Curator's Key

Gloria Hasnay on Julie Becker's *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–96)

All images: Julie Becker, *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*, 1993–96. Installation views, "Julie Becker: I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent," The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2018

Curators talk about a work they keep coming back to

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Los Angeles is one of the most mediated places in America. For many – myself included – it is first, or foremost, encountered through the city playing itself, endlessly reimagined in cinema and television. Myth and reality collapse onscreen and off, the American dream repeatedly shading into nightmares that expose its many fantasies and dispossessions. Long cast as an eternally sunny, entertainment-driven utopia, the city is draped in a polished image of the perfect life that, when tugged at, reveals the metropolis's seam-busting contradictions, its excess wealth and widespread homelessness, resource abundance and ecological exhaustion. What appears as effortless glamor clouds over, and eventually binds aspiration and instability into the same civil system. "Everything you read about Los Angeles is true," once remarked Giovanni Intra, the late artist, writer, gallerist (including Julie Becker's), and altogether seminal figure, circa 2000, in the maturation of LA's art scene. "The city adapts to its own mythology. It's such a ludicrously discussed place that I always feel slightly idiotic in my attempts to produce a serious discourse about it."

The work of Angeleno Julie Becker (1972–2016) articulates one rather enthralling attempt, by crystallizing the tensions that shaped the city in the 1990s – a period marked by widening economic divides and civil unrest in the aftermath of the brutal, racially charged police beating of Rodney King – and by constantly returning to LA's disjunct between promise and constraint. Working across drawing, collage, video, photography, and installation, her practice grounded Conceptualism in a material investigation of social class. Her sensitivity to unstable architectures can be traced to an itinerant upbringing with her artist parents, as well as to her adult life in Echo Park, a once underserved neighborhood then undergoing rapid gentrification. She didn't comment on these conditions directly; instead, the bleak realities of single-room occupancy housing, dilapidated rentals, and improvised interiors seeped into her work, without displacing its often tongue-in-cheek sensibility. As writer Sabrina Tarasoff notes, "Somehow Becker retrieved from domestic darkness the miracle of a bright imaginary." In a place where movie sets and motels share the same flimsy provisionality, she developed an artistic vocabulary that illuminates the porous boundary between "home" and "haunted house," as much as a dialectic of alienation and belonging.

These concerns perhaps find their clearest form in *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–96). It's a work I first came across a decade ago, while living in New York – a city that, while far removed from Los Angeles, is no less

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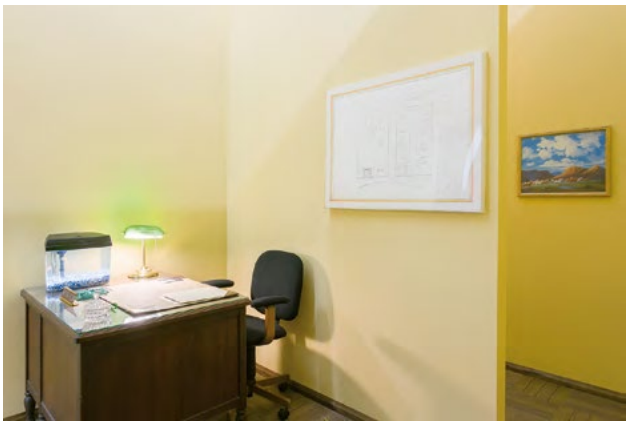

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invested in the continuous (re)production of its own stories and double-dealings, and whose demanding pace made Becker's attention to rest and instability feel particularly acute. First developed as her MFA thesis at CalArts, and shown soon after at the 23rd São Paulo Biennial (1996) and Kunsthalle Zürich (1997), the installation guides viewers through three connected zones: a small waiting room; a central space with two sprawling scale models; and a back room configured as an archive-like workspace.

Outfitted with a desk, a banker's lamp, a fish tank, a couch, a cabinet of magazines, and a set of interchangeable nameplates ("Real Estate Agent," "Entertainment Agency," "Concierge," "Psychiatrist"), the first room is a transitional interior – part doctor's office, part hotel lobby, part travel agency – while, mounted behind the desk, a floor plan gestures towards the miniatures to come.

The central room holds an assembly of cardboard refrigerator boxes that, upright, flattened, or on their sides, hold a bodily presence, whether of improvised shelters or childhood play structures. Next to them, two large architectural models sit low on wheeled platforms, requiring that viewers lean in or crouch to examine their elaborate interiors. Like a camera scanning a set, our eyes move across improvised studios, makeshift sleeping areas, dead-end corridors, and

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spaces that, so sparsely "decorated" or "furnished," could be anything, from hotel suites to offices or libraries and living rooms, their ambiguity colliding domestic, commercial, and institutional typologies. Empty of figures, they are dense with what Richard Birkett, who curated a posthumous retrospective of Becker's work at the ICA, London, in 2018, describes as "an object theatre of found items and carefully constructed scale replicas, with a sparse psychodrama enacted in each room." The tiny tableaux take cues from the installation's full-scale rooms, and appear at once meticulously crafted and somewhat neglected: toothpick furniture, dollhouse accessories, slanting walls, replica rugs not fully glued down. On their walls, miniature versions from Becker's photographic series *Interior Corners* (1993) appear, further complicating the distinction between actual and fabricated space.

The back room adopts a more investigatory logic: crowded with stationary, files, photographs, cassette recorders, a typewriter, a drip coffeemaker, arm chairs, and a videotaped interview with the Hollywood psychic Voxx, it maps the installation's associative leaps. Research folders on the "residents" sit beside diaries attributed to "Danny" (Torrance), who, possessed of psychic abilities, navigated the haunted Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*

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(1980); and "Eloise," a resident of the luxurious Plaza Hotel in Kay Thompson's children's books series from the 1950s. As emblematic child figures in American popular culture, their fictional lives resonate with those of the occupants who, absent from the scene, Becker's work invites us to imagine in, all the while serving as guides through her inquiry into how physical spaces accrue psychological charge.

A defining achievement of the installation, and of the artist's work more broadly, is its dissolution of fixed categories: those of author and subject, interior and exterior, fiction and documentation, original and replica. Despite Becker's early success and seeming fluency within the art world, much of her life unfolded at its margins, shaped by precarity, mental health struggles, and addiction. These circumstances echo, but don't determine, the autofictional settings she built; rather, they sharpened her sensitivity to a city and a country in which dreams persist even as the structures that support them erode.

Since her premature death, an engaged, if intimate, network of friends, collaborators, and posthumous admirers has produced an insightful and often deeply personal discourse around Becker's life and practice. Their accounts often echo Intra's observation: like the city from which it emerged, Becker's work generates its own mythology, even as it exposes the shaky conditions of its making. As our present continue to worsen its incongruities, not least between economic precarization and a proliferation of domesticity's mediated fantasies, Becker's work feels all the more durable and timely, reflecting back to us the inter-nesting of myth, memory, and material history. I look to *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* often as an interpretive framework in my practice: it's a way of understanding the present as always fragmented, unstable, and processual, and of thinking along with art that bears its own contingency and necessary slipperiness. —

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