Don’t Think: Tom, Joe and Rick Potts at POTTS

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For the past three years, the artist-run space POTTS has inhabited the front part of a former plumbing supply store in Alhambra. Opened in 1939 by Norman Wallace Potts and his son Norm Jr., Potts Plumbing Parts moved to its current location on Valley Boulevard in 1968, where Norm Jr.’s sons Tom, Joe, and Rick essentially grew up before eventually taking the store over themselves. The brothers were also founding members of underground music collective the Los Angeles Free Music Society (LAFMS) in 1973. POTTS gallery co-founder Jackie Tarquinio Kennedy had met the brothers through her previous position at The Box gallery, which mounted an LAFMS exhibition in 2012. The plumbing store had been shut down since 2015, and the

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used storefront inspired Kennedy and her collaborators to start the gallery space in 2017. Even after its transition to a gallery, the back room at POTTS retained the tools and accoutrements of the plumbing shop, electronics and instruments from the LAFMS, and also served as a painting studio for Joe and Rick.

As many artist-run spaces do, POTTS is closing after three years, and for their last show, the gallery has paid homage to its forbearers, bringing together four decades of work from the three Potts brothers: from doodles posted on locker doors to surreal cartoonish paintings and assemblage sculptures.

Traditional artistic hierarchies are discarded as paintings are displayed alongside makeshift functional objects. Although a checklist identifies which brother is responsible for each work, specific attributions are de-emphasized, and instead the focus centers on recreating a time, place, and certain familial energy—a creative nexus that defies easy categorization.

This show highlights the Potts’ legacy of experimentation: from utilitarian items cobbled together by Tom (who designed the shop’s sign, also adopted by the gallery) to Rick’s fantastical paintings of bucolic landscapes filled with Boschian creatures and Joe’s thrift-store assemblages. Small photos of the plumbing shop are placed on the gallery’s windows, visible from outside, as if overlaying the space’s previous life onto the present. Several of Rick’s doodles—reminiscent of underground comics à la R. Crumb—are drawn on stationary from other plumbing shops. Pettis Pipe & Supply Co.’s letterhead boasts “Right Now Service” above Rick’s blueprint drawing of a dog with the pyramidal Eye of Providence for a head. The drawings are placed on rusty locker doors that were pulled from the plumbing storage area in the back room.

A few more of Rick’s more finished paintings are on view: *Untitled (skeleton torso)* (1976), a Christ-like figure with a cork-screw nose and a fleshless skeletal torso, and *Eye* (1980), a solitary eyeball run through with angry red veins.

A large assemblage of pipes is placed in the center of the gallery. Made by the oldest brother, Tom, who describes himself as “not an artist,” *Untitled (pipe rack)* (date unknown) was noted as not intended as an artwork. Rather, the piece was made as a functional device for the shop—a sort of rack to hold long pipes. But, relocated to the gallery space, it becomes a minimalist installation, its form as important as its function. Tom’s other contribution to the show is a sculpture made from the shell of a sea turtle—which Tom notes he ate part of. The shell is flensed out with a wooden burl as a head topped by a pigskin baseball hat, its hands and feet are made from paper Halloween skeleton parts. The piece, *Untitled* (2005), is both unnerving and charming, the kind of low-fi humorous bricolage that is evidenced throughout the show. Also on view, for instance, are assemblage works by Joe of thrift store paintings mounted on one another—a gladiator heaped atop a matador layers and obscures meaning. As Joe notes in a text from the early ’80s, reproduced in a gallery newsletter: “All painters are interconnected. The individual artist is an illusion.” The notion is equally applicable to the anonymous painters he is recycling as it is to the intermingled work of the three brothers.

Joe’s output also includes serial works like *All Seeing Eye* (2015), a grid of colorful digital prints, each detailing an example of a supernatural occult eye from various cultures: Akhenaten, Masonic Eye, Hamsa. This trope is extended into contemporary conspiracy theories around the panopticon and the All-Seeing Eye of Tech, illustrated here by an image of the donut-shaped headquarters of GCHQ, a U.K.-based intelligence agency. *The Daily Planet* series (1983) takes images of from autopsies, pornography, and architecture, and reproduces them in dense layers, recalling both grainy xerox and the rich tonality of etchings. As you gaze at the prints, recognizable forms jump out of the jumble.

Although the show challenges discreet categories of artistic display, and much of the works on view were considered doodles or practical tools by their makers, it would be wrong to say that this is a show of outsider artists. Joe and Rick both went to art school, and Rick’s paintings have been exhibited at Richard Telles Fine Art. In addition to their show at The Box, the LAFMS has also performed at institutions like MOCA and the Getty. As vital members of this group, it is an oversight that their musical output has not been included in the POTTS exhibition, although there may be a closing performance.

*Don’t Think* sets out an almost insurmountable...
challenge for itself: how to capture that space between art and life in a conventional gallery exhibition, where art (only half of the equation here) is what's on view. The objects included provide one facet of the Potts brothers' very messy and expansive oeuvre. It is bittersweet, but perhaps fitting then that this is the gallery's last exhibition. It highlights the limitations of a traditional show that freezes and flattens a disparate practice. Though, wandering into the back storage area, between rows of makeshift plumbing tools designed by Tom, musical instruments used by the LAFMS, and stacks of Rick's whimsical paintings, one gets a visceral sense of the gesamt-kunstwerk of these brothers. Here, the gallery walls become porous, the back room an unofficial addendum, a living archive. Still, the exhibition itself offers a worthwhile entry point into a phenomenon that extends beyond the walls.