she received the Society for Photographic Education Award for Excellence in Historical, Critical, and Theoretical Writing.